

An Interview with Matthew Dicks, author of *Something Missing* (Broadway Books, 978-07679-3088-8)

1. You've been a Boy Scout, a pole-vaulter, a bassoonist, a teacher, a McDonald's manager, a DJ, and a reporter. How did these roles prepare you for the role of novelist?

Some of these roles certainly helped me more than others, but most probably helped me to become a more persistent, creative person, two qualities that have served me well in my role as a novelist.

As a McDonald's manager, I once to work from 4 AM until 2 PM five days a week, managing mostly non-English speaking employees, while also attending college fulltime. Around this time, I also launched my DJ company, with no previous experience in the industry. Just a desire to hang out with my best friend and make some money. To combine the three endeavors effectively required a great deal of persistence and creativity.

As a teacher, I have learned that never giving up on a student and trying everything within my means to reach a kid, including some occasionally unorthodox methods, can often yield surprisingly results. Again, persistence and creativity can win the day.

I took up the bassoon in an attempt to flee the flute, the first instrument that I learned to play. Being the only male flutist in my school and still unaware of the benefits of hanging around large groups of female flutists, I jumped at the opportunity to learn to play the bassoon, but taking up an instrument so late in my schooling required quite a bit of persistence in order to play well.

As a Boy Scout, persistence and creativity are a must. My friends and I would literally walk into the woods with a sleeping bag, some food, an axe, and a ball of twine and spend days building and sleeping in shelters that rivaled some homes that I see today. When I became lost in the mountains of New Hampshire for two days as a teenager, I was more relaxed and at ease than when I was in algebra class, because I knew that persistence, knowledge and a little creativity would allow me to survive.

The pole vaulting, however, had perhaps the greatest impact on my role as a novelist. In choosing pole vaulting candidates, our track and field coach took all of his sprinters, myself included, and identified the two who were crazy enough to run as fast as we could with a fifteen foot fiberglass pole in our hands and then, without slowing, jam that pole into a metal box in the ground while simultaneously throwing our bodies into the air. This is how I have learned to approach my books. Dispensing with planning and outlining, armed with just the glimmer of a character or a plotline, I begin writing, pounding away at the keyboard with little concern for where I might be going or what might happen to my story. Reckless abandon is how I begin writing my books, and this philosophy, so similar to the way a pole vaulter approaches his jumps, has served me well.

2. What was the initial inspiration for Martin's character? What aspect of his life required the most research? What are the best sources when researching illegal activity?

The initial inspiration for Martin came on a November evening in 2004. My wife and I were having dinner with close friends, Charles and Justine. During the course of the meal, Justine told us that she had lost an earring earlier that day and was hoping to find it when they returned home. I asked Justine how she knew that the earring had been misplaced. "Perhaps some clever thief came to your house and stole just one earring, so that you wouldn't suspect theft," I suggested. This idea lodged itself in my mind and began to blossom throughout the evening, and when I arrived home later that night, I jotted down the idea on my ever-growing list of possible story ideas.

Fast forward three months later to February of 2005. My wife and I are in Boca Raton, Florida to spend a week with her grandmother. After a day without Internet access or cable television service and a dearth of decent reading material, I found myself in a desperate search of something to keep me busy. With my idea of a thief who steals items that go unnoticed still rolling around in my mind, I decided to give the story a try. I wasn't sure if it would be a short story or something longer, but by the time the trip was done, the first three chapters of the novel were complete and I was well on my way.

In terms of research, much of it was done online, and it was probably aspects related to lock picking that required the most time. I learned that lock picking is considered a sport by some enthusiasts, and I spent several nights reading through forum postings and participating in chat sessions in order to learn more about the craft. Once I had a means by which he could enter his clients' homes, the rest fell into place.

3. You've said that you had died twice by the age of 18 before being revived by paramedics, and that you were robbed at gunpoint at age 23. How did these brushes with mortality affect you?

More than anything, these brushes with death have given me a great deal of perspective and an appreciation for each day of my life. There isn't much that upsets me nowadays. Regardless of the situation, most problems and struggles seem less relevant and consequential to me. I figure that if I'm still breathing, everything else, good or bad, is gravy. This works out well for me, but it's not always as pleasant for the people around me. I tend to dismiss a lot of concerns and complaints, many legitimate, and I roll my eyes a lot.

I've also become a purposeful procrastinator, particularly when the task or assignment can wait. For example, I was sent these interview questions at the end of March, and though I've put some thought into their answers, I didn't start writing until April 9, just a day before they were due, because if I were to die on April 6, for example, it would have been quite tragic to have spent the last day of my life in front of the computer, answering this question. This is how I evaluate everything in my life. I prioritize things like my

family and friends and my teaching and writing above all else, saving the mundane tasks of bill paying, yard work, and all the other paperwork and chores associated with my life until the last minute. I live on the edge of being late all the time and am perfectly comfortable there.

But I also worry about not finishing things before I die. My wife and I, for example, are watching the re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica* series on DVD, and I worry sometimes that I might die before I reach the end. I know it may sound a little melodramatic and silly, but my heart has stopped beating twice already and I've found myself at the end of a gun another time. Life truly is fleeting, and that thought sticks with me every hour of every day. To die without ever knowing if Apollo and Starbuck and the rest of humanity ever find Earth would be quite upsetting. These thoughts also pertain to my novels, particularly when I get close to finishing one. As I approach the end, I begin to write faster in fear of a safe falling on my head at any minute.

4. How do Martin's parents compare to yours?

Unfortunately, Martin's parents and my own are quite similar. Martin's mother has passed away by the time we meet him, and my mother has also passed away, two years ago, prior to the sale of *SOMETHING MISSING*. She never had a chance to read it or even know that it would someday be published.

My former step-father also resembles Martin's step-father in that they were both awful, selfish people who took advantage of their families and left their step-siblings destitute and alone.

And like Martin, I do not know my own father very well and have not spoken to him in years. As a result of stupidity on both our parts, we drifted apart after my parents' divorce and have failed to reconnect. Though not intentional, I'm certain that Martin's attempt to reconnect with his father echo a wish that I might do the same someday.

5. Describe your experiences on the road to getting published. What advice do you have for other aspiring first-time novelists?

In the spring of 2006, I finished *SOMETHING MISSING*, and with my school year coming to a close, I made it my goal to find an agent before the end of my summer vacation.

I began online, researching the process by which writers find agents, and initially, I was discouraged. Based upon my findings, it seemed as if many writers got their start by knowing someone in the industry. A professor recommends a talented young writer to an agent. A magazine or newspaper editor sets up a meeting between a staff writer/fledgling novelist and an agent who once worked at the magazine as well.

I had no such contacts. I was living in Connecticut, writing on my dining table, with no friends or colleagues in the literary world. I knew that finding an agent wasn't going to be easy.

And so I began. I spent the entire month of July reading through *The Writer's Market*, circling the names of prospective agents, researching their agencies online, and writing and sending query letters. Almost one hundred in all.

My goal was to target my search to those agents who were most likely to like my manuscript, and this plan paid off enormously. What I have learned is that any old agent won't do. You must find an agent who loves your work at least as much as you do, if not more. I have been asked for the contact information for my agent, Taryn Fagerness, by would-be writers more than once in hopes that a name and an email address might be enough to for them to find an agent, but each time, I have refused. Passing on her name would be meaningless. Taryn is the right agent for me, but she is not necessarily the right agent for everyone. Or even for most. And I think she would agree.

At their core, literary agents are people who like books. But like all people, they each have particular preferences and tastes. Taryn loved my manuscript, and as a result, she decided to work with me, much the same way an actor might choose a movie or a musician might choose a song. She had to love the material to make it work.

I sometimes think Taryn loves my books more than I do. This is a very good thing.

So when choosing agents to whom I would send my query letters, I targeted those whose taste best matched my work. *The Writer's Market*, as well as the agency websites, can be enormously helpful in this regard.

At the time, Taryn worked for the Sandra Dijkstra Literary Agency (she has since opened her own agency), which, according to *Writer's Market*, accepted unsolicited submissions at that time. After identifying this agency as a possibility, I went online to read about each individual agent. There were several from which to choose.

I started by eliminating the agency's founder, Sandra Dijkstra. I thought that since I was new to the publishing world, I might have a better chance and be better served by someone less established. Sandra Dijkstra's biography is impressive. Too impressive, I thought, for a little guy like me.

I settled on Taryn after reading that "In a fiction project, Taryn is drawn to highly original concepts and voices; she likes an element of the unexpected." While I wasn't sure how to characterize my book or writing style yet, I thought that my main character, Martin, and the means by which he engaged in his profession (thievery of an unusual sort) was an original concept. And while I'm not sure if I would describe the novel as a suspense story, it certainly contains elements of the unexpected throughout.

I was also intrigued by the word *quirky*. Taryn's bio indicated that she is drawn to quirky nonfiction topics, and while my novel is fiction, it had been described by some of my early readers as amusing and quirky, and the elements of nonfiction that it contains might meet this description as well.

So I wrote to Taryn, and about eighty other agents, and once my query letter was out, I waited. Two weeks later the responses began rolling in.

Of the eighty letters that I sent out, about seventy of the agents responded to me, usually in a form letter or postcard, but some with personal letters as well. In all, I received ten responses that contained some kind of personal remark, whether it was a hand written addendum to a form letter or a two page letter directly specifically to me. Sixty-seven of those responses were rejections of one sort or another, sometimes with offers to resubmit once the manuscript had undergone revisions, but most were flat-out rejections. Three agents, including Taryn, showed genuine interest in the manuscript, and it was during this courting process that Taryn wrote to me and later called.

I knew immediately that Taryn was the right fit for me. In our conversations together, we clicked. And on the last day summer vacation, Taryn called, informing me that she and her agency would like to represent me.

I couldn't have been happier. She was enthusiastic, honest, full of ideas for revision, and most importantly, she got me. Understood me as a writer. Appreciated my work. I spent three years at Trinity College in a Creative Writing program and many more hours in writing classes and workshops at various colleges, museums, and other locales, and no one has been more effective at helping me edit and revise than Taryn has, despite the fact that we have yet to meet face to face.

And this surprised me as well. After selling to book to Doubleday, I was contacted by my editor, Melissa Danaczko, who has also been nothing but the best for me and the book. Her first message to me, which I still have on my answering machine, informed me that she anticipated a "light edit" of the manuscript. Light edit, I can assure you, only because of the months of work that Taryn and I spent in getting it ready for sale. I never realized how important an agent can be in the revision process. I was under the impression that an agent simply takes your book and attempts to sell it to a publisher as is.

Thankfully this has not been the case.

For more than five months after signing on with Taryn, she and I worked on editing and revising the manuscript together in order to prepare it for sale. This began with long conversations over the phone regarding her thoughts on the book, followed by dozens of emails back and forth as the process continued. Even today, as I finish my second book and begin my third, Taryn is with me, reading the first draft and making many suggestions.

I know the search for an agent isn't easy, and for many, the process can take considerably longer than it did for me, but I urge writers to continue your search and seek out the right person for the job.

Someone who will be a fan of your work.

6. Which novelists serve as your inspiration for fiction? What is the most recent book you have read?

My greatest inspiration has come from the short story writers that I was required to read in college. Writers like Updike and Carver and Atwood taught me about what is important to a story and what can be left out, and as a result, I tend to write many more pages than you will find in the final version of my books. I try to give the reader exactly what he or she wants and nothing more.

I also draw a great deal of inspiration from Stephen King, whose book ON WRITING is outstanding. I am constantly pushing MY hardcopy on would-be writers and listening to the audio version whenever I am between audio books. He has a direct and clear style that I adore, and his ability to bring voice to his characters in his fiction is remarkable. I haven't loved all his work, but he's written some great stories, and his Dark Tower series was another series of books that I rushed through as quickly as possible in fear that I might someday die before I finish.

I also adore the lean, sarcastic, rule-breaking style of Kurt Vonnegut, probably my favorite author, and have recently become quite fond of Nicholson Baker and Jasper Fforde, the former for his ability to bring enlightenment and excitement to minutia and the latter for his quirky but deadly serious plotlines.

In terms of what I am reading now, I tend to read several books at the same time, the victim of a childhood of video games and in subsequent inability to attend to one thing too long. So I am currently reading DEATH WITH INTERRUPTIONS by Jose Saramago, ARE YOU THERE GOD? IT'S ME, VODKA, by Chelsea Handler, THE IRREGULARS: ROALD DAHL AND THE BRITISH SPY RING IN WARTIME WASHINGTON DC by Jennet Conant, and TIME QUAKE, the last Vonnegut novel that I haven't read. I only allow myself a page or two a week, with as much re-reading as I want, as this will be the last new Vonnegut novel for me.

7. Describe your writing process. Like Martin, did you find it difficult to get started on a novel after doing fairly well with non-fiction assignments?

The most difficult part of writing a novel for me was the first word. For years, I'd thought about writing a book but always assumed that I had to have the book plotted out in my mind ahead of time. Even an outline seemed so daunting that I wasted years thinking about writing rather than just jumping in and beginning to write.

Now that I have the first novel under my belt, things have been much easier. I took a week off before starting my second book, and when I finished it back in February, I had planned to take a week off to write a couple Op-Ed pieces, but instead, I literally opened a new document on my laptop and began writing. I had moved from one book to the next in a matter of seconds.

I'm toying with the idea of writing two novels simultaneously. I have a list of novel ideas a mile long, and a couple ideas in particular have garnered my attention right now. I've started working with one of them, and it's going well, but the other idea is constantly making its way into my thoughts, so I may begin writing a second book on the side.

Against my wife's better judgment.

I try to write for at least two hours every day. An hour in the morning and an hour in the evening. I'd write more, but between teaching, a DJ company, a baby daughter, and a bunch of side projects, two hours is sometimes all I can manage. But I carry my laptop everywhere I go and take advantage of every spare minute to write. I worked on SOMETHING MISSING on the day of my wedding and while on my honeymoon, and I was working on my second book in between contractions during the birth of my daughter. I've suffered from writer's block only once, a three month period in the middle of SOMETHING MISSING. A new character had appeared in the story and I did not know why. It took me a while to finally figure it out.

Being from the video game generation, I crave instant feedback, so I have a group of people who read my books, chapter by chapter, as I write. They provide me with invaluable insight, opinions and encouragement on the course of my story. This often results in cheesy, overly dramatic, teaser sentences at the end of each chapter that my agent can usually convince me to eliminate during the revision process.

8. Your acknowledgments begin with a quote from Stephen King about what a difference it makes for writers to have someone who believes in them. Talk about the people who made a difference in your writing career, particularly your wife and your high-school English teacher.

It's amusing to think that teachers like Mr. Compopiano have no idea how important they are in the lives of their students. I often wonder if he even remembers me.

When I entered Mr. Compo's English class, I thought of myself of a good writer. Though I couldn't type or spell to save my life and nothing that I submitted was ever on time, the words and sentences came easily to me, and I had a lot to say. I wrote for the school newspaper and kept a diary off and on during my high school career, and I wrote I lot of notes and letters to girls.

Though I never thought that writing could become a career for me, I also managed to make a little money with my ability. For a short period of time, I went into the business of writing and selling term papers for my fellow students. Charging between \$25-\$100

depending on the topic and length of the term paper, I managed to buy my first car, a 1978 Chevy Malibu, with the profits of this covert operation.

The day that changed life as a writer was November 29, 1988. On that day, I handed in an assignment in which I was asked to write a satirical piece that expressed humor. I wrote a piece on how America claims to be the land of the free, yet young men can be forcibly sent to foreign countries in order to kill strangers. I also noted that it is illegal to engage in prostitution and commit suicide, both seemingly personal decisions, and that many states restricted the rights of homosexuals.

In reading this piece today, I cringe. It is not well written. It is not funny. And it is barely satirical. But on that day in November, I was certain that I was handing in a gem, so three days later, December 2, 1988, when Mr. Compo handed back the assignment with a grade of B-, I was confounded. Scrawled across the paper were the words *Not satire* (as well as *Many spelling errors!*). At the top of the page, Mr. Compo had written:

Some of this is not satire. It's too obvious.

I disagreed. Despite his years of experience, I had decided in that moment that Mr. Compo was wrong. He had no clue what satire was and had missed the whole point of my piece. Emboldened by overconfidence, I approached his desk and protested my grade. We debated the merits of my piece for a while, and finally, he offered a solution:

Read the piece to the class. If a majority believes that it is satire, I will increase the score on your paper by one letter grade. But if a majority agrees with me, we decrease your score by one letter grade.

Basking in self-assurance and unable to refuse a challenge, I agreed. Though this was a serious English class, and I knew that my classmates would be fair and objective, I was also certain that I was right and that they would side with me.

They did.

By a unanimous vote, the class declared my work as satire and my B- was instantly transformed into an A-. I still have the assignment upon which the change in score is noted.

After reading the piece, Mr. Compo admitted that the tone in which I read the piece helped in delineating the satire quite a bit, and what initially sounded dry and rhetorical came to life as I spoke the words.

Some of David Sedaris's work can be like this. Read it and you think, "That was amusing." Listen to him read it and you're rolling on the floor in fits of laughter.

Don't get me wrong. I was no David Sedaris, nor am I anywhere in his league today. My piece, which was entitled *Welcome to America*, is amateurish, silly, and somewhat

embarrassing as I read it today, but on that December morning, I learned that my words can change minds. On that morning, I had changed the mind of a man I respected a great deal, perhaps the man who I respected the most at that time, and from then on, I knew that I wanted to write.

It would be another fifteen years before I would even begin writing SOMETHING MISSING, but the short stories, the Op-Eds, the poetry, and everything else that followed can be traced back to that December morning when I read a piece of writing and changed a teacher's mind.

My wife is my biggest fan and the bedrock upon which everything else in my life is built. It's probably no coincidence that I didn't start writing novels until we were together. Her honesty, her love for my work and her enthusiasm for everything I do means so much to me. Writing can be a lonely process, but with Elysha, I feel like I have a silent partner sitting beside me at all times, believing in me.

When I received word that SOMETHING MISSING sold, I immediately sought out my wife, who teaches in the same school as me, in order to tell her the news. I expected her to be excited, but I did not expect her to collapse to the ground, crying hysterically. But she did. She fell to tile floor, back against the wall, cheeks red, tears rolling down her face, weeping into her hands.

Colleagues poked their heads from classrooms, certain that something terrible had just happened.

I was so happy. In fact, it's one of the happiest moments of my life. The phone call from my agent, telling me about the news of the sale was great, but to knock your wife off her feet with news like this was indescribable.

More than anyone or anything, she is the reason that I write.

9. Martin's job would be a lot more difficult if he hadn't been able to buy a pick gun. Do you believe it's ethical to sell pick guns to anyone but locksmiths?

The interesting things about lock picking in general is that unless you are robbing homes repeatedly, lock picks, whether they be pick guns or the old fashion kind, are relatively useless to burglars. As secure as we imagine our homes to be, most of us are only as safe as the thin pane of glass in each one of our windows. If Martin was not returning to these homes again and again, as I can't imagine any burglars are, it's just as easy to break a window and climb into a house as it is to pick the lock on the front door. Perhaps even easier, since lock picking requires time. So while I can't imagine why someone might want to own a pick gun, I don't think its availability increases the likelihood of a successful robbery in any way whatsoever.

10. What are you writing now? Where will your next book take you?

In February I finished my second book, tentatively titled UNEXPECTEDLY, MILO. It's the story of Milo Slade, a man who has managed to hide a multitude of weird compulsions from his wife for over three years. Milo is inexplicably compelled, from time to time, to open the pressure seal on jelly jars, break ice cubes from their tray, bowl a strike, and other, more inconvenient activities, and he's carefully kept these odd demands secret since childhood. When Milo finds a video camera and a bag of tapes on a park bench, and begins to watch the apparent video confessional of a woman unburdening her deepest secrets, he connects with this stranger in way he's never done with a real person. As his marriage continues to crumble around him, he decides to do something radical: to help this video diary stranger by attempting to solve a mystery that has secretly plagued her for years. With plenty of jelly jars in the trunk of his car, Milo sets out on an adventure which quickly sidetracks as his un-ignorable demands call. But it is on the sidetracks that the true meaning of his adventure takes shape. Milo is weird, but as he discovers, so is everyone else.

I've also begun my third book, a story about two brothers: one who owns and operates the family's funeral home and the other who has built a fast-food chicken shack on the back of the funeral home, much to his family's dismay. The brothers don't get along, but when the town begins to divide over issues related to money and power, they have to decide whether or not to stand together or remain apart. At its heart, it's going to be a book about loyalty and betrayal, the measures that people will take in order to ensure self-preservation, the ease by which a person's reputation can be destroyed without merit, and the way in which small things can become larger and uglier than they ever deserve to be when people are angry, threatened, small-minded and powerful.