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Real life private eye

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WEST BOYLSTON— West Boylston based private detective John Lajoie has been shot at. It happened in Worcester, on a golf course. There was no shoot-out. There was no high-speed chase through the hills of Worcester. Lajoie took cover and called the police. The shooter fled. That's the life of a real private investigator.

That story is recounted in 47-year-old Lajoie's new book, "Trials and Tribulations of a Real Life Private Eye," recently released by AuthorHouse publishing.

Lajoie's reaction that day was not only life saving, but also the only thing legally allowed. Contrary to the private investigators of popular fiction, Lajoie said his license gives him the same rights "as an average Joe on the streets."

"If I shoot someone, they will arrest me first, and ask questions later," Lajoie, one of the most successful private investigators in the country, said. "I will be on the front page and lose my clients."

In fact, according to the book, most private investigators do not carry guns. Most do not need them, because in all likelihood, they will never be shot at.

"Clients," in most cases, refers to the lawyers and families who hire Lajoie and other private investigators to do what they do best - research and come up with the facts, often to help bolster a defense case in court.

Stereotypes debunked

It is the stereotypical image of private investigators portrayed in fiction that nudged Lajoie to spend 10 months writing about his profession.

"There are no Mike Hammers out there," Lajoie said. "There are no Columbos or Magnum PI's. Some want to think they are, every profession has that element, but this stuff doesn't happen 99.9 percent of the time. Surveillance doesn't happen ... where you stop in a red car and the subject comes out two minutes later.

"I have all the respect in the world for Mickey Spillane's talent as a writer," he added. "But why did he have to pick my profession to write about?"

While not the first book Lajoie has sat down to write, it is the first for mass-market sales. His previous book, "How to



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"Become a Private Investigator," read like a textbook, Lajoie said, because that is what it was meant to be.

He wrote it as a guide for would-be private investigators, printing the pages and connecting them with wire rings himself. It was when he sat down to rewrite that book, adding some anecdotes, that his new book took on a life of its own.

"I wanted to apply my anecdotal advice to the reality of case investigation," Lajoie said. "(The book) is a lot about life; how to operate in reality, rather than the mythical impression created by TV, fiction novelists, movies and the media."

When Lajoie's "literary advisor," fellow PI and an award-winning author Michael Koryta suggested he add anecdotes to the manuscript, Lajoie started writing. Soon after, he had 60 pages worth of real-life stories.

"I started writing the anecdotes, and anecdotes turned into chapters. I couldn't stop writing," Lajoie said with a laugh.

The result is a 200-plus-page book that has already gained him praise from his fellow investigators and drawn the attention of Investigative Education Consultants, an outfit that is now offering a two-year private investigator degree program through accredited colleges like the University of Phoenix and Boston University.

While "Trials and Tribulations of A Real Life Private Eye" speaks directly to private investigators and investigators who want to own their own agency, Lajoie said he intended the book for wider appeal. The book, he expects, will appeal to another audience too, the "folks intrigued by detective fiction," whether it be Columbo, or new shows like CSI.

"That's a lot of people," Lajoie said. "Who hasn't picked up a Hardy Boy book and wanted to be Frank Hardy? I know I did. I wanted to bring these people into reality."

Blue-collar background

His peers and the media that covers his profession have recognized him. He turned down the Eric Rudolph - Olympic park and Birmingham Alabama bomber - case for reasons he talks about in the book. Lajoie still has a Rudolph file more than an inch thick, but follows the confidentiality agreement he signed when first looking at the case and declines to talk about it.

In the world of private investigators, Lajoie is successful enough to set up in big cities, charging big city rates. Instead, he said he chooses to stay where his roots are, in the blue-collar atmosphere of central Massachusetts.

"I don't want to gouge anybody," Lajoie said. "I want to be able to offer Worcester prices to Worcester businesses and individuals. I want to be able to bring my services to those who need them. I'm acutely aware of being able to help people. I want to give them quality service and product."

His personal motto for mistakes, "mess up, fess up" is clearly aimed at private investigators, but can be applied to other professions, as, he noted, are his theories expressed in the book on personality types.

"That's why I say in the introduction, if you're not a private eye, pretend to be one," Lajoie said. "I wanted to put the reader in that frame of mind while they are reading the book."

Lajoie himself did not start out to be a private investigator. Instead, the West Boylston High graduate and first in his family to go to college thought he would be a lawyer after he left the Air Force, studying history, political science and philosophy.

After his marriage, and a brief stay in Boylston, Lajoie decided to enter the workforce. He applied at the then up-and-coming Commerce Insurance Company and took a job in claims investigation and adjusting. Here, he wrote, he "discovered the world of investigation."

The book reveals this path, from childhood to entrepreneurship to high profile cases. Lajoie said he felt it important to speak about his life to answer the question, "Is he like us?"

"Where did this guy come from? How did he decide to be a private eye? What led up to that?" Those are the questions Lajoie said his book readers would have had if he simply wrote about running an investigation agency and taking cases.

Instead, his moral code is laid out in the stories of his childhood in a close-knit Worcester neighborhood from where he still maintains friendships decades later. Stories about a 5-year-old Lajoie escaping from his house - which he said he did by stacking up chairs to unlock the deadbolt - might show the real beginning of his career, "exploring and investigating." There is also plenty of credit for the people in his life who helped make him who he is.

Lajoie also made sure to express what he feels is the true duty of a private investigator to his readers, to work for the client. For private investigators who recognize themselves in the chapter on personalities, Lajoie said he hopes they do a "good self-evaluation" and turn their personality around so they can become a successful, ethical private investigator and contributing member to the community."

It is that "straight shooting" style that Lajoie said earned him praise in the October issue of PI Magazine, in which reviewer and private investigator Herbert Simon wrote: "The reader immediately meets the person who is the expert."

Relating an e-mail he received from a reader who Lajoie said wrote "I found myself having a conversation with you as I was reading your words," Lajoie said: "It really doesn't get much better. As a writer, that is the greatest compliment you can get."

Real life PI roles

What does it take to become a successful private investigator? Strong communication skills are top of the list, Lajoie said.

"You have to be able to go from the homeless shelter to the mayor's office and have a fruitful, productive conversation," Lajoie said. "To get information from people who do not want to give it up, without a badge, it's hard."

Also needed is the understanding that you as the investigator are not the judge, but the fact gatherer, Lajoie said. It can be a tough lesson for some investigators, especially, he noted, those coming from a career in law enforcement. But, Lajoie said, the role of a private investigator is to make sure his client gets due process under the Constitution.

"I don't think I would want an investigator who is acting as a judge," he said.

There are also the "cases you know you can't win," Lajoie said. Those are the cases where the law and public perception are hostile, yet the client is still under a presumption of innocence.

For Lajoie, that case came in December, 1999, when Eddie Morales shot and killed a 21-year veteran police officer in Holyoke, just days before Christmas.

For the book, Lajoie not only recounts the emotions and turmoil around the Morales case, but talks one-on-one with high profile private investigator H. Ellis Armistead, who took on the case of Timothy McVeigh.

"Such a case can be life altering," Lajoie said. "You have an epiphany when you do a case like that, you learn about who you are and what you are."

"Trials and Tribulations of A Real Life Private Eye" can be ordered at any bookstore, although Lajoie encourages people in this area to buy it at Tatnuck Bookseller, the first store to put the book on the shelves and the host of his Worcester book signing Oct. 22 at 4 p.m. In addition to talking about the cases in the book, Lajoie said he plans on inviting some of the people he talks about in the book to the signing.