

# A Promising New Voice

By Dorinda Ohnstad

Miami Beach resident Anthony Gagliano was born in New York City and attended Queens College. A Rhodes Scholar candidate, he briefly attended the graduate writing program at Columbia University before deciding it was time to get a job. For the next twenty years, he worked at a variety of professions including house detective at the St. Moritz hotel in Manhattan. In 1984 he moved to Miami where he worked on his graduate degree in creative writing at Florida International University. His debut novel *Straits of Fortune*, released by William Morrow May 22<sup>nd</sup>, began as his thesis project.

In *Straits of Fortune*, former NYPD cop Jack Vaughn reinvented himself as a personal trainer to the rich and famous in Miami Beach. One of those clients is retired Army Colonel Andrew Patterson, wealthy owner of a biotech company and father of Jack's former lover Vivian. The Colonel offers Jack \$100,000 to sink a yacht that holds two dead bodies and a damning sex tape that could land Vivian in jail. Against his better judgment, Jack is drawn back into the warped lives of the Patterson family and finds himself double-crossed and fighting for his life.

What struck me immediately about Anthony's writing was his prose. It was a pleasant surprise—especially since the book is labeled a hard-boiled crime noir novel. The opening line from the book reads “It was late August when the Colonel called me, one of those hot, humid, interminable days when you search for a new adjective for the heat and end up with nothing for your trouble but the taste of salt at the edge of your mouth.” He had me hooked and I was compelled to invest my time reading his book. If not for the plot, then solely for the beauty of his prose. If I hadn't, I would've missed out on lines such as: “If the eyes really are the windows to the soul, then I needed to find some shades pretty fast.” or “The mansion was all mirrors and white steel and the audacity that comes with great fortune. It was all about math and money and inhuman precision, and at night it was magnificent, especially when the moon was full.”

Advertised as the perfect “Grit-Lit” beach read, *Straits of Fortune* doesn't fail to deliver if you have few expectations beyond a good summer beach read. It was a one-day read and is written in a unique voice that kept me interested from beginning to end. Although, the beginning was much better than the end. While Anthony needs to work on developing the requisite plot twists of bestselling suspense novels, in his debut novel there is a glimmer of promise for what may come. Perhaps in the next Jack Vaughn novel. In the mean time pull up a beach chair and enjoy *Straits of Fortune*.

**Q: Why did you choose crime fiction as your genre of choice for your debut novel?**

**A:** When I started *Straits of Fortune*, I wasn't thinking in terms of a particular genre. For me, it was all about character, action and adventure.

**Q: When did you begin the process of writing your first book? How long did it take you? What did you find the most challenging?**

**A:** I was a graduate student at Florida International University working on a degree in creative writing. *Straits of Fortune* was begun in 1999 and completed in 2001 when it served as my thesis. The most challenging aspect of writing the book was getting the plot right. Fortunately for me, I had some excellent advisors to help me in that respect.

**Q: Once you had a completed manuscript, tell us what it took to get it published. What was your biggest career break along that process?**

**A:** I got lucky. The head of the creative writing program, Les Standiford, hooked me up with his agent at the time who agreed to represent me. Unfortunately, he sat on the book for a year without making a real attempt to sell it. Once again Les and my good friend Dan Wakefield, another writer and teacher in the program helped me out. They were at a writer's conference and convinced an agent there to read my book. She consented to represent me and sold the book to William Morrow a few months later. So I would say that meeting my agent was my biggest break.

**Q: Character, Setting, Story. Which is your starting point? Do you outline your plot before you begin? If so, how extensively?**

**A:** I start with character. I heard Jack's voice in my head and went from there. I also tend to think in pictures, so the opening scene was very clear to me. I saw a white yacht anchored off shore in front of a mansion made of glass. Then I had to figure out what it was doing there. I'm not big on outlines, but I wish I were. Dan Wakefield wanted an outline after he saw the first thirty pages of *Straits of Fortune*. Believe me, coming up with one was a lot harder than writing the book, though without it the book might have ended up being about a thousand pages long. Even though I deviated from the outline, it helped me in keeping the action focused.

**Q: Who are some of your favorite authors? Is there anyone in particular you draw inspiration from? If so, how has that influenced your writing?**

**A:** Until I entered college, I only read science fiction and comic books. I was a big fan of Edgar Rice Burroughs, the creator of Tarzan. In fact, I thought I'd wind up writing sci-fi. From then on it's been mostly what they call literary fiction. I like Hemingway and Willa Catha. Graham Greene is another favorite. Greene was versatile. He could write both literary and commercial fiction – what he called his entertainments. As far as crime writers go, Raymond Chandler and Elmore Leonard have influenced me the most.

**Q: For a debut novelist, marketing and exposure to the reading public are key to long-term writing success. Tell us what that process has been like for you.**

**A:** I've been lucky. My publicist, Danielle Bartlett, has been great. I've been on Radio and TV and online and the book has been reviewed in several newspapers, including the NY Times. This is the big advantage of being signed by a big publisher like HarperCollins. It's been a little nerve wracking at times, but it's all been good. I've had good attendance at my book signings too. People I hadn't seen in years showed up, some of whom didn't even know I was a writer, including a bartender who brought me a bottle of whiskey as a present. It turns out they had seen my picture in the Miami Herald. I even got a congratulatory e-mail from my ex-wife up in New York who saw the review in the Times. I'm just not used to the exposure, having worked in silent misery for so long.

**Q: What are your long-term writing goals?**

**A:** I'm going to continue to chronicle the adventures of Jack Vaughn, certified personal trainer. People seem to like him, and I'm kind of fond of him myself. I'd also like someday to write a non-fiction book about Carlos Castaneda, the late anthropologist and best-selling author whose controversial and compelling books have been a strong influence on me.

**Q: In reading your novel, *Straits of Fortune*, what struck me most about your writing was your prose, particularly your use of metaphors and similes. How did you hone this skill?**

**A:** Once upon a time I was a fair poet. In fact, in college I was the editor of my school's poetry magazine. I was even voted most promising poet, believe it or not. Poetry is all about feeling, imagery and precision of expression, and I think it has helped me tremendously with my prose.

**Q: How has your writing process changed since you published your first book?**

**A:** I'm more conscious of the planning progress with regards to plot, and I spend more time on it now. In the past I would just start writing and pray that god would guide my hand. Unfortunately, god seems to have been busy with more pressing matters and my stories tended to wander off then peter out for want of direction. I'm not sure what the record is for the world's longest short story, but I may have broken it on several occasions.

**Q: Your protagonist Jack Vaughn is a distinctive character. What resources did you draw upon to create him, and will we see him in a future novel?**

**A:** I've worked as a personal trainer for twenty years. During that time, some of my clients have asked me to do things that had nothing to do with exercise. I've been asked to follow wayward employees, collect debts and to serve as a bodyguard. One client even asked me to assemble his kid's tricycle. As a personal trainer you meet lots of different people, but all of them have one thing in common: they all have more money than you do. I also worked as a hotel detective at the old St. Moritz hotel in Manhattan. Most of my coworkers in security were either cops or retired cops. That's where the idea of making Jack an ex-cop came from. I even took the cop exam myself down here in Miami. Unfortunately, I failed the psychological part of the test. They said I wouldn't do well in a structured environment. I asked them if I could just have the gun and badge but they said no for some reason. And yes: Jack will be back.

**Q: Your dialog is sharp, but I notice that you rely more on narrative description in your novel. Is this part of your writing style, or what you felt was the best style to tell this story?**

**A:** When I decided to tell the story from Jack's perspective alone, I knew I needed a voice that was buoyant and flexible enough to keep the readers interest. I did my best to weave the dialogue and narration in a manner that would keep the story flowing. When you've only got one camera, even the pit stops in the plot have to be vivid and intriguing.

**Q: What advice would you give to aspiring writers?**

**A:** Don't listen when people warn you about the odds of getting published. Las Vegas wasn't built by people who thought they were losers. Go for it, give it all you've got, and write the best book you can pull together and get good, reliable feedback. And don't drink too much.

**Q: What's up next for you? Are you working on another book? If so, tell us a bit about it and when we should expect to see it on bookstore shelves.**

**A:** I'm happy to say that a lot of people have asked me the same question. My next book is tentatively titled *The Death Defier*. The story takes Jack down to Mexico in an attempt to save the life of a friend. It's another mile a minute hell ride for Jack that takes him from the streets of Miami to the pyramids of Mexico. I hope to finish it in a few months. After that it's up to my publisher.