

Pardon my Ignorance
An Interview with New York Times Bestseller James Grippando
By Dorinda Ohnstad

Every voracious reader, while remaining true to their favorite authors, yearns to find a new author to fall in love with. Sometimes we'll start a book and see a glimmer of hope only to have it dashed before we've reached the end. Then sometimes upon rare occasion we're lucky enough to find a new author whose book has unexpectedly kept us up late at night unable to put their book down before we've devoured and savored every word. It's at those times that we close the book and fall asleep content knowing that the hours of sleep lost were well worth it and that we've added another author to our favorites' list. This was my experience the first time I read a James Grippando novel. I have to confess that prior to reading his book *Lying with Strangers*, New York Times bestseller or not, I simply hadn't heard of him. After finishing the book I wondered how that could be and decided I simply had to interview him.

James Grippando received both his bachelor's and law degree from University of Florida where he was Executive Editor of the Law Review. After graduating from law school he served as a law clerk to the Honorable Thomas A Clark, United States Courts of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit in Atlanta. From there he went on to private practice at Steel, Hector & Davis, a prestigious Miami law firm considered by many to be Florida's finest. In both settings James worked on a number of appeals in death penalty cases, an experience that later served him in writing his first published novel, *The Pardon*.

However, *The Pardon* was not James' first completed novel. He also wrote what he refers to as his labor of love and the first misstep in the unending quest for Holy Grisham Grail. While practicing law full-time, and billing his required two-thousand hours per year, he spent four years completing his first novel—a 250,000 word behemoth. While that novel was never published, it was his foray into the publishing world that landed him an agent that believed in his work and encouraged him to write his second novel.

Sign of a true writer, James delved in and wrote the next in seven months. This time with a compelling topic based on his own experiences as an appellate law clerk for the Eleventh Circuit, which was effectively the "court of last resort" for death row inmates in Florida and Georgia—two states that, at the time, were carrying out more executions than the other forty-eight states combined. Death cases are always last-minute pleas for stays of execution where generally the evidence of guilt is overwhelming. But every so often, a case would make him wonder: What if this guy really is innocent? Ten years later, that sounded like a good premise for a novel and *The Pardon* was born. *The Pardon* was sold at auction to HarperCollins and brought a six figure advance and selection to the Literary Guild, Mystery Guild and Doubleday Book Club. Something rare for a debut novelist.

James wrote one more novel while still practicing law: *The Informant* was published in October 1996. After twelve years of practicing law he left to write full time, and a string of novels followed: *The Abduction* (1998); *Found Money* (1999); *Under Cover of Darkness* (2000); *A King's Ransom* (2001); *Beyond Suspicion* (2002); *Last to Die* (2003);

Hear No Evil (2004); *Got the Look* (2006); *Leapholes* (for young adults) (2006); *When Darkness Falls* (2007) and *Lying with Strangers* (2007). *Beyond Suspicion* marked the return of character Jack Swyteck, and since then, all but *Leapholes* and *Lying with Strangers* have been in the Jack Swyteck series.

James' 14th novel, *Last Call*, was released December 18th and is the seventh book in his Jack Swyteck series. In *The Pardon*, protagonist Jack Swyteck, a Miami criminal defense lawyer, exonerates Theo Knight, a teenager on Florida's death row for a murder he didn't commit, which seals their life-long friendship. In *Last Call* Theo is confronted by his past when an escaped convict from the old neighborhood shows up at his bar asking for shelter and money in return for fingering the man who brutally murdered Theo's mother when he was a boy. Together Jack and Theo must piece together a twenty-year-old conspiracy of greed and corruption that leads to the very top of Miami's elite, while revisiting a past that Theo has tried hard to forget.

James keeps an idea file in his closet that he says is already overflowing with sufficient ideas to keep him writing the rest of his life. For that his fans are truly grateful. If you aren't already a James Grippando fan, I recommend that you pick up one of his books (any one of them would do) and experience what his fans already love about his writing—his wit, gripping plots, compelling voice and characters that we can root for.

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? With thirteen published books under your belt how has the writing process changed for you?

A: Becoming a writer was never a goal for me—it was a life-long dream. In 1988, I was five years into the practice of law and tired of the fact that no one—including judges—seemed to be interested in any of the legal stuff I was writing. I also noted that the hottest show on television was *L.A. Law*, and the hottest book in the country was Scott Turow's *Presumed Innocent*. There seemed to be this insatiable public appetite for stories about lawyers written by lawyers. So I started writing, nights and weekends, still practicing law full time. Finally, after four years, I had a 250,000-word monster in the box that no publisher wanted. But my agent assured me that I had received—get this—the most encouraging rejection letters he had ever seen. With his encouragement, I wrote *The Pardon* over the next seven months, and it sold to HarperCollins in a weekend. It's now all over the world in over two dozen languages. So it was a very long road to publication, and thankfully, as you suggest, the process has changed dramatically since those early days. I live in south Florida, so I write in my backyard. My outdoor office has these essentials: a patio table and chair, a big shade umbrella, a laptop computer, a hammock, a hot tub, and a swimming pool. The cell phone is optional. For me a "normal" workday means putting on my oldest pair of shorts and favorite T-shirt, visiting the refrigerator every half hour, and explaining to my youngest daughter that she can't bang on the keyboard while daddy is trying to write a book. Early in my career, I often woke in the middle of the night to write. I try not to do that so much anymore, but you never know when inspiration is going to strike. For the most part, morning is my most

productive writing time, and I try to finish every afternoon in time to coach my son's soccer team.

Q: How have you translated your legal training and experiences into your ability to write fiction?

A: A few things in my own life have reappeared in Jack's fictional world, but it's really the overall experience of being a trial lawyer that has benefited me most in my writing. As a trial lawyer, you see the best and worst of people. You see victims of crimes who have the courage to come into a public courtroom, look their attacker in the eye, and work through the emotional pain of telling a jury exactly what happened. Just as courageous, you see third parties with no personal stake in the case come forward—sometimes at the risk of their employment or personal safety—simply to make sure that justice is done. So, in some sense I see the world as filled with unlikely heroes. On the other hand, you deal with the snakes who can't give an honest answer to a simple question. You deal with some lawyers who think litigation is just a game and that the rules are for losers. That overall perspective that I've gained through personal experience is written into every chapter of the Jack Swyteck novels.

Q: What do you feel are the key elements of writing a gripping legal thriller?

A: After my first novel (*The Pardon*) sold to HarperCollins in 1993, my new editor sent me a thirty-five page, single-spaced letter describing “the six essential elements of a thriller.” I still use those guideposts, and I share them with readers when I lecture about writing: 1) a sympathetic lead character, 2) a problem or conflict that commands immediate attention, 3) a worthy adversary in the form of a compelling villain, 4) every-escalating peril, 5) a dramatic, clear climax, and 6) a satisfying conclusion. Or you might subscribe to my agent's view. The key to a good thriller, he used to say, is in the first ten pages, with the test of a great ten pages being simply this: “Do you want to get to page eleven?”

Q: Your latest novel, *Last Call*, is the seventh novel in your popular series featuring Miami criminal defense lawyer Jack Swyteck and his outrageous sidekick, Theo Knight. How many more novels in the series should your fans expect? How much of Jack Swyteck's life is planned out in your head? How do you know where you will go with him next?

A: Here's the deal: I'll keep writing Swyteck novels as long as fans keep reading them. The next Swyteck novel is in the works, and I'm having too much fun with the series to let go any time soon. Jack is not super-cool, super-rich, or super-successful. But he is the kind of guy we all want as a friend—someone we care about enough to celebrate his good days and suffer through his bad ones as if they were our own. Theo and Abuela make Jack especially fun to write and read about. Most of us can relate to having someone in our life like Abuela—that person who can't understand why we didn't meet the love of our life by our twenty-first birthday. And all of us need a friend like Theo—someone to remind us that “There are two kinds of people in this world, risk takers and s-

-- takers. Someday, you gotta decide which you're gonna be when you grow up." Theo is at the heart of the action in "Last Call," and as he grows as a character, that opens up all kinds of new possibilities for the series. Where will the series go next? Heck if I know. That's what keeps it fun for me.

Q: Having just read *Lying with Strangers* and *Last Call* back-to-back I noticed that they have a distinctly different feel to them. I liked them both, but found that your Jack Swyteck book had more humor and a quicker pace. I can see why that series has gained a strong fan base. Do you find your series books easier to write than stand alones? How are they different?

A: Humor comes more naturally with characters you know well—which is why it works in the Swyteck series. I've written seven stand-alone novels now, and seven in the series, and I wouldn't say as a blanket rule that the stand alones were more difficult. In fact, sometimes there are things I'd like to do in the Swyteck novels that I simply can't because of Jack's past and future. What really made *Lying with Strangers* difficult was not the fact that it was a stand alone, but that the lead character was female. I started *Lying with Strangers* in 1999, and I can still see my wife looking up from the early manuscript, rolling her eyes, and telling me "A woman would never say that!" Now, the feedback from women readers is glowing, so it was worth sweating the details.

Q. Over the last ten years legal thrillers have become box office hits. Which of your books do you think would translate well into a Hollywood movie, and who would you choose to play your protagonist? Do you think someday we'll see Jack Swyteck come to life on the movie screen?

A: I leave the movies to my agent. It's very distracting to be involved in that process, so I have told him to call me only when it's time to pop the popcorn.

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: My favorite author? That's easy: My mom. Some of my earliest childhood memories are of my father coming home from work on Saturday afternoon from the printing factory and my mother giving us a bath (there were five of us children) before she headed off in her starched white nursing uniform to work the Saturday night late shift at the hospital. Somehow she managed to raise five kids, work, and take courses on the side to get a doctorate degree in education. Her dissertation was later published and became one of the top textbooks in the country for nursing students. It last through six editions for over twenty-five years. I hope I can have a run like that. As for fellow writers I read and enjoy, Linda Fairstein, Harlan Coben, and Nelson DeMille are all at the top of my list.

Q: What was your biggest career break?

A: Meeting the right agent. *A King's Ransom* is dedicated to my agent Artie Pine, who passed away in 2001. I would never have become a published author if it weren't for

Artie. I spent four years writing a novel while practicing law full time, writing nights and weekends. Artie believed in that book, pitched it hard for an entire summer, but not a single publisher would touch it. Not many people could have persuaded me to start all over again with a new idea, page one, chapter one. But Artie had a way of making you believe that rejection was just another step along the road to success—and he was right. I'm now writing my sixteenth novel for the same publisher, and I'm represented by Artie's son, Richard.

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

A: My characters are like my second family (dysfunctional, I admit, but still family), and their problems feel like my own. I know Jack Swyteck—my serial protagonist—better than I know myself. Think of how attached readers get to serial characters just by reading one book a year over a few hours. The writer spends every day of his life with that character. People will often tell me how much they enjoyed this or that plot twist in *Last Call* or another one of my novels, and many times I don't even remember having written it. But the things that define a character—Jack's relationship with his father, Jack's trouble with women, the strange things that tequila does to Jack's head when he drinks it "without training wheels" (salt and lemon)—are the things that stay with me. That is not to suggest that plotting is secondary. I do outline my plot before I start writing—my plots are too complex not to—but I never outline the resolution. I outline only to the point of conflict, and then things work themselves out in the writing.

Q. What advice would you give to other lawyers aspiring to break into the legal thriller market?

A. Keep it fun—and accept the fact that luck is part of the equation. People tell me that I have talent, and I know I work hard. But so do a lot of aspiring writers. The difference between them and me is that I found my first break. The first question you should ask yourself is "why do I write?" For some people the answer is "because I have to." That's fine. For me, the answer is "I love it." At age eleven I wrote a comedy western and put my friends in it so they would sit and listen to me read it to them. In high school and college I was the guy who actually looked for courses that required you to write a paper. As a lawyer I published in more academic journals than most tenured law professors. I keep an "idea file" in my closet, and I'll never live long enough to write all the stories I want to write. It blows my mind that I actually get paid to do this. Truly. But my point is this: until you understand why you write, you'll have a hard time figuring out who you are as a writer.

Q. *Last Call* is due out December 18th, but 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. The eighth Swyteck novel will be released in early 2009, called "Born to Run." Before that (spring 2008), members of the Literary Guild, Doubleday Book Club, and Book of the Month Club can get an early read of a stand-alone thriller called "Intent to Kill." It's the story of a rising baseball star who is married to the perfect woman—until a

car accident changes everything. The research was really easy for this one. I love baseball and, of course, I'm married to the perfect woman.

For more information about James Grippando and his novels visit his website at www.jamesgrippando.com.