David Rabin
Q&A

What comes first for you — the plot or the characters?

The characters. To me, the plot is a vehicle for the characters.

What are your personal rules when writing your novels?

I will always respect the reader. I'll assume the reader is smarter than I am. That means leaving no plot holes, minimizing coincidences, taking no easy outs, and making the story plausible. I never want the reader to think, "that couldn't happen." I'll make the story as authentic as possible, which means doing research to the nth degree and consulting with experts. I live in fear of a subject-matter expert telling me I got something wrong. I'll create characters that I hope readers will bond with and like so much that they'll want to read the next book just to be able to spend more time with them.

What is your writing process?

I think the key to good writing is putting oneself in the reader's position. What I'm thinking isn't important. What's important is what the reader is perceiving.

To that end, I imagine I'm watching a movie. I write down what I'm seeing and hearing.

When you're not writing, what are you likely to be doing?

I'm probably at the shooting range, practicing or shooting in a match and kibitzing with my shooting buddies. If I'm not at the range, there's a good chance I'm reloading ammunition.

If you knew you could not fail, what would you do?

I'd be a blues-rock guitarist. Think: ZZ Top, Foghat, and George Thorogood.

In Danger of Judgment

What was the inspiration for the setup to your story?

I've been interested in the so-called "Golden Triangle" and its role in heroin production and smuggling ever since I watched the *Miami Vice* series in the 1980s, which featured the Golden Triangle in a couple of episodes. The history behind it is fascinating, and I delve into it in the book. But I wanted to go beyond a drug-smuggling story by wrapping it into a larger conspiracy. The Vietnam War provided the perfect context for that larger story, both geographically and in terms of the era, so events in Vietnam became the spark for the plot.

Can you tell us a bit about the characters and the story?

The protagonists are two Chicago police detectives, Marcelle DeSantis and William "Bernie" Bernardelli. The villain is Robert Thornton, who started out as a college professor, served in the OSS during World War Two, worked for the CIA for several years, operated as a mercenary in Asia and Africa, and, when we meet him in the main story, is the chief enforcer for a Southeast Asian heroin cartel.

The story: Marcelle and Bernie are investigating a series of heroin-related murders that appear to be professional hits. They're soon enmeshed in a larger conspiracy arising out of a failed covert operation fifteen years earlier during the Vietnam War. As they desperately try to stop a drug war, they're unaware they're about to be caught between Thornton and a man seeking revenge against him. The plot can be summarized as: history, crime, and vengeance.

What were some themes that were important for you to explore in this book?

For me, the principal theme is the importance of friendship. The secondary theme is: when is it morally justifiable to kill someone?

What has been your favorite reader feedback?

Several people have told me they stayed up until early in the morning to finish reading the book. Knowing I was able to entertain people is gratifying beyond words. Others have commented on the authenticity and attention to detail in the story. I did an enormous amount of research, though I'd estimate that less than ten percent made it into the book. Having people give me that shout-out makes all the effort worthwhile.

Summary Judgment

How will the cast of characters be the same or different in this book?

Marcelle and Bernie are back. John Shepard, one of the characters in book 1, is back as well. We'll also see Bernie's childhood friend, Bobby Torelli, now the head of Chicago's Mafia family. Bernie's mother reappears in a bigger role. And of course, there's a whole slew of new villains.

Tell us about the plot of *Summary Judgment* and how you came up with it.

The precipitating event is the murder of an heir to a media fortune. A homeless teenager is the only witness. The book has three storylines: the investigation of the murder, the murderer's effort to kill the witness, and the murderer's colleagues trying to kill Marcelle, Bernie, and John. While most of the story occurs in Chicago, a significant portion takes place in rural Georgia. I enjoyed showing readers two completely different environments.

As for how I came up with it: *Summary Judgment* is the second book in the series. When I conceived the first book, I envisioned a larger story that would need two more books to tell properly. I wanted each book in the trilogy to have a self-contained story, while also having the three books together tell the larger one—basically the same structure as the first three *Star Wars* movies.

The first book, *In Danger of Judgment*, established the characters and the background. As the middle book in the trilogy, *Summary Judgment* is the transition to the last book.

Knowing that transition would be critical, I started planning *Summary Judgment* by asking myself: what's the best way to get from that book to the last one? And so, I first figured out how to end *Summary Judgment* and worked backward from there.

Tell us about your main characters and how you invented them. Was there someone you modeled them after?

I didn't model them after real people, though in hindsight I realized one of them is modeled after an ideal person. I'll get to that in a second.

My books have an ensemble of three principal characters. I wanted three people with distinct personalities and behaviors who would complement one another and be entertaining to readers.

Chicago Police Detective Marcelle DeSantis is a thirty-something who's the only female detective in the department's Violent Crimes Division. She has three main characteristics: whatever room she's in, she's the smartest person in the room; she can be whoever she needs to be to get the job done; and she takes no grief from anyone.

Marcelle's partner, Bernie Bernardelli, is a long-time CPD veteran who's seen it all but has managed not to get jaded. He's Marcelle's mentor, though he'd never describe himself that way. He and Marcelle have a kind of uncle-niece relationship. He's the moral center of the stories and the glue that holds the three characters together.

John Shepard is an Internal Revenue Service Special Agent assigned to the IRS Criminal Investigation Division. He's an accountant by training. He's also neurodivergent.

I created the characters after my wife and I had had two sons and knew we wouldn't have more children. Long after I wrote the first book, I realized I had created Marcelle as the daughter I would have wanted.

If your books were made into a movie, which actors would play your characters?

Amber Rose Revah as Marcelle DeSantis.

Delaney Williams as Bernie Bernardelli.

Elijah Wood as John Shepard.