

## **How to Write a Bestselling Mystery Novel**

What Happens Next - 01.07.22

Larry Bernstein:

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein.

What Happens Next is a podcast which covers economics, finance, politics, and the arts. I give the speaker just six minutes to make his opening argument.

Today's topic is How to Write a Bestselling Mystery Novel.

The speaker is my close friend Scott Turow who is the author of One L and Presumed Innocent. I have asked Scott to give us a preview of his new book entitled Suspect.

I hope to learn from Scott about how he thinks about constructing a novel and character development. The role of the editor, how to do the rewriting process, and then in the post development how to market a novel and sell the film rights, and ways to generate excitement about the work so that booksellers can sell it.

There is much to cover, so buckle up.

I make this podcast to learn, and I offer this program free of charge to anyone that is interested. Please tell your friends about it and have them sign-up to receive our weekly emails about upcoming shows. If you enjoy today's podcast, please subscribe so that you can continue to enjoy this content.

Ok, let us begin with Scott's opening six-minute remarks.

Scott Turow:

As a novelist, I've written a series of books that are interrelated, but they're not the customary series that follows one character. These books are instead all set in the same locale, which is a fictional Midwestern city, and the characters go from the background in one book to the foreground in another, and then they retreat into the background again. The novel before Suspect was called The Last Trial, which focused on Sandy Stern, who was the defense lawyer in the movie Presumed Innocent that starred Harrison Ford. All novels are going well when there's a character who runs away with the novel who, no matter how romantic it sounds, decides for herself that she deserves a larger role.

In the novel The Last Trial that character was Pinky, Sandy Stern's granddaughter, who was working as an extremely unreliable and erratic paralegal. Eventually people were so attracted to

Pinky that I decided I would give her a novel of her own. Pinky is in her own judgment, weird; she misses signals. Everybody in a room gets a joke but her. She's never had an intuitive understanding of norms and rules. It has proven to make her quite acute, and as a result, an excellent investigator.

She's working as the investigator attached to the law office of a relative, Rik, who's hardworking but he's never been in the limelight in the way he would like. He and Pinky think that they now have a case that will take them into the bright lights. The police chief in the small city of Highland Isle, which is across the river from Kindle County, has hired Rik as the lawyer to conduct a defense of the chief who has been charged with so-called Sextortion, namely, soliciting sex in exchange for promotions in the police department. And this candidly is something happening in police departments all over the United States.

There's a more unusual element: the person accused is a woman, and what she's charged with is shaking down men for sexual favors.

It's been an enormous blessing to have an audience and a readership throughout my career, but it's also a burden, because it's a trick worthy of Houdini to avoid being captured by that audience's expectation. I've always tried to push the boundaries in writing about Pinky, who's 40 years younger than I am, of addiction, different sexual orientation, a different gender.

This is the first of my novels that's written entirely from the point of view of someone who is not an attorney. She's certainly well versed in legal practice, but she's not a lawyer herself. That's the setup for Suspect. I hope it gives people an introduction to the book.

Larry Bernstein:

In your previous novels, the characters were mostly lawyers, prosecutors, judges, and their spouses. They were well educated and lived within upper middle class social norms. That is not the case for the cast of characters in your new book Suspect. Why did you choose to write about members of the lower social class?

Scott Turow:

Pinky doesn't have a lot of money. She was raised in the suburbs, in an affluent setting. That's not going to be her life, and she knows that without any regret. She doesn't dream of owning a house or anything like that. She sees herself as somebody who will always work for a living and doesn't seem to care very much about material things. You're right, she's much more working class than anybody I've ever written about before.

Larry Bernstein:

Next topic is the use of a book series. My first experience with a series of novels goes back to the summer before sixth grade when I read all 110 of the Hardy Boy series. These characters would never grow or seemingly learn from their previous adventures. Each book was a separate mystery to be solved without any character development. This is not true of your novels. We meet your characters in each novel and they have gained from their previous experiences. Why did you decide to give your characters the benefit of personal growth?

Scott Turow:

It came as a shock to me when looking at Amazon to see what reader reviews are like. The book in question was described as Kindle County book number nine. Because I never thought I was writing a series. My goal after *Presumed Innocent* was not to try to rewrite *Presumed Innocent* because I had waited a long time for literary success. I see myself as straddling the stools between the literary novel and the pure mystery.

One of the hallmarks of literary work is an element of psychological realism, character development and even growth. It doesn't necessarily have to be a moral deepening that takes place with the character. But as you point out, they do have to learn something along the way. Or occasionally, as in *Stendhal*, you realize this guy's never going to learn and that is the magnificent takeaway of *The Red and the Black*. That is definitely what I am trying to do. Usually, my characters come away disappointed to some extent. Generally, what has been revealed to them through the course of the so-called mystery is something that leaves them older but wiser but not necessarily more cheerful or optimistic.

Larry Bernstein:

How does a mystery writer do his craft? Is there a lot of outlining, or do you come up with a concept and then go back and then layer in the clues?

Scott Turow:

Beginning a novel for the first several months to a year, I work on the traditional elements of the novel, particularly character and setting and figuring out the inner relationships between the characters and who these people are in psychological terms. Trying to get a thorough sense of the imagined world. The hairpin turns come somewhat intuitively. And there is a point in that process where I will say to myself, well, this is all very interesting, but who in the hell killed her? I will have to figure that out. And I always want the answer to that question to be organic to the world that I've already made, so that I don't have to come in with a *deus ex machina* at the end. I want it to flow from the character relationships, which both makes it believable when it is revealed and unpredictable from the start. Leaving enough breadcrumbs but hiding them is important. You do want the surprises to be real surprises. And some of them come in imagining who these people are. The novel I'm writing now, a character in a love relationship, it's always the case that you're discovering who that person is as the years go on. So yes, is that going to be

a shocking development in the middle of the novel, when the main character, Rusty Sabich, discovered something about this woman he's been living with. And because it's shocking to him, it's also going to be shocking to the reader. It's organic to the plot and the world and understanding, who this woman isn't and has been.

Larry Bernstein:

Your interest in literature and literary theory begins before you go to law school. You attend Harvard Law School, join the prosecutor's office, and then move to criminal defense. You are exposed to a new realm. The underworld, cops, prosecutors, judges, and the courts. I do not know anything about the legal world and neither does most of your audience. You also keep learning; you find out about new methods and evidentiary practices and then I imagine that you have this aha moment where you say I can't wait to apply that to my next literary work. Tell me about it.

Scott Turow:

The best example of that is at one point in *Suspect*, there is DNA evidence extracted from a mosquito found at the crime scene. This was the idea of my wife Adriane, whom Larry knows well. And it was a way to embroider upon the increasing relevance of DNA. When I started out as a prosecutor, there was no DNA. And I often point out to people, if Rusty Sabich were tried for the crime in *Presumed Innocent* in the era of DNA, they would just have backed up the jail van because the case would've been largely hopeless against him.

DNA and the growth in the understanding of human biology and the way that that's been married into the laws is interesting to me. Adriane's idea was what if they got this DNA out of a mosquito? And you could sort of prove that the mosquito was related to who was at the crime scene. And I thought that was just a brilliant idea. Adriane is so proud of the fact that the mosquito is on the cover of the British paperback of *Suspect*.

*Suspect* has had just a delirious reception in the UK where it's been named one of the best or the best book of the year by various journalists.

Larry Bernstein:

You make this book, this work of art and you give it to the world, and then it takes on a life of its own. The graphic designers who make the book covers. It might get made into a movie and teams of people get involved: screenwriters, directors, producers, and actors. Then for the book there is a marketing team too. There are foreign translations of the book. So many people are involved from the genesis of your creative process. It's mindboggling.

Scott Turow:

The most dramatic instance of this is standing on a film set. You look around and there's 200 people at work and you realize what they are working on is bringing to real life something that started out in your imagination. That's a great thrill.

The film aspect is most tangible one, and *Suspect* has been optioned. You're right to focus on the publishing side because people don't understand how dependent the author is on many other people. They do think about editors and agents, but marketing is incredibly important. My publisher Grand Central is nonpareil in their ability to sell books.

People have no idea that far and away the most important ingredient of being a best seller is getting the book into the stores where it can be bought. And yes, of course, Amazon has its own mechanics. And believe me, the publishers pay Amazon for book placement.

Why should you go with a publisher who's got an established record of bestselling books? The answer is because the book sellers, when those salespeople come in, are happy to see them because they're making a living off that. It's an enormous advantage to publish with a company that has a track record of being one of the champions in getting books sold.

There are people who handle the social media and people who do advertising everything from the New York Subways to the little film snippets that are going to appear on Instagram or Facebook. And it's a big team. It really is. I'm grateful to every single one of them, because it takes a lot of very competent people to make a book of success.

Larry Bernstein:

I went into an independent bookstore yesterday in Coconut Grove. It was the first time I'd been in a bookstore probably in at least a year.

Scott Turow:

Was it Books and Books?

Larry Bernstein:

Yes, it was Books and Books.

I walked around, there was a big sign that said, "Support Your Independent Book Seller." I was surprised how few books were in the entire store.

I found four books that I wanted to purchase. And I thought to myself that I really would prefer the Kindle version to the physical books. So, in a moment of weakness, I bought all four e-books from Amazon and then walked out, not compensating the independent bookstore a penny. But

what can I do? I prefer E-books. I do think that the independent book seller provides a service, but I do not know what to do about it.

Scott Turow:

Books and Books is owned by Mitchell Kaplan and is one of the great independent bookstores in the country. Mitchell on top of running a successful conglomerate of bookstores in the Miami area. He is the impresario of the Miami Book Fair, which is a great event every November on the streets of Miami. This is what has killed independent bookstores, what you just did. And yes, they will sell to you online. Uh, and when I'm going to buy a physical book, I try to buy it online. But, you know, I, I am like you, we live in Florida, spend time in Chicago and Southern Wisconsin. You've visited us in these places and to be running around trying to find where did I put that book as opposed to my iPad is much harder. I am inclined to read on the screen.

Larry Bernstein:

We were playing golf this summer when you finished *Suspect*, and you said that now you had to go on the road to market your book at bookstores and other locales. That seems so inefficient. Why not use social media, radio, and podcasting as a better way to leverage yourself to market your book. The bookstore tour seems so 1990.

Scott Turow:

I was out on tour. You go to a city, you do some local publicity, sometimes a newspaper reporter, sometimes somebody from a website will show up to interview you. The best is when you do radio interviews. I did a radio tour right before I hit the road and made appearances by satellite link on 20 radio shows across the country.

The book sellers said repeatedly, wherever I went, I'm going to sell your book online. That's where all these orders are going to come in. And your being in the store is an opportunity to video you and put it up on the website and use that as a prop.

I'm going to sell 1500 copies online in the next couple of weeks. That didn't exist with the last book I published.

And when you deliver the author, hopefully raise a crowd for the store, people come in, they're waiting for the author to appear, they go around the store, they pick up two or three other books. The book seller is happy to have foot traffic in the store. You're being delivered to the store like the toy in the Cracker Jack box. It's not necessarily to sell your book as much as to prop up the relationship between the publisher and the book seller. That's a fact of the business. But I don't know whether touring is going to continue or not. Even when people were standing in line for two hours to buy copies of *Presumed Innocent*, had me sign it, I've never really been convinced that touring was that beneficial. A lot of it has to do with the ancillary benefit to the publisher.

Larry Bernstein:

I got to believe word of mouth is the number one.

Scott Turow:

Absolutely. And how you create that today is social media. I just have not been able to get it together, to maintain the hectic social media presence that some people do. They are going to put up every day on Facebook and then they're going to tweet about it. Younger novelists were all describing the pressure that their publishers put on to spend an hour a day on social media. Well, that's an hour a day that literally comes out of writing time. Everybody's doing it. I'm not positive that it works. Certainly, it's a great thing to have a million Facebook followers, that's terrific. But I don't know when it's measured in the low thousands if it makes any difference.

Larry Bernstein:

What does it mean that you feel pressure from your audience most of whom you will never meet?

Scott Turow:

This is a rich and complicated question because you can get straight jacketed creatively if I was writing every book about the same protagonist. They can't be as deep as when you're writing about new characters or even the same character 15 years later when they're to some extent a different person. I've always tried to keep the expectations of the audience in mind, but not be governed by them and that's tricky. I remember I was publishing my third novel, which I thought of as being a comic novel and different from what I had done in the first two books.

I remember my agent talking to one of the editors around the world, and she asked him, how do you feel if Scott writes this very different book? And he basically came back with this line, I don't know whether Hemingway or Graham Greene who said it, but that all authors really write just one book. I know that a popular interpretation of what I'm doing is that I write courtroom scenes because that's my brand. But what happens in court is so deeply burned into me from my years as a trial lawyer. There's an incredible drama that I understand, a subtext to what's going on and a richness to the representation of reality that's taking place in the courtroom that I just never tire of.

I'm going to be writing in this next book about a different kind of courtroom venue, in the sense that it's small town, not big city, and the cast of characters will be different than what I've typically written about. But the dramatic process of confrontation and discovery in the courtroom, which has been the engine for many of my novels, is the same. I don't feel straight jacketed by that. It's what I know how to do, what I think I'm good at. But most significantly, it's

the engine for the literary revelation that I want to produce that is important to the literature that I write.

Larry Bernstein:

I have been a member of your audience for 35 years. I read *One L* when I was thinking about going to law school after college, and then I read *Presumed Innocent* in one sitting after it came out in the late 1980s. It was a real treat to meet you when I joined the same country club as you. I don't know what I expected when I met you, but when your audience does get to meet you in person, they must have certain expectations. How do you interact with interested fans?

Scott Turow:

I don't know that much about the expectations that people are bringing. Occasionally there's someone who bursts out with, God, I thought you were a lot taller.

Larry Bernstein:

I'm one of those people.

Scott Turow:

But generally, people don't voice those expectations. It's weird for me that people seem thrilled to meet me. I was on a book tour in Phoenix, and there was a guy who proceeded to show me a photograph of a wall of Scott Turow novels that he had. He had flown in from Virginia just to be at this book event with me. The book is both of you and beyond you. It's something you put into the world.

You no longer have the intense, intimate connection you have with the book as it's being written. Very often people will ask me about something in one of the novels, and I'll just have to say, I don't remember anymore. I try to be who I am. I don't have a persona that some authors assume. I don't need to put on my cowboy hat and my French coat before I make my public appearances. I remember when I was in college reading essays by both Saul Bellow and Philip Roth, in which they were arguing that authors shouldn't waste their time meeting the public. It's been detrimental to those authors who are not great in public. Anne Tyler is one of the best living American novelists, but she's terminally shy and she's never been able to tour and that clearly has come at some detriment to her sales. She's a great writer.

Larry Bernstein:

What about J.D. Salinger who hid from the public?

Scott Turow:

What about J.D. Salinger? It worked for him at the time, and part of it worked because of the mystery of who he was and that is very hard to do that today. Either you're available for

interview or you're not. It might still work for Elena Ferrante who wrote this magnificent quartet of novels. Nobody knows who Elena Ferrante is; it's a pseudonym. There's a lot of speculation. Some people think that her husband who grew up in Naples had some part in writing it. One of the Italian journals thought they had outed her, although I'm not positive that they were correct. There's that mystery about who's behind the books. But authors are now expected to be known. And I have found one of the great privileges of my life is getting to know other authors. Sometimes the old saying is true that writers are better read but for the most part, I have not found that to be true at all. And like the other members of this rock band Dave Barry and Dave and his wife Michelle are dear friends of ours, and Stephen King and Tabby, his wife is even funnier than he is.

Knowing authors has just been one of the greatest privileges of my life.

Larry Bernstein:

I was reading your Wikipedia page and it mentions that you have sold over 30 million books. This must blow your mind.

Scott Turow:

I try not to get invested in it. It's just like Hollywood. I have never ever looked at my Wikipedia entry.

Larry Bernstein:

Oh, you'd be shocked, it has the year that you were born.

Scott Turow:

I might be, but I'm not going there. I've never Googled Scott Turow. I don't want to become overly invested in my public persona. It's why I've never moved to Hollywood. I like the life I have, and I know who I am. I see myself first as a father and a husband and those are the most important things in my life. I love the excitement that I've been feeling working on this new novel and feeling this creative world come into being. Figuring out the turns and the depth of the characters and then getting it on the page and seeing the way that it's marching along.

That's what I want to do rather than trying to build an audience on social media. At the end of the day the books are there. I've been lucky enough to have the kind of success that I've had. I always say that all writers are contemporary writers. Whether we're talking about Shakespeare or somebody alive today, they are read because of their continuing relevance to the audience that's alive in the present tense. You can't control that because of our inability to fully anticipate the future.

Larry Bernstein:

Tell us about the editing process, is this where the magic happens?

Scott Turow:

I've had a wonderful relationship with the three editors who have worked on my novels. My longest relationship was with Jonathan Galassi, who was the publisher at Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux. And with Deb Futter and then Ben Sevier at Grand Central. Jonathan and I would meet at the Lowell Hotel in New York and sit in a suite, and Jonathan would literally go over every page in the first draft that I had sent him and free associate, and say things like, "I read that paragraph and it's such a beautiful paragraph, but then I got to this word, and I think you need to rethink this word."

And "this is such a great scene, but I'm still not sure I fully know what's happening to her in this scene. I wasn't really understanding your main character at this moment." That was magical in part because he's such a brilliant guy. It was just wonderful to have intense light of his huge intelligence focused on what I had written. And 100% it made every book better. Jonathan eventually stopped having time for it. He went from being responsible for his line of authors to the entire house. Nobody has time to edit that way anymore. You hear authors who hire outside editors because they can't get enough attention from the people who are supposed to be editing their books.

I've always found the input of my editors very worthwhile.

Larry Bernstein:

What about your rewrite process? When I go visit the JP Morgan Library in New York, they have exhibits of the original drafts of famous works by Hemingway and Fitzgerald and others. You see the first typed draft, and then you'll see the most incredibly extensive rewrite imaginable. Now we have Microsoft Word since the late 80s. How has this computer program changed the rewrite process?

Scott Turow:

I would not be having this conversation if you were it not for the invention of the word processor because I started out writing by hand on the morning commuter train, and I just didn't have time to write in sequence because I wanted to get it onto the page, whatever was burning with me that day. I'd be creating scenes in the book that eventually became Presumed Innocent, that were largely based on some transmogrification of what I'd been feeling in my world as a prosecutor. It resulted in passages that would ultimately appear all over the book. I never had any idea how I was going to put that together until the PC was invented. So that's always been important in my process. And I still write the same way with little passages coming to me and I write them out.

They're generally either under the character's name or sometimes they're thematic, and then I've got to weave it all together. Once I submit a first draft these days, I am on a production schedule. I still do a lot of rewriting. They're usually four or five of them and the differences are not always as dramatic as what you're talking about with Hemingway and Fitzgerald, a lot of that has taken place before the first draft ever gets to New York. The point I'm at right now, creating that world, getting things down on paper, I can still go ahead and say, now this character isn't working. You can literally look through the draft in these early stages and see me changing my mind about characters or plot. Sometimes I'll just type out no and keep going rather than erasing. Once I send the first draft to New York, I'm on a train with limited ability to change things after that.

Larry Bernstein:

What are you optimistic about your craft, about the novel, about mysteries, about the literary world?

Scott Turow:

It's less diverse because of the concentration of publishing. I lament that because there are inevitably voices that are not recognized. Maybe somebody who would be the next Shakespeare is never going to get the chance to get off the ground. But there are a lot of good books and more than I can read. There's a lot of wonderful writers who are finding enough support in the literary environment that they're able to continue.

Larry Bernstein:

What do you think of audio books, especially for your work?

Scott Turow:

People tell me, sort of apologetically, I listen to your book in the car. I'm always at pains to point out to them that if you are lucky, if you grow up in a blessed environment, your first experience of literature is having it read to you. That is how you first come to appreciate it. And what happens later is just a translation of the skills that you've developed as a child listening to books being read to you. You become eventually the person who reads them to themselves.

Right before we came back to Florida, I spent a fabulous hour with my granddaughter in Evanston, reading to her, and she sagged against me. It was for me it was an incredible intimate moment with this effervescent child. Maybe she'll remember, maybe she won't. I always will. Audio books rock. I remember a couple of years ago I decided I was going to read War and Peace. I was going to go all the way through it. I listened when I was exercising. I listened in the car. I read at night, and I got through it. Very often these days I'll be both reading and listening. It's a great way to experience a book.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks to Scott for joining us today.

If you missed last week's show, check it out. The topic is how to get your kid a job. We had two speakers, Lauren Rivera who is a management professor at Northwestern's Kellogg School and the author of *Pedigree: How Elite Students get Elite Jobs*. And our second speaker was Beth Hendler-Grunt who is the author of *The Next Great Step: The Parents' Guide to Launching our New Grad into a Career* and a career advisor.

I have a junior and senior in college right now and getting that first job is a big topic in the Bernstein family household right now, so I thought it was an important topic.

I would like to make a plug for next week's show. The topic will be pickleball. This is the hottest new sport. Player enthusiasm is off the charts. A few blocks from my house in Miami Beach, four rarely used tennis courts were repurposed into 12 pickleball courts and the place is a zoo. It is teeming with players from dawn till dusk. My guest will be close friend Steve Kuhn who founded the new Major League Pickleball, you know the one where Tom Brady and LeBron are team owners. Steve is incredibly creative and highly excitable. You will love hearing from him about this pickleball phenomenon.

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I would like to thank our audience for your continued engagement with these important issues, good-bye.