



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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Meet the Winners of the 10th Speculative Fiction Contest!

-Interview with Ben Marshall (Best Overall Story)

Quote from the Story:

“Speed-of-light travel causes the traveler to age more slowly than someone at a fixed location. It is called ‘time dilation’,” he explained. “Time dilation slows down the actual passage of time, not the sensation of the passage of time. And that’s where my postulation had failed to grasp the loose thread.”

EDITOR:

Ben, thanks for participating in this interview with AoF and congratulations on winning the best overall story again! To start off, can you tell us a bit about yourself and briefly run us through your career history?

BEN:

I am an actuary, lawyer and minister—trained and licensed in all three professions. My wife and I have five children, ranging in age from eight to 27. I was born in the U.S., but have lived in Canada for nearly half my life, including the past 17 years continuously.

My early career was spent with Confederation Life. I later became the CFO at one of Aegon’s operating divisions, before getting my law degree and practicing law in the insurance sector practice group at Stikeman Elliott, one of the larger firms in Canada. I then spent nine years at Royal Bank, the largest bank in Canada, most recently as a vice president overseeing capital and risk management. I just moved in February to a new role as CFO at a new organization—FaithLife Financial in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. This was a unique opportunity to direct my career to a cause that inspires me. FaithLife focuses its products and sales approach on Christian financial stewardship, using its excess profits to fund charitable causes.

EDITOR:

What made you interested in entering this contest? What is your secret of winning? Do you have any advice to share with future contestants?

BEN:

I began entering the biennial contest in 2005. One of my

cousins had been stricken with cancer two years earlier, and I spent a good deal of time with him prior to his death. We talked about regrets and missed opportunities. We both shared a love of writing, and one of his big regrets was that he had let time slip by without writing. He said something that has stuck with me, and I shared it with friends and family when I did his eulogy: “Writers write.” It serves as an encouragement to me, to all of us, that if there’s something important to you, you’ll spend the time to do it. And I took him up on his advice.

As far as winning and advising others, there are some obvious things that are important, like a creative plot, snappy dialogue, strong character development, a need for tension and resolution, and—to state it negatively—avoidance of laboured narrative. However, I also think it’s important to be passionate about what you write. I find that my most creative moments are when I’m experiencing internally what I write into my characters on the page. I’m not ashamed to admit that I’ve sometimes had a free flow of tears or a shout of exuberance while I write.

EDITOR:

What inspired you to write “*The Fountain of Youth*”? Did you have any unique experiences? How long did it take for you to write it?

BEN:

Several of my past stories arose out of unique experiences. My first SOA-winning story, “For Three Transgressions and for Four” was inspired by the death of my mother, coupled with my first-hand view of the dark side of the U.S. health care system’s treatment of the elderly. “The Fountain of Youth”, my recently winning story, was not inspired by a unique event, but rather was a product of some of my musings on (and frustrations with) the interplay between medical technology developments and the profit motive. Once the basic ideas crystallized in my mind, it took a few weeks to write and edit, working on it a few hours at a time once every two or three days.



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EDITOR:

Have you always had a love for writing? What do you like to write about? Are you writing any new stories?

BEN:

I've loved writing since I took a creative writing course in the 10th grade. My teacher was named Dell Wanda Gorman. She gave me the only "B" I received in high school, which kept me from being the class valedictorian. But it was easily my favourite class throughout my high school years. And I wound up winning the school's short story contest (with blind judging) in 10th, 11th and 12th grades—a record that still stands 30+ years later.

I like to write about moral dilemmas and human nature. I like to challenge while entertaining the reader. I've learned in my ministerial experience that people learn concepts and embrace change much more readily through a well-told story than through a dogmatic diatribe. You see that clearly in the gospel accounts of Jesus' parables, too.

I'm currently working on a story about a lawyer's misguided intervention in the lives of a couple experiencing marital discord. I know where I'm going with it, but like all my stories, it takes on a life of its own while I'm writing it. The finished product is always chock-full of things I didn't anticipate when I started. My next big writing project after that is to write a novel based loosely on my research of cryonics and on my musings about its moral and spiritual implications.

EDITOR:

Why did you choose an actuarial career? What is an alternative career route for you?

BEN:

I chose the actuarial profession somewhat late. I had been planning to be a high school math teacher. I enjoy teaching to this day. However, I found while doing my practice teaching that many students don't want to learn, and are only in the math classes because they're required.

So during one of my breaks I looked up math careers on the microfiche at the guidance office, and at the top of the alphabetized list—you guessed it—was "actuary."

You'll note from the earlier question that alternative career routes abound for me. I have practiced law and served in ministerial roles (as a volunteer). As trite as it sounds, if I had no bills to pay, I'd probably be a writer as a vocation. As it is, it's a fun avocation.

EDITOR:

To those who have not read (and have read) your story, could you share with us what message are you trying to send? What do you want people to remember?

BEN:

SPOILER ALERT! My description of "The Fountain of Youth" to close friends and family goes something like this: "It's a treatise on the greed that drives the development (and potentially the suppression) of medical technology, wrapped in an exploration of genuine faith in the face of impending death, while treading heavily on the issue of gender biases, all in a light-hearted, yet believable montage of events and conversations." It's the first time that I've developed so many characters (at least 14 distinct ones) in such a short amount of space (less than 8,000 words or roughly 25 pages).

EDITOR:

What is your favorite book, and why?

BEN:

I read a lot of novels, roughly one every week or so for the past ten years. There are many very good authors, but I've found the consistency of quality varies from one book to another with every author. My most consistently enjoyable author is Harlan Coben, but my favorite book has to be *The Testament* by John Grisham. It's compelling because it exhibits all the qualities of good writing I stated earlier (creative plot, snappy dialogue, strong character development, tension and resolution, and avoidance of laboured narrative), plus it's a journey

of redemption for the seemingly unworthy protagonist. If I could get everyone to read one work of fiction that would transform the way that they view the world, it would be *The Testament*.

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EDITOR:

What have you done with your prize money?

BEN:

I don't like to waste money, so to feed my voracious appetite for reading, I primarily use the public library. However, I had a list of books not available at the library, but nonetheless of great interest to me because of who wrote them. So I used my prize money to purchase some of those books. My sense is that a core component of development as a writer is internalized through reading. If you would like to read Ben's story "The Fountain of Youth" or other entries to the contest, you can find them at <http://www.soa.org/Professional-Interests/speculative-fiction-contest.aspx> ☆