

## Tech By Day/Write By Night: Sam Hilliard



Apr 8th, 2010 by [Dina](#)

[Sam Hilliard](#) graciously offered to be the first writer to participate in the [Tech By Day/Write By Night](#) interview. Thank you Sam. He is the author of [The Last Track](#) published by [Buddhapuss Ink](#). I'll let Sam take it from here.

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### **What kind of technology work do you do?**

First, thanks very much for an opportunity to post my resumé online in an innocuous location, thereby relieving the concerns of my employer. Currently, I direct all technical operations at a boarding school for girls. The learning community consists of students, faculty, administration and staff and totals in the low hundreds.

My job is to implement and support technology campus wide, as well as assist other administrators and faculty who connect and collaborate with vendors, other high schools, colleges, parents, alumni and prospective students. This task encompasses different technologies in a variety of contexts, but if a device has more than one wire and a circuit board, and lives inside our perimeter, sooner or later it becomes my problem.

Keeping the phones, servers and network running smoothly remain a top priority, not only because the students will riot if [Facebook](#) is unavailable, but also because so many additional systems rely upon the steady flow of data between the many buildings as well as a persistent Internet connection. Every day the students discover new applications available for download that could potentially disrupt these operations. Thanks, Internets.

### **What's it like being one of the few males on campus at all-girls boarding high school? Is it intimidating?**

It's rather like having a lot of cousins who look very different but for some odd reason dress exactly alike. Stranger yet, these relatives remain teenagers in perpetuity, even as I age noticeably each semester.

Working with technology can be isolating in itself, much like writing, since I'm an only child who moved around constantly, being different feels like familiar ground. Ultimately I think my role at the school sets me apart from the community far more than my gender, since I have to consider tech projects and requests in terms of how it might impact our infrastructure. At the same time, I remain open to suggestions that come through various channels, because sometimes those sources become the most vocal champions for investments in new technology. In short, I'm the virtual fish that must swim in every department's pond.

So while my role at the school differs greatly from other administrators, as I spend part of the day at a keyboard talking to myself, our goal is the same: Foster a positive learning environment that brings out the best in the students and each other.

But yes, being so vastly outnumbered, it's also imperative to prepare for any eventuality. After all, world class drama unfolds daily all around me. And this is why I study [Krav Maga](#) and [Tai Chi](#).

### **What area of creative writing are you working on?**

Currently, I'm bouncing between two novels, both of which are thrillers. One I started four years ago and have no clear idea when I might finish. The other is the second book in the Mike Brody series, a sequel to [The Last Track](#), which is in the outline stage and the publisher "strongly suggests" I complete by June 2011. The second novel is the one I'll make money on in the short term. Needless to say, I'll probably spend as much spare time working on the former as possible. Something about the essential conflict of the main character keeps drawing me back to the pages.

### **How have creative writing and technology mixed?**

Technology and writing are converging by the day. In Japan, novels are being written and distributed on cell-phones. Over here in the States, writers pimp their wares using social networking tools and apps, thanks to advances in technology.

[Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) are the most rapidly adopted technologies in history. And what are they? Essentially a pretty wrapper for sharing text messages with groups of people, large and small. In a way, these tools are all about writing.

### **What tech tools have crossed over into your writing life?**

Quite a lot of technology creeps into the writing life. For starters, computers and mobile devices of all kinds, including cell phones, GPS, as well as applications like [Wordpress](#), [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

I generally like to play with a device before placing it in a character's hands, where possible. Sometimes the technology might be too expensive for me to have a chance to try it. In that case, I find someone who does work with the tool and ask for their thoughts and advice on how it can be best manipulated for fictional purposes.

### **What kinds of writing tools have crossed over into your tech life?**

[Open Office](#). Touch typing. Caffeine. The ability to sit and stare at the screen for hours without getting frustrated—no matter how insurmountable the problem seems.

## **Platform of choice: Mac/Windows/Linux/Other?**

All are intrinsically broken and yet amazing at once. Work compels proficiency with all three. At home I bounce between [Windows](#) and [Mac](#).

## **Cellphone of choice: Blackberry/iPhone/Google/Windows Mobile/Other?**

[Blackberry Bold 9700](#). Or Baybeh 9700, as I call her. Nothing can touch her. Literally. I don't let anyone do anything more than look at Baybeh 9700. In fact, we've spoken enough about her already. Let's move on.

## **Do you prefer working with hardware or software?**

Hardware is fantastically useless these days without software. Almost every device has some kind computer in it and lines of instruction code. My beloved [Cisco switches](#), the incredible workhorses they are, depend on an operating system.

Really, everything runs on software except my cats. They are something I can't explain.

## **Tech toys (smart phone/mp3 player/etc) or old-fashioned (pen/paper)?**

I have to use toys for writing. My penmanship is miserable, verging on pathological.

## **If you had to choose one: tech or writing?**

It will very likely remain both for some time. I really like my job, and being a tech makes me a better writer. Honestly I believe the two disciplines, which seem miles apart in terms of objectives and results, actually complement each other.

In the beginning of my career, I was a tech writer. That experience and the years afterward I spent programming and now as a system administrator, instilled experiences and lessons that no amount of gin and therapy could erase. This was not for lack of trying.

For instance, as a programmer, I learned to cherish powerful commands, which in essence are a critical set of verbs and nouns, each with their respective parameters. As a tech writer, I became proficient at explaining complex processes in the simplest terms and the most direct language. Finally as a system administrator, I learned the value of building something right the first time, even if it meant lots of planning and in the darkest of times, starting over from scratch.

All these are valuable lessons that aid a writer; however, producing a novel requires mastery of a few more parts of speech and a larger dictionary. Unfortunately rich descriptions and narrative have no place in a software manual, program or server install, so these skills tend to atrophy without practice. That means, well, writing.

Regardless of what happens with my writing, technology will always interest me.

## **Number of computers or devices you use in a typical week?**

That number depends on what breaks and who shows up in my office in a given week. There are four hundred nodes that I'm responsible for at school, plus my stash of gear at home. Let's say three dozen.

## Time of day you write?

I'm usually writing, even if it's just in my head. When watching movies, I can see the lines of dialog on the page. That being said, I write late at night.

## Current project you want to promote?

[The Last Track](#) available on [Amazon.com](#), [B&N.com](#) and elsewhere. Bookstores can order it from Ingram or Baker & Taylor with the following ISBN: 9780984203512.



The Last Track

### ***The Last Track* is categorized as a Mystery/Thriller. Why?**

The novel borrows heavily from both the mystery and thriller world, and hopefully embraces the strengths while sidestepping the weakness of either form. Despite the mystery/thriller classification, I generally rail at the thought of being labeled a mystery writer. I say this even though I love mysteries and there is a fair share of those elements in *The Last Track*.

As for Mike Brody being cast as a detective, I like to think of him as different sort of hero with an unusual gift. Mike is trying to find a way to heal his childhood wounds in the best way he knows how. He does this even when it comes with tremendous personal and emotional risks.

So without slighting mysteries, there is more going on in *The Last Track* than a straight-up potboiler that today's sophisticated reader can solve by page 12. The ending is the crux of a book for me, and I take the task of its construction very seriously in my books. If people really know what's going to happen hundreds of pages out, what is the point for the reader? Just tweet the thing and be done with it.

I played with the ending of *The Last Track* literally up to the last possible moment. When it went to press, only four people knew exactly what was on the final two pages. And one thing I keep hearing from readers now is that they did not see the new reveal coming, and because of that, they want to read the next book.

Despite my love for surprise endings, *The Last Track* isn't a straight up thriller, either, though the story moves fast, hinges on suspense and cliffhangers. Strong supporting characters bring depth and complication to the journey, too.

My point is that genre classifications are rather meaningless; it's about the story.

## What is the job of a writer?

A writer's job is to create characters and put them in situations where they will be at odds with themselves and others. Make the reader want to turn the page by giving them a reason. Get to the point early, stay in the moment, and then rip the rug out from under the reader just when they're most comfortable. That's my formula.

## **Talk about your video book trailer since it's amazing: the idea, the production, the results.**

Thanks very much for the compliment! I'm proud of how the trailer turned out. Quite a few gifted people made it possible.

[The Last Track](#) video trailer on YouTube.

The idea for the book trailer came in mid 2008 when trailers started getting the press that blogs, podcasts and [Twitter](#) had generated before them. Unlike blogs and podcasts, where the draw seemed apparent, or tweets, which were at least brief, the early trailers hinged on a different purpose: linger on the cover and bore the hell out of anyone watching.

Ironically, what the first generation book trailers lacked in visual aesthetics, they made up for in production value. It was very clear that big publishers were spending a fortune on the next evolution in book promotion and getting little more for it than a high resolution reproduction of the cover.

My happy accident came when sharing this assessment with [Steve Patient](#) who was (and is) a professional entertainer. A few years ago, changes in the entertainment business made getting quality bookings difficult without a DVD. Well, Steve refused to pay a production company thousands of dollars for something he knew he could make himself; he bought a copy of [Adobe Creative Suites](#), which included some video editing tools and made his own media kit. That's how we stumbled on the idea of him directing a book trailer. Also, I think his wife assumed—wrongly—that I would be a good influence on Steve.

Besides I had failed to impress the 122 agents who ultimately passed, so it was time to change gears. I was betting if I made *The Last Track* look like a big deal, someone might pick up on it.

We both contributed different elements to the project. Steve brought a photographic memory, a creative streak a mile wide, and a knack for marrying the right sound effect with the perfect image. I had some broad ideas of what to say visually, though little idea about the techniques or methods for realizing those statements. Basically the challenge for Steve was threefold: one make it look as much like a movie trailer as possible, two hit the audience hard, and three repeat step two until it was over.

There was a very rough script which we abandoned when things began evolving organically. The sequence where Mike Brody visualizes what happened at the crime scene when he places his hand in the track, Steve devised on his own, down to the last sound effect. My suggestion to Steve: "Make it look like we're inside his head, as if we are running through a tunnel deep into his psyche. Thanks. See you at Karaoke!"

We shot the footage during two periods, a few days in August, and again in late November. In between, Steve was traveling actively for gigs, so he shot footage and then edited it while he was on the road.

After editing the August footage, which included the beginning, the visualization sequence, and parts of the original ending, it was clear the project needed another push. I mentioned something to my martial arts instructor, Jasin Gibson, who answered, "guns or knives?"

See, the cool thing about Jasin Gibson is besides being an extremely knowledgeable martial artist with a wicked sense of humor, he knows how to play to the camera. He was born to be a villain, and did so expertly.

Jasin choreographed the fight, then Steve filmed it over and over again from different angles. Props to Steve, he put himself in harms way quite a few times to get the right shot. Dedication like that really made all the difference.

Once we had all the fight footage in November, Steve and I edited the trailer together. That's when

matters got very mechanical and we were literally working frame by frame, shoulder to shoulder, looking for the right point to cut to the next shot.

The really interesting part was that Steve had the drum and heart beats in mind when he was filming the fight footage all along. Steve literally described what kind of timing he was going for when Jasin explained the combat sequence. In the end, the punctuation of the fight largely mirrors Steve's original outline, even though he had no idea what a hammer fist or pommel hit was. That's a level of insight I can really respect.

The bottom line is the cost of the trailer was some free time. For that I owe Steve Patient and Jasin Gibson a tremendous debt.

But what you're probably more curious about is the result. When Steve finished a version we both liked, I made some DVD's out of the trailer and sent them with the query. This time I went direct to editors and publishers. At this point I just wanted the word out about *The Last Track*. Fortunately in 2009 someone picked up on the project—and quickly. After years of trying the agent route, the book finally landed on the right desk at [Buddhapuss Ink](#) and without an agent.

**Your list of [book influences](#) on your web site is impressively extensive. Please tell me about your reading life.**

I spent most of my childhood behind a book, a practice which my parents nurtured. Other mothers served milk and cookies; mine served [A Wrinkle In Time](#) and [Fahrenheit 451](#). Books stacks covered the furniture and floors in every room.

In grammar school, [Scholastic](#) offered titles for sale via classroom orders and when the books appeared, the teacher made me come to the front of the room instead of passing the plastic bag down the row, because it was so heavy. I took plenty of flack for it, but whatever. I liked my [Bruno and Boots](#).

Reading is also the greatest benefit of a free and open society. If you can read, the whole world opens up. You realize that not only are there a lot of amazing people who have felt the same as you, but they lived through the experience and have interesting stories to tell about their struggles.

So besides being a civic responsibility of sorts, reading is a critical part of a writer's development. Writers become devout readers long before they start writing good stories. And it's an important habit to feed throughout life. Neglect reading long enough, and sooner or later, the cracks will surface in the writing.

Also it's important to drink from as many wells as possible. It's not like any single writer gets everything right. But if you sample a good cross section it's a lot easier to understand what works on the page and why.

For instance, [Robert Parker](#) crafts a likeable character with a single sentence of dialog. [Thomas Harris](#) is one of the authorities on building suspense. [Grisham](#) is a master plotter. [Chris Moore](#) is hysterical. [George Orwell](#) writes incredibly prescient tales. [Robert Caro](#) translates complex historical figures into an accessible and engaging narrative. [Ray Bradbury](#) still makes the whole thing look easy. [Hunter Thompson](#) when he is on his game has moments of brilliance. And there will always be a special place in my heart for [Hemingway](#). I think a lot of writers can benefit from his no-nonsense approach.

These days, while I don't read as much as I used to, I do average one book every ten days. Topics of interest might be narrative non-fiction, pop psychology, history or the latest thriller. Basically, if I think there's something to be learned from the book, I'll take a chance on it regardless of the author, publisher or length.