



BEYOND *the* LAW

Brenda Buchanan

Interview and photos by Daniel J. Murphy

It has been said that the art of writing a great thriller is knowing when to let the spinning plate fall to ground. Although suspense is the lifeblood of all crime fiction, the most satisfying novels are carefully woven out of compelling characters, engrossing story line, and riveting conflict. For Brenda Buchanan, author of the *Joe Gale* mystery series and other crime novels, this creative process for writing crime fiction has become a source of great fulfillment and an important part of her daily routine. Buchanan, a transactional attorney at Warren, Currier & Buchanan, P.A, in Portland, recently sat down with the *Maine Bar Journal* to discuss her interests.

How did you become a crime fiction novelist?

I was a journalist before I became a lawyer. I began writing at a very young age—fiction, poetry, and journalism—trying it all on. I was editor of my high school newspaper and studied journalism at Northeastern University in Boston, where through the co-op program, I worked as a reporter trainee at the *Boston Globe*. I grew up reading the *Globe*, so it was really thrilling for me at age 20 to work in that newsroom. When I was at Northeastern, I also studied creative writing with Robert B. Parker, who wrote, famously, *The Spencer Series*. At the time, he had published a few books, and was at the point where he was about to let go of teaching and write full time. I took two courses with him and believe the second was one of the last courses he taught, either my junior or senior year. It was one of those cool things that happen in your life that you tuck away for later. After graduation from Northeastern I became a journalist and moved to Maine, where I worked at the *York County Coast Star* down in Kennebunk.

How many years were you at the *York County Coast Star*?

From 1980 to 1986. It was a great experience, but eventually, I wanted to move on and do something different. I was interested in the *Maine Times* and the *Press Herald*, but they didn't have any openings. I covered the courts for the *Star*, which allowed me to meet an awful lot of lawyers, several of whom asked if I was considering law school. I hadn't, but with their encouragement, I did. So, journalism led me directly to law school. I went to Maine Law and then set about building a legal career. But all that time, the writing thing stayed in my mind because first and foremost, before I was anything else, I was a writer. When I was doing litigation and appellate work I poured a lot of energy into writing briefs. Now I confine my practice to transactional work and I'm really precise with words when drafting contracts. The writing part of lawyering matters a lot to me.

About 10 years ago, I'd been living on Peaks Island for a dozen years and was getting ready to move to the mainland. I loved living on the island and knew I would miss it. I also realized I would have the chance to substitute something else for the time that it took to commute back and forth. At that point, I realized that it was high time to start writing fiction. I started noodling around before we moved, and once we settled in our new home I made sure to create a physical space for my writing. I took a couple of classes and eventually developed the most critical thing—a daily writing habit. I made the commitment to myself to write every day. The book that had been rattling around in my brain with a newspaper reporter protagonist began to emerge. I originally thought that if I could write two pages a night, I'd have a book in six or eight months. And, of course, that is funny, because I soon learned it takes years to hone a book to where you are happy with it, and able to send it out, find an agent, and sell it to a publisher.

Could you describe your writing routine for our readers?

I usually get to work early in the morning and if I'm having an efficient day, I can leave around 5:00. Those are the really good days. I don't ever write fiction when I'm at my office unless I come in on a weekend specifically for that purpose. On workdays, when I'm in the office, I'm lawyering. I owe that to my clients. I owe that to my partners. But whatever time I manage to leave on a workday, after I step out the back door of 57 Exchange Street, I begin to think about writing, and where I am going with the book. I have a quick supper and write a couple of hours in the evening. There are days when my writing time gets shortened up a bit, but every day I make sure to set aside time for writing. Right now, I'm in the final revisions of a manuscript, so "writing" means taking apart every paragraph and looking at every word to make sure it does what I want it to do. When I'm actively writing, I usually try to get about 1,000 words down each night. Sometimes the words come very, very quickly, and other times it's like pulling teeth.

What was your first crime novel?

My first book is called *Quick Pivot*, and has as its protagonist a contemporary newspaper reporter named Joe Gale. Joe has deep respect for journalism and for the role of journalism in a democratic society. Primarily he covers crime and the courts, but like most local newspaper reporters, he's a generalist. As the book opens, Joe is touring a defunct textile mill being redeveloped into condominiums. He and the developer are walking through the basement where a construction crew is knocking down a wall, and a skull comes flying out of the rubble. It turns out the skull is that of a man who once worked in the mill's finance department, who disappeared in 1968. He vanished around the same time as half a million dollars went missing, which was a lot of money in 1968. It's long been assumed he embezzled the money and left town. So when his body is found in the mill 44 years later, it's obvious that not only did he not steal the money, but also that somebody murdered him and made him the fall guy. Joe Gale uses the old notes of his late mentor to help reconstruct what happened in 1968 and uncover the facts that weren't discovered at the time. The story moves back and forth in time, with every third chapter occurring in 1968. It was a lot of fun to write, and to pull out historical photos and other data to figure out where things were in Portland at that time.

Did you receive some nice feedback for your first work?

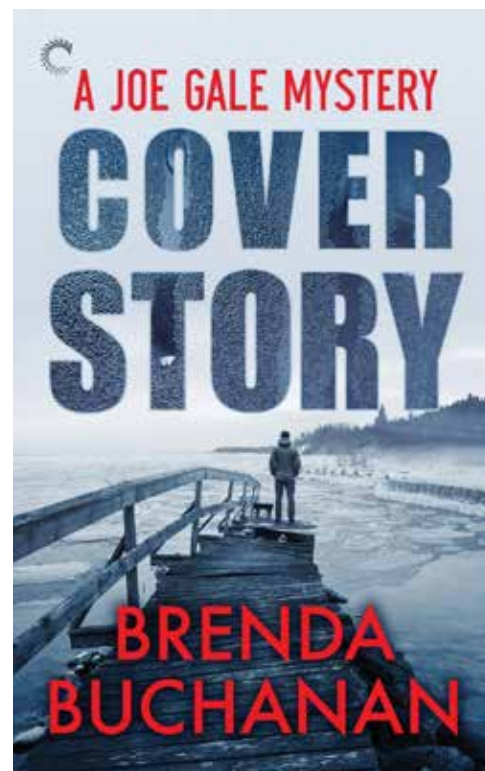
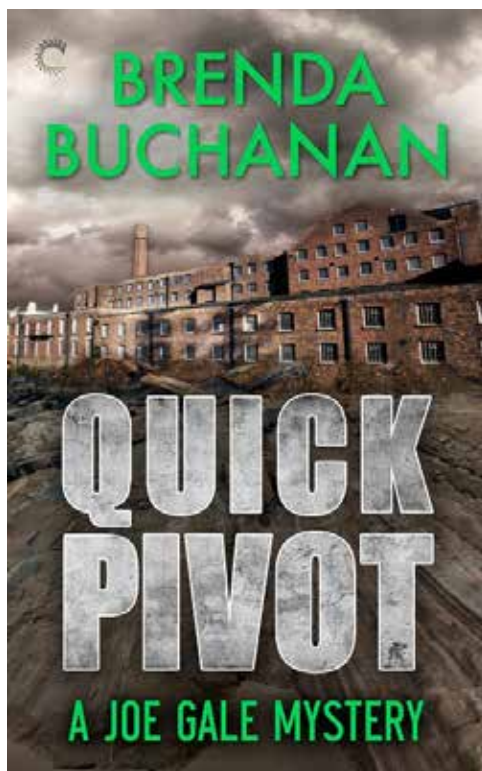
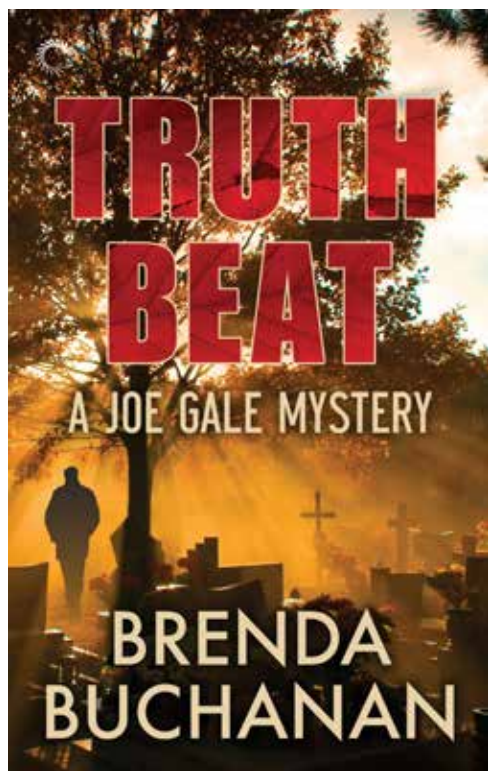
Yes. It was great to hear from people, both from the area and from away. Really gratifying.

My second book in the Joe Gale series, *Cover Story*, is set in Machias and involves a murder trial. The best reaction to that book came from a friend who said he was reading it on his deck on a hot summer day with a glass of iced tea sweating on the table beside him. When he was reading a scene that occurs during a blizzard, he had the urge to get up and put on a sweater, because the book transported him into the dead of winter. What a compliment!

The third book in the series, called *Truth Beat*, takes place back in the Portland area. It involves the murder of a Catholic priest who stood with the victims when the priest abuse scandal broke. He stood up to the bishop, who was inclined to sweep things under the rug. He advocated for the victims very strongly and ran support groups for Catholics who were devastated by the scandal. This made him some enemies, and that, it was assumed, led to his murder. But as is always the case with mysteries, there were other factors at work, things no one knew. Joe Gale was acquainted with the priest personally, and his coverage of the case is key to figuring out who killed Father Patrick, and why.

Where are these books available?

This series is only available in digital format. All three books



are easily available anywhere you would buy an e-book. My publisher is Carina Press, and my books are available through its website. They also can be purchased through Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and Apple, depending on whether you have a Kindle, a Nook, or an iPad.

Are you currently working on another book?

I'm just finishing up the manuscript for a book that I'm calling *Big Fish*. If it's published, it may be under another title, but that's my working title right now. I'm about send it to my agent in the next week or two. Hopefully, we will be able to sell it and have it published in both paper and digital versions.

Is the new book a crime novel?

Oh, yes. It has as its protagonist a Portland criminal defense lawyer named Neva Pierce. She's the daughter of a criminal defense lawyer here in Portland, who was a flamboyant, high profile kind of guy. She had no interest in following his footsteps. Fresh out of law school she landed a job in Boston at a high-powered, white-collar defense firm. Through a series of circumstances, she lost her job at the Boston firm the same week her father dropped dead of a heart attack. So she moved back to Portland to wind up her father's law practice. One of the conflicts she faces is whether to stay in Portland, or move to a bigger city, for another shot of what she thinks of as "the

big time." In *Big Fish* there is, of course, a murder to sort out, as well as a large burglary case in which she represents a key figure. Neva—which is short for Geneva—is an interesting character in that she wrestles with both personal and professional conflicts. I'm very excited about this book and I have a plot sketched out for two more books in the series.

What is it about writing that gives you pleasure?

I love storytelling. I come from an Irish family where storytelling was central. My mother and her side of the family were big storytellers. I remember as a kid sitting around and listening to people tell a well-crafted story, and being amazed by their skill. I also was a big mystery reader growing up. As I kid, I thought a lot about actually writing a book myself, and spent a lot of time dreaming up plots and characters. It began to come to life when I was in college and had that opportunity to study creative writing, but then I put it on hold for a while. It gives me pleasure to imagine people into existence, and create complex stories that say something about the human condition through characters who are multi-faceted people. It's a challenge, and it's a lot of fun.

Do you have any influences as writers or folks who inspire you to write?

One big role model was in my law school class—Julia

Spencer-Fleming. She practiced here in Portland briefly, started a family, and then started writing. She's a wonderful writer—a *New York Times* bestseller—who is just so skilled at what she does. Anyone who hasn't read her books really ought to get out there and find them.

What's the best advice you have ever received?

You shouldn't proofread your own work. That advice really has two levels of meaning. Literally, of course, if you insist on proofing your own work, chances are you're going to miss errors. But it's also good counsel in a larger sense, because in law and in writing, the help of other people is vital. If you invite others to help you and you embrace what they have to offer, your work will shine.

There are a lot of crime writers in Maine. We are very supportive of each other and work hard to become more skilled at what we do. We hang out at various conferences where we participate on panel discussions and workshops. And sometimes we just get together to have fun. For example,

there is an event called *Noir @ The Bar* that happens a couple of times a year over at Bull Feeney's. It's a Sunday afternoon gathering where a dozen or so local crime writers get up on stage and do three-minute readings from their work. It's always a great time.

I've also been involved with the Maine Writers and Publishers Alliance (MWPA), a statewide organization for writers, which has been a wonderful thing for me. MWPA helps people interested in writing plug into the community and find support. This goes back to my best advice, which is to ask others for help. Support from colleagues is essential, both in law and writing. Nobody can do this alone.




DANIEL J. MURPHY is a shareholder in Bernstein Shur's Business Law and Litigation Practice Groups, where his practice concentrates on business and commercial litigation matters.

Beyond The Law features conversations with Maine lawyers who pursue unique interests or pastimes. Readers are invited to suggest candidates for *Beyond The Law* by contacting Dan Murphy at dmurphy@bernsteinshur.com.

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