

YOUR FIRST 50 PAGES: HOW TO HOOK AN AGENT FROM THE START

WRITER'S DIGEST

Meet Your Future Agent!

25 AGENTS SEEKING NEW WRITERS

LEARN WHAT THEY WANT AND HOW TO SUBMIT



Mistakes to Avoid in Your Submission

REAL FIRST-PAGE CRITIQUES

What Agents Really Do

(AND WHY YOU NEED TO KNOW)

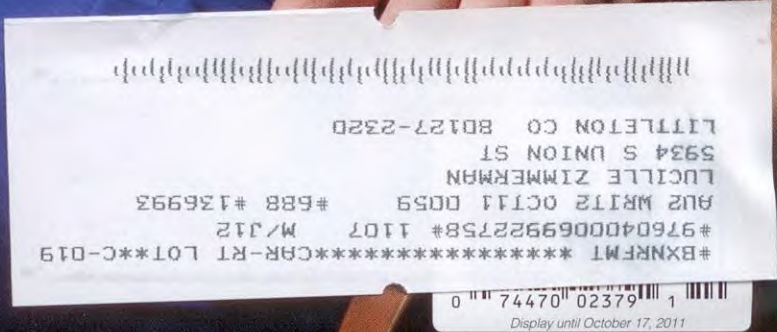
How to Master Your Market

NONFICTION BOOK PROPOSAL SECRETS

WD INTERVIEW

Dave Cullen

THE COLUMBINE AUTHOR ON WRITING FACT LIKE FICTION



The WD Interview

Dave Cullen

NARRATING LIFE

For this modern master of truth that reads like fiction, the best writing begins with the toughest questions—and a drive to reveal the answers in a voice all your own.

BY LINDSEY O'CONNOR

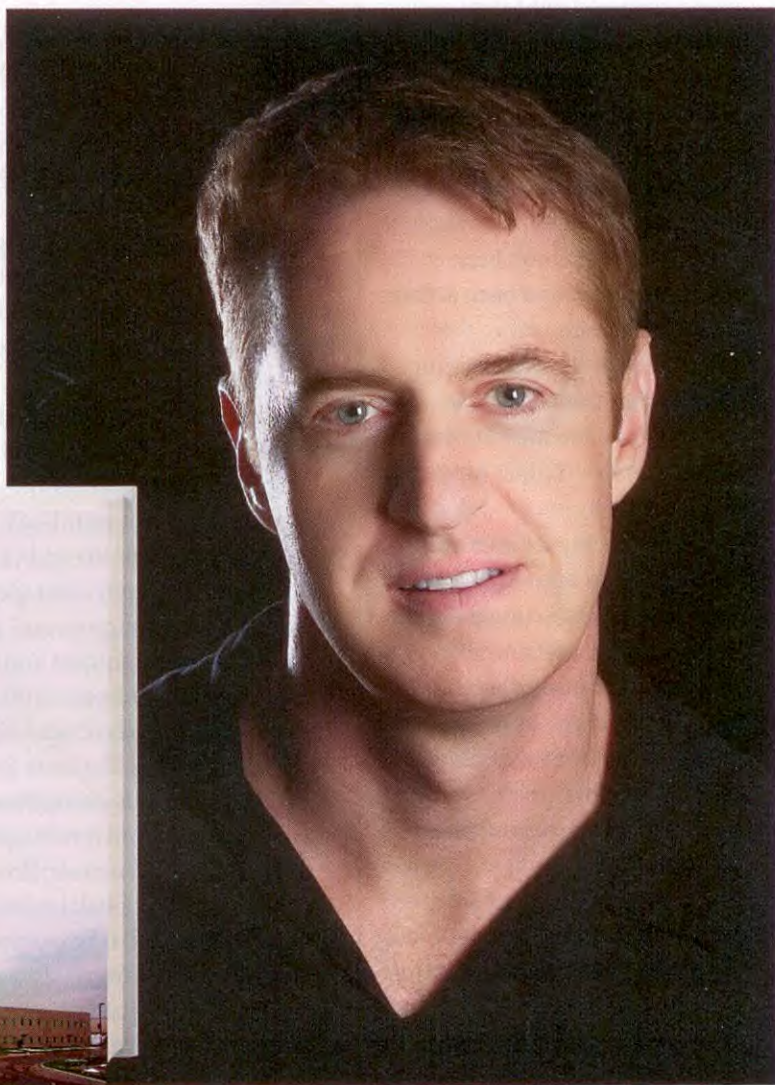


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For narrative writers, the hard part is finding the story, that Aristotelian beginning, middle and end. So bestselling author and journalist Dave Cullen's own tale might begin with a character-revealing scene *in medias res*, in the middle of things, perhaps at a climactic moment of becoming a journalist, long before he wrote for *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Times of London* and *Salon.com*. At 19, sitting in the back of a car interviewing soon-to-be Vice President George Bush Sr.—just Cullen, Bush and a Secret Service agent. Or later, getting his head shaved in basic training for the Army, having signed up to see what war was like, live through it, experience everything. Or still years down the road, at 33, quitting a six-figure job as a management consultant with Arthur Andersen after a two-year stint in Kuwait allowed him to save enough money to go to graduate school for a Master of Arts in creative writing.

Or it could be that Cullen's story should begin much earlier, in the hallway of his suburban Chicago Catholic grade school, tornado sirens blaring as he and his 6-year-old classmates crouched with their heads between their knees while nuns prayed the tornado wouldn't hit, and Cullen hoped for the opposite: *Are you kidding me? A tornado's coming? What might it be like to live through a tornado?*

It was the same curiosity that eventually drove him to seek the real story of the Columbine High School shooting. His mission to find out what everyone wanted to know—"Why'd they do it?"—would become his debut breakout book, *Columbine*, which drew immediate attention for boldly debunking media-perpetuated myths. "I only want to read about things when I don't know the answer," he says. "My writing's like detective work. What hasn't been discovered yet?"

In person, for the author of such a heavy book, he's unexpectedly funny, tangential and charming. He makes you believe you can write no matter how difficult, and achieve your dreams with hard work and tenacity.

And he should know. He researched and wrote *Columbine* for 10 years.

In that decade, he culled through more than 25,000 pages of police evidence, suffered two bouts of post-

traumatic stress disorder, and went through five editors, an e-book version, three publishers and multiple years-long extensions before the book's long-awaited publication culminated in eight weeks on *The New York Times* hardcover bestseller list and anointment by Oprah Winfrey.

Today, he's a top authority on the tragedy and a go-to media source on school shootings and safety, but make no mistake—he's not just a subject expert who wrote a book. He's a literary talent—critically and publicly acclaimed for his storytelling and pacing mastery, as well as his meticulously detailed reporting and research—and *Columbine* is a masterwork of narrative nonfiction in the vein of Truman Capote. "In my book I want every word to be true, but to read like a novel," Cullen says.

Finding that form took years. He tried lyrics, screenwriting, short stories. "I had to slow down in my 30s and 40s to hit the pace so I could write, quit trying so hard, find my authentic voice. It wasn't until my late 40s where I got to be a good enough writer and was ready for my first book."

He's now been writing close to full time for the past 15 years, and is the recipient of an Edgar Allan Poe Award, Barnes & Noble Discover Award, The Truth About the Fact's Literary Nonfiction Book of the Year Award and a Goodreads Choice Award, as well as a finalist for both Audie and LA Times book awards, and a presence on numerous "Best of" lists. He lived in Denver while writing *Columbine*, but is now a New Yorker and prefers long-form projects, often about subcultures and people on the margins.

Here, Cullen shares what he's learned from his breakout success, why he believes in quality over quantity, and where his curiosity is taking him next.

What's it been like to have award-winning success on your first book?

It's been wonderful. Disbelief. I was also giddy. I was 48 when the book came out. I started creating novelistic stories when I was 4 or 5 years old, journalism in college, creative writing in high school, on my own in my 20s, grad school in my 30s—then, after nearly half a century, my dream of getting a book published finally happened.

At the Edgar Awards, Jon Karp, my editor (who's bril-

"We live in a rushed world. Everyone's doing things faster. Do something slow, where craftsmanship, quality shows."

liant), sat next to me. It was a year after publication and he asked, "Has it changed your life?" I was stuck. It seemed kind of weird I didn't know, but now I understand why. I was still on that wave. Now I've landed on the beach and can say my life is vastly different.

You regularly address classes using your Online Instructor's Guide. What led you to create that?

About six months after the book came out I noticed high school kids on my Facebook page. Some were telling me they were using it in school for projects, some for pleasure. It became clear I could help them.

I created the student guide first. Once I realized both kids and teachers were interested, an instructor's guide was a no-brainer. So were more videos, Skypes and Facebook. Kids were reading my book for pleasure, and teachers wanted to use it in class: So, make it easier for them. And sell more books. That's a win-win.

How can other writers emulate that approach?

Any book that might appeal to kids can have an instructor guide. It helps to have a model. Use mine—feel free to steal it [columbine-instructor-guide.com]. Creating the model was the hardest part: I created a syllabus and exercises, test questions and writing assignments. And start small. Come up with 10 questions and two to three writing assignments. People can write and say, "I like your instructor guide, but why don't you have XYZ?" Then you can add it.

Before the book came out we created book club questions. That, we'd thought ahead. We were ready when Oprah called.

That's such a great line: "When Oprah called."

[Laughs.] It worked out that way. Oprah's magazine and website featured the book in her summer reading list.

What's the best thing you've done to help your sales?

One of the biggest things I've done is create Columbine Online [columbine-online.com]—a guide with everything imaginable you'd want to know about the Columbine case, at least the highlights. The idea, especially with a nonfiction book, is to create a resource that's useful for readers and that can build its own identity and traffic independent

of and in advance of the book. That really helped launch the book. Over years hundreds of thousands had visited my site, so when people saw a review or interview, they saw there's not just a book on Columbine, there's a book by that guy. There was trust. They'd go, "Hmm, I might actually have to buy that book."

Can sharing so much before publication take away from the book itself?

I think it's silliness to worry about giving it away. You can't wait to start building your platform—the whole time you're working on [your book] you can be getting your stuff out there. You build up good will, interest and awareness. Awareness is golden.

It's really curating. I sifted, organized it and provided comment. People say, "Oh, he's done the work for me." Now they're a part of my audience. For the next book, I'll have more support material about the subject matter up, a dedicated Facebook page, videos and loads of links in place before the launch, because that's when its impact is multiplied. The key is giving people something they can use. Some of those people will buy the book. It's not about closing a sale; it's about building traffic with solid material. They'll buy the book if they want it. Or their friends might.

How'd you stick with such a tough project for so long?

If you want to be any kind of artist, you've got to have that tenacity to keep beating your head against the wall. We all get rejected, but you keep doing it anyway if you want to be a writer. Officer Candidate School [taught me that] you can make it through anything when you think you can't. It was brutally hard. I learned perceptions are deceiving. It seems impossible, but you do it anyway. I broke my back after OCS and spent almost a year in a body cast; that tested whether it was really true. I learned it doesn't matter how much pain you're in or how hopeless it seems. The idea of the impossible is an illusion, and it will look very different on the other side. It's a matter of persevering.

Practically, while writing I got counseling and treatment and I went dancing every Saturday night and gave myself Sunday off. I also went to the gym. Betsy, my agent, told me this is a marathon. Find something that restores

you, to balance out the dark stuff you're taking in. Find things that make you whole.

You spend an extraordinary amount of time on promotion. How do you balance that with writing time?

When the book released I worked full time 60–70 hours a week on promotion. Two years after my book came out, I've spent 95 percent of my time still promoting it. I don't know yet if that was the right balance. Everything I did that first year promoting the hardcover was priming the pump for the paperback launch, which helped me sell tens of thousands of paperbacks to live off [of for] the next year. I look at my sales as investing in the future. If I don't screw it up they can be my readers for life. That's how I've financially justified it. It's cumulative.

What's your writing routine like?

It varies wildly. Writing is scary. I'm afraid of not doing it well. Getting the momentum going is very hard. In Denver I had paper taped to the wall labeled "When I'm stuck" in 72-point bold. I don't have a routine—I have tactics to get me going again.

I take a walk. I always have a pen and paper in my pocket, folded, so when writing starts itself I'm here to meet it. (I start 95 percent of scenes on paper ... on a PC it's too easy to rewrite as I go. I get forward momentum with a pen because it's harder to change. Once I'm far enough into a scene where I've got it, I switch to the computer.) I also read something fantastic that I adore, and two pages in I'm so in love with writing I can't wait to be doing it again.

Do you write while researching, or afterward?

Back and forth, constantly. At least that's the plan. I usually end up researching too long before I start a section, and regret it. Writing is the best way to discover what I still need to research.

What advice do you have for crafting nonfiction that reads like a novel?

Learn from whatever art inspires you. For me, it was film, pop music (punk, Neil Young, Patti Smith ...) and novels, in that order. Don't let the existing constraints of the narrative nonfiction form bind you. We're still in the early days. Truth is the only boundary. *How* you tell the truth is wide open.

You've advised writers not to release a book before it's ready. How do you know when it is ready?

It's not getting it perfect. This is taking an infinite project



MORE LESSONS CULLED FROM CULLEN

For Dave Cullen's best advice on making a living from your writing, visit writersdigest.com/article/cullen-bonusinterview.

and turning it into a finite project. It's about realizing it isn't your *absolute* best work—because then you'd never let go of it—but it's something you'd be very proud of.

How do you balance that with the pressure to publish at a steady pace?

Playing against type has always worked for me. I want to be the guy who's the perfectionist and takes longer. Long gestation periods work for me. I've got to make every book count, but I'm going to have less books. I'd rather have five incredible books than 10 or 20 good ones.

We live in a rushed world. Everyone's doing things faster. Do something slow, where craftsmanship, quality shows. I believe we have this innate desire for long-form things that's wired into human nature—so the more everything is shorter and faster, the more the hunger grows. We consume tons of that, but it's like eating potato chips all day, and when somebody lays out a gourmet meal, it's like, *wow!* Be the gourmet meal. Don't be the potato chip.

You've kept quiet about your next project until recently.

Now I'm writing a book about gay military officers. I'm planning on taking you inside their lives—what it's like to be a soldier, and a soldier's spouse.

How does it compare in scope to *Columbine*?

It will be two story lines and two protagonists instead of 10, so mercifully simpler. But that will give me the space to dive into each life more deeply. It will span two decades—most of their careers—and weave through extraordinary surprises and sacrifice. A completely different experience.

Will this be narrative nonfiction, too?

Always narrative. My idea now is I'll always write the form of the novel with many or most of them true. For this next one I decided truth is better, so I'll stick to the truth. No one has ever read narrative nonfiction that feels as intimate as *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I'll be shooting for that on this book—to bring the nonfiction side up to full, stand side by side with the novel as art and in intimacy. That's my current lifetime goal. **WD**

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