

## Writing Thriller Novels Makes Me A Better Lawyer

By **Reece Hirsch** (December 1, 2023, 9:40 AM EST)

When someone learns that I've written six thriller novels, they often ask how I found the time while practicing law. I look at it a little differently. For me, it's hard to consider how I would have maintained a successful practice without the outlet of writing.

I don't view writing fiction as detracting from my legal practice or my service to clients. If anything, writing has enriched my work as a partner at a BigLaw firm.

### Finding a Change of Pace

Writing offers a welcome change of pace from my legal work — it engages a very different part of my brain. When the characters in a manuscript are coming alive and the plot is gathering momentum, writing becomes almost meditative and it's easy to forget everything else.

But I do not want to suggest that writing is easy, or "fun" in the conventional sense of the word. As the sports columnist Red Smith once described the process of writing, "You simply sit down at the typewriter, open your veins, and bleed."

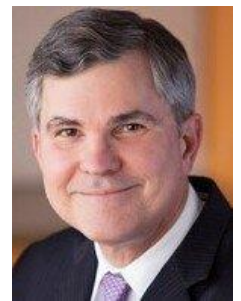
Regardless, starting a workday focused on something other than day-to-day legal work can clear your head for a fresh start.

### Looking at Your Practice Through a New Lens

Writing novels has also allowed me to use what I've learned by practicing law in a very different context. I wrote my first novel, "The Insider," when I was a young partner, and it reflects some of my experiences struggling to get ahead in a large firm.

All of my books draw upon the technology issues that I've encountered in my practice — from ransomware and security breaches to artificial intelligence and big data. Three of my books feature the character Chris Bruen, a former U.S. Department of Justice cybercrimes prosecutor who is a partner in a San Francisco law firm.

The first chapter of the first Bruen book, "The Adversary," was inspired by a conversation I once had with a colleague. He was about to embark on a trip to Amsterdam where, accompanied by Dutch law enforcement, he would knock on the door of a hacker to seek the return of stolen intellectual property.



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In real life, everything turned out OK for my colleague. On the other hand — spoiler alert — in my dramatized version, the characters aren't so lucky.

Reading the Bruen books, you would think that being a privacy attorney is one of the world's most dangerous professions. I can assure you that liberties were taken. Even though my books amplify the drama of privacy law to action-movie levels, writing the Bruen series has served to remind me of just how dynamic and interesting my practice area really is.

Looking at your practice in a different light can bring new life to your work.

### **Knowledge Expansion**

Writing novels has also expanded my knowledge of my practice area. In order to develop my thriller plotlines, I've had to research aspects of cybersecurity that I do not actually touch upon in my practice.

For "The Adversary," I learned about cyberterrorism and the Stuxnet computer virus, which is believed to have destroyed Iranian nuclear centrifuges. For "Intrusion," I delved into cyberespionage and the state-sponsored theft of intellectual property. For "Black Nowhere," I researched dark web marketplaces and cryptocurrency. For "Dark Tomorrow," I studied deepfake technology and the workings of U.S. Cyber Command.

Just like many other practice areas, privacy law requires constant reading to keep up with emerging technologies and issues. Writing technology thrillers has been a fun way to keep me on the cutting-edge, because in my books I often try to anticipate what is just around the corner with respect to privacy and cybersecurity threats.

Given publishing lead times, staying ahead of the curve can be a challenge. When I wrote about quantum computing in my 2016 thriller "Surveillance," I thought the technology was more science fiction than reality. In 2019, I was proved wrong when Google announced an early breakthrough in quantum computing.

It is important for all attorneys to continue learning and expanding their knowledge base, whatever their practice area.

Outside of my legal practice, writing thrillers has been an entertaining way for me to stay abreast of the latest developments in privacy and cybersecurity — including through dialogue with experts, like technologist Bruce Schneier, who consulted on several of my books.

### **Staying Sharp**

If there is a theme that runs through my novels, it's the one that is stenciled on rearview mirrors: Objects are closer than they appear.

While technology has brought people together in so many beneficial ways, it has also brought a wide range of bad things and bad people to our digital doorsteps. We are all one misguided click away from cybercriminals and malware. This is a reality that I deal with every day in my law practice, but developing the plots of my thrillers has underlined just how precarious the worst-case scenarios can be.

All attorneys deal in anticipating and defending against "what ifs," and exercising your skills outside of

the legal practice can help to sharpen those instincts. For me, writing thrillers keeps me vigilant.

### **Making Connections**

Writing has also introduced me to a community that is very different from my colleagues and friends in the legal profession. Every year I attend at least one of the major conferences for the mystery and thriller community, such as the Bouchercon World Mystery Convention and ThrillerFest.

This year, I moderated a panel at Bouchercon in San Diego on technology in thrillers. In a sort of Turing test, I used ChatGPT to generate some of the panel questions and asked the audience to vote on whether a question was written by me or artificial intelligence. The attendees weren't able to differentiate between me and ChatGPT, which either says something about my skills as an interviewer or the growing power of AI.

Because the legal profession is rigorous, some attorneys, particularly young attorneys, can find that their social lives come to revolve mostly around their colleagues and firm. Having a serious hobby can introduce you to an entirely new and different group of friends.

In my case, joining the local chapter of the Mystery Writers of America widened my social circle and made me feel like I was part of the mystery writing community, even before I was a published author.

### **Conclusion**

Writing fiction has benefited my professional and personal development immensely. It has provided me with a fresh perspective on my privacy practice, expanded my knowledge, and kept me alert to the next wave of issues in this fascinating and increasingly complex space. It has also exposed me to an entirely new group of contacts with interests and pursuits beyond the law.

I am one attorney who knows exactly what he will be doing in retirement.

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