

Dan Burns Interview with Sandy Colbert of In Print Radio – September 2013

Interviewer: We are joined today by Dan Burns whose new book is called *Recalled to Life*. His first book is a non-fiction work, *The First 60 Seconds*. Welcome to the show, Dan.

Dan: Good morning. Thank you for having me.

Interviewer: Great to have you. Before we get to your work, tell our listeners a little bit about yourself. I know you're a member of the Chicago Writers Association and you hail from the La Grange area.

Dan: I do. I currently live in La Grange, Illinois; grew up on the North side of Chicago; been in the area for a very long time and as you mentioned, part of the Chicago Writers Association today and very proud to be a member of that group -- just a tremendous organization, helping our local writers. As I said, I grew up in the Chicago area, I have had a lot of great experiences in the area, and a lot of those experiences have been great for fueling a lot of my fiction-writing in particular. So *Recalled to Life*, my latest novel, is set in Chicago; and surprisingly, my next novel, which is going to be a crime mystery is set in Chicago as well.

Interviewer: Well, there is a lot in Chicago to draw from.

Dan: There really is.

Interviewer: No two ways about that.

Dan: It's very exciting and maybe the book after that I'll branch out into some other locale.

Interviewer: And you're a teacher.

Dan: I'm also a teacher. I have the fortunate opportunity to teach at my alma mater DePaul University. I get to stay linked to my past. I spent 25 years in the information technology industry and I got my MBA from DePaul University; and after I graduated, and once things settled down with my business, I had the opportunity to go back and teach. So I teach a Management of Information Technology class in the graduate school, for the MBA program.

Interviewer: That's impressive.

Dan: Lots of fun. It keeps me young, it keeps me tied to technology and that industry which I have always found to be terribly interesting and exciting. And I just love to teach. There's nothing better than seeing that sparkle in somebody's eye when they've gotten it or you've reached them with something. So it's a lot of fun.

Interviewer: It's interesting because some of the previous interviews I've done, they've all had

a teaching background and I find it fascinating that so many teachers are writing now -- it seems like to me, so far.

Dan: And have they been teachers of English and Writing or varied disciplines?

Interviewer: Varied. Yes.

Dan: It's kind of interesting.

Interviewer: And they've gone into writing novels or nonfiction, so it's interesting but you've probably grasped so much over the years and learned so much that it's a great outlet, if you've been a teacher.

Dan: It's great to give back too. I had a great experience at DePaul going through the graduate program there and it was a pleasure to be asked -- and an honor to be asked -- to come back and teach and be part of that same program that I'd benefitted from and to help students today get through that program in a much better position to get out there and take on the world, like I did a few years back.

Interviewer: Well, tell us about your current work. It's called *Recalled to Life* and it's about a Chicago architect?

Dan: It is. It's about a Chicago architect who is kind of, by design, everything in his life needs to be perfect. His buildings need to be perfect; his job needs to be perfect; his wife needs to be perfect and as we know, life is not like that. And so, through the course of the story, the protagonist -- Peter O'Hara, is challenged with some life events. Some that we've probably all had the opportunity to experience and some that are probably a little bit beyond that. But through these experiences, it forces him, and his family, to really focus on what's most important in life and we find out it tends to be different than maybe we originally thought or what the character originally thought. It was a great opportunity to kind of explore a lot of things that have been going on in my head for many, many years. Writing, for me, is kind of-, you talk about having an outlet; let go of ideas and experiences and maybe explore some things that I haven't had the chance to experience yet. I tell people it's a beautiful thing, you get to put these characters into situations and then see what they do. And sometimes you get to lead the characters, and sometimes they lead you in a completely different path that you never expected. And that was certainly the case with this story.

Interviewer: And you can almost tell that when you're reading a novel; that the author didn't have that much to do with it; that this is what happened and there's no changing the path that this character's on. And it's a fascinating thing about writing.

Dan: I always talk about how fun it is, and I have not had this much fun -- from a career standpoint, in my entire life. It's really a joy to be able to write and then to talk to people about the [0:05:00] writing. I've always had the experience of-, I've read a lot of books, a lot of authors, and it's, for me, a very subjective experience

how I'm experiencing that writing at that particular point in time. And I can re-read a book five years later and experience it differently. But the great thing, and as I'm getting out to talk to people about my new book, I can talk to a hundred people and there are a hundred different experiences of that book and of that story and the interpretation that they've made of that story and I love hearing about those interpretations. It's really fascinating.

Interviewer: And the protagonist -- this Chicago architect, which I know there's no greater architecture in the United States but Chicago. I mean, they are it. And I've heard it said that we even best New York when it comes to the architecture. So the architecture must play something in your book.

Dan: It certainly does. It's a metaphor for a number of things -- about the grand nature of the city; but also it's a metaphor for this character and again, how he is as a person. These grand buildings and design and structure and form, all have a very specific tie to this individual character's life. Again, there's a lot to draw from in Chicago, which is a beautiful thing. I talked earlier before about in your fiction writing, sometimes you get to put these characters into a scene and let them do things maybe that you haven't had a chance to experience yet. I've always had a love of architecture and in the early days, I considered a career in architecture; and I got steered away by the lure and fascination of technology, which was fantastic for me but the whole idea of architecture and design never left me. So I really got to explore what it would be like to be an architect through this character. Again, tremendous fun.

Interviewer: Yeah, that sounds like it would be fun because it's how you could relive a dream or a fantasy that you've wanted without having to go to college and go through all of that. You could go through the experience. Your previous book was a nonfiction, so this was a departure. Tell us about your previous book *The First 60 Seconds*.

Dan: This book is pretty different and I guarantee that the next book will be different as well. My first book is called *The First 60 Seconds*, and its subtitle is 'Win the Job Interview Before it Begins' and its based upon this fundamental principle that a hiring manager makes a decisive qualification about a job candidate within the first 60 seconds of the time they meet. This was a way for me to put to rest my past career -- I used to own an information technology consulting company. And through that business, we helped more than a thousand people get their next great job opportunity and to help a thousand people get a job required thousands of interview experiences. And so this book is a culmination of all the things that work, based upon real life interview experiences and feedback from clients and customers and hiring managers. And it leaves out all the stuff that doesn't matter. So again, a lot of people think that they had the opportunity in the interview to sell themselves and the point of the book, and reality tells us as well, is that often times the decision is made before the interview ever starts.

So what can you do as a job candidate to prepare yourself, not only for that first 60 seconds of your meeting, but what can you do prior to the meeting to set yourself apart. You know, when I sold my business and I wanted to really spend full time writing, the goal was to write fiction. I've been doing it for a while, I just haven't been able to spend as much time on it as I wanted. So I started writing my short stories and this idea for 'The First 60 Seconds' just would not let me alone, and the great thing about nonfiction books is you can sell on spec and proposal. So I put a book proposal together and I sent it off to a couple of publishers -- Source Books, here in Naperville, picked it up and it was published a year later. Again, a great opportunity to go around throughout the Chicago and surrounding areas to talk to groups and help people get back to work using that book.

Interviewer: Especially at this time, you know, with the recession and people trying for years, literally, to get a job. It must have been a great asset.

Dan: It was great and if you can give someone just one additional idea to incorporate into their job-search process that they weren't doing before, I think that's a great thing. But the book has dozens. It was trying to help people customize how they approached their job-search to be more effective. Kind of the key word I showed everyone is how to differentiate yourself. You're competing for a job with 25, 50 other people [0:10:00] who all have a two page resume and who all present themselves basically the same. How are you going to differentiate yourself? And so the book focuses on dozens of ways to set yourself apart in the eyes of the hiring manager.

Interviewer: Right. That's really fascinating. And then you went on speaking tours and...

Dan: Yes, for about eighteen months; and then it kind of slowed down a little as the economy improved a little bit. But I also had to move on. This next project would not leave me alone either, and so I stopped that book tour and speaking tour and sat down to finish writing *Recalled to Life*.

Interviewer: And how long did it take take you to write *Recalled to Life*?

Dan: Well, the interesting thing about this story is that I wrote it first as a screenplay for a movie. My philosophy, I guess you could say, is I'm always nervous about investing a long period of time on a story or a project only to read it myself and go "Wow, I don't like it!" So the idea of investing a smaller amount of time to explore an idea or a story or some characters, made sense to me. Again, I've been writing short stories for years. That's great, right? You can spend a day or a week writing a short story and being done with it. If it's interesting, maybe you take it further. And so, with this idea, I did take it further and I wrote it as a screenplay -- which you invest about a hundred pages in; that's industry standard -- and it allows you to focus on dialogue and plot and character. And so I wrote the screenplay and I thought that might be the end of it; but again, it kept nagging

me; it wouldn't leave me alone. And so I adapted it as a novel. So it's kind of the reverse of how it typically happens -- where people write a novel and have it adapted to the screen. I like the process of being able to visualize it and to understand what these characters are going to go through before making it a full-blown novel.

Interviewer: Was there a lot of research?

Dan: A little bit. It was more research, for me, on technique and form of how to write the story in a screenplay form. And also to practice and learn -- I'm continuously learning how to be a writer; so research on how to make this a great story from a novel standpoint. But the screenplay process took me about a year, and then it took me about another eight months to flesh it out as a novel. And I spent an awful lot of time -- I hired my own copy editor and editor to help me make sure that it was in appropriate form, before I started sending it out to agents and publishers.

Interviewer: And who was the publisher?

Dan: The publisher is Eckhartz Press, which is an independent publisher based in Chicago. They started up a few years ago; and I always loved the idea of working with a Chicago publisher. I think great things are going on in Chicago literature and especially from the publishing standpoint. So the whole idea of being affiliated with a Chicago publisher was very exciting for me; and after sending out dozens and dozens of query letters to agents and publishers, and collecting my share of pages to staple up on the wall, I sent off a query to the gentlemen at Eckhartz Press and they got back right away and said "We love the story; we love that it's Chicago -- we're Chicago, let's do it!" And eight months later, the book was published. It was a very exciting, whirlwind experience and it's a pleasure to be one of their authors and it's a great approach that they're taking to publishing today. As we know, the publishing industry is evolving, and I think they're taking the opportunity to, not only evolve with the industry, but to try different things -- to maybe dictate how the industry is going to go.

Interviewer: So you were able to do this without an agent, then?

Dan: I did. Without an agent. Because we all dream of "Wouldn't it be great to have a big shot agent and get marketed to one of the big publishers?" I still have that dream and that will come in time.

Interviewer: It's hard enough to get a book published; but when you also have to find the right agent and the right publisher, it's just doubly hard for a writer to get anything done. And to be able to go right to a press and have someone take your book is wonderful.

Dan: Right. And I was able to do it with the first book as well -- which I kind of like. In the traditional form of publishing, there are a lot of people in between the writer

and the reader, you know? To get that book published. And I like more and more, the opportunities where we can take those middle people out or I can have more control over how the book is going to be published.

Interviewer: Well, even with the internet now, there's so much available to writers, [0:15:00] as far as somebody to design and do the graphics for your cover. I mean, it's just changed so much in five years or ten years. None of this was even thought about ten or fifteen years ago and all of a sudden everything's at our fingertips.

Dan: Everything that a traditional publisher does, is available as a service to writers outside of that traditional norm, as you said. And it's a wonderful thing. The important thing is we have to not forget to do all of the steps in the process. Self-publishing, maybe historically, has gotten a bad rep because some people do not go through the same stringent process that a publisher might. But it's our responsibility -- if we're going to do a hybrid model or self-publishing model, we need to hire the copy editors and the editors and the book designers; and we have to make sure all of those things get done appropriately and professionally. I think that's a lot more fun; it's more work, but to know that you've had the involvement in each aspect and some involvement and control over the end result, I think is pretty cool.

Interviewer: Now, what about the marketing? Do they leave that mostly to you?

Dan: Their approach is the same as everybody else where they leave it mostly to the author. However, they've done a great job of getting me local publicity and it's been a shared approach. But even when I was with a more traditional publisher with my first book, I still did the majority of the marketing. We had a marketing budget for a month and then they had to move on to the next hundred or so different books. I always assumed that it would be my responsibility and I've always taken that responsibility in all of my other past careers and business ventures, just because I like having control and seeing the end result..

Interviewer: Well, I think a lot of authors think "Well, I'm published. And the publisher will get the book on Barnes and Noble's shelf and Amazon, and I can sit back and just cash the checks." They don't realize you have to get in the car with a box of books and get out there to the book fairs and talk to people and get on radio shows and whatever you can do to promote it. It's a lot of work; it doesn't end after you've been published.

Dan: It really just starts! And a lot of us don't think that way. We think "Wow, the job is to really sit down and actually finish the book," and that is one of the jobs; but then once it's done, unless you're just writing it for yourself, you need to get it exposed to the public. And I think that's part of the fun; keep it moving along, and get out and meet people and get the exposure.

Interviewer: And people, I've found, love meeting published authors. There is still some kind

of aura around somebody that's says "Well, I've been published and here it is." And I still get a kick out of meeting a published author even if it's just-, it doesn't have to be Stephen King. You know, the fact that you've done it impresses me and impresses a lot of people.

Dan: I enjoy it as well. I love meeting published authors -- famous or not, it really doesn't matter. I talked before about differentiation from the career standpoint. Getting published is a differentiator; it sets you apart from the millions of other people that are talking about writing or working on something; and it puts an end to, a completion, if you will, of the cycle for you and really sets you apart. I appreciate that as a writer; I appreciate it as a reader, and I love meeting other writers as well.

Interviewer: And just talking about the craft. Just talking with other writers -- what they've gone through, you could learn so much just from talking to other writers. Everyone has a different story; some people just absolutely hate self-publishing; some people -- that's the only way they'll go. So in this day and age, there's a lot going on and a lot of stories out there.

Dan: I take great comfort in knowing that I'm not the first one -- how many hundreds, thousands, millions of writers went through this before me, and had to struggle through. We've just got to figure out those things that work for us as a writer, and put them to good use and learn from other people that have been through it before.

Interviewer: And when you think of the classics -- you know, Hemingway, Faulkner, all sitting there with their pen and paper, literally, and a type-writer -- we have it so much easier now. And the market is just incredible. People, I think more than ever, love to read. The written word will never, ever fade away.

Dan: It will never fade away.

Interviewer: Your next book is another departure. Tell us about that.

Dan: It's called *A Fine Line*, and it is a crime mystery set in Chicago. It's tremendous fun. I went through the same process: I wrote the story as a screenplay, which I really hope will get picked up by a studio and made into a film. It's one of those films that I know I would like to see and I think other people would like to see as well. But I'm in the process of writing it as a novel. It's about a washed-up and struggling writer who lives in Chicago; [0:20:00] who has a secret government past; who surprisingly is called on to help solve a cold murder case. And it was a very interesting and exciting opportunity to explore what this individual's past was and what puts him in a position to help solve this cold murder case when no one else has been able to for ten years. It wasn't intentional, but I got done with the screenplay and I read it and I really liked this character. People who see the film or read the book will feel the same way; I had no intention of creating a series

character in the protagonist, whose name is Sebastian Drake, but I think I might be interested in...

Interviewer: ... doing a series.

Dan: And move beyond that. Now, I also said, I think, earlier, that I'm going to try and do something different with each book. And it may not be keeping my promise if I do a series kind of set of stories, but I'll still make them different.

Interviewer: Well, I love any book that goes back in time. Whether it's the 1500's or the 1900's, just to be carried back to another time and place and learn about that time and place as you read it. That always draws me to a book, it really does. I would love to see more books about Chicago and old Chicago and Chicago in the 40's and the 50's, when I think from a journalistic standpoint, were really something. You know, the fedora and the cigarette in the mouth...

Dan: I love that time!

Interviewer: Me too!

Dan: Maybe, I think, you may have just given me an idea for the next book. Maybe I have to go back further, because *A Fine Line* goes back ten years and then to present; but maybe we have to go back a little bit further.

Interviewer: Chicago was quite the place in the 40's and 50's. Because we had nightclubs and all sorts of really interesting characters. I've got several books that were written at that time and when you read something from the 40's or 50's about Chicago, it makes me want to go back. It wasn't a polished place -- it was tough and it was rugged, but it was so interesting. There was so much going on; you had beatniks and things like that. It was very, very interesting. Yeah, incorporate that in your next book.

Dan: Alright, thank you.

Interviewer: Tell us about the Windy City Review that you are involved with.

Dan: Well, as I mentioned before, I am a member of the Chicago Writers Association -- great organization -- and for any writers out there that are looking for a great group of people to join up with, certainly sign-up. One of the services offered to the membership is a book review service. And it's called Windy City Reviews, the website is windycityreviews.org and it is a service supported by the volunteer efforts of our membership. I should say we had 25 reviewers; we just sent out another blast asking for more because our requests are going through the roof. So I think we signed up another 20 reviewers. We have about 20 editors, so that when the reviews are completed, they're edited professionally before they get published on our website. It's a great service for Chicago writers that are looking for additional help to publicize their book. They can go to our website, there's

submission guidelines which are very simple; they submit a request; they get to select up to three potential reviewers -- and we try to assign it to one of those three. But we assign it to a reviewer; it typically takes anywhere from four to eight weeks turnaround; and again, it's volunteer time for the reviewers and they have to read it, craft their review and we have to get it edited; but it's a great process.

Interviewer: Is it all genres?

Dan: It's all genres. The great thing about our reviewing team is that in their bio's that are on the website, it states what they're interested in reading, so you get to, as a writer of a book, you get to pick somebody that is interested in your type of writing or has experience with your type of writing.

Interviewer: So if you're writing sci-fi, you can get a reviewer who is a sci-fi enthusiast.

Dan: Absolutely. If you're a poet, you can get somebody who is interested in reading and reviewing poetry. And I think we have just about every genre covered. But what we've also found out is even when it hasn't been a perfect match, we have reviewers that are willing to go outside of their comfort zone to take on additional projects. And I talked before-, it's a great thing to see, not only, having the service available for Chicago writers, but to have our Chicago writers volunteering time to help other people. It's really awesome.

Interviewer: Is there a fee involved?

Dan: Membership is fifteen dollars a year for all member benefits -- of which the review program is just one of them. One of the great benefits, and it's one of the reasons why I became a member, years back -- I always had a dream of publishing a book and going to the Printers Row [0:25:00] Lit Fest. I had heard about the Chicago Writers Association and they were going to have a tent at Printers Row, and I said "Sign me up!" I had been a fan and a member and supporter ever since. What a great opportunity, right? For a writer to be able to, not only get their book published, but then get exposed to the thousands of people that show up at Printers Row.

Interviewer: Right. I go every year to Printers Row and that is my dream -- that one day I'll be on the other side; that I won't be buying; I'll be selling my book. It's still amazing how many-, this last Printers Row, I think they estimated over a hundred thousand people in a two-day period, came through.

Dan: It's unbelievable. It's so much fun! Again, I like getting out and meeting people; and helping get the book exposed to as many people as possible. And just a real quick story: I was there for most of the day because I was manning the table for the Chicago Writers Association, but I was also selling my book at the same time. And I've taken great pride in the cover of the book. A local artist did the work, and it was a beautiful thing to see, of the thousands of people walking by, they would stop and they would look at the cover of the book, and keep walking. And then

they would double-take, and turn back around and then come over; and they were intrigued by the cover and they flipped it over to read the back, and then we got to talk. And sometimes it resulted in them buying a book; sometimes not. And that was okay because something reached out to them.

Interviewer: Well, it's a great cover. It really is. It's really eye-catching. Who designed it?

Dan: Her name is Susan. She is from Naperville and she displays a lot of her art in local shops. And the experience was -- I think it was about two years ago: I went into Hammer Boutique, which is in downtown La Grange; I walked in with my wife and as soon as we walked in, we looked up and we saw this painting. And we both turned to each other and said "Do you see that? That's beautiful! We have to buy it." We don't buy much artwork, but we bought it and we put it up in our family room. And when it came time to come up with a cover design for the novel and we were exploring a number of different design ideas, and I just looked up and I had that same reaction and that was "That's it!" I don't know what I was thinking about. So it's kind of funny how it impacted me upon first seeing it; it impacted me as an idea for the book cover; and I think it's having an impact on other people who will see it. But her name is Susan Rackish Janssen; and again, she's local; she lives in Naperville and just a wonderful artist doing beautiful things.

Interviewer: Really obviously, when you look at this cover it's beautiful. It really, really is. Well, Dan, I really want to thank you for joining us today. This was great fun and I wish you nothing but the best. And I do hope your books become movies -- I think that'd be fabulous. Thank you so much for joining us.

Dan: Thank you for having me. It's been an honor being here, and I hope to see you at Printers Row with your book.

Interviewer: Next year. Absolutely. I'll be there 'cos my book takes place in Chicago too.

Dan: Good luck to you.

Interviewer: Thank you.

Dan: Thank you.