

# Writer worked through his own mysteries to find his real career

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By [TARA CUSLIDGE](#) / Staff Writer

In 2001, lawyer Daniel J. Hale was taking a break from mediating when he looked down and realized he'd damaged one of his expensive Alden Cordovan shoes. Initial upset led to questioning.

"I thought to myself: Do I really want to go through life upset about a nick on my shoe?" he said.

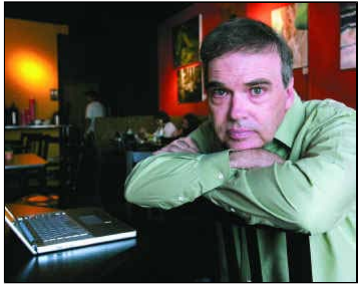
The answer was a resounding "No."

Six years later, Mr. Hale, now 47, has published two books, earned a mystery-writing award, and has a grand title to show he has arrived at the center of the genre: In January, the Dallas author was voted executive vice president of the Mystery Writers of America, a position that has allowed him to rub shoulders with the likes of Stephen King and one of his own literary heroes, Nelson DeMille.

The group's Southwest chapter is putting on a conference in Dallas starting Friday, and Mr. Hale will be among those speaking about the craft and business of mystery writing.

His own love of a good mystery began at a young age when, as an 8-year-old in Ashdown, Ark., he checked out Dodie Smith's *The 101 Dalmatians*.

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JIM MAHONEY/DMN

**Dallas-based author Daniel J. Hale discovered his love of books early.**

The book inspired him to write.

"When I finished it I knew," he said. "It only took me 20 years to do it."

At Southern Methodist University, he was encouraged and challenged by a professor, whose name escapes Mr. Hale though he says one day he is going to go back and look at his transcripts to give the man proper thanks. "He said, 'You have a gift, what you need is more life experience,' " said Mr. Hale.

Mr. Hale earned his bachelor's degree in business administration from SMU, a master's in business administration from Cornell University, and a law degree from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock's Bowen School of Law. He continues to be a licensed attorney in Arkansas. But he never gave up on his deferred career path.

His break came almost by chance. In 2000, Mr. Hale was trying to cheer up his soccer-playing nephew, Matthew LaBrot, after the then 12-year-old returned from a game upset with his coach. Mr. Hale typed a sentence on his laptop computer: "The coach lay on the side of the field in a pool of blood."

"I thought that would be it. I just wanted to make him laugh," he said.

After exchanging the laptop several times, the two had the beginnings of a "really good mystery." *Red Card*, the book, was published in 2002 and later won an Agatha Award for best children's and young-adult mystery from Malice Domestic, a yearly mystery-writing conference. *Green Streak*, a follow-up to the first Zeke Armstrong mystery, was published in 2004. It was also nominated for an Agatha Award.

Mr. LaBrot said he thinks part of the reason his uncle has become so involved in the Mystery Writers of America is to inspire. Mr. Hale gives talks at elementary schools, libraries and other locations often speaking to children.

"I know for him a big part of growing up was reading," said Mr. LaBrot. " *The 101 Dalmatians* is what got him into mysteries and writing. I think he wants kids to feel the same way he did."

Mr. Hale said he doesn't feel he does enough.

"As much as I do, I think there is maybe one little extra thing I can do," he said. "That is my aim, to do as much as I can."

Right now, he is focusing on the responsibilities of

his position. He regularly reads manuscripts for fellow mystery writers and handles day-by-day operations for the 3,200-member group, which is responsible for the Edgar Awards – the field's equivalent to the Academy Awards. This year, he was on hand at the 2007 ceremony in New York, where he mingled with some of the most well-known names in the business, including Sandra Brown, Carol Higgins Clark, Robert Crais and David Morrell.

He calls Mr. King "cool" and laughs as he describes calling Mr. DeMille "dude."

Mr. Hale admits he sounds a little boastful when he talks about chatting it up with the foremost mystery writers in America. But friends say he is down-to-earth.

Suzanne Frank has tapped Mr. Hale to teach in the continuing studies creative-writing program she runs at SMU. She had rave reviews of him from his students.

"When he finds out what someone does he gives them advice and helps them in any way," she said. "He is amazing."

He's at work on several writing projects. He counts friends among some of his favorite writers, such as Charlaine Harris, Harry Hunsicker and Rick Riordan, though on this particular day he is reading Megan Abbott's *The Song Is You*.

These days, he comfortably wears a \$35 pair of Vans.

"I'm the luckiest guy on the face of the earth," he said. "I get to do what I love doing. Anybody who gets to do what they love doing is a very lucky person."

## Plan your life

The Mystery Writers of America Southwest Chapter presents "Hardboiled Heroes & Cozy Cats," a conference for writers, Friday and Saturday at the Radisson Hotel Central Dallas, 6060 N. Central Expressway. \$125 to \$135 for registration only. For details, go to [www.mwasw.org](http://www.mwasw.org).

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