

STAR LEDGER REVIEW

Dentist Tries Hand at Fiction By JANE LOCASTRO

Phillip Hunter, 18, a 1993 graduate of Livingston High School, has just landed a job at a pharmaceutical company, and he's mapping out his future.

But the path that awaits him will ultimately take him on a journey into the past. The story unfolds in "Someone Else's Son," the first novel of West Orange resident Dr. Alan Winter, a periodontist who recently returned to Livingston High-his alma mater-to talk to students about his newly successful "hobby" of writing. And his words were not lost on would-be writers, who, like the fictional Hunter, will soon be venturing out to pursue their dreams.

"I was shocked," said 12th-grader Lisa Kirn, a student in Carleton Rehr's elective creative writing class, "because he's a dentist, and he started this on a whim." That Winter succeeded in getting his novel published "is admirable," Lisa added. "He also has a lot of knowledge about technique. I'm really impressed."

Tenth-grader Stephanie Gerson, also in the creative writing class, admitted that it was a bit sobering to hear Winter say they probably shouldn't count on writing for their meat and potatoes.

"He's very realistic," said Stephanie, who aspires to be a writer of songs, short stories and poetry. "I thought writing could be one job to live by..."

A Newark native who was graduated from Livingston High School in 1965, Winter told the students, "If someone said to me 25 years ago, 'You're going to be a novelist,' I would have laughed."

Readers will recognize some real 'places in this fictional tale - Newark Beth Israel Medical Center, South Mountain Reservation and familiar towns such as Livingston, Millburn and others.

Stick with the familiar, Winter said. Write about what you know. In his novel, the graduate's summer job involves the study of dominant and recessive genes in laboratory animals, and through a quirk, Hunter makes a shocking discovery about his own identity: He may not be the natural child of his parents. For Hunter's father, it may be what Winter calls "a parent's worst nightmare"-raising somebody else's child.

Winter has completed a second novel and is working on a third and fourth. But the man who said he knew he wanted to be a dentist since the time he was 12 has no intention of giving up his day job.

In fact, in a roundabout way, it was through his work as a periodontist in New York City that Winter began to develop the premise for "Someone Else's Son."

"When I first started my practice, I was very young-looking and my patients didn't believe I was old enough to be a dentist. So I brought in pictures of my children. This was 20 years ago," Winter recalled.

Winter's three sons each had different coloring, he said, "so every week for 10 years I would hear, 'Are you sure they're brothers?'"

The seed for the idea was planted. It became a compulsion of his to write about it. He said he wondered what he would do as a parent in that hypothetical situation.

"All of you should be able to relate to the story," Winter told the students. "I made the protagonist 18 because at that age, he has the opportunity to go out and do whatever he wants to do about this problem."

I'm sure most of you deal with siblings... (the book) deals with the questions of who we are, what we are about," said Winter, adding that his experience as a parent helped bring an air of authenticity to the story. And it is that genuineness that is among the ingredients of good writing, he said.

But bringing the story from rough draft to finished product took time-and plenty of rewrites, Winter told his listeners.

He admitted that he never really liked English in high school, but he loved history. He switched from biological science to a history major at Rutgers College, where he received a bachelor's degree in history in 1969.

He went on to New York University's College of Dentistry, and received a doctor of dentistry in 1973. Winter did his internship at Albert Einstein Medical School in the Bronx and went on to Columbia University's School of Oral and Dental Surgery, where he earned the two-year certificate of peri-odontics in 1976. The spark to try his hand at writing developed in the early 1930's, when he met a "would-be" screenwriter. They developed a movie treatment (precursor to a screenplay), Winter recalled.

"I looked at what this man did, and said 'I could do this.'"

A passion to write began to develop, and in the summer of 1986, with his three sons away at camp, Winter took a yellow pad and started to write what would eventually develop into the novel.

"I liked the intellectual challenge," he said. "Could I make a story from nothing?" When he completed the first draft, "nothing" had evolved into 800 pages. He put the project on hold when he went through a separation and divorce in 1987-88.

Many rejections came from various publishers. Among these came a call from Pam Bernstein - then with the William Moms agency - who told Winter she had to reject the manuscript but wanted to meet him.

"She said, 'You may think you're a dentist, but you're a writer,'" Winter said.

After months of rewriting, Winter cut the story down to half its original size. Bernstein encouraged him to "keep going."

He took a creative writing course at Columbia's School of General Studies. And kept rewriting.

At the suggestion of one of his patients, Winter decided to hire a mentor. "You can't look one up in the yellow pages," he joked. So Winter approached John Bowers, a writing teacher at Columbia.

"We met every Tuesday for about a year at a coffee shop in Manhattan. He told me to bring Strunk and White's 'Elements of Style' and Zissner's 'On Writing Well.'"

Bowers also gave Winter a list of "100 great novels" to read and advised him to pick a writer whose style appealed to him.

Not having read enough of these was "one of the obvious inadequacies I brought to this (writing)," Winter said.

Reading "as much as you can" is one of the most important things an aspiring writer can do, Winter told the students. "To be a good writer, you need to be a good reader, a discriminating reader."

Bowers also advised Winter to edit down to the essentials - advice Winter passed on to the students at Livingston.

"I wrote too much," Winter said, recalling his early drafts. "When you expound that way, you lose the reader. Good writing is a minimalist way of writing."

Winter's mentor also instructed him not to give away too much of the plot early on. "You don't want the reader to know what's coming," Winter reiterated. "You want to bring them along. You're foreshadowing; dropping hints.

Parceling out only what the reader needs, to sustain him."

He sent chapters of his novel to Bowers weekly, and finally, in 1991, Bowers told Winter that he had a submittable manuscript.

MasterMedia Limited (New York) published "Someone Else's Son," now available at some local bookstores, or by calling (800) 334-8232.

Winter had some writing experience prior to the novel, having founded the journal for the Northeastern Society of Periodontists in 1979. He was editor of the publication for nine years.

He also said he thinks his writing benefited his sons, Scott, 20, a student at the University of Wisconsin, and Jordan, 18, and Ryan 15, students at Tenafly High School. "Without my helping, they've become better writers at school," said Winter. He recommended that the students keep journals, writing all the time.

And for those with stars in their eyes^ Winter suggested: "Do something else, and write on the side. It's not wise to think that this is what you're going to do," he said, noting that comparatively few writers actually make their living at the craft.

"I would encourage you to shoot as high as you possibly can, but don't be economically foolish," Winter said.

"The kids really tune in on this," observed English teacher Penny Wityk. "They love to see success. Everything is so immediate for teenagers, but here they see someone who is not only successful in his field, but also doing something else that he loves."

Alan lives in his native New Jersey. His next novel will be "Island Bluffs," which explores the question, "Are children and grandchildren responsible for the sins of their parents?"