

Author Interview

1. How did you start writing? What was your first piece of writing?

I can't remember my first written piece, but I remember the first time I thought someone might like to read something I'd written. It was an eleventh-grade term paper about Walt Whitman. The teacher liked it, and I acquired my favorite quote: "Do I contradict myself? Very well, then, I contradict myself. I am large—I contain multitudes" (Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*).

2. Why do you write fiction?

Stories are the way I understand life. I often forget people's names. I almost never forget their stories. It's how I make sense of things. It's how I think. How I view the events of my own life. When I write, I'm not a writer at a desk; I'm a construction foreman on a large project, clearing the site, digging the foundation, building the walls. Or I'm an artist painting a picture, brush stroke after brush stroke, laying on color after color until it looks just right. Or a singer, laying down track after track in the studio, searching for exactly the right sound. When I'm on the road signing books, I'm not a writer who wishes he was back at home writing. I'm Elvis before he was Elvis. On the road. Every night, another town. Life is a story. It's who I am.

3. What is the power of story?

Imagination. A reader doesn't read a story as an objective observer. He or she becomes the story. A participant. And as a participant, the reader engages the story with emotion. The story isn't words on a page; it's an experience, one that finds a place in the reader's memory. A memory that creates conflict in the reader's mind and lingers as that conflict is resolved. That's the power of story—the power to move a reader.

4. What do you hope readers will take away from your books?

Every story has a point. *The Sun Also Rises* (Hemingway), *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* (Twain), or *The Firm* (Grisham)—they all have a point, a message, a subject or issue about which the writer was thinking and about which the writer wants the reader to think. I hope readers have an experience with my books that makes them think. I hope my books take them on a journey, and I hope they find the point I had in mind, but they'll have to find it on their own. I'm not telling.

5. Which character in this book is most like you?

Every character in every book comes from somewhere inside the writer. Fiction—readable, entertaining fiction—cannot be written any other way. Every character in my books is some part of me. In these Mike Connolly mysteries I suppose I identify most with Mike Connolly, but that primarily is because he is the character most fully developed. I had to go deeper into myself to find more of him, and in doing that, he became more of me.

6. What actor would you picture playing Mike Connolly in a movie?

Robert Duvall can play any character in any story I've ever written. Give me a call, Bobby, and bring Tommy Lee Jones with you.

7. Which writers have influenced you most?

Mark Twain and Ernest Hemingway—in that order. I first encountered Mark Twain at the age of seven. What a storyteller. But it was Hemingway who most influenced my writing style. Sparse, lean prose. Develop the characters through realistic dialogue. Don't answer every question about the characters. Don't fill in every detail about the story. There's nothing like a Hemingway novel.

8. Describe your writing process.

As a former attorney, I believe that all good writing begins with a legal pad and a black pen. I write out the story idea in one or two sentences. Next, I find a character through whom I can tell that story. I then write out the ending of the book. That's how I prepared for jury trials, and it's a good way to lay out a story. With those things in place, I figure out the chapters with a single sentence for each chapter. Finally, I turn on the computer and start writing out what I see in my mind.

9. Can you share a particularly memorable encounter with a reader?

I remember a lady who came to a book signing in Shreveport, Louisiana. Her name was Connie. She'd come there with a group from Monroe to attend a concert. They arrived early and wandered into the store while they waited. She bought one of my books. It was the first time she'd ever purchased a book signed by the author. I still remember the look on her face.

10. What is one fact about yourself that readers might find most surprising?

I once "mooned" the president of the United States. Actually it was unintentional. I was changing clothes in the parking lot at the

Pentagon when his helicopter flew over. He flew right over my car at the most inopportune moment. There was nothing to do but wave.

OTHER BOOKS BY JOE HILLEY

SOBER JUSTICE
DOUBLE TAKE
ELECTRIC BEACH
NIGHT RAIN

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