

Building Edward Stanton

By Craig Lancaster

For any writer who attempts to breathe life into fictional characters, two questions are inevitable, and they often come in succession:

1. Where did you get the idea for your character?
2. Is the character you?

For purposes of discussing Edward Stanton, the protagonist of my debut novel, *600 Hours of Edward*, I'll deal with the second question first, by way of comparison points.

Edward is 39 years old. I was 38 when I wrote the book.

Edward lives in Billings, Montana. So do I.

Edward is enchanted by the following things: the '60s cop show *Dragnet*, rock 'n' roll performers R.E.M. and Matthew Sweet, and the Dallas Cowboys. I can recite whole sections of *Dragnet* scripts, own every R.E.M. and Matthew Sweet album and have sacrificed more Sundays than I care to count genuflecting at the Cowboys.

Edward is 6-foot-4 and about 280 pounds. I am in the neighborhood of both of those numbers – in the case of the weight, only if it's a very large neighborhood.

And yet, for all of those similarities, Edward is not me. He's more afflicted than I am (he has obsessive-compulsive disorder and Asperger syndrome). He's not as jaded. He trusts only what he can see and verify, while I tether myself to hunches. And, at his core, Edward is sweeter than I could ever be.

He isn't me.

But for 25 magical days last November, as I furiously drafted his story, I became Edward.

Edward's story spills onto the page in a first-person, present-tense point of view. My decision to approach the story in that way was grounded in practicality: I wanted his story of transformative change to happen on the ground, in the moment, as he saw it. The immediate side benefit of that approach was that I slipped into Edward's head almost from the get-go. His flat, non-ironic tone found its way from my imagination to my fingers on the keyboard. Rarely has writing been so effortless for me, and that was true all the way through the first draft. I never lost

my footing, and I never lost the threads of the story, even as my imagination of them changed dramatically. I ascribe that entirely to being overtaken by a character who rang true in my head and in my heart. I have no other way to account for it.

Casting Edward as an obsessive-compulsive Aspergian was another calculated move. In the earliest conception of the story, I wanted a main character who lived his life in patterns. Among other predictable behavior, Edward ends most of the 25 days of the story by watching an episode of *Dragnet* (in sequential order) and then writing an unsent letter of complaint to whoever is addling him (that the letters are never sent is the idea of his therapist, Dr. Buckley, which is all the better to keep him out of trouble). By structuring the story in such a way, I figured that I could build a dramatic arc into the infrastructure of Edward's compulsions. This worked out better than I could have ever hoped. But some stroke of luck, many of the morals of the *Dragnet* episodes proved applicable to the corresponding junctures of Edward's story. That this was so can be chalked up only as a happy accident.

Edward came with two primary challenges in the drafting and revising stages.

First, it would have been all too easy to make him a butt of a book-long joke, given his condition. That was unacceptable to me, and I suspect that it would have been unacceptable to readers. People who have read the book have generously complimented the comedy that pervades the story, but not once has anyone accused me of creating that fun at Edward's expense. In retrospect, that was a niftier trick than perhaps I gave myself credit for achieving.

Second, his delivery is so flat that I became intimate with the maxim "kill your darlings." Each time I took a whack at the manuscript, I would hammer into submission the occasional florid phrase where Edward's sensibility had fallen away and mine had taken over. I deleted several sentences that, in the drafting stage, had filled me with pride. While it hurt to see them go, it was the right choice. Edward's believability lies, in part, in his consistency.

To illustrate this, I offer up the following section of the story. It's fairly late in the book, and I needed Edward to plumb an emotional depth that he had never experienced, but in his own words:

I find myself wishing that I had taken pictures of that snowy day in front my house, when Kyle was riding his Blue Blaster and Donna and I were throwing snowballs. Photographs, it seems to me, are both moments in time and bits of memory. I have the memory of that day with

Donna and Kyle, but I also know that the camera that created the memory is imprecise. If I'd had a real camera, instead of just a memory, I could have caught the moments so that they would never escape me. If Donna has decided that she no longer wants to be my friend, I'll have to desperately hold on to those memories so that they never get away, because I won't have the chance to replace them.

When my 25 days of being Edward Stanton came to an end, I brimmed with something approaching melancholy. Fortunately, it didn't last. These days, I get to revisit him every so often, be it through a venue like this one or when someone reads his story and is kind enough to share what it meant. I treasure those moments, just as I treasure him. On my horizon, I hope, are dozens of characters waiting to be discovered and explored. And yet I'd be surprised if I come to like any of them more than I like Edward.

I hope you like him, too.