

Ten Questions answered by National Award Winning Thriller Author Ed Mitchell

Q1: Your stories are very contemporary and seem to be autobiographic. Are they?

A: Just the 216 love scenes.

Seriously, in 99 percent of what you read in my stories it is not a one-for-one lifting out of my life. Instead it's an extension or adjustment of my experiences or people I've met or places I've seen molding them into the plot, scenes, emotions, and characters that I bring on stage for readers to enjoy.

One rule of writing I've heard is "write what you know." I express that rule a bit differently. Leverage what you know. What I leverage into my stories includes living in a foster family, serving 25 years in the Army, traveling in Asia, Latin America, and Europe; as well as observing, like you have, current political, economic, and terrorist events; plus marrying, divorcing, being in car crashes, burying pets, and losing loved ones to cancer.

I believe my thrillers are realistic and believable because I make it easy for the reader to connect with events in the story similar to those in their life.

Q2: Why do you write?

A: Humans are storytellers. In some of us the drive is almost maternal in strength. We're driven to give our story life by getting it out of our minds and onto paper or onto the computer screen. I have that drive, strong enough to keep me writing for over twenty-five years.

Second, my mother fueled my drive to tell story when she taught me to read while sitting at her side. She instilled in me the love of reading, of being transported into different lands with exotic people doing incredible deeds. Over the years, like many people, I came to appreciate the magic author have to create stories that touch peoples souls and stay with them for decades. Reading was the footpath that led me to the point where I decided to attempt to create the magic that I enjoyed so much.

Third, my birth mother was mentally ill most of my life slipping in and out of mental hospitals. I wondered as I grew up if that insanity had been passed on to me, simmering to emerge some day in my life. When I was thirty I concluded that sanity exists in a person when they are creative in positive ways— not in destructive ways. Being a published author validates my sanity. It keeps a lid on the simmering pot.

Fourth, I enjoy writing. I enjoy the challenge to communicate in as few words as possible the feelings bubbling in my characters, in painting the scent and feel of a location, in portraying action. I enjoy creating the magic, especially when it works for the reader.

Q3: Why do you write thrillers and not mystery or other genres?

A: I like to kid my mystery author friends by saying that, thrillers are what mystery writers wish they could write. Thrillers are more complex than mysteries. The thriller author usually is found entwining events and characters spread around the globe along with a large splash of technical, scientific, or historical data. The skill of the author is in how well he or she weaves the disparate threads into a recognizable, believable pattern so by the time the reader finishes the last chapter he or she is satisfied with the ending.

My publisher doesn't like me to say this but it's true. Since my Gold Lust series of thrillers is a saga of a family it has a strong romance genre component. In my stories soldiers or FBI agents are not portrayed just in the action they are involved with. They have parents, spouses, children, and pets (just like you and me) that spice up and complicate their lives.

Q4: Where do your ideas for stories come from?

A: From heavy doses of alcohol, drugs, and wild women.

Actually, the idea for the Gold Lust series of thrillers about an Army counter-terrorist who resigns his commission to help his ailing foster parents came to me in 1981 while attending the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California.

After class one day I was at the beach thinking how useless it was for a terrorist to blow himself up in a cafe and kill five or six people. It dawned on me that if we ever faced a terrorist general who had the strategic, logistic, and tactical skills trained into our military, that America would experience a terrible day. I had this idea 20 years prior to the 9/11 attack in New York City.

That day I realized that a story about such a mastermind turning on sleeper cells in American would be informative and interesting. That's when I began the Gold Lust series.

Q5: How do you write your thrillers?

A: First I come up with a beginning, then a believable ending. If I can't conceive of a satisfying, believable ending I don't write that story. Once I get the beginning and ending I then fill in the rest of the book by outlining each scene leading from chapter 1 to the ending.

As adjunct to the outline, I create the critical intelligence sequence (or clue sequence) listing what critical information the protagonist and hero/heroine sequentially generate or have access to and in what scene or chapter that information occurs.

Also In parallel to the plot/story outline I create a character list summarizing the attributes, motivations, and names of the primary and secondary characters.

Next, I write each chapter trying to avoid getting bogged down editing and re-writing a chapter over and over. I do edit as I go along but steer clear of getting sucked into the tar pit of trying to create the perfect chapter before I've written an integrated story of at least 30 chapters in length (400 pages).

Why you ask? Because the integrated story may take me in an unexpected direction not in my outline. When that happens, and it routinely does, the time spent on polishing the early chapter may turn into wasted effort on material that will be tossed out.

Q6: Which of the characters you have created in your Gold Lust series are your favorites?

A: That's a tough question because a character, good or bad, doesn't appear in my book unless they interest me and contribute to twisting the plot in unexpected ways.

Each of them is like an old friend who I respect for their strengths while accepting their weaknesses. My stories would not work without the characters I selected.

Q7: What has been the most surprising aspect of being an author?

A: When I started out to write my first thriller I had no clue the type of experiences I would have as an author trying to gain recognition for my work.

Launching my first thriller at the National Steinbeck Center in Salinas was unique. As was participating in the California State sesquicentennial on the Capital steps holding a quarter million dollar gold nugget. Or using a rubber snake to teach sixty fourth-grade students in Fairbanks, Alaska that writing a story is easy. Or having fruit flies fly up my nose while doing a reading at the Maui Writers Conference.

The variety of author events and how they turn out are a constant surprise.

Q8: What do you enjoy the most of being an author?

A: I greatly enjoy the writing. But then I have to wait months to learn if I've successfully created the magic. I'm on pins and needles waiting until the first buyers finish reading the stories so I can find out what they enjoyed or if my efforts are a bust. Because I can never experience the books as the readers do. They are walking down the path for the first time and experiencing the twists and turns without knowing what I've laid out for them. Learning that the stories work is a high point for me.

Q9: Why did you start a humorous newsletter about the behind the scenes happenings of being an author?

A: A sense of humor helps an author get through the rejections and struggles to become well known. Plus, I found it surprising what happens to an author after being published. You don't get to go back to writing. No, you have to market the book, do radio and TV shows, schedule and do tour events, and travel to bookstores or

event sites without getting lost. I thought my readers would enjoy a view behind the scenes so I started the newsletter.

I was right. Time after time I've had readers tell me how enjoyable the newsletter is. Some have been reading since 1999 when the first newsletter went out on the internet.

Q10: If you could provide an aspiring author one piece of advice, what would it be?

A: Enjoy the journey whether you ever get published or not, whether you sell one million or just one book. And while you're on that journey appreciate your spouse or significant other. Be kind to them and thank them for all the support they give you, especially when you receive rejection letters or run out of gas in the desert on the way to an important event.