

**Sisters in Crime Hawaii, January 15, 2011**  
**Minutes of the Luncheon Meeting at the Hale Koa Hotel, Kalia II Room, Honolulu.**

Our speaker was Douglas Corleone, former New York City criminal defense attorney. He now lives on Oahu, in Ko'olina, writing novels full time. Doug is the author of *One Man's Paradise*, winner of the 2009 Minotaur Books/Mystery Writers of America First Crime Novel Award. He brought along his wife, Jill, and lively 18-month-old-son, Jack. During a delicious gourmet lunch, Doug expansively and patiently informed and entertained us.

**Douglas Corleone's life as a New York City criminal defense attorney**

During lunch, before Doug's speech, we asked him questions. (We were so eager for his answers and he was so obliging that he was lucky to get to eat!) *Question: As a criminal defense attorney, would you ask your client if he was guilty?* "No, because if he was, I couldn't put him on the stand. I knew anyway, because I'd read all the discovery, the toxicology reports, etc. My job was to poke holes in the prosecutor's case." It all came down to plea bargaining: negotiations between prosecutors and defense attorneys—the process was not about justice." Plea bargains serve an important function: they save the state money. He spent nine years in that job and left "because there was very little satisfaction and gratitude. Criminal law is an adversarial system. Being a criminal defense attorney is a thankless job, with high stress and long hours littered with obstacles. Many lawyers go home angry."

How did he get into law? Doug grew up in New Jersey with a single mother who liked shopping in the malls. That bored him, so he carried his Hardy Boys novels with him and told his mother *he* wanted to write those kinds of books. His mother said that was a hobby, not a career. So he went into law. He envisioned representing beautiful women who were innocent. They did not beat down his door. He opened his own practice straight out of law school. "It was exciting—for the first couple of days." Then he discovered that "nobody trusts you, especially criminal clients." Personally, he wanted to go back into the law, but his wife didn't want him to continue. They decided to move away from that climate and chose Hawaii. "Jill was the ultimate push."

**His writing life: "A long, winding path"**

He wrote his first draft on Waikiki Beach in three weeks, the final draft in four months. He began writing in 2005 and got published in 2010. He received 85 rejections. Worse than the rejections were those that "came close." Searching for an agent, he sent out 30 query letters. Number 30 responded positively and represented him. Today publishers are looking for international thrillers, spy stories, high-tech suspense novels, etc. Readers today are not so interested in detective novels. His agent contract expired. He submitted *One Man's Paradise* to small presses, with no success. Then he entered St. Martin Minotaur's crime novel competition. He won the award and they accepted his book. Ironically, Minotaur originally turned it down. They paid a \$10,000 advance against royalties and printed 6,000 copies. "Author advances have remained stagnant for over 50 years. Today the average writer is expected to promote his own books," for instance by hiring a publicist, which costs about \$5,000. His book is in hard cover and on Kindle (no

paperback is planned). He makes the same royalty for both editions. The publisher sells his novel for 11.99 on Kindle. He protested that the norm is \$9.99. The publisher refused to lower the price.

His current agent told him that now editors want long-term authors who will produce two books a year! Romance novels, six books a year! He produces one per year. There are fewer book readers today, according to publishers. If a hard cover doesn't sell well, it does not go to paperback.

Publishers have just about done away with paperbacks. They are not collectible; many readers prefer hard covers. "If they do away with hard covers I don't know if I'll want to continue writing novels." The paperback craze started in the 1960s. Since the introduction of the e-book, paperback sales have dropped significantly. "I imagined that my first novel would be a paperback, but it will not be. I was shocked to find that out. How I'm going to build an audience at this point is beyond me." Libraries account for one-fifth of sales. About author James Patterson and how he grinds out his books: He writes an outline of about two pages and hands it off to another writer, pays him or her \$10,000, maybe \$15,000. With Patterson's name on it, it becomes a *New York Times* bestseller. "Is it something I want to read? No."

Doug buys most of the books he reads on Kindle. "Bookstores are becoming irrelevant because you can order bestsellers, etc. on Kindle, Nook, Amazon." However, the publishing industry is not in imminent danger. About Barnes & Noble: "They—and their employees—care more about books than Borders does." His book (new) costs \$18.51 on Amazon; \$3.99 used.

### **Getting a publisher: three recommendations**

1. Get an agent. He recently signed with a Writers House agent (his third agent.). "Now is a good time to seek an agent. It's easier now than ever. Many agents only accept e-mail queries. Buy the *2011 Writers Guide to Literary Agents*. Personalize each query letter." He also recommends networking to meet agents by attending writers' conventions such as Bouchercon, Left Coast Crime, Malice Domestic, etc.
2. Try to get an agent and/or traditional publisher first, before you consider self-publishing.
3. Befriend an established author (but not to beg him to get you to his agent).

### **Where do his characters come from?**

Obviously they have to be larger than life. His protagonist, Kevin Corvelli, is a man of self-loathing, a flawed man, full of self-deprecating humor, neurotic and impatient, but impervious to threats. "I abhor protagonists who are perfect and always do the right thing, especially when they are lawyers." His sidekick, Jake Harper, becomes Kevin's conscience. Milt Cashman is a parody of one lawyer in particular. Gretchen is a parody of all news commentators. The story is based on the case of Natalee Holloway—her disappearance in Aruba.

### **The writing process.**

“I start with a scrap of paper, then make an outline, which I abandon. I write seven days a week, but when it’s not going well, I stand around and annoy my wife.” He does his research while he’s writing. He began by writing two drafts and found that wasteful. Now he writes the final draft from the beginning. “I’m a minimalist” he says. He doesn’t do a formal description of Kevin, his protagonist, but the reader gets to know him well. “I like the reader to share in the experience.”

### **The worst advice Doug ever received.**

1. You must have a complete first draft before beginning revisions. Not true.
2. Avoid reading books on writing. “This is also terrible advice. I read lots of books on how to tighten the plot and conceive characters. *Writing Mysteries* by Sue Grafton, a book of short essays, is my favorite how-to book.”

### **Advice.**

1. Create a protagonist with a unique voice. He should be a bit of an outlaw with a code of living. Make him larger than life.
2. Don’t overwrite. Focus on action and dialogue. Don’t stuff in research. *Moby Dick* would never be published today; nobody wants to read 50 pages about whales.
3. Publishing your novel should *not* be your end goal. Honing your craft should be your main objective.
4. Read, read, read. I only read in my genre—Raymond Chandler, John Grisham, Steve Martini, Denis Lehane, Charles Bukowski, etc.

*Q:* Did you send your manuscripts to friends to critique?

*A:* Jill reads my books. I don’t need feedback from other people. I’m a very discerning reader. I read 50 to 75 novels a year, so I know what good writing is and what’s good in my own book.

*Q:* Did you bring copies of your book today?

*A:* No, because I’m lazy. And I don’t want to pressure anybody to buy my book.

Doug is also writing screen plays of his books and has bought software to do that. His second novel, *Night on Fire*, will be out later this year. His third novel, *Choice of Evils*, will be published in 2012. You’ll find him on Facebook, where he says he shares a lot of information about bookstores, etc. His website is [www.douglascorleone.com](http://www.douglascorleone.com).