

This was a way of getting inside the circle that had so far boxed me out.

The Patterson School of Writing

Becoming James Patterson's coauthor was the best thing I could do for my writing career

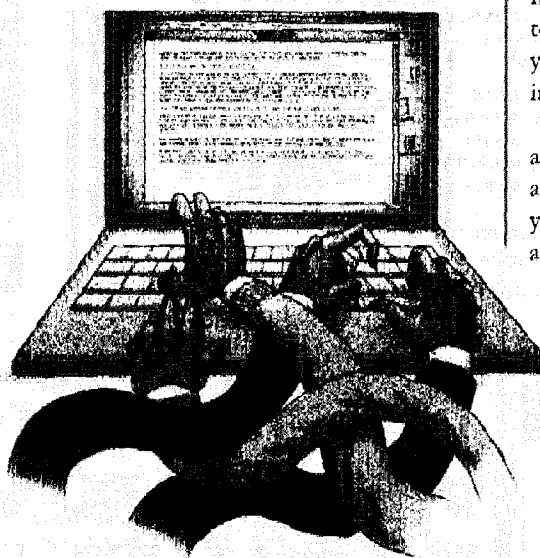
BY ANDREW GROSS

My first novel, which I wrote 10 years ago, didn't exactly have a Grishamesque effect on my career. It got close: I found a top-notch agent and for a week, my head swelled with the rosy forecast of a publisher's bidding war. But then it died. Every publisher passed. A month later, my "masterpiece" was a stray disc tossed in the back of a drawer, where it still lies. The only real noise it made was a loud thud in the final publisher's circular file.

Yet, to my amazement, the "thud," as I now refer to it, didn't actually echo in one publisher's trash bin. Instead, the publisher passed my book along to its biggest-selling author. Out of the blue one day, my agent called. "Would you be interested in taking a call from James Patterson?"

Would I be interested? I would have done a conga dance if the mailman called, if he had a few nice things to say about my book.

Jim and I met for breakfast soon after. Over an omelet, he told me, "You've got the goods, Andy. I know why it didn't sell. And if you want, you can take my advice and polish it up for another year



and resubmit it—or maybe I can interest you in something else."

"Something else" turned out to be that Jim had many, many stories to tell and not enough time to tell them all. He outlined a story he wanted to do, about four women crime fighters. I suddenly saw this as a way of getting inside the circle that had so far boxed me out. Inspired, I went home that afternoon and banged out two chapters—a veritable freight train of pace and alarm. I faxed them over. "Not bad," Jim said, "but if you're going to do this thing with me, the story's gonna have to move just a little more quickly."

We ended up working together for seven years and coauthored five novels together.

Iwon't go into who did what, or what the working arrangements were like, or whether Jim's a nice guy or not (incidentally, he is).

But I will tell you what I learned. Working with Jim was like receiving an M.F.A. in thriller composition—with an M.B.A. thrown in.

I learned about pace, the kind of 24-like pace, when a story is meant to be devoured

in a sitting or two. Where multiple chapters drive you from one to another before you even look up. Especially in the opening 50 pages and at the end.

I learned how to plot. How to map out a 100-chapter story in a detailed outline, and figure out the puzzle pieces before you wade into the first page. How to create vivid scenes that stay with readers like movie scenes. And how to create surprises.

I learned the importance of making your lead character someone who readers love. To make them crucially invested in that character's struggle, right from the opening scenes. And how to make your bad guys bad. Real bad. It's a simple formula, maybe, but how many books do you put down at the end and say, "I just didn't really care"?

I learned how to edit. To strip scenes down to the essential action that drives the plot. How not to fall in love with your own prose. I can't tell you how many painstakingly worked-out scenes never showed up in the final draft. (From time to time, some rather important clues, too.)

In sum, I learned how to write for one's audience, not the people you want them to be.

This month, I published my own thriller novel. And the truth is, it's not a Patterson clone. My scenes sometimes run on a little longer; my characters' stories evolve. It doesn't start with a horrifying death—or 20. And instead of going into an adrenaline-withdrawal as you turn the last page, you just might cry.

There are a million ways to get your first novel published. For me, it all started with a "thud" that didn't take place 10 years ago. It turned out to be the luckiest "rejection" of my writing life. ■

Andrew Gross's novel, *The Blue Zone* (Morrow), is #11 on our bestseller list (p. 24).