

## [Boot Camp for Aspiring Grishams](#)

By Anniken Davenport

The setting is Cape Cod. Clutching yellow legal pads, suppressing reasonable doubt and wearing the determined look of lawyers ready to make the most important opening argument of their careers, 250 would-be legal novelists make ready to pitch a jury of agents, publishers and editors on the idea that they've discovered the next *King of Torts*.

"Are you ready for the agents?" Lisa Scottoline, *New York Times* best-selling author and workshop leader, asks from the dais at the front of the ballroom she has commanded for the last two days. She leans over and whispers conspiratorially into a wireless microphone hooked to her low-slung Gucci belt. "They need you more than you need them. They're here because they can't make a living without you."

Then she delivers a gift that suddenly has her students uncapping pens and scribbling. If the agents they're about to pitch aren't responsive, they are invited to try hers. Scottoline's agent has agreed to look at any work from the author's students. But there's a caveat. Do it only after the manuscript is finished. And, yes, the students can send that finished manuscript to Scottoline too. She promises she'll read it. If she likes it, she'll provide a blurb for the back cover.

Then they're off to the races. This is the moment they've paid \$1,000 for. They're ready to pitch their work after the weekend writers conference taught by Scottoline, author of legal thrillers that include *Killer Smile*, featuring an all-female Philadelphia law firm, and *Devil's Corner*, featuring a rookie federal prosecutor, and Stephen Horn, author of noirish novels *In Her Defense* and *Law of Gravity*. Some are hoping to beat the odds and trade their Brooks Brothers suits and pallid complexions for a more casual look, maybe even something a little racy. Like what 49-year-old Scottoline's wearing today — tight jeans exposing a tanned and flat stomach and Manolo Blahniks, \$600 shoes she told the crowd they'd be able to deduct as she does "for research to see if my character can run in them."

The aspiring Grishams rushing from agent station to agent station in the ballroom have reason for optimism. The conference organizer, SEAK Inc., sponsors an annual legal fiction-writing contest. Last year's winner saw her first novel published by HarperCollins. Claire Hamner Maturro's *Skinny Dipping* heroine is a vegetarian medical malpractice lawyer. Maturro credits winning the contest for landing a publisher. "There's no question but that winning the SEAK prize was my toe in the door with HarperCollins," she reports. After winning, she e-mailed a HarperCollins editor who had attended the conference. A two-book contract followed.

At agent Esmond Harmsworth's table, one of serial killer Ted Bundy's former defense attorneys launches into his pitch. John Henry Browne has a release from Bundy and can freely write about the case. But that's not the book he really wants to write, he tells Harmsworth, a non-practicing attorney who is looking for non-fiction true-crime and investigative works. The book he has in him explains *why* attorneys choose to represent people like Bundy. He drops names of friends in the criminal defense bar. He's sure they'll contribute their point of view. But Browne makes clear he has standards. Comfortable with serial killers and cold-blooded murderers, he refused to represent Mary Kay Letourneau, who was convicted of raping a sixth-grade student and eventually bore two of the victim's children. Harmsworth is interested and asks for a query and proposal.

At Lori Ann Pope's table, a pitch begins with, "I'm one of the winners of the fiction contest." That's enough for Pope, who holds a master of fine arts degree and recently formed her own agency, Writers Represent. She's looking for "the next generation of literary novelists, especially African-American voices." She attends specialized writing conferences and likens the experience to sowing seeds. "Sometimes," she says, "a prospective client does not contact me until a year or two later." The emerging voice she's looking for may be at the conference, "but not quite ready to show her work."

At another table, Mel Berger finally agrees to look at another contest winner's proposal even though it isn't the sort of work the senior vice president of the William Morris Agency usually

represents. Berger relents “because you’re persistent and I like that.”

The SEAK contest, which opened the door for Matturro, is open to all participants. Steven Greenlee, who won second place for his story *Letters from Sam*, told the conference’s organizers that one of the agents he pitched called Monday morning asking for the first 100 pages of his manuscript. A partner in a Colorado law firm, his only previously published work is an article in a law journal, “Employee Handbooks: At-will or Not At-will? A Question of Form over Substance.”

Another participant, Ruth Stone, left the conference confident she would sell her short story collection to agent Keith Korman. Korman had expressed interest in seeing the Florida State University Law School professor’s collection after reading excerpts she submitted to the conference organizers. After sending the stories, she got back a note that read, “Sorry, Ruth, it just didn’t draw me in.” That, she said, “was a real bummer.”

Becoming the next Claire Hamner Matturro is a long shot. Becoming the next Lisa Scottoline or Stephen Horn is an even longer shot. The longest shot of all is becoming the next John Grisham or Scott Turow. But that doesn’t deter the lawyers who came from as far away as Alaska and California to learn how to leave the law for the life of a best-selling author. Greenlee explains it like this: “If John Grisham can sell a gazillion books, why can’t I?” For him, the fantasy of becoming a best-selling novelist is better than “having to deal with the daily drudgery of practicing law and the heavy responsibility of taking care of other people’s problems.” Scottoline offered enthusiastic encouragement, telling her audience that attending a conference like this put them ahead of other would-be novelists. “You,” she told the audience, “are the top of the heap.”

But being on top of the heap still means competing for a slot on a publisher’s fiction list. According to R.R. Bowker, a company that tracks book-selling trends, adult general fiction titles numbered 25,184 in 2004, a small percentage of the 195,000 book titles published last year. That may sound like a lot of books, but consider that a 2002 study by the Jenkins Group, a publishing services company, estimated six million Americans have already-completed manuscripts.

Who are these men and women who fantasize about the writer’s life and want to beat the odds? They include partners and associates in major national law firms, military officers and even a law professor from the University of Tennessee who had Grisham in his civil procedure class. According to Greenlee, “We all know that the writer’s life is not easy, but from where I’m standing, it sure as hell looks that way.”

Scottoline, who also teaches justice and fiction at the University of Pennsylvania School of Law, remembers taking a course taught by Philip Roth when she was a Penn undergraduate. She recalls being intimidated by the author of *Portnoy’s Complaint* but also that “it was so cool to be in a room with someone who published a book when you secretly want to publish a book.” It’s that feeling, she says, that she wants to recreate for lawyers secretly dreaming of publication.

Over the course of the weekend, lawyers attended workshop sessions on “Setting the Atmosphere,” “Developing Suspense,” “Flashbacks” and “How to Research Cost Effectively.” Scottoline and Horn shared tips on everything from getting plot ideas (don’t fictionalize real cases, but borrow ideas from headlines) to the mechanics of writing. (Horn uses an outline, while Scottoline asks what her character would do next.) Like alcoholics at an AA meeting, participants lined up at the microphone to share opening lines and read impromptu writing exercises. Scottoline and Horn offered criticism, most of it gentle. “Get rid of the passive voice”; “verbs really matter”; “your last page sells your next book.” When faced with a particularly passive passage, Scottoline exclaimed, “Channel your inner bitch!”

Was it worth it? Judging by the enthusiastic applause at the end of the program, many thought so. Second-place fiction winner Greenlee agrees, calling the seminar the best he’s ever attended and “perhaps the best money I have ever spent on anything.” He hasn’t quite finished the novel he’s working on, but he’s sure he will soon, if he can keep his motivation and inspiration going. They’ve waned a bit since the conference, he admits. It’s “that daily drudgery, you know.”

That daily drudgery may be one reason Scottoline reports that so far no one has taken her up on her offer to read any completed manuscript written by her conference students. The offer and the promise of a blurb for the cover would almost certainly increase the odds of finding a publisher and joining the ranks of lawyers who write.

### **Pennsylvania Lawyers Who Write Fiction**

#### ***Lisa Scottoline***

Scottoline is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania School of Law and studied under Philip Roth while an undergraduate at Penn. She worked for Dechert, Price and Rhoads before leaving to raise her daughter and write fiction. Her second book, *Final Appeal*, won the Edgar Award, presented by the Mystery Writers of America. Scottoline's books are set in Philadelphia and frequently feature an all-female Philadelphia law firm. Her books have been published in 23 countries and include *The Vendetta Defense* (exploring cultural defenses), *Courting Trouble* (highlighting stalking and domestic abuse), *Killer Smile* (dealing with Italian-American internment camps during WWII) and *Devil's Corner* (delving into the effects of drug trafficking). The *New York Times* best-selling author lives outside Philadelphia.

#### ***William Lashner***

Lashner is a graduate of New York University Law School and the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop, one of the most prestigious graduate writing programs in the country. He served a stint as a trial attorney in the criminal division of the U.S. Department of Justice before becoming a full-time fiction writer. Several of his books have hit *The New York Times* fiction best-selling list. They include *Fatal Flaw*, *Past Due*, *Bitter Truth* and his most recent, *Falls the Shadow*. His works feature a frequently down-on-his-luck Philadelphia attorney, Victor Carl. Lashner lives outside Philadelphia.

#### ***Bonnie MacDougal***

MacDougal is a graduate of Bryn Mawr and the University of Pennsylvania Law School. Her books include *Out of Order*, *Breach of Trust*, *Angle of Impact* and *Common Pleas*. MacDougal lives in Philadelphia and practices law with Pepper Hamilton L.L.P.

### **Resources for Would-Be Lawyer-Novelist**

- **SEAK:** This annual conference is held on Cape Cod every fall. ([www.seak.com](http://www.seak.com))
- **Michael Levin:** Levin, an attorney, conducts CLE programs on legal fiction writing. ([www.cle.com](http://www.cle.com))
- *Their Word is Law: Best Selling Lawyer-Novelist Talk About Their Craft*, by Stephen Murphy.

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