

## A Thrilling Debut

### An Interview with Jonathan Hayes

British-born Jonathan Hayes attended medical school at the University of London and then moved to the United States to train in pathology at Boston University Medical Center and in forensics at the Dade County Medical Examiner's Office in Miami. In 1990 he moved to New York City as a medical examiner. He is now a twenty-year veteran senior forensic pathologist. He has worked at the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner of the City of New York performing autopsies and testifying in murder trials since 1990. Since 1993 he has held a teaching appointment at the New York University School of Medicine. Jonathan is also a Fellow of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences and lectures nationally on forensic science.

Hayes started his writing career as a freelance writer, writing regularly for the New York Times, New York Magazine, GQ, Food and Wine, Martha Stewart Living and many other magazines. He easily made the transition from non-fiction articles to writing fiction novels. *Precious Blood*, Hayes's first novel, introduces Edward Jenner, a forensic pathologist burnt out after 9/11. Jenner is dragged out of retirement when his best friend's niece witnesses the gruesome murder of her college roommate. When the niece barely escapes a similar fate and becomes a likely target for the killer, Jenner steps in as both her protector and investigator. Jenner is pushed to the limits of his physical and emotional endurance as he struggles to protect Ana and put an end to the psychopathic killing spree. As Jenner unravels the forensic clues, what ensues is a desperate race against time to stop the man behind the grisliest murders Jenner has ever seen.

*Precious Blood* is not for the squeamish reader. Hayes didn't hold back on the realistic, and graphic, details involved in the deaths of several victims at the hands of the psycho killer. The book is not a CSI-type procedural, but rather a complex story that explores the human psyche where religion and obsession intertwine to form a warped justification in the mind a sociopathic killer. The book delivers a thrilling read with page-turning pace, multifaceted yet down-to-earth characters, and dialogue that jumps from the page and puts the reader into the story. Forensic pathologist Jonathan Hayes provides an authentic voice, which without overwhelming the story provides it a realism that makes the story compelling. If you haven't already picked *Precious Blood* off the shelf to read, I highly recommend you do. You won't be disappointed.

**Q: You have a very interesting background: Forensic pathologist turned freelance food and travel writer turned forensic thriller writer. The first and last are a natural connection, but not the freelance food and travel writer. How did you end up as a freelance food and travel writer?**

**A:** I have been absurdly lucky in my career – actually, in all my careers. And in my life! Seriously, I deserve to be struck down by a meteor at any second.

I began writing when I was asked to write for a magazine. An editor for a small, super-trendy (still!) NYC magazine saw some of my online writing about restaurants, and asked

if I'd like to write for them. I wrote about my favorite Vietnamese restaurants, and they liked it enough to say I could write about anything I'd like. So I pitched them a monthly column about the electronic music of the rave and nightclub scene, they said Yes, and I wrote "A Higher State of Consciousness" for a couple of exhilarating, delirious years. I also continued writing about food, and one day an editor from Food & Wine saw my stuff, and asked if they could send me to Las Vegas. I was then spotted by an editor at Martha Stewart Living, and then the NY Times, New York magazine, etc.

I have had a ludicrously easy ride; on the plus side, I never forget that, and am always grateful.

**Q: One would expect you would write articles such as *How to Clean up a Crime Scene*; *How to Remove Blood Stains from your Carpet*, or even *The Proper Etiquette for Performing an Autopsy*, but that's not the case. What types of articles did you write for *New York Times*, *New York Magazine*, *GQ*, *Gourmet* and *Food & Wine* and *Martha Stewart Living*?**

**A:** One wouldn't expect that if one had seen the state of my apartment, or my utter lack of *politesse* at the autopsy table! I jest – I'm very polite at the autopsy table.

The great thing about being a freelance writer with a decent day job is that I only write about things that interested me. Music, food, travel, video games. Really, for me, the great satisfaction of free-lance writing hasn't been so much inflicting my work on the reader, or even the vast sums of money freelancers make, but getting access to the people who make my world so interesting – musicians, chefs, and video game designers.

My interests are pretty broad-based – reminding myself what I write about by peeking at my website ([www.jonathanhayes.com](http://www.jonathanhayes.com)), in just the posted articles, I've covered the public's fascination with forensic science, the food of Helsinki, molecular gastronomy, eating iguana in Oaxaca, the video game *Shadow of the Colossus*. At a more personal level, I've talked about what happened when my girlfriend lost her beloved dog (an epic narrative, I kid you not), my life before 9/11, my life after 9/11. The last two were, obviously, very personal indeed, and important to me – after I talked about the problems I was having after 9/11, I got a lot of private mail from cops and firemen who thought that they were alone in feeling messed-up.

I loved writing for Martha. I loved my stories, I loved the magazine, I loved the people. I became a contributing editor there, and resigned recently to focus on fiction.

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

**A:** Just before 9/11. Which is where my problems began – I had an idea for a story I wanted to tell, and started putting something together, then my life got turned upside down. However, in early 2002, a pastry chef friend approached me about writing his dessert cookbook with him. I met with his editor, she asked if I'd ever written fiction, I

showed her what I had, she signed me, and the book sold immediately in a pre-emptive bid from Harper.

So, I had a contract, I had a story and characters, but... That was a very hard time for me, really heart-breaking. Because of the work I was doing during my days, it was very challenging to work on such a dark book, so I avoided it a time. I had a break when I realized that I could incorporate some of my own problems into the protagonist, after which point things moved along much more smoothly. It wasn't a quick and breezy write, though.

**Q: How much of the plot for *Precious Blood* was drawn from your own life experiences as a forensic pathologist?**

**A:** For the most part, I'm not one for war stories or forensic gossip; the people in whose deaths I have become involved are real people, who've died in sad and sometimes horrific circumstances. But seeing what I see creates a tension inside me: I *do* want to talk about it, and not in a clinical way, but in an emotional way. What I see affects me deeply, and writing fiction gives me the opportunity to talk about what I see.

That said, I don't discuss my real cases, I take the essence of what I see, and I polish it up and make it slightly mythical and glossy. I occasionally use dialogue I've heard from cops or investigators, or at crime scenes. And, obviously, the forensics is tight and realistic. There's one slight distortion in *Precious Blood*, but it's not a forensic science or criminal investigation one; besides, I'm allowed some artistic license!

Some of the cops in *Precious Blood* are named after cops with whom I worked on the 9/11 line.

**Q: What is your work schedule like? How has it changed since you published your first book?**

**A:** I'm still a full time medical examiner, 5 days a week, one and a half weekends a month. People always ask me how I manage to fit everything in, and the answer is: I *can't* fit everything in! It took me several years to write *Precious Blood*. I've effectively stopped freelance writing, at least until after *A Hard Death* is done, and the *Hard Death* sequel, tentatively titled *Charmer*.

**Q: What are your favorite and least favorite things about being a writer?**

**A:** It's funny, I don't really think of myself as a writer. Or do I? Maybe I do now. I'm at a forensic meeting in Denver, and yesterday a woman came up to me and gushed about how much she loved the book; it was the first time I felt that I was both a forensic pathologist and a writer. Oddly, I don't feel like a doctor, but I *know* I'm a forensic pathologist, no two ways about that.

Favorite thing? I'm paraphrasing poorly here, but Orson Welles once said that making a movie was like being given the biggest toy train set in the world. It's the same with writing. I get to make stuff up. No, I get *paid* to make stuff up. It's kind of cool to make something that didn't exist before.

Least favorite? Finding the time to write, the time to read. I've cut back, but I still have too much to do.

**Q: What do you and don't you miss about being a forensic pathologist?**

Well, I'm only off for the week! And I'll be lecturing to forensic scientists, so, while I may not be doing autopsies, I'm still a forensic pathologist!

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

**A:** I'm a very visual person, and all of my stories (*Precious Blood* is the first of five Jenner books I've got roughly plotted) stem from a particular image. For *Precious Blood*, that image was the body of a naked woman fastened upside down to a wall. For *A Hard Death*, the image was of four men hanging in a grove in a swamp.

I had my protagonist, Jenner – he's me, only better and worse, just as sentimental, just as doomed. My killer in *Precious Blood* was born in the things he did.

**Q: Who are some of your favorite authors? Is there anyone in particular you draw inspiration from?**

**A:** My earliest inspirations were Conan Doyle and Donald "Encyclopedia Brown" Sobol; if I hadn't read them as a child, I wouldn't be a forensic pathologist now, although I might still be a writer. I read everything (or rather, I did until I ran out of time) – Christie, Sayers, Hammet more than Chandler, Stout, Highsmith, John D. McDonald. Ian Fleming made a huge impression on me as a child, but that related more to the man I wanted to be than the writer I wanted to be – perhaps it's time I reread Bond. For more modern stuff, I like PD James enormously, Henning Mankell, and for the spectacle lover in me, Steven King and Thomas Harris. The last two books I read (both of which I'd highly recommend) are Joe Hill's *Heart-shaped Box* (Steven King's son – the apple has not fallen far from the tree) and James Crumley's *The Last Good Kiss* (slightly Chandler-esque 70's noir, and excellent, if a little lyrical for my taste).

**Q: What are your long term goals as a writer?**

**A:** To really get it right.

**Q: When can we expect another Jonathan Hayes novel to hit bookstore shelves? Tell us a bit about it.**

**A:** I'm heading towards the end of *A Hard Death*; hopefully, British readers will be able to get their hands on it this summer. The US edition will probably be out in the fall, or early 2010. Yikes! 2010! I think the next one will be faster. God I hope so!

*A Hard Death* sees Jenner gone from New York (for reasons that will probably be apparent to readers of *Precious Blood*); he's doing a locum tenens job, working as acting medical examiner for a rural county in southwestern Florida.

Bad things happen.

For more information about Jonathan Hayes visit his website at [www.jonathanhayes.com](http://www.jonathanhayes.com).