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JANUARY 26, 2009 \$12.00

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The Second Time Around

BY TOM ROB SMITH

Your first book is a success. No matter how success is defined, the specter of the second book looms large. The question you've been continually asking of your narrative—"What happens next?"—is asked of you. And it seems as if the story of your career is already written: success is followed by a fall.

In storytelling there's little drama in consistency. But your career is not a piece of fiction and there's no reason why a monotonous pattern of success couldn't be established. In many ways, the odds are in your favor. You're no longer subject to the corrosive uncertainty of wondering if you're wasting your time. You have editors, agents and readers who want you to repeat your success. Perhaps there lies the problem: it isn't one of success, it's one of repetition. Writing is creative. Repetition is mechanical. Factories and assembly lines repeat. Artists do not. Should everything that was loved about your first book be avoided? To copy yourself is the surest way to devalue that which you've already written.

And so on, the second book anxieties rumble. For unpublished writers, the obstacles of a second book must appear like a distant and wonderful fantasy. That is because the challenge in being published the first time around is one of brute stamina, tolerating humiliation and rejection, and juggling jobs. The challenge of a second book is an intellectual one. You have too much time to think.

I decided to write *Child 44* after months of pitching original movie and

How tough is it to follow up a successful debut novel?



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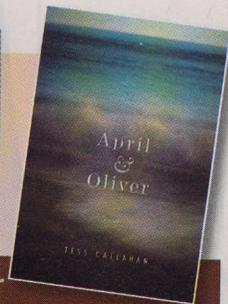
television ideas. As a remedy, I showed the book's outline to very few people, wary of having my enthusiasm whittled down by a thousand polite doubts. There is no greater enemy to getting anything done than speaking to someone reasonable. If your first book is an act of madness, stepping off a cliff without any idea if there's water underneath you, the danger with your second book is one of rationalization. You consider. You analyze. You search for a spot along the cliff face where you calculate the drop is shallow and the water deep. You consider some more.

I caught a quote the other day from the very wonderful Lee Child. He was asked if he had any tips for first-time writers. His advice was to ignore all advice. It strikes me that a first-time novelist will run with that sentiment, charging headlong into success or disappointment. A novelist writing his second book will spot the paradox of being advised to ignore advice. Should he disregard this advice also?

In the end, what's the worst that could happen? And even if the worst does happen, there's always book three. And everyone loves the story of a great comeback.



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April & Oliver
Tess Callahan, 46
(Grand Central, June)

Born: Long Island; now lives in northern New Jersey.

Favorite authors: Amy Hempel, James Joyce, Gabriel García Márquez.

Career arc: From Bennington College MFA candidate to teaching and writing.

Plot: Two inseparable childhood friends are reunited after the sudden death of April's brother. Their lives have taken wildly different paths—Oliver, the responsible, newly engaged law student, and April, embroiled in abusive relationships and lost. Always drawn to each other, Oliver attempts to save April from her grief; it becomes apparent he has some demons of his own.

Author's toughest challenge: "I write to explore what I don't understand. Questions drive me, and answers are sometimes elusive. For me, the process is an open-ended journey, which means I have to observe without interference while my characters blunder toward their own discoveries."

Publisher's pitch: According to publicity manager Tanisha Christie, "In this emotionally lush debut, Callahan presents a couple that is able to love and hurt one another with an equally violent and compelling force. It is simply impossible to turn away."

Opening lines: "Long before dawn on the morning of the funeral, a rogue wind enters April's apartment, clattering the shells of her wind chime, causing her to bolt upright in bed. Night air seizes her. Her mind hurtles through darkness, not wanting to remember, but the realization gaining on her. *It's today.*"

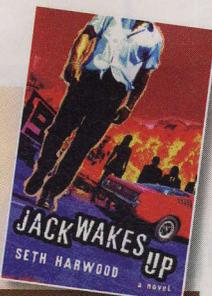
Smith's *Child 44* was published by Grand Central last April to glowing reviews (including a starred PW). His next, *The Secret Speech*, is due from Grand Central in May.

Cover Story



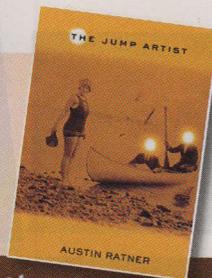
How to Sell

Clancy Martin, 41
(FSG, May)



Jack Wakes Up

Seth Harwood, 34
(Three Rivers Press, May)



The Jump Artist

Austin Ratner, 37
(Bellevue Literary Press, May)

Born: Toronto, Ontario; now lives in Kansas City, Mo.

Favorite authors: Knut Hamsun, Celine, Charles Lamb, Cervantes, Dostoyevski, Kierkegaard, Kafka, Proust, Rilke, Wallace Stevens, Doris Lessing, Emmanuel Levinas, Sarah Kofman.

Career arc: From graduate student to jewelry store and wine bar owner to chair of the philosophy department at the University of Missouri.

Plot: A young man goes to work for his brother at a high-end jewelry store in 1980s Fort Worth, Tex. There he gets his first hard lessons in love, sex, beauty, fraud and... how to sell.

Author's toughest challenge: "Beating alcoholism."

Publisher's pitch: Says senior editor Lorin Stein, "This tour-de-force has already won raves from the likes of Zadie Smith, Gary Shteyngart and Jonathan Franzen, who called it 'dity, greatly original and very hard to stop reading.' A fast-paced, funny, squirmingly dark exposé of the jewelry business and the human heart, this autobiographical novel captures the sleaze and exquisiteness that underlie true luxury. It also captures the high-end salesman's desperation to seduce at all costs. You'll never look at an engagement ring or a Rolex the same way again."

Opening lines: "Our father told it that Jim was caught dressing up in my grandmother's black Mikimotos when he was scarcely two years old, but the first time I considered jewelry was the morning I stole my mother's wedding ring... It was white gold. It was the only precious thing she had left."

Born: Boston; now lives in Berkeley, Calif.

Favorite authors: "Lawrence Block, Denis Johnson, Raymond Carver, Michael Connelly, Raymond Chandler, Flannery O'Connor, Denis Lehane."

Career arc: From options trader to librarian to Iowa Writers' Workshop to teacher to podcaster to published crime writer.

Plot: When washed-up B-movie star Jack Palms agrees to show some high rollers a good time, he finds himself caught in the middle of a Bay Area drug war... and it'll take the performance of a lifetime to get him through it alive.

Author's toughest challenge: "Learning that authors can't always take the traditional route. Even with an MFA and published stories, I had to create my own audience to get noticed. I bought a microphone, started serializing my novels as free podcasts and built a solid fan base."

Publisher's pitch: According to acquiring editor Julian Pavia, "On the surface, *Jack Wakes Up* is a joyously pulpy summer blockbuster, filled with shady villains, drug deals and explosions. But start to look a little closer and you realize that what really makes it tick are the fresh, three-dimensional characters and the pitch-perfect noir prose."

Opening lines: "Jack takes out a cigarette, his one of the day: the one he smokes with his cup of coffee in the morning, the one that reminds him where he's been. He kicked the junk three years ago, one thousand, sixty-six days exactly, and hasn't had a drink in two years. No cigarettes either, just this one every morning."

Born: On the Cuyahoga River; now lives in Brooklyn.

Favorite authors: Joyce, Chekhov, Calvino, Frost, Terry Pluto (*The Curse of Rocky Colavito*).

Career arc: From medical student to writer.

Plot: In September 1928, in the Alps of western Austria, a young Jew stands falsely accused of patricide. He must endure prison and a grueling trial, and he must re-create himself years later in Paris, through the art of photography and love.

Author's toughest challenge: "Enjoying myself. I try to worry and regret whenever possible. If I get the sense I might be about to enjoy something, I try to reconsider it in light of human mortality. I'm told such crepe-hanging is encrypted guilt, but I have trouble remembering guilt. Maybe remembering is the hardest thing."

Publisher's pitch: "*The Jump Artist* is vivid psychological fiction based on the true, and largely unknown, story of renowned photographer Philippe Halsman, a man Adolph Hitler knew by name, whom Sigmund Freud wrote about in 1931 and who put Marilyn Monroe on the cover of *Life* magazine," says assistant editor Leslie Hodgkins.

Opening lines: "10 September 1928, the Zillertal, Austria. Eduard Severin Maria, one of the elder Princes of Auer-sperg, led a hunt that day in the valley. His horse fell and was later found beheaded in the grass. But Eduard gave little thought to his horses. The Auer-spergs took greater pride in their hunting dogs."