

Interview with P. J. Grondin discussing his newest novel: *Drug Wars*



Q. What inspired you to write *Drug Wars*?

A. A number of things. First, there has recently been a major media focus on law enforcement misconduct. *Drug Wars* highlights a team of Drug Enforcement Administration agents and other government officials who are abusing their power and positions to enrich themselves at the expense of young folks just trying to make a living. I felt that the premise of the story was, and still is, timely. I think it bothers a lot of folks in the United States, that the actions of a relative few law enforcement officers are overshadowing the good accomplished by so many others. We need to support the good officers and prosecute those abusing their positions. Second, I wanted to introduce a protagonist with a high degree of integrity, versus a guy with a beat-em-up/shoot-em-up, head banging mentality. Third, my wife and I vacationed in Savannah, Georgia. I was so impressed by the historic district of Savannah that I wanted to base the series in the heart of the city. I placed Peden Savage's office in one of the nineteenth century buildings, using the Bird-Baldwin House as the model. We stayed at the house while there and found that, being on West Liberty Street, it was the perfect location to see the Historic District on foot. Finally, I needed to start with some fresh characters after closing out the McKinney Brothers series. Though the McKinney Brothers and their friends were very good to me, I wanted to set off in a different direction with the new series. The McKinneys were amateur sleuths, where Peden Savage is a licensed investigator. He brings a whole new set of skills, friends, and enemies with him. I thought about bringing William "Hatch" Hatcher into the new series, since he is from Moniac, Georgia, but decided against it. I think that you will find some of my new characters will be just as colorful as Hatch.

Q. What sets Peden Savage apart from Private Investigators in other novels that you have read?

A. As a former Marine, Peden has a strong code of ethics and little tolerance for people who break the law, especially those in positions of trust and power. He is exceptionally smart, is an expert in covert surveillance devices, and keeps his emotions in check. He picks his friends and associates carefully. He has a knack for sensing when someone is being less than truthful. Peden was forced out of the FBI when he threatened to blow the whistle on fellow agents who were crossing legal and ethical lines by planting evidence on criminals to ensure successful prosecutions. His former colleagues and others in the law enforcement community either love

and respect him for his low tolerance for unethical behavior or hate him for his perceived betrayal of his fellow agents.

Q. As the series progresses, do you expect that Savage and Megan Moore, his former FBI partner, will become romantically involved?

A. Megan Moore, a beautiful, tough, serious FBI agent is Peden's former partner at the bureau. She never smiles and wears a perpetually serious expression. She never seems to have a personal relationship, though I believe that she will within the next couple of novels. She is very close with Savage, trusts his judgment, and is very respectful of the decisions that he made at the FBI. She is attracted to him, but not in a physical sense. I believe that they both may be tempted to cross that line later in the series as their relationship continues to develop. Megan was partly responsible for Peden's divorce from his former wife, though she and Peden never had any romantic encounters. It was all a misunderstanding on Peden's wife's part, though Megan didn't try to dissuade his wife's suspicions. Moore believed that his wife was bad for him, both personally and professionally, because she constantly distracted him from his work.

Q. Should readers start with book one in the series, then move to book two, or do you expect that they can be read the stories out of order?

A. In this particular series, I am recommending that the stories be read in order, though each book will have a distinctly unique plot. I plan to have Savage and his friends and associates grow and mature with each story. There may be spoilers in later novels that may provide conclusions from previous stories for the reader and a few minor characters may carryover from one story to the next. That's why I'd recommend readers follow the series beginning with Drug Wars.

Q. The Peden Savage series is published by your own publishing company. What does being an indie author, and publisher, mean to you?

A. First, it has been, and continues to be, quite an education. Every book is a unique project. From writing the initial main plot, creating new characters with their very own quirks, to weaving in subplots that are essential to keeping the story interesting, without giving away the ending, just writing a novel is a major endeavor. Publishing the work is a whole new ballgame. All of the complex aspects of creating a marketable product are things that I learned over a couple of decades. I love telling stories that I have essentially created in my mind and bringing those characters to life in print. The process of taking that story and physically molding it into the finished product is very challenging. But when you see and feel and read the finished product, it gives you a tremendous sense of accomplishment. Learning all the aspects of publishing a book has been a real education. From getting ISBN numbers, copyright protection, to registering the work with the Library of Congress, these are all steps that the indie publisher must take to produce a commercially marketable book. You wear many hats, far more than just the lid of an author. I learned early on in my writing career that it takes a lot of time, knowledge, and energy to complete a quality book. Along the way, you learn a lot about the process, and yourself. There were aspects of the job that I thought about contracting out to experts. But the more I did, the more I learned. One thing that is a certainty in this business; you can't be afraid of failure. I've made many mistakes, but they have always pointed me towards success.

Q. Can you tell us a little bit about your writing process?

A. I start with “the big idea,” the main plot. I write a paragraph or two about the plot. From there, I have a spreadsheet with five tabs (though this can change from book to book). The first tab is broken into about 45 lines which I use to write a few sentences about each chapter. Also on this tab I describe the viewpoint for each chapter. I try to keep the number of viewpoints to that of seven major characters. I also keep track of the open points for each chapter so that I can make sure they are addressed prior to the end of the story. The second tab is for character descriptions. This is where I write information on the particulars for each character, both major and minor. The third tab is for an overview of the viewpoints, location information, and other notes. The fourth tab is strictly to track word counts. I shoot for between 80,000 and 100,000 words, ideally somewhere in the lower to middle part of that range. The last tab is a very brief synopsis of each chapter (first tab boiled down to a single sentence. I use this spreadsheet as my roadmap. It also helps me maintain an easy reference to see where I am in the story. It is easy to get lost in the midpoint of a manuscript so I like using this process to stay on track.

Q. Who is your favorite fictional character?

A. My favorite at the moment is Lucas Davenport, the primary character in John Sandford’s “Prey” series. I am also a big fan of Kinsey Milhone from Sue Grafton’s alphabet books, the late Vince Flynn’s Mitch Rapp, and Harry Bosch, the detective in a very popular series by Michael Connelly. Others that I like are Jack Reacher (who doesn’t like Reacher) by Lee Child, and John Corey from Nelson DeMille.

Q. Describe the perfect writing environment.

A. The perfect writing environment would be a locked, quiet room with a computer that has internet access for research, with a white board and no windows. Unfortunately, I haven’t found this ideal room for a number of reasons.

Q. How would you describe your writing style?

A. Great question. I try to write in such a way that the reader forms their own motion picture in their mind. I try to arouse each of the reader’s senses so that they feel like they are there, in the scene, with the characters in the story. I’m not sure that I always succeed.

10. What’s your ultimate writing goal?

A. I hope that, one day, one of my stories is picked up for either a television series or a motion picture. I’ve had a number of people tell me, after reading one of the McKinney Brothers novels that they could picture the story unfold on the big screen. I was pretty pumped at the time, but I came back down to earth and realized that there is a lot of work involved before that happens. The good news is that I am now retired from my day job, and at (cough) sixty, I still have a few good years in me to work towards that goal.

Bio

Pete ‘P.J.’ Grondin was born in Sandusky, Ohio in 1956. He is the seventh of twelve children born to Nicholas and Patricia Grondin. The family moved a number of times when Pete

was young; from Sandusky, Ohio to Bay City, Michigan, then to Maitland, Florida, finally settling in the small, rural community of Zellwood, Florida. At age 22, he moved back to Sandusky and worked at a retail department store where he met his wife, Debbie. They were married in January, 1984 and have two children. He joined the US Navy in the Nuclear Power Program and served on the ballistic missile submarine, USS John Adams (SSBN 620b). After being discharged from the US Navy in 1989, he moved his family back to their hometown of Sandusky. He was elected to the Sandusky City Commission, serving a single term from 1993 to 1997. He recently retired from a major regional electric utility where he worked as the technical lead in the IT department.

His current novels in the McKinney Brothers suspense series are *A Lifetime of Vengeance*, *A Lifetime of Deception*, *A Lifetime of Exposure*, *A Lifetime of Terror*, and *A Lifetime of Betrayal*. His newest novel, the first in the Peden Savage series, is *Drug Wars*.