

Interview With Author Joseph Finder

By Christian Marcus Lyons

New York Times bestselling author Joseph Finder is a scary man. Not Bela Lugosi scary, perhaps, but the sheer volume of his knowledge about espionage and national intelligence is enough to make the most secure person keep at least one eye looking over his shoulder.

Finder began life as a world traveler—his first language was Farsi—and he later became a Harvard professor before being recruited by the CIA. His books tackle corporate espionage and the often underhanded tactics overly ambitious men and women utilize to further their own agendas. But for all that focus on paranoia and intrigue, he is refreshingly open about himself, his writing process, and the world around him.

Finder published his first book at the age of 24, a nonfiction exposé titled *Red Carpet: The Connection Between the Kremlin and America's Most Powerful Businessmen*. Undaunted by threats of a libel suit over the book, Finder told the rest of the story in 1991s novel, *The Moscow Club*, which *Publisher's Weekly* touted as “one of the top ten best spy thrillers of all time.” Since then, Finder's prolific career has covered the spectrum of societal paranoia, from *The Zero Hour*, *High Crimes* (which became a 2002 Twentieth Century Fox film starring Ashley Judd and Morgan Freeman), to the aptly titled *Paranoia* in 2004, 2005s *Company Man*, and his latest release, *Vanished* (St. Martin's Press, August 2009).

PPW's staff writer Christian Marcus Lyons caught up with him at his home on the Cape, in the midst of Finder's full schedule.

CML: Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. If you don't mind, I'm going to jump right in. We've heard of the sometimes peculiar jobs some authors held before hitting it big in the writing industry, but you originally had the desire to become a spy. How did that early yearning for spyhood translate into a successful writing career?

JF: I learned that the world of intelligence was a lot less exciting than I thought it would be in reality. Fiction tends to intensify the humdrum. Writing about spies and espionage allows me to do what I want to do, and that's turning the dial up to 11. I have lots of contacts in the CIA—all the way to the top—and can call whoever I want for information. And because I write fiction, people tend to be more open with me, more willing to talk. So those contacts and what I learned working on the inside provide authenticity to what I write.

CML: Your Web site bio mentions that you're a fan of the late Robert Ludlum's work. Ludlum's writing was influenced by conspiracy theories, much like your writing, and—like Ludlum—your books feature one heroic character fighting the forces of evil. What other authors influenced your writing and your desire to become an author?

JF: Let's see...Frederick Forsythe, John Le Carre, Ken Follett, Len Deighton...and some of the early ones, Eric Ambler...

CML: Did you find that you emulated them?

JF: Writers starting out cannot help emulating other writers. My first couple of novels emulated Ludlum in structure—a building conspiracy—but I was more inspired by Le Carre's prose. But eventually, it's your own voice that comes through.

CML: You released *Paranoia* as a free download for the Amazon Kindle. How do you perceive the future of the publishing industry in light of electronic advancements?

JF: I'm concerned. Worried. On the one hand—and it wasn't just the Kindle, but also Sony, E-Reader, iTunes audiobooks—it's been great because it's allowed me to reach out to new readers. It's hard to reach the mass market through publishers. They don't have the money to market an author to so many people. But the free thing was great. E-books will probably become a dominant force. Books won't go away, though. People like the experience, the paper versions. However, e-book sellers will start pressuring publishers to e-publish. And they pay less for an electronic copy of a new novel. Amazon charges \$9.99 per book, and that cost will probably drop as e-readers become more popular. That means that writers—who don't make all that much to begin with, except the hugely successful ones—will make less. I don't want them to drive writers out of business.

CML: Your latest thriller, *Vanished*, is the first in a four-book series with recurring character Nick Heller, which I'm sure your fans are very excited about. I know I am. What was it about the character, or the story, that led to the series?

JF: I've wanted to create a series character for a long time. People at my book signings always ask about the characters... Adam Cassidy (*Paranoia*), Jason Steadman (*Killer Instinct*)...but it didn't make sense to create a series from a standalone. Nick Heller is unique in that he was specially created for the series. I didn't want to duplicate what's already been done, wanted a unique take on the genre. One day, I met with a CIA friend who'd gone private—doing the same thing he was doing but for private corporations and governments. I realized then that Heller was a private spy.

CML: Kind of like a private eye, only a private spy.

JF: Exactly.

CML: How is writing a series different in the way you approached it?

JF: The major difference is character arc, the arc of transformation. A series character cannot transform in any significant way. The vector is not about change, but about revelation to the reader. [Heller] will not transform.

CML: As writers, we're responsible for finding our own motivation and inspiration. What nourishes you as a writer?

JF: I love to write. It is the feeling I get when writing. I love being in that space where I'm creating things. It's not money, not fame—they're great such as they are—but they only support my habit. Bottom line: I love writing. I don't like getting bad reviews, I don't like the stress of touring, and so I have to remind myself what I'm in it for.

CML: Are you an advocate of outlining novels prior to sitting down to write them?

JF: Yes. The cool thing about writing is that no one tells us how to do it. It's not like driving a car, where there's a specific way to go about it. We can't go around making up our own laws. Writers have to figure it out for themselves. It's scary, but it's also liberating. I know very few thriller writers who can get away without outlining. Lee Child doesn't [outline], but he's such a pro, he outlines in his head. If it's overdone, it kills spontaneity. It gets boring. You have to find that balance in your outline where you know your major plot points, but how you get from point C to point D is purely creative.

CML: What's a typical writing day look like in the life of Joseph Finder?

JF: It's really, really rigid. Far more than most office workers' schedules. I wake up, get my daughter off to school—drive car pool if it's my turn—then head to my office and my assistant around eight a.m. I drink an espresso, fire up my computer, and start

with reading a couple lines. I practice the slow-cooker method— you know, where you put something to cook overnight? I'll read the outline and the next day's notes before going to sleep and often wake up spilling over with ideas. I work all morning, then take a break, work out, have lunch with someone, do business-y stuff in the afternoons. Maybe get a few more hours in the late afternoon. Sometimes, when things are really rolling, I'll write early. Four or five a.m., before my daughter even awakens. That way I can get a couple extra hours in. There's no email, no telephone calls...

CML: You give back to the writing community in many ways. Was there a mentor who influenced your passion to write?

JF: No, no mentor. I feel it's my responsibility. I wished I had a mentor to help me avoid mistakes. I had no idea about agents, publishers, any of that. I figured it out myself. Now, I'm always giving and getting advice from other bestselling writers, and I feel it's an established writer's job to help the younger writers, help them learn what to do.

CML: Thank you for taking time to meet with me. Do you have any sage advice for the writers who will read this?

JF: This may sound flip or trite, but: Just write. Way too many writers get hung up on marketing. You write a book. Then you write another one. If you publish, write another. Writing can already be so difficult, and many writers spend so much time selling their work and not enough time writing. The most successful writers aren't the best writers, but the most stubborn.

Christian Marcus Lyons is a four-time Pikes Peak Writers Conference Fiction Competition award winner in novel-length fiction, short fiction, creative nonfiction, and screenplay. He has also been a finalist in the RMFW Colorado Gold Conference Fiction Contest, Ploughshares Literary Magazine's Award for Emerging New Writers, Glimmer Train's Short Story Award for New Writers, and the Asian International Film Festival. In 2009, he joined the PPWC Fiction Competition judging panel, and is on the judging panel for the Crested Butte "Sandy." He lives in Lafayette, CO, with his three ginormous dogs, where he's at work on his latest novel.

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