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Exclusive Interview: The Painted Gun Author Bradley Spinelli

One of the common traits among noir crime novels is that they're quick reads. You can usually tear through one in a weekend, especially if *The Simpsons* are a rerun. But in talking to writer Bradley Spinelli about his noir crime novel *The Painted Gun* ([paperback](#), [digital](#)), it seems that it sometimes takes a lot longer than a *Simpsons*-free weekend to write one of these page-turners.

DISCOVER HOW



Photo: (c) Claudia Paul

I always like to start with the basics. So, basically, what is *The Painted Gun* about?

It's about David "Itchy" Crane, an ex-journalist running a dying business as an "Information Broker" in late-'90s San Francisco. He gets hired to find a missing girl because of a portrait of him that he didn't sit for, and stumbles into a plot to frame him for several murders, and starts to fall for the missing girl.

That's the book jacket. I would say it's about loneliness as a disease you don't know

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you have, and the kind of romance that only appeals to the tragic at heart.

Where did you get the original idea for it, and how different is the final version from that original idea?

The original idea was just the mysterious painting. That was 1997, when I was living in South San Francisco. By 2001 I had figured out the frame job, and wrote half the book before September 11t made me put it down again.

The first twist came from working on it in Guatemala and learning about United Fruit and the CIA's coup in Guatemala in the '50s. When I finished the book, it sat in a drawer for eight years or so until I met Aaron Petrovich at Akashic. He knows so much about noir, and pointed out a missed opportunity in the plot. Then I randomly read about the Death Master File and worked it in as a solution: It's a Social Security database that filters down into all other facets of society, so if you're declared dead in the DMF by "keystroke error," you can lose your house, your pension, your savings, everything. That's the other major change from the "original" idea.

Writer Sterling Watson [[Suitcase City](#)] said that *The Painted Gun* has, "...some of the most sure-footed tough guy prose I've seen since [Dashiell] Hammett and [Raymond] Chandler walked those mean streets." Do you consider Hammett and Chandler to be big influences on your writing? And by that I mean by what you write about as well as how you write.

That's some high praise. It kind of makes me a little uncomfortable.

I probably shouldn't admit this, but I only read [The Thin Man](#) in the last year. It's so wonderfully dated. People just sit around and talk. And their epic drinking makes modern writers look like rookies.

Chandler is the reason I wanted to write this book in the first place. My other work, before and since, is much darker fiction. But I read a bunch of Chandler's books and he was definitely the model for the book initially, both style and content, though I was updating for the time I was living in. A lot of writers get dissed for doing "genre," but Chandler is unquestionably a master stylist. His sentences and his dialogue are so tight they make the margins look a mile wide.

Who else do you consider to be the big influences on *The Painted Gun*, and in what ways?

Once I tapped into the United Fruit story, I pulled from James Ellroy. I'm knocked out by how he weaves fact and fiction in [American Tabloid](#) and the books that follow. I did a lot of research, and even tied in real-life unsolved murders from '90s San Francisco to drop into the plot.

The main character is a journalist named Itchy. How often, when writing the book, did you accidentally call him Scratchy?

Never. I did get called out by my friend Mike DeCapite, the novelist. "Itchy" is an old nickname of his. I told him I didn't know that when I came up with the character's name, but I don't think he believed me. He's the one who originally loaned me all those Raymond Chandler books, so this whole thing is his fault anyway.

In terms of how you depicted Itchy, did you consult with any real journalists, or did you base him on ones you've seen in movies and/or TV?

Itchy wasn't based on anyone, really. I liked the idea of "information services" as a job, and it seemed natural that an ex-journalist might gravitate to that in the last five

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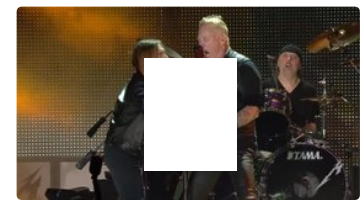
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minutes before the Internet made it obsolete. The wider archetype was “Normal Guy” caught up in something way out of his league... the accidental detective, like Cary Grant in *North By Northwest*. If there are more adventures to come for Itchy, this one is his origin story.

Strangely, I've done much more work as a journalist since I wrote this book than I did before. And perhaps aptly, in the past few years the profession of “journalist” has been widely usurped by “information services,” from bloggers rewriting press releases to media empires that recycle news stories. And now, with the Gawker takedown, the widespread muzzling of the press by the new administration, the rise of “Alternative Facts,” and just flat-out demonizing journalists, we're seeing an arc where “Information Services” in the U.S. is becoming defined in a more Soviet-era manner.

So, has there been any talk of adapting *The Painted Gun* into a movie or TV show?

There's talk, but nothing I would repeat for fear of jinxing any chances. Adapting books into movies is a long, slow, agonizing process punctuated by brief glimpses of hope. It's like being at the dentist, and you can see the nitrous on the other side of the room, but you're not getting any.

I see this book as more of a film — or a series of films, following Itchy forward in time — than a TV show. Though a TV series about a '90s detective could be a moneymaker.

If it were to be made into a movie or TV show, who would you want to see play Itchy and the other major roles?

Considering the glacial pace of development, my perfect Ashley is probably in sixth grade right now. And even if the novelist is lucky enough to work on the screenplay, he's the last person with casting input. But, if I were directing this now...

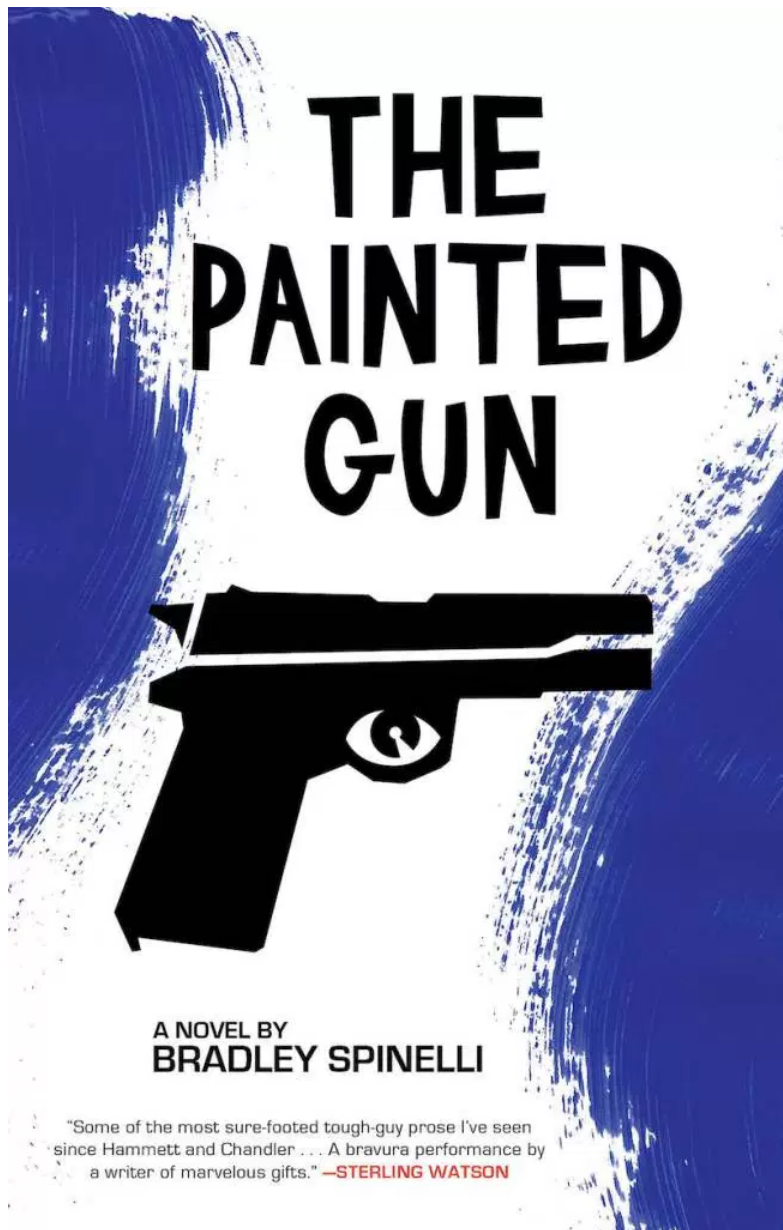
Ashley is no Manic Pixie Dream Girl, and with the scant screen time, she'd have to be intense. Maybe Saoirse Ronan; not just because of *Brooklyn*, but her revealing work in *The Way Back*. Or Kara Hayward. She had only a brief appearance in *Manchester By The Sea*, but that look she gives in *Moonlight Kingdom* dressed as a raven, that's pure Ashley: intense, off-putting, very beautiful, and a little scary.

Itchy has to be rugged, but if he's too old then the romance angle gets creepy; too young, and the actor won't carry Itchy's world-weariness. It's a perfect role for Willem Dafoe circa *Wild At Heart*. On the older side, maybe Josh Brolin, think *No Country For Old Men*. Benicio del Toro also has that shifty quality. On the younger side, maybe Joseph Gordon-Levitt, he had that shiftiness in *Brick* and *The Lookout*.

Michael Shannon from *Midnight Special* might be just right. Do you have his phone number?

Sorry, no. Now, as you said, it took you a long time to finish and publish *The Painted Gun*. Will it take just as long to do book number three?

You never know. Publication is elusive, so I think it's pretty common for writers to put projects down and pick them back up. They do feed off of each other. My next novel is *Soi Six*, which is the evil stepchild of *The Painted Gun* and my first novel, *Killing Williamsburg*. It's half set in Bangkok, half spy caper, and half psychological thriller.



Finally, if someone enjoyed *The Painted Gun*, what would you suggest they read next and why?

For this genre, I'll always recommend the greats: [The Big Sleep](#) or anything else by Chandler, [James] Ellroy's [American Tabloid](#) and its sequels, and [anything by] Elmore Leonard.

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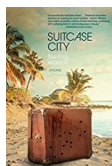
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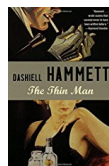
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ABOUT ME

Paul Semel has been writing about music, movies, games, DVDs and Blu-rays, books, and other fun stuff for more than twenty years. A former editor at Bikini, Electronic Gaming Monthly, and Incite, he has contributed to Maxim, Complex, Nylon, G4TV.com, Ray Gun, and GamePro, and currently writes for Walmart GameCenter, Comic Book Resources.com, GameCrate, and Playboy.com, among others.

