

Writing Numbered Account

“How did you write your first book?” “Where did you get the idea?” “How did you know you could do it?” “Were you certain it was going to get published?” There you have them: my four most frequently asked questions. The best way I can answer them is to talk a little about how I came to write my debut novel, *Numbered Account*. Here goes:

Way back in 1994, I was living in the lovely lakeside town of Neuchatel, Switzerland, where I was the CEO of a small Swiss watch company called Giorgio Beverly Hills Timepieces. I’d started up the company in 1991, and after three years, we had fifty employees and were selling the watches in over thirty countries around the world. All that jetting around the world sounds fun - and believe me, lots of it was – but for some reason I just wasn’t happy. I wasn’t sure what I should be doing, but I knew this wasn’t it.

Searching for another way to make a living, I resurrected a dream I’d had in college about becoming a novelist. Back then, I was a huge Hemingway fan - “nut” is more like it. I didn’t know much about writing, but I liked the idea of sipping Sangria on the streets of Pamplona, dressed dashingly in white while waiting for the bulls to come charging down the street. Or, ambling along the Boulevard St. Michel on my way to the Café Deux Maggots for a nightcap, all of Paris twinkling around me. Yes, I decided. Writing might just be the life for me. At some point in my senior year at Georgetown, I even started writing an outline about a thriller that took place in the Himalayas, high on the slopes of Mt. Everest. I even had a title: *Tigers of the Snow*. Unfortunately, that’s as far as I got. An outline of Act I plus a title. Impressive, I know.

You see, I made this crucial mistake of trying to write the book during the summer right after I’d graduated. I didn’t make it to the Himalayas, or even to Paris or Pamplona. Instead, I hunkered down in the attic of my fraternity house on Prospect Street, where as a weather forecaster might say, “temperatures routinely peaked at one hundred degrees.” Instead of ice-cold sangria, I was drinking luke-warm Bud. And in place of the stampeding bulls, I was catching Oriole games on a black and white TV. Glamorous, it wasn’t. Worst, I didn’t write a single page. Not one.

So much for old “Hem.” It was time to get a job.

Now, we’re back to 1994 with me thinking about quitting my job to become a writer. A “novelist,” no less. I was newly married, and I asked my wife, Sue, what she thought about the idea. She looked at me and said, “Have you written any short stories I don’t know about?” I said, “no.” Then, she asked if I’d taken any English classes in college. Again, I shook my head. “But I read a lot,” I said. Sue smiled.

Here we were, both in our early thirties, with big dreams, no kids, the world basically wide open in front of us. Neither of us were what you’d call whimsical. We had no intention of living the life of a starving artist. We enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle and knew it took money to have it. There was no pressing reason for me to quit my six-figure job cold turkey just because I didn’t love the corporate world. Okay, Neuchatel wasn’t exactly New York, but “come on, buddy, tough it out. What kind of wimp, are you?” That’s what most wives would have said. Not Sue.

Sue gave me a hug and said, “If you really think you can do this, I think you can, too.”

I quit three months later. And a month after that, we moved to Austin, Texas, (one of my favorite places in the world!) where I’d done my MBA to give this writing thing a go. Now here comes my first rule about writing: Give yourself the chance to succeed.

Sue and I had saved enough money to give my “new career” about two years...if Sue worked, too, that is. With her resume, she landed a job at a place called Southwest Industries that owned Astroturf, the artificial grass that football players can’t get enough of. In a short while, she was made head of their international sales department. While we weren’t pulling in the big bucks, we weren’t starving either. A little pressure was taken off my shoulders. I had my two years.

Here’s rule two: Just write.

Every morning, I’d sit down at my desk no later than 8 AM and I’d work all day. That’s right, a regular workday: 8 – 5. Or more often: 7 – 5:30. The discipline I’d acquired working in a Swiss bank, and later, founding my own company, came in handy. There is simply no substitute for hours strapped to a chair staring at a blank piece of paper. Remember what Mark Twain said about writing? “Apply back of pants to seat of chair.” Well, it’s true.

Newsflash: There is no muse. And if there is, she takes her own sweet time about showing up. It’s my experience that she arrives sometime after you’ve cranked out about three pages and are finally building up something that resembles momentum.

So, where did I get my idea? From my experiences working at a large Swiss bank. In fact, I can pretty much pinpoint the moment it happened. You can find it in *Numbered Accounts* somewhere around page 75 in the paperback, the scene where Sterling Thorne, the American DEA agent, addresses the assembly of Swiss bankers. That meeting really happened. The agent’s name wasn’t Sterling Thorne, but everything else was pretty much verbatim. I remember standing there getting a shiver down my spine and thinking, “this would make an awesome book!” So there you go. It’s really true what they say about writing what you know.

Nine months later, I had the first draft of the book. Six hundred double-spaced pages. One-inch margins. I took a long look at it and decided it needed work. Lots of it. January through April 1996 was spent rewriting the book in its entirety.

Give yourself the chance to succeed.

Just write.

Here’s rule three. Be humble. Accept criticism in the spirit it is given. Enough people told me the book was good, but not great, that I knew it needed some reshaping. My butt went right back on my chair!

Then luck came my way. I was able to get the manuscript into the hands of a family friend named Farlan Myers. Farlan read the first fifty pages and thought it was good enough to show to

a friend of his who knew a thing or two about writing. In fact, the friend was his boss at J. Walter Thompson advertising agency, a guy who wrote a little in his spare time. That man's name was James Patterson. Or as I call him, "Saint Jim."

Back then, Jim was still working full-time while writing the first of the Alex Cross books. I think he'd published *Along Came A Spider* and *Kiss The Girls* by the time he received my magnum opus. Here's the amazing thing: He actually read it. This man who not only ran one of the world's largest ad agencies, but woke up every morning at 4:30 to write another chapter or two of his novels, took the time to read a total stranger's work. Not all of it, to be sure, but enough to see that maybe this kid named Reich had a little talent. Emphasis on "little." That is what you call a "quality human being," or better yet, a "gentleman."

One day in early May, I get a phone call from Jim telling me that he'd read some of the book and enjoyed it enough to break his long held rule about recommending another writer to his agent, Richard Pine. (Editorial note: insert cardiac arrest scene [HERE](#).) Ten minutes later, I got a call from New York. It was Richard telling me that he, too, had read the book and that he wanted to be my agent.

That was a no brainer!

(An aside about publishing: Agents are crucial. They are keepers of the keys to the kingdom. A good agent can make you. A bad one can break you. But also remember this: if you can't write, no agent can help you. Contrary to popular myth, literary agents are not rude, stuck-up snobs who wouldn't know a good book if it bit them in the you-know-what. In fact, agents are probably the kindest, most passionate, and helpful people you will meet in the industry. Together, a writer and an agent make a team of one. And by the way, they are dying to lay their eyes on saleable manuscripts. Richard tells me that he can spot a writer with talent inside of two pages. And, if he's got a story to tell inside of five.)

I guess that leads to another rule. Don't ask what number, I've lost count. Make sure your work is as good as it can be before you show it to a professional. You only make a first impression once.

Okay so back to the story.

Richard Pine was now my agent. Little did I know that my work had only just begun. Between May, 1996, and January, 1997, we (and I say "we" because Richard was there every paragraph of the way) rewrote *Numbered Account* at least five times. My first problem was that my hero, Nicholas Neumann, didn't quite speak as an American should. I remember Richard's comment. I paraphrase:

"Chris, this guy Neumann, he's an American right?"

"Yeah."

"A Marine, too?"

“Yeah.”

“Then why in the world does he sound like Lord Peter *%\$#! Wimsey?”

“Oops.”

Credit my love of John le Carre, Ken Follett, Frederick Forsyth, and all things British. How else was a hero supposed to talk but like George Smiley?

John Irving says that “anyone can write a novel. Only a writer can re-write one.” Or something to that effect. Regardless, it’s true. The way to make your bones in this business is through rewriting your work. And rewrite and rewrite. By the time, I finished *Numbered Account*, I could have recited it verbatim for Books on Tape. And don’t ever ask me if I re-read my work for fun. Believe me, if a writer’s done his job, he never wants to see a finished book again. I read Nelson DeMille for fun. Mine are work.

So anyway, there we were in late January 1997. I’d sent in my manuscript to Richard (again) and was awaiting his comments. I called him on a cold, wet Tuesday morning from Austin and asked snarkily, “So, what’s wrong with it this time?”

A (snarky) pause. “Nothing. That’s why I sent it out to auction.”

I swallowed. Hard. Then I asked what exactly he meant. You see, during all this time, I’d never really gotten around to asking to whom he hoped to sell it, or for how much. None of that seemed important. The book was the only thing that mattered. *Just write.*

That week passed by slowly. The word, “glacial” comes to mind. To make matters worse, Sue was feeling dreadful. Some kind of stomach thing going around. On Thursday, she showed her face at my office door. In her hand she was holding something that looked suspiciously like an EPT. If you don’t know what those initials mean, you won’t appreciate the story. And for some reason, she was smiling. “Chris, we’re pregnant.” I smiled back, of course, but my stomach started doing cartwheels.

We’d just spent the rest of our savings on a new house, my wife was pregnant, and my agent had disappeared into the wilds of Manhattan without a trace. No one, it appeared, was interested in buying the book.

The rest of Thursday came and went. Then Friday.

Finally, at three o’clock, Richard called. “Chris, it’s Richard.”

“I know who it is.” To this date, I maintain that I was as cool as a cucumber. Richard has mentioned something about me sounding like I was having a nervous breakdown.

“I have some news,” he went on. Did I mention that he’s a cruel man?

“Yes?”

“We sold the book.”

“We did? I mean, ‘you did?’”

“To Delacorte for \$750,000.”

Screeech! The world actually stopped. I swear it to this day. Everything froze. I can still see myself holding the phone in my kitchen at our new home on Pickfair Drive in Austin, Texas. It was dreary outside, and I’m certain that the clock read 3:13. Then everything started back up, and now things we’re going fast. Richard told me that he’d sold the book to Leslie Schnur at Delacorte and that she’d be calling in a while to introduce herself. I think he also told me to calm down. He didn’t want Leslie thinking that I was some kind of nut.

I replaced the receiver. I took one calm step. Then another. And then, I broke into a run across the kitchen, across the living room, and into the bedroom where Sue was resting. I leaped onto the bed and started jumping up and down.

“Sue, we sold the book. We sold the book. For \$750,000!”

Embarrassing behavior, I know, for a thirty-five-year-old man with degrees from several prestigious institutions of higher learning. The gnomes in Zurich would not have been pleased.

But, I couldn’t have cared less. I jumped. I screamed. I broke down and cried.

Finally, Sue said, “Honey, would you please stop jumping on the bed. You’re making me sick!”

Fast forward one year. Today Show. Tom Snyder. *Forbes* Magazine. Starred PW review. (Other less glowing reviews...but who cares about them?!)

Numbered Account debuted at #13 on “the List,” as we, in the know, call the *New York Times* Bestseller List. It stayed on the list for six weeks, going as high as #9. Better yet, it kept on selling for months. The paperback did even better, and to this day, that darned book has sold somewhere north of a million copies.

I’ll answer those four questions now.

I sat my butt in a chair and did it.

Half from my life. Half from my imagination. (Did I mention that I read a lot?)

I just knew.

And, yes.

A million copies. Not bad for a first effort.