

INTERVIEWS & PROFILES

CHRIS ORCUTT

WRITING WELL, AND PUBLISHING IT YOURSELF, ACROSS GENRES

By Rhett Morgan



IN 2011, CHRIS ORCUTT brought years of experience as a professional writer and award-winning journalist to Kindle, releasing his mystery novel, *A Real Piece of Work*. Orcutt's witty prose helped elevate cunning detective Dakota Stevens and gorgeous chess master Svetlana—Orcutt's contemporary, cosmopolitan equivalents for Sherlock Holmes and Watson—out of the crowded mystery genre, earning bestseller spots on Amazon and admiration from critics. Several more Dakota mysteries have since been released, but Orcutt has also used self-publishing to expand his devotion to high-quality writing into several genres: 2014 saw award-winning novel *One Hundred Miles from Manhattan*, and just last year he released both a memoir, *Perpetuating Trouble*, and a very timely play about an arrogant celebrity-turned-politician, *The Ronald*.

What made you decide to self-publish a novel, and what was the experience like?

I received an offer for *A Real Piece of Work* from a legacy publisher, but their terms were entirely in their favor. I was tired of the legacy publisher hoop-jumping, anyway—writing synopses and query letters, waiting for replies—that had nothing to do with what I loved, which was writing novels. I knew that if I could just get my books in front of *readers*, they'd enjoy them, and that's proven to be the case. I've discovered the independent path suits me. I'm a maverick, an artist who enjoys the entire process of creation. I consider myself the literary equivalent of an independent filmmaker in the vein of Woody Allen or Quentin Tarantino.

What do you think sets your Dakota Stevens series apart from other mystery series?

The quality of the writing. Beyond riveting plots and sharp dialogue, I strive to give readers aesthetic pleasure through the language itself—beautifully written page-turners. Also setting the series apart is Dakota and Svetlana's relationship. Their humorous banter, especially.

Why did you want to create a political satire like *The Ronald*, and why did you choose to make it into a play?

I am highly attuned to the Muse, what's happening around me, and what I want to say. For two weeks after the 2016 presidential election, I wondered how Trump pulled it off, then the answer came to me in a dream. But I didn't *choose* to make it into a play; the story revealed itself to me as a play, and I took dictation.

What do you appreciate about writing in several genres?

I'm a lover of sentences and literature, so no matter what format or genre I write in, I want the writing to

be stellar. Also, my reading interests have a very wide range, and I like to write books I would like to read.

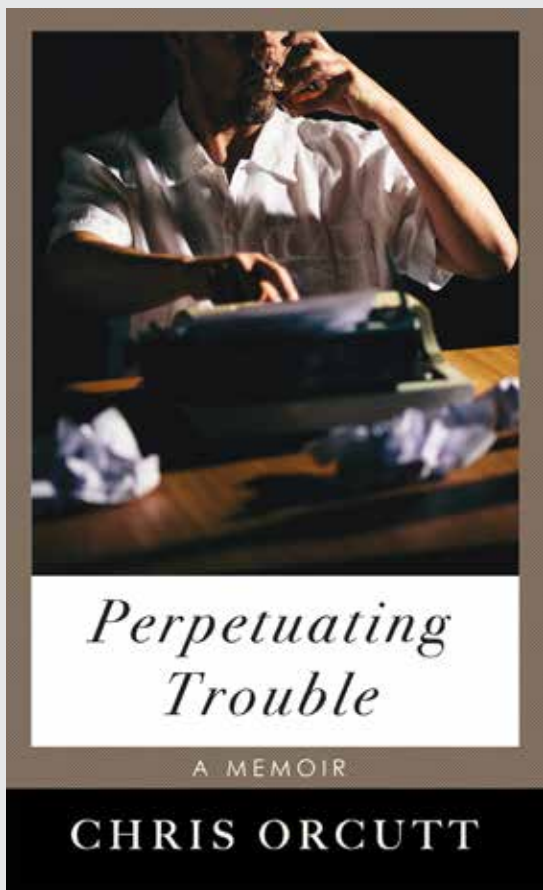
How do you approach releasing your work in different genres?

I write and release what I want to say. I don't write to an audience or seek out an audience when I release a book. They'll find me eventually. Regardless, I get the satisfaction of putting out the very best work I can produce.

What are you working on next?

I recently finished the first draft of a *War and Peace*-length nonfiction novel; I'm revising a Paris memoir/travelogue; I'm about to publish a Dakota Stevens "origin story"; and I'm currently writing a short novel about a biblical hero. Simply put, I'm always writing, always trying to improve and top myself. I believe that readers, whatever their tastes, can find something in my oeuvre that they'll enjoy.

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the delusional leader. Gaiter adroitly intertwines the personal stories of Rufus and his cohorts with the larger narrative of the cruelty perpetrated against Native Americans. Rufus is scarred by his father's disillusionment after he watched the Cherokees sell off their land, and their heritage, in exchange for small individual payouts and worthless promises: "To Buck, that was like buying a house and splitting the money evenly between the man, his wife, and each child and telling them all to go their separate ways." He knew the same would happen to the Creeks. Skillful prose depicts white Americans' pervasive bigotry and the methodical destruction of Indian sovereignty. Unfortunately, the novel contains not a single likable central protagonist.

A historically valuable, well-written, and unrelentingly bleak read.



REDLINED
A Memoir of Race, Change, and Fractured Community in 1960s Chicago

Gartz, Linda
 She Writes Press (256 pp.)
 \$16.95 paper | Apr. 3, 2018
 978-1-63152-320-5

A stunning debut memoir that documents the societal and racial changes of the mid-20th century, told from the perspective of a Chicago family caught in the middle of them.

After the deaths of their parents, Fred and Lillian Gartz, the author and her two brothers found a genealogical treasure: decades' worth of "letters, diaries, documents, and photos" written and taken by her parents and grandparents. Using these detailed sources, she pieced together this family memoir, which begins with her grandparents' immigration to Chicago, their strict and sometimes-abusive child-rearing methods, and their financial devastation during the Great Depression. The spotlight then shifts to her parents' romantic courtship and the early days of their marriage. The joy and innocence of their young love would soon face the demands of everyday life, including caring for Lil's psychotic mother, "their time-sucking devotion to building maintenance" as landlords, and Fred's travel-heavy job that severely strained their marriage. Later, she says, the 1950s brought "a mass migration of African Americans, escaping from the...cruelties of the Jim Crow South." Gartz describes the racial tensions that existed in her white family's neighborhood, manifesting especially in discriminatory property laws that kept black people in poverty. Gartz concludes the book with her own recollections of the civil rights movement and the era's changing sexual mores before returning the spotlight to her parents in their old age. Although the subtitle suggests that this book is primarily about race in 1960s Chicago, it actually covers a much broader array of material, both chronologically (from the early 1900s to the '80s) and topically, as she addresses mental illness, marital distress, and her own quest for independence, among other issues. Her primary sources, which include the aforementioned photographs and quoted letters