

What's up Doc?



A NOVEL IDEA

The amazing story of periodontist-cum-novelist Alan Winter

In many ways, Alan Winter would seem to be a typical – even a prototypical – periodontist. “My parents stressed the importance of having a profession,” Dr. Winter said, but his parents didn’t have to twist his arm. “Even as a child I adored our family dentist,” he recalled. “He was a great man, meticulous in his profession, and I wanted to be like him.”

After receiving his postgraduate degree in periodontics from Columbia University in 1976, Dr. Winter joined Hirschfeld and Wasserman, a prominent Manhattan periodontal practice founded in 1902. Six years into his career in periodontics, Dr. Winter became a Diplomate of the American Board of Periodontology.

While he loved his profession, he also had a powerful attraction to another profession: writing. He had already written several clinical articles and founded *Periodontal Case Reports*. But as a former college history major nominated for a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship in history – which he turned down for dental school – he longed to write historically-based novels.

And so he began a 40-year journey, somehow finding the time to write an average of 30 hours a week, while

running his periodontal practice four days a week, and teaching at Columbia University and then NYU dental schools one day a week. The first fruit of his literary labors was a screenplay for a science fiction “B movie” in 1982. He started pitching his script to several studios, only to discover that a movie had come out based on his idea. “I was flattered that someone thought my idea was worth stealing,” he said. “It gave me encouragement to continue writing.”

This experience led him to focus on books rather than movies. The idea for Dr. Winter’s first book was based on an experience early in his career. “I had photos of my three sons in my treatment room, and patients would constantly tell me that they didn’t look like brothers,” he explained. “I promised myself that if I ever had the chance, I would write a story about this.” That chance arose in the summer of 1985, when the boys were away at camp. Dr. Winter used his extra time for the next two months writing a story about what might happen if two families brought the wrong babies home from the hospital. He titled the story, *Someone Else’s Son*. A patient arranged for Dr. Winter to meet with an agent at the William Morris talent agency. The agent told him, “You may think you’re a dentist, but you’re a writer.” She also told him he had made the mistake most first-time novelists make: his story was

too long. She advised him to cut his story in half and find a mentor.

He eventually found his mentor: a professor of writing at Columbia University. He gave Dr. Winter a list of the greatest 100 books ever written and encouraged him to read as many as possible. For several years, they would meet every Monday at 5:00 pm at the same coffee shop. Each week, the professor would teach Dr. Winter a different “trick of the craft” until his entire book was rewritten. The mentor then dispatched the mentee to find a publisher.

After much searching, he found one: MasterMedia. In 1983, eight years after its initial draft was completed, *Someone Else’s Son* was published, and Alan Winter was a published author.

The book received a flattering review from *The New York Times*. Dr. Winter went on tour making over 30 appearances at bookstores throughout the Northeast, helping the book sell around 3,000 copies. “It didn’t garner the wide audience we might have hoped for,” he said, “but in those pre-Amazon, pre-social media days, it wasn’t bad for a first novel.”

Dr. Winter’s mentor then advised him to write a first-person book based on his own experiences. Dr. Winter complied, completing a draft within a few years.

Based on positive reviews for *Someone Else's Son*, Dr. Winter was able to get his manuscript read by some of publishing's biggest names. These included two people who loved his story: the agent for Robert Ludlum, the author of *The Bourne Identity*, and the agent for Ken Follett, author of *Eye of the Needle*, and Jack Higgins, author of *The Eagle Has Landed*. Inexplicably, both agents declined to work with Dr. Winter because they felt people would not want to read books written by a dentist. Disillusioned, he put his search for a publisher on hold and started to contemplate his next story.

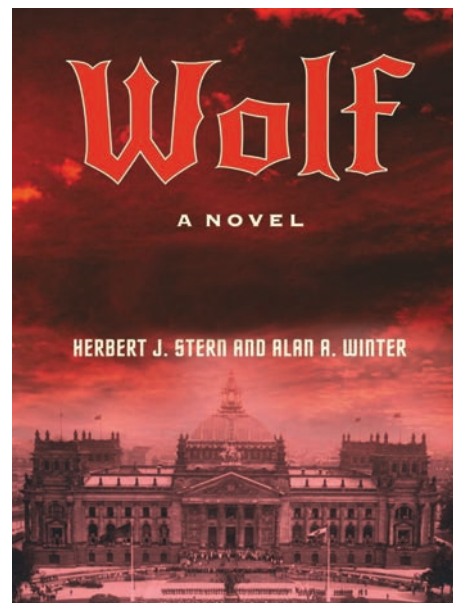
That story ended up being inspired by Dr. Winter's meeting with a dentist whose personal and professional lives had been ruined by his involvement with a well-known cult movement. Intrigued and alarmed by the dentist's story, Dr. Winter researched the shockingly sophisticated techniques used by cults to identify people who are vulnerable to their influence. He then wrote a book, *Snowflakes in the Sahara*, about a forensic dentist who discovers that the U.S. president is under the control of such a cult. Dr. Winter, who trained in forensic dentistry to prepare for the project, decided to self-publish the book. It attracted a modest but enthusiastic following.

Dr. Winter's next book, *Savior's Day*, was a suspense thriller based on an open case involving an NYPD detective, the Archbishop of the Diocese of New York, and Israel's Mossad spy agency. Published in 2013, it was named one of the top 250 books of the year by the prestigious Kirkus Review and received an honorable mention at the New York Book Festival.

Dr. Winter then wrote a screenplay titled *Polly*, which received an honorable mention at the Austin Film Festival. It became the basis for his next novel, *Island Bluffs*, which he also self-published. The protagonist is the same New York City forensic dentist featured in *Snowflakes in the Sahara*. The book is based in part on Dr. Winter's conversations with a patient who unknowingly purchased a home on the Jersey Shore once owned by a German spy who used shortwave radios to help German submarines target American ships during World War II.

Dr. Winter's latest book was co-authored by long-time friend and patient Herbert Stern. Mr. Stern is a legal legend who prosecuted the assassin of Malcolm X and presided over the only case ever tried in an American court in the occupied American Sector of West Berlin. (His book about that case, *Judgment in Berlin*, became a major motion picture.) Mr. Stern broached the idea of a joint writing venture by asking Dr. Winter, "What if I told you that Adolf Hitler was in a mental institution at the end of World War I?" Intrigued by this revelation, Dr. Winter agreed to assist his friend in researching the topic. "We concluded that most historians had missed the fact that while Adolph Hitler committed inhumane atrocities, he wasn't inhuman. And we decided we had to tell the true story of what made him who he was, or else people might miss the next man who comes along who's just as evil."

The historical novel they wrote is titled *Wolf: A Novel*, based on Hitler's self-given nickname. It was published by Skyhorse Publishing in February 2020 as the first book in a planned trilogy. The book, which begins as World War I is ending and finishes just as Hitler is elected president in 1934, has received enthusiastic reviews. Kirkus Review wrote, "As the novel ends, the horrors are only beginning. An engrossing look at a monster." The book, as with Dr. Winter's other four books, is available on Amazon.com.



Dr. Winter and Mr. Stern have already completed the second book in the trilogy, *Sins of the Fathers*, and expect it to be approved for publishing soon. It begins where *Wolf: A Novel* left off and runs through "Kristallnacht." The authors are currently researching the last book in the trilogy.

When asked if there are any similarities between periodontists and authors, Dr. Winter said that both professions attract compulsive personalities. "To be a periodontist, you have to be a high achiever, someone who's determined to excel at a very challenging profession," he said. "The same is true of authors." He also identified a huge difference. "As an author, you have to deal with a lot of rejection," said Dr. Winter. "The recognition and appreciation I got as a periodontist grounded me and enabled me to handle that rejection."

Whatever rejection Alan Winter the writer might have received, he clearly has received much praise for his literary efforts. In fact, one wonders if he might be persuaded to write his next historical novel about an exceedingly talented man who somehow balances a 44-year career as an accomplished periodontist with a 40-year career as a successful author. That story line might sound a bit far-fetched, but Dr. Winter's track record suggests he would find a way to make it both believable and riveting. ■