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*The Writing Life – Mystery Scene Magazine*

## Where the Story Begins

By Rick Mofina

Several years ago, I sat in the newsroom of *The Toronto Star* staring at the note an editor had just given me.

I had to write about a death.

A restaurant owner had died of cancer, I was to talk to his family and write his obituary but I stared at my phone, unable to make the call.

Then I glanced around at the other student interns who were competing for a full-time job. Everyone was going full bore on their stories.

Everyone, except me.

I'd never interviewed anyone about a death and didn't know if I could. It got me doubting whether I would ever become a reporter, let alone survive the paper's tough internship program.

*The Toronto Star* is one of the largest newspapers in North America, legendary for demanding excellence. Ernest Hemingway, one of the paper's feature writers, did not leave on the best terms.

As minutes ticked by, the editor returned to my desk.

"This going to be a problem for you?"

Somewhere between contemplating my phone and my future, it hit me: I was either cut out to be a reporter, or I wasn't.

I made the call.

During my interview with the deceased man's eldest son, I apologized so many times that he consoled me.

Then I pored my heart into the piece, which turned out to be pretty good. A respectful item that the man's family liked.

It was *that* moment, as a rookie in *The Toronto Star's* internship program, which not only launched my reporting career but also laid the foundation for me as crime fiction author of six books.

In fact, my experience as a *Toronto Star* intern is the inspiration for my newest thriller, *The Dying Hour*.

In the book, Jason Wade, a rookie reporter, is competing for a staff job in *The Seattle Mirror's* internship program. He breaks the story of a missing college student whose car is found abandoned along a lonely stretch of road in the Pacific Northwest, near the Canadian border. Along the way, he makes mistakes while grappling with competition and paralyzing self-doubt, much as I did.

At the *Star*, I learned the reporting craft working in the suburban bureaus and the metro news desk at One Yonge Street. I covered a range of stories, including a murder trial, and a takedown by the SWAT team looking for an escaped killer.

I also did time in the, "torture chamber," the cell-like room housing banks of chattering police scanners where you kept your ears pricked for the first hint of a story that could stop the heart of the city.

Or break it.

And woe to the reporter who missed anything on the *Star's* scanners.

By the end of that summer, I would write about death a few more times. And in a news career that would span three decades and several newsrooms, I would write about it in all of its terrible manifestations.

I'll never forget talking to a mother hours after she'd seen her little boy killed before her eyes. Or my face-to-face interview with a murderer on death row who told me his victims visited his cell at night, haunting him from the foot of his bed.

Reporting on death never got easier.

If anything, I grew more philosophical, searching for deeper meaning in its aftermath. In the courage of families, in the determination of detectives and in the lives of reporters who struggled to make sense of the chaos unleashed on them all.

That became the quest of Tom Reed, a hard-driving San Francisco reporter, and Walt Sydowski, a case-hardened SFPD Homicide Inspector, lead characters in my first series. For I instilled in my fiction what I'd observed in life.

My first book, *If Angels Fall*, is a story about loss, redemption and the unsolved murder of a baby girl. Set in San Francisco, it is loosely inspired by an event I'd witnessed in a Toronto subway car -- a scene played out in the opening chapter.

My next book, *Cold Fear*, grew out of my reporting for the *Calgary Herald* on the search for a girl missing in the Rockies. What if, I thought later for my novel set in Montana's Glacier National Park, the FBI didn't buy her parents' version of how she got lost?

My third book, *Blood of Others*, won Canada's top literary prize for crime fiction, the Arthur Ellis Award for Best Novel. James Patterson praised the book, which is drawn from several true cases and has Tom Reed investigating a dying killer who targets shy, lonely women who've lied to him in chat rooms.

In my fourth book, *No Way Back*, which Michael Connelly, calls, "my kind of novel," Reed confronts every reporter's nightmare when he covers a botched heist that results in a cop's murder and a woman taken hostage.

And, *Be Mine*, my fifth Reed-Sydowski book, is a tight psychological story about the murder of a homicide detective whose corpse is found by his girlfriend, a crime reporter.

But it was in writing *The Dying Hour*, with rookie Jason Wade, pursuing the first big story of his news career, which I looked back on mine. Through Jason, it was easy to re-live the thrill of landing a scoop and the adrenaline-fuelled days of my summer at *The Toronto Star*.

Reflecting on it now, it was the season that forged some of the best reporters in the business. Of the dozen or so interns, some went on to become foreign correspondents and senior editors. At least three became syndicated columnists; three have authored books. In total, the group has won, and continues to win, major news awards; including a Pulitzer Prize that changed U.S. foreign policy.

Paul Watson, a *Star* foreign correspondent won the 1994 Pulitzer for the photograph he took of a U.S. soldier's body being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu by a mob of jeering Somalis. Outrage over the image led to the withdrawal of American troops.

And if you want to extend *The Toronto Star's* drive for excelling to all of its ex-

staffers, add Hemingway's Noble Prize for Literature.

Not a bad crowd to run with on your first newspaper job.

Which brings me back to Jason Wade, the rookie crime reporter in *The Dying Hour*. *The Seattle Mirror* introduces him to the story of his life, just as *The Toronto Star* opened the door to the stories of mine.

For me, it started when an editor passed me a note to write about a man who had just died.

For Jason, it all begins when he breaks the story missing Seattle college student whose car is found abandoned along a lonely highway that coils through the mist-shrouded mountains near the Canadian border.