

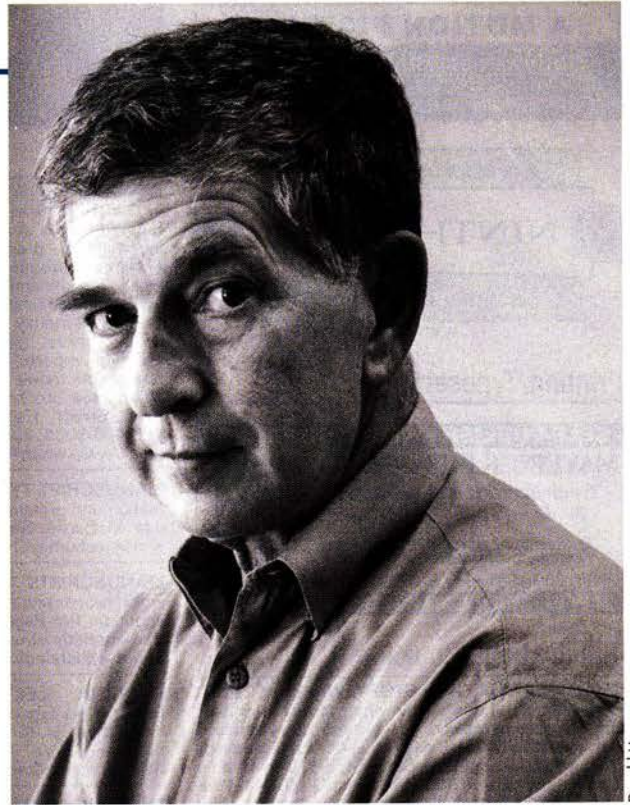


How I Write

Stuart M. Kaminsky

Stuart M. Kaminsky can trace his interest in memorable gumshoes to his days of enjoying Sam Spade's exploits on the radio. In four mystery series comprising more than 50 books, he's breathed life into four distinctive protagonists who seek justice in very different worlds: veteran Chicago police detective Abe Lieberman; Russia-based Inspector Porfiry Rostnikov; a private detective in 1940s Hollywood, Toby Peters; and a Chicago-to-Florida transplant, investigator Lew Fonesca. The former professor of television and film writing has also written short stories, screenplays and biographies, and has won a number of prestigious awards: an Edgar for the Rostnikov novel *A Cold Red Sunrise*; the Mystery Writers of America's 2006 Grand Master Award; and the 2007 "Eye" award for lifetime achievement from Private Eye Writers of America. He lives in Sarasota, Fla., with his wife and youngest daughter.

Credits: Recent books include *Always Say Goodbye* and *The Dead Don't Lie*. *People Who Walk in Darkness* is due out in May.



Why: I write for two reasons: I have to—I've had the drive to be a writer since I was very, very young—and to make a living. And they're pretty equal.

Influences: Dostoevsky is number one. The obvious ones, Chandler more than Hammett. And you can go back to the TV series *The Rockford Files* and *Harry O*. I don't necessarily remember what the mysteries were; I remember the characters. *The Brothers Karamazov* is kind of a dopey story, but the characters are all wonderful. I think people obsess ridiculously over plot. I reread Sherlock Holmes for Holmes and Watson, not the plot. With so many popular writers, I just don't care about their characters.

Routine: On a good day, I get up and make my wife coffee, feed the cats, get the newspaper, and have something to eat. I start writing at 9 and go until about noon or 1. I devote some of that time to research, which doesn't necessarily have to do with what I'm working on. Then I have the great, great hope that the Cubs are on TV, or I play soft-

ball. I carry note cards with me in case I get an idea. I'm always thinking and writing in my head.

Process: I usually work from an outline, about 12 pages. I shoot for 10 pages a day, double-spaced, 14-point type. A book takes about four months from start through the end of one major revision. I work on one book at a time, but I can't stop thinking about the others when I'm writing.

On sustaining a series: If characters come alive for one book, I just want to get back to them. I want to know what they and everyone around them are going to do. If characters are really alive, you don't have to ask "What will he say next?" or "What will she do next?" They just *do* it.

Setting: Location and character come at the same time for me. When I create a new series, I think of who my characters will be and where they will be. Then I imagine the characters in the location, and I get out of their way and let them live.

Revisions: I do *not* revise as I write. I just go and go and go until I finish the draft. If I feel there's something I need to take care of, I make a note on a pad and go back and fix it when I'm done.

Biggest challenge: Finding and keeping a base of readers. There are many fine mystery writers out there, and the competition for reader attention is great. Coming up with stories is relatively easy—it's what we're expected to do. Coming up with characters the readers want to keep returning to is the essence of any series. One can be taught to come up with stories, but one needs imagination and almost magical talent to create living characters.

Advice: Write about characters you're interested in and let them come to life. If you can't, you're not getting it. If you can't write one page a day, meaning 365 pages a year, which is a reasonable-length novel, then you shouldn't be doing this.

Interview by Mary Ellen Collins, a freelance writer in Boca Raton, Fla.