

## Where Stories Come From

### By Craig Lancaster

I'll start with an admission: I'm not a very organized writer. If I had a lick of sense, I'd carry around a notebook and scratch down little bits of inspiration and snippets of conversation that I find provocative. I'm certain that I would be a much more robust short-story writer, for example, if I did a better job of recording those small moments that are perfect for the short form. Instead, I wander around with only my eyes, ears and brain – notoriously faulty instruments, all of them – as receptacles for ideas.

Thus, my system of capturing and managing story ideas is something akin to a spider's method of trapping food. I wait for something suitably juicy to fly into my web, and then I wrap it up tight and put it away until I'm ready to consume it.

With my first novel, "600 Hours of Edward," ([http://www.amazon.com/600-Hours-Edward-Craig-Lancaster/dp/1606390139/ref=pd\\_sim\\_sbs\\_b\\_1](http://www.amazon.com/600-Hours-Edward-Craig-Lancaster/dp/1606390139/ref=pd_sim_sbs_b_1)) the idea of taking a sledgehammer to the finely honed routines of the autistic and obsessive Edward Stanton came to me in a torrent and exited my fingertips in a similar flash flood. I wrote "Edward" in 24 days and finished the book, revisions and all, in less than three months.

For my second novel, the just-released "The Summer Son," ([http://www.amazon.com/Summer-Son-Craig-Lancaster/dp/1935597248/ref=pd\\_sim\\_b\\_1](http://www.amazon.com/Summer-Son-Craig-Lancaster/dp/1935597248/ref=pd_sim_b_1)) the idea occurred in a similar thunderclap, but the writing proved much more arduous. I needed nearly a year, and about five drafts, to emerge with the story I wanted. It's an intensely personal tale, the closest thing to a love letter to my father that I can imagine writing, and despite this deep emotional attachment, I had great difficulty teasing out the central theme. My friend Jim Thomsen (<http://pugetsoundblogs.com/readingkitsap/>), one of my biggest supporters and most reliable critics, rightly diagnosed my early efforts as straddling an uncomfortable line between fiction and essay, to an unsatisfactory conclusion on each count. With each draft, the exposition fell away and a taut, emotional story emerged.

At a crucial juncture in the latter third of the book, the protagonist, 39-year-old Mitch Quillen, learns something about his father, Jim, that puts a lifetime of assumptions on the firing line. It's perhaps a bit uncouth for a writer to talk about his own favorite lines – of far greater

import is what readers think – but I must be honest: I’m as proud of these two paragraphs as I am of anything I’ve written:

*I began to peel back through the years, pulling out scraps of memory and holding them to the light to see if I could spot lost truths hidden in the scenes and sounds I’d stashed. The images and the moments had my fingerprints all over them, so commonly were they retraced by me, and still I flipped them over and looked at them from new angles, hoping that I would see something that had eluded me before.*

*Were I inclined to rationality, I would have conceded that it was pointless. I could find little instructive in what had gone before, at least as it pertained to my life. I also knew that I couldn’t trust the pictures in my head. The moments weren’t frozen in time; they changed, sometimes imperceptibly, as the years dragged on and my sensibilities shifted. Whatever came to me as I put down my time on earth affected my inward and outward views of the circumstances of my life and the lives around me. I was older, wiser, less tolerant, less motivated, more distant – and so was my lens. I could no longer trust my interpretation of long-past events. I could only try to do my best with what came at me now.*

With “The Summer Son” now launched into the world, I’m back to managing ideas. I’m deep into Novel No. 3, a story that I started in November 2009 and set aside for several months while doing promotional work on “Edward.” The idea for No. 4 has been percolating for months now, ever since Thomsen – who’s also a muse, apparently – sent me a short news item about a troubled boy and said, “This young man as an adult would make a good character in a Craig Lancaster novel.”

He’s right. I haven’t stopped thinking about that kid-turned-man and the fictional possibilities that await him. That’s how I know I have a good idea on the hook.