

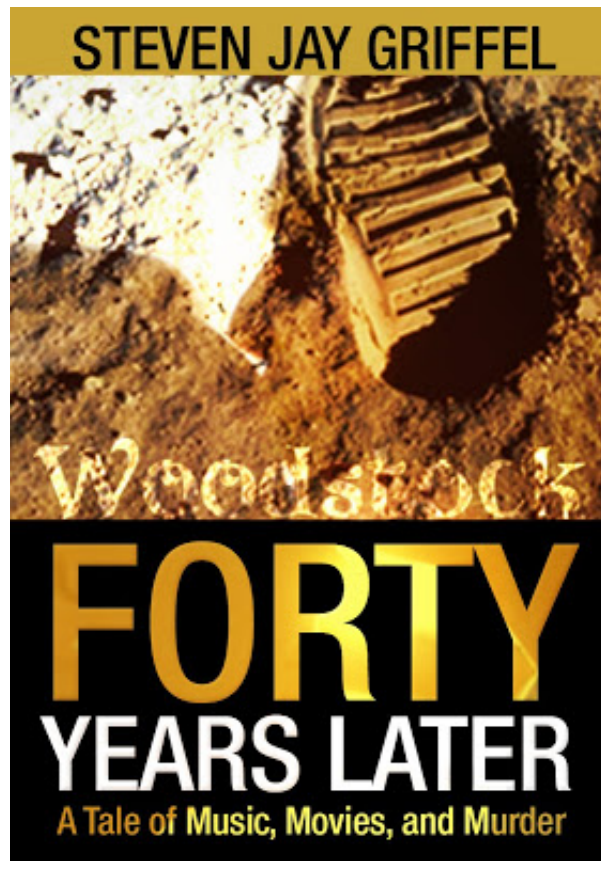


Paper Dollz

Presenting international perspectives from innovators in the Arts.

November 24, 2009

Memory Lane Leads to Fiction for Author Steven Jay Griffel



Only one month after publication, Steven Jay Griffel's first published novel, *Forty Years Later*, has already skyrocketed to third place in the category of Rock among Kindle's 360,000 e-books.

Forty Years Later is the story of David Grossman's struggles to reconcile the regrets of his youth and the failures of his middle-age. It is a suspenseful and psychological journey involving two very different women who represent his past and future. Set against a background of Hollywood movie making and Woodstock rock 'n roll, it is a fast-paced, funny, and poignant novel.

Recently, Steven Jay Griffel sat down with our editor to comment on his journey as a writer and the new accessibility of

his work through digital publishing.

What was your motivation / inspiration for writing *Forty Years Later*? There is a real-life story that parallels the early chapters of *Forty Years Later*. I really did meet someone I had not seen for forty years who is an award-winning screenwriter and whose work mined some of the same themes I had explored in my earlier writing. I spent one very full day with this person and began to fantasize what it would be like to continue the relationship. My musings took shape—and I found myself writing a new novel.

When we spoke you described your career in publishing as an issue of practicality. Has every writer faced such issues? Every writer not born with a silver spoon in his mouth has faced issues of practicality. Most writers don't have trust funds or inheritances to support them. Like most folk, we have to work for a living, doing all the quotidian things to make the world run smoothly—not to mention feed ourselves and our families. Faulkner worked as a postmaster; Hawthorne as a custom's agent; Wallace Stevens worked in the insurance industry; T.S. Eliot was a banker. Doctors, lawyers, soldiers, mothers, teachers, criminals—everyone has to make a buck.

How hard was it to cross over from being an editor to a writer? There wasn't much of a cross-over. Most of my work was in educational textbooks, and while I must have written hundreds of reading passages, articles, and essays—including several Young Adult books—the skill sets I relied on are quite different from those I use when I write creatively. Even when I had the great pleasure of working as a literary anthologist, the process was not creative the way writing fiction is.

Also, I didn't cross over from editor to writer, I was a writer first. I always knew I'd be a writer. At sixteen I entered the Creative Writing department at Queens College and graduated with that major. I went on to complete a Master's Degree in American Literature because I wanted to know who had come before me and where I fit in.

Where do you fit in the spectrum of authors? At this point, I'm a minor footnote in the long and venerable history of New York Jewish writers.

Do you see yourself as a Jewish novelist? I am a Jewish novelist by birth and vocation, but it hardly defines me. It sure as hell doesn't limit me.

How did you develop your writer's voice? I was a terrible writer for many years because of my unnatural voice. I wrote what I thought sounded literary. I wrote what I thought others would regard as impressive or important. Of course, I wrote a lot of crap. It's not easy to find one's writing voice. It isn't the same as writing the way one speaks, though that at least would have been more natural than the artificial stuff I was cranking out. I was like the bad actor who mouths words stiffly and unconvincingly. He isn't inside his character—he isn't expressing himself naturally, from the inside out. A good actor—or writer—has to let go of his ego in order to create something else.

When you say you made an effort to “sound literary,” was that because you were aiming to create high literature, as something different than literature for the masses? It is a topic that I have wrestled with as a writer. I don't believe in categorical distinctions such as high and low literature, literature for the elite and literature for the masses. Literature exists along a continuum. There is great writing and there is bad writing; most writing falls somewhere in between. Early on I didn't trust my own literary instincts. I didn't think anyone would think much of my writing unless I continually pulled out all the stops, and so my early writing was more like colorful fireworks than a controlled, purposeful narrative. I did not yet understand that every word in a story must serve a purpose. If a writer is equivocal about a certain word or phrase, he must ask himself: Does the wording gratify my ego or does it enhance the narrative? If it is a question of ego, the word or phrase

must be cut.

Did you use any techniques you learned in the publishing industry when you wrote the novel? Effective business correspondence is clear and targeted. It does not gain points for rich ambiguity the way fiction does. As a writer of business correspondence I trained myself to write succinctly, and this control occasionally proved valuable when I wrote fiction.

How important to you is the editing, or revising, of your work? Revision is the heart and soul of good writing. Forget the Romantic notion of being inspired by a Muse and having torrents of words gush out. Though this sometimes happens, a story written in a passionate frenzy is usually unfocused.

I revise my work carefully. My first revisions are for sense. Did I say everything I wanted to say? Later revisions are for sound. At this point I rely more on my ears than my eyes. I listen to the words. I try to hear the rhythm of my prose. The meaning and music of my words must work together. There are writers who tell a great story but whose music is clumsy and monotonous. And there are writers who write amazingly musical prose—but who are not adept at creating full-blooded characters and believable plots. The greatest writers do both well. And when that happens—voilà!

Sometimes non-writers assume the work we do is mostly autobiographical. In a sense, it's true. I think all the work novelists do is mostly autobiographical, whether we realize it or not. Think of J.R.R. Tolkien, author of the *Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*. I can guarantee you that every imaginative moment in his fantastical adventures has its counterpart in some remembered event or emotion. Imagination doesn't come out of thin air!

Fiction is removed from autobiographical reality only by degrees. The beginning of *Forty Years Later* is strongly autobiographical—but not the second half of the book. None of those events actually took place, although the ideas were inspired by bits and pieces of my lived life.

While happenstances in life do provide inspiration, every writer has a way of expanding one experience into a larger story. Can you describe your process for transforming moments of inspiration? People often experience events or relationships and think “This would make a good story.” But not every real-life story can be successfully developed into a novel. I think writers often begin a novel with a single story in mind, knowing—or at least hoping—that other details, supporting cast, and plot will be imagined to augment the central idea. That has been my *modus operandi*—and it certainly was true of *Forty Years Later*. I knew two people would meet after forty years, and I knew sparks would fly, and I knew there would be hell to pay. I just couldn't have said *what*, exactly. But that's the mystery of art!

Did you have to do any research? The only substantial research I did was to visit the Bethel Woods Center to see what the new, permanent “Woodstock” venue is like. I also wanted to pay homage to the original site.

Is the original site still there? Yes. The grassy amphitheater that once accommodated hundreds of thousands is pretty much the same. There is a flat, gravelly area at the bottom where the stage stood, but the lake behind the stage, which had provided such a beautiful backdrop, is shielded by new tree growth. I was surprised to discover this, though I shouldn't have been. After all, it's been forty years.

You said your publisher calls you a digital pioneer? What does that mean to you? It took some getting used to. I'm older than you are and my early life wasn't shaped by the Digital Revolution as yours was, presumably.

While I had always dreamed of seeing my books in the windows of book superstores, I now have the pleasure of knowing my book is accessible to every reader on the planet who has a computer or a Kindle, iPhone, etc. Two weeks ago one of my best friends flew from LA to New York and read *Forty Years Later* on his iPod Touch—at forty thousand feet. He said reading my book was a great high!

Really, I'm thrilled to be a digital pioneer. I love the fact that e-books are less expensive and more readily accessible to readers. Already I have heard from people in Germany, Australia, Canada, Denmark, Israel, and Peru who want to read *Forty Years Later*, and it's only been out a little more than a month!

It's a new age. Things will change. Some things will be missed. For instance, I think large bookstores will probably go the way of the dinosaur as many fewer books will be published in a paper-bound format. However, I think more people will read more books than ever before. In a few years electronic readers like the Kindle and the Nook might be as commonplace as cell phones. On balance, I think the Digital Revolution is one of the great positive changes in human history. I'm proud to be one of its pioneers.

Are you working on any other projects? What is next for you? Actually, I'm working on a new novel about what happens when a novelist, who is also an antiquarian (a collector of rare books and beautiful bindings), finds himself at the forefront of the digital revolution, sounding the death-knell for the very thing he cherishes most. Revolutions are exciting but not without casualties.



Steven Jay Griffel is the first author to be published by Schiller and Wells, a division of Stay Thirsty Media. He is a nationally known editor and publisher of educational textbooks, and the author of many articles and books for young adults. *Forty Years Later* is his first published novel. Combining humor and nostalgia with a cutting-edge style that makes use of phone conversations and e-mails, Griffel has fashioned a fast-paced contemporary tale befitting one of this generation's

digital pioneers. Griffel lives with his wife and two daughters in New York City.

[Order your copy of Forty Years Later here.](#)

Editor- K. T. Mitchell at 8:36 PM

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3 comments:



GABixler November 26, 2009 at 9:39 AM

"I'm a minor footnote in the long and venerable history of New York Jewish writers."

This is a wonderful statement! May your footnotes turn into the top Google items...

Great Interview...

Best,
Glenda

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eudora November 27, 2009 at 5:05 PM

It definitely is a great interview!The interviewer allowed the writer to expand his viewpoints. For active writers and potential writers, Griffel offers an honest, quite unglamorous, picture of the inspiration based on real life and the hard work of craftsmanship.That's what most writers really need to know! And, to be encouraged by it!

Now, I have to read that book!

[Reply](#)



KennethPitchford@aol.com December 4, 2009 at 2:28 PM

I am one of those who believe that neither "minor" nor "footnote" will be a useful term with which to discuss the work of Steven Jay Griffel. Rock on.

Thanks, Steve!
Kenneth

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Editor- K. T. Mitchell

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