



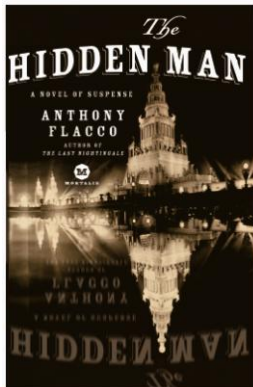
POE'S DEADLY DAUGHTERS

A Blog For Mystery Lovers

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Interview with Anthony Flacco

Interviewed by Sandra Parshall



Anthony Flacco's first historical suspense novel, *The Last Nightingale* (2007), featuring San Francisco detective Randall Blackburn, has been nominated for a Thriller Award by International Thriller Writers. The sequel, *The Hidden Man*, was released this week. Anthony is an award-winning screenwriter and the author of two nonfiction books, *A Checklist for Murder* and *Tiny Dancer*. He has also worked as an acquisitions editor for a literary agency and is creator and former director of the AFI Alumni Networking Workshop.

Q. Would you give us a brief description of The Hidden Man?

A. It is early in the year of 1915 in the city of San Francisco, and the environment is permeated with falsehood. The city leaders are desperate to succeed with their ten-month Panama-Pacific International Exhibition in order to re-attract the business base that dried up after the Great Earthquake of 1906. The backroom powers that be operate far outside the law to prevent their desperate ploy from failing. They draw Randall Blackburn into their snare and present him with the worst moral dilemma he has ever faced. It tears at his very definition of himself.

Against all of that falsehood, Shane Nightingale and Vignette Nightingale are pulled into the story because they both still live at home. The story opens with their family unit under a sustained assault from a crooked police captain who wants to drive them apart. But after nine years together as a family, this unit that they have created with nothing more than their mutually sustained love and caring turns out to be something that not one of them is willing to live without.

Q. The Hidden Man features the same trio of protagonists as The Last Nightingale, but it takes place nine years after the events of the first book. Why did you decide to skip those years in the characters' lives?

A. It allowed me to advance the ages of Shane and Vignette, who are twelve and nine, respectively, in *The Last*

Nightingale, to that of a twenty-one year old young man and a young woman of nineteen for *The Hidden Man*. This gave each of them substantially more ability to affect the story with their actions. The nine year leap ahead in time also placed the setting at the beginning of San Francisco's glorious coming-out party after the decimation of the 1906 quake. That all made for a grand story backdrop.

Q. Is your mesmerist/showman, James Duncan, based on a real historical figure?

A. No, Duncan is a bit of faded glory, a celebrity desperately hanging onto his public persona, still physically vital but mentally failing. He lives in a time when there is no social knowledge about Alzheimer's Disease, only the label of "senile," a single word that would kill his career. He is addicted to a brand new drug which helps to clear his mind, but thus demands his continuous use of a substance whose addictive power is eventually too much even for his lifelong self-discipline. It does not matter how determined he might be to avoid addiction because he has to use the drug to be able to perform. The drug is brand new and unheard of in America, at that time. Today meth, or methamphetamine, is commonly known by any one of a list of street names.

Within the chaos of all that dysfunction, my goal was to consider the plight of such a man when his heart and soul are good, and when he is experiencing great moral torment over finding the right course of action for himself - even as he balances the ego of a longtime showman with the needs of a secret drug addict.

Q. I was fascinated by the references in The Hidden Man to Dr. Alois Alzheimer and his use of stimulants to treat the brain disease we now call Alzheimer's. Did that information inspire the story of Duncan, or did you come across it in your research and decide to fit it in?

A. I had already decided that Duncan needed to be battling cognitive degeneration, in order to raise the stakes on his internal conflict. In the research, I was happily surprised by the coincidence of Dr. Alzheimer's groundbreaking work in Germany in the immediately preceding years, and also by the invention in 1913 of methylenedioxymethamphetamine - "meth" - also in Germany, by a company that is still known today as Merck.

Since Duncan is an international showman, it is no great leap to place him in Europe on tour a couple of years earlier, where his initial symptoms are diagnosed by Dr. Alzheimer, who then refers Duncan to a Merck scientist in order to get him a supply of one of the only drugs then available for clearing the mind. He therefore has all that he needs, so the issue of supply is not a problem. Instead he is afflicted with the clawing urges of an addiction that produces effects in him which nobody of the era understands.

Q. You've obviously done exhaustive research into San Francisco's history. Here's another chicken-or-egg question: Did your interest in the city inspire your novels, or did you first decide to set a book during the 1906 earthquake and fire, then embark on your research?

A. My initial idea was to write a "gaslight thriller," meaning a murder mystery set in the era of gaslight street lamps, just prior to the widespread availability of electricity. The sweeping changes that technology was just about to unleash upon America at that time remind me of the digital electronic revolution that has utterly

transformed our own landscape over the last twenty years.

I am fascinated by the pressures that these larger forces place upon the individual moral character of the people affected by them. *The Last Nightingale* takes place where the citizens have been betrayed by the very ground beneath their feet, and there is talk everywhere that they may have brought about the city's demise with their own wickedness. Religious leaders are warning of the impending end.

And so the more things change, the more they don't. The situation is little different in 1906 or nine years later in 1915, while the Great War raging in Europe has not yet ensnared America. And so there are wars and rumors of wars. It is clear to those people that the world is perched at the brink of Biblical destruction... Through those bygone events, we may hope to look at ourselves, sometimes with greater clarity, using the emotional advantage of that illusion of distance.

Q. In the back of The Hidden Man, you have a wonderful essay about the attractions of historical fiction and the role of family in the lives of real and fictional people. I know it's not fair to ask you to boil your thoughts down to a couple of paragraphs, but since the alternative is to print the entire essay here, I'm going to ask you to do just that. Why do you think people are drawn to historical novels, and what do the readers demand from these stories? Why do you believe it's essential for a character to have some kind of family structure in his life?

A. The Hollywood-ization of character has permeated the Western world's storytelling process with so much two-dimensional characterization that it is practically expected in many quarters and tolerated by many more. It's not that anybody is guilty of anything, here - rather it is the natural and understandable result of a film's need to get through the visually uninteresting character development scenes so that they can utilize the more visually stimulating shots that are loved and embraced by millions of film goers. The phenomenon has bled over into the writing of narrative novels as well, of course, because the effects of major Hollywood movies are cultural in scope. Nevertheless, writers who capture my attention and enthusiasm tend to create characters who are so well rounded that they seem as if they could get up off of the page or step off of the screen to greet you.

As for the larger issues of your question, I love the fact that you raise them, but I can't do better than that "dossier" piece without using up about as much text space. I am very glad that you found it worthy of interest and invite the readers not to miss it, since it's tucked away at the back of *The Hidden Man*.

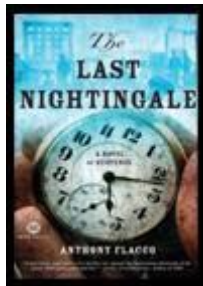
Q. You've written screenplays and published two nonfiction books. Why crime fiction? Why now? Has this been a long-time ambition for you or a more recent interest?

A. I ricocheted into this subject matter off of the historical fiction of another novel, a book that I began before these two, but which I have only recently completed. That story takes place in Europe at the turn of the 20th Century, and then in New York City from 1900 through 1946. I loved the research work, and the more I thought about the story that eventually came from it, the more it became apparent that the surface differences of any historical era do little to disguise the familiarity of human nature within the situation. The cosmetic differences, however, do impart to the writer a greater freedom to explore perennial issues of human nature without getting

caught up in the political and social winds of the day. Within the time frame of that other book's story, I felt attracted to the gaslight era, and began to think about doing a story or series of stories revolving around a small set of disparate characters who live in that time. That was the beginning for *The Last Nightingale*.

Q. Has writing crime fiction presented any difficulties you didn't anticipate? Which aspects of it have given you the most pleasure?

A. The only challenges that I encounter in writing narrative fiction are the recurring issues of free imagination versus coherent structure, ease of narrative versus disciplined polish, and the constant questions of how best to create compelling characters and evocative dialogue. All of which are challenges that I heartily embrace. There is nothing about the writer's life that I don't love, and I am grateful to have it. My readers are my heroes because they let me know that what I am doing matters to them, and I am thankful for that beyond measure.



Q. In your work as a freelance editor and an acquisitions editor for a literary agency, what are some common flaws you've seen in manuscripts?

A. I am continually astonished by the number of people who strive for mainstream publication by sending out unfinished or unpolished work. Don't such writers ever go to a bookstore and look at the shelves? How about a library? Because that's all you need to do to get a picture of the competition. I am also surprised by how commonly writers try to add their own personal stories of great illness or personal trauma to a submission of their work, as if to further convince the reader to their cause. This places the reader in a bizarre and most unwelcome position, and oddly enough, signals the writer's essential lack of faith in the strength of the work itself.

Q. Who are your favorite crime fiction and true crime writers – authors whose work you've learned from?

A. I look to the basics in contemporary American crime writing: Truman Capote for *In Cold Blood* and Joe McGinniss for *Fatal Vision*. Of course there are many fine male and female writers of crime fiction today and we don't need to look backward to find excellence. However, these two in particular can show a writer everything that they need to know about true crime writing, if that writer studies the way that both books balance a well-structured story with deeply developed character portrayals of the real-life counterparts, and above all, an abiding respect for the powerful use of polished language.

Q. Aside from Thrillerfest, will you be attending any mystery conventions this year where fans can meet you?

A. I certainly hope to. We are just now beginning to process of putting together my summer and fall schedule in light of the fact that I am moving my literary bunker and all of my Graduate Interns up to the Seattle area just before *The Hidden Man* is released in June. I love to speak or give seminars at writers conventions and it's always a pleasure to meet an enthusiastic reader.

Q. In parting, what advice do you have for aspiring writers?

A. Out-work your competition! Out-work your competition! Out-work your competition! Put in more head-work prior to sketching out your story. Do more research than most would do on the background of your story and characters. Before you send out your work, spend more time than most other writers are willing to spend in polishing it. The foolish greed of writers who undertake the writing of a book as a get-rich-quick scheme is only exceeded by the carelessness of preparation that they inevitably display in their hurried and impatient work.

It doesn't matter if they have more talent than you do. It doesn't matter if they are smarter than you are. It doesn't even matter if they are somehow more deserving of success than you may be.

YOU can still join the winners on the strength of your own sustained determination.

Visit the author's web site: www.anthonylacco.com

*See a trailer for **The Hidden Man** [here](#).*