

THE TEACHER'S EDITION

Afterschool Sessions with Our Favorite Teachers—by Ann Charles

Hello, everybody. I've set out to interview some of my favorite writing teachers and learn more about them as teachers, not just as authors.

Today, I'm staying after class to talk with: Lee Lofland.

I met Lee a few years back at a writing conference in Seattle. I sat in on his workshop and was mesmerized the whole time. Not only is he a great speaker with lots of interesting and entertaining stories, he's also very generous with his knowledge. Later, at that same conference, I pitched my manuscript to an agent and she asked me to talk to someone to confirm some details on the crime in my book. I contacted Lee and he helped me to make my manuscript accurate before shipping it off to the agent. Months later, the agent called and offered me representation. I couldn't have made it this far without Lee's help!

As for Lee's bio, I thought I'd just stick with what he has on his website:

Lee Lofland is a veteran police investigator who began his law-enforcement career working as an officer in Virginia's prison system. He later became a sheriff's deputy, a patrol officer, and finally, he achieved the highly-prized gold shield of detective. Along the way, he gained a breadth of experience that's unusual to find in the career of a single officer.

During Lee's career, he solved cases in areas including narcotics, homicide, rape, murder-for-hire, robbery, and ritualistic and occult crimes. He worked as an undercover officer for several jurisdictions, and he even spent a few years as a narcotics K-9 handler. He received advanced certifications from the U.S. Department of Justice, Virginia State Police Academy, and the DEA, and he maintained certificates in Crime Scene Management and Crime Scene Investigations. He also supervised a Street Crimes Unit and Tactical Entry Teams for the execution of high-risk search warrants. He even served as an Internal Affairs Investigator.

Later in his career, Lee became a police academy instructor and instructor trainer. During his tenure at the academy, he taught defensive tactics, firearms, officer survival, and CPR and first aid.

Lee saw the toughest parts of law enforcement first hand. He had to shoot and kill an armed bank robber - something every police officer hopes he never has to do - and was awarded medals of valor for his conduct. Lee also witnessed the execution of one of the country's worst serial killers who Patricia Cornwell's bestselling book, Postmortem was based upon. The execution was the first in the U.S. resulting from a verdict based on the use of DNA.

It's thrilling to listen to Lee describe his career. He's a born raconteur, able to depict the gamut of police work from the often-monotonous daily routine to the piercing moments of absolute terror. His wit and humor shed light to a side of law enforcement most have never seen.

Lee and his wife, Dr. Denene Lofland, currently live in the Boston area. Lee divides his time speaking, consulting, and writing. He's proud to serve as a member of the Board of Directors for the Mystery Writers of America's New England Chapter, as a member of Sisters in Crime, and he previously served as a Board Member on the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, NCADD in the Silicon Valley.

In addition to his books, Lee writes articles for both Mystery Writers of America and Sisters In Crime newsletters. He also writes regular features and exclusives for newspapers across the country. He's written for The Writer magazine and has served as a consultant for Slate Magazine, Spike TV, BBC Television, and for many bestselling authors.

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Okay, let's get down to business.

1. **You're a busy guy with all of the articles, interviews, workshops, promotion, etc. Does your wife ever get to see you?**

My wife is the director of microbiology for a biotech company in the Boston area, so she's extremely busy, too. We both travel quite a bit, she for her job and I for writer's conferences. We joke about the number of times we've passed in the skies during our travels. When we're home we make an effort to have breakfast and dinner together. In fact, every Sunday morning we have blueberry pancakes and read the paper—a tradition we started years ago. That's when we catch up on the events of the past week.

2. **List three of your favorite writing self-help books. (For example, your own *Police Procedure and Investigation* could be one since it helps writers improve their manuscripts. Another example is *GMC: Goal, Motivation, Conflict* by Debra Dixon—a book that helps writers build their stories.)**

Of course, I'll have to list my book since even I refer to it quite a bit. It sits on my desk next to a copy of Black's Law Dictionary and several other books about police, forensics, and law.

My book, *Police Procedure and Investigation, A Guide For Writers*, is in the new Howdunit series published by Writers Digest Books. The new series is a group of four books that will make a great addition to the libraries of mystery and crime writers. The first book is *Poisons* by Stevens and Bannon. My book is the second. Dr. D.P. Lyle penned the third book titled *Forensics, A Guide for Writers*. Dr. Lyle's book is scheduled for release later this spring. Sheila Stephens, a former ATF agent, is writing the last book, *The Book Of Weapons*. I believe Sheila's book is scheduled for release in the fall of 2008.

One of the best books around for writers is Hallie Ephron's *Writing and Selling your Mystery Novel*. I also like Martha Alderson's *Blockbuster Plots—Pure and Simple*. Both are great additions to any writer's collection of reference material.

3. **After retiring from law enforcement work, what made you decide to become a writer (a much more sedentary type of career)?**

Actually, writing has been something I wanted to do since childhood. I discovered the Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine at an early age, and those wonderful stories sparked my interest in both crime-solving and writing. I suppose I can consider my career in law enforcement as research for my writing. I was also a huge fan of Poe, Dickens, and my relative, Dr. John Lofland, the first Poet Laureate of Delaware, who was a great friend of Edgar Allan Poe.

4. **What kind of information can writers gain from reading your non-fiction book, *Police Procedure and Investigation*?**

PP&I is a journey through an entire career in law-enforcement, from the police academy through retirement. It's like having a police detective sitting next to you, ready to answer all your questions. It's a book about cops, crooks, the justice system, autopsies, drug raids, and more.

I wrote about the little things the average person doesn't know about cops. Surprises. I also mixed in a few real-life stories to show the emotion that comes with the job. One of my favorite reactions to the book was from a woman who told me one of my real-life stories in the book actually tugged on her emotions enough to make her cry. That's not a bad compliment considering the book is a reference book.

5. **Tell me more about your upcoming non-fiction book, *Everything KIDS: I Want to be a Police Officer*. Who is Becky Levine and, again, what can writers gain from reading this book?**

I Want To Be A Police Officer is the first book in a new series from Adams Media. The series is a career-based series for kids in the 7 – 9 age group. It's a cute book for kids who have thoughts and desires of becoming a police officer when they grow up.

Becky Levine, my co-author, is a good friend of mine. I met her a few years ago when she was teaching a creative writing class in California. I was one of her students. During the six-week class she urged me to begin writing seriously. I took her advice.

Becky is a wonderful writer and her passion just happens to be writing middle-grade kid's mysteries. When the opportunity to write the kid's book came along I called Becky and asked if she'd like to co-write it. We discussed the project and thought it would be fun.

6. **You've written a mystery/thriller (fiction) called *The Trapper*. Are you working on any other mysteries right now? Or is focus on your non-fiction books at this time?**

Well, this book is no longer titled *The Trapper*. It's a work-in-progress and it's in the final stages of the final rewrite . . . finally.

Fiction is what I want to write, but I keep getting interrupted to write nonfiction. I guess that's a good problem to have.

I have also begun a new fiction project that I'm very excited about—more than any other. I've already started mapping out the plot and the characters have already decided their parts. They're anxiously waiting in the wings, ready for me to say the word "action."

7. **What's your next class/workshop on the slate?**

I leave for sunny Florida in a few weeks to speak for the Emerald Coast Writers Conference in Fort Walton Beach. I'm looking forward to a break from the Boston winter weather.

8. **When it comes to getting the word out about your books, is there a single promotional tool you use that you believe helps you sell more books?**

For me, I think it's a combination of having a website, a very active blog, and speaking for writer's conferences all across the country.

My new blog is called *The Graveyard Shift*. Each day, I post a short article relating to police, forensics, or CSI. I also include real-life photographs. Readers are encouraged to submit comments and questions about the daily topic. So far, it's been a lot of fun. Hundreds of people are visiting the site each day from all over the world. In the coming weeks I'll be having experts as guest bloggers. I've already lined up a very well-known forensic anthropologist, a forensic computer expert, and several others.

9. **Why do you enjoy helping other writers?**

Easy question. Writers are wonderful people. I've had a ton of help from other writers—some of them are the biggest names in the business—and I intend to return the favor.

10. **What are the biggest mistakes writers make when it comes to including police procedures in their books?**

Another easy question. They use television and film as a tool for research. I have to say this to writers about using TV as reference material...STOP IT!

11. **You've said that one of the most popular questions you receive is if you have ever shot anyone. Why do you think nice, normal people like to write and read about violence, shootings, and dead bodies?**

People are simply fascinated with murder. Perhaps, it's a curiosity about the taboo—something that's forbidden in our society. Something they'd never do themselves, but in their mind...

Another popular question I get is: What's the perfect murder?

I always have the same response. There is no such thing as a perfect murder, just imperfect investigations.

12. **Given all of your experiences in law enforcement, what story do you most like to tell?**

You've finally asked a difficult question. There are so many stories floating among my memories. Some are happy; some not so cheerful. I've seen the worst society has to offer—murder by every means imaginable, ghastly suicides, horrific automobile accidents, people killed by trains, and the abuse of children. I've seen good people succumb to drug addiction and alcoholism. I've told mothers their children were killed by gunfire; told wives their husbands were killed in late-night car wrecks.

I'll always have the soul of the man I killed in my mind. I often think of his family, especially during holidays. I wonder why he didn't put down his gun. I wonder why he decided to shoot it out with the police. He didn't have to die.

On the other end of the spectrum are the tales that make me smile—reuniting lost kids with their parents, bringing good news to families about loved ones, returning stolen money to an elderly person who lives on a meager income, hearing thanks for something you do as a normal part of your day, rescuing a lost puppy. In fact, my longtime buddy that's sitting by my side as I answer these questions was a rescued dog. I found her abandoned and shivering in the cold rain and brought her home.

Now, to answer your question. My favorite story starts when I first pinned a badge to my chest nearly thirty years ago. I haven't reached the last page, but I'm getting closer to it every day.

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Lee loves to hear from writers and considers it an honor to answer your online questions. He's also available for professional speaking engagements, writers conferences, workshop presentations, as well as personal consultations and manuscript reviews.

To contact Lee, email him at Lee@LeeLofland.com. For more information about Lee and to read some informative articles he's written, visit his website at www.leelofland.com. Take a moment to visit Lee's blog *The Graveyard Shift* at www.leelofland.com/wordpress/

Thank you, Lee, for sharing your time with all of us Guppies; and thanks to all of you Guppies for reading along! If any of you have a particular "teacher" you would

like me to interview, please email me with his or her name and any other helpful information.

Until the next after-school session...

Ann Charles
Mystery, Mayhem, and Fun in the Sun!

Written by Ann Charles, this essay was originally published in First Draft, March 2008.



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