

Chris Grabenstein is a writer with many talents. He found his start as an ad writer and improvisational comedian. While at the top of his career in advertising, Chris decided to trade in his fancy office and title to write crime fiction. And are we ever glad he did. *TILT-A-WHIRL* was published in 2005. It earned Chris an Anthony Award for "Best First Mystery" and launched the John Ceepak mystery series. Chris went on to publish four more acclaimed Ceepak novels: *MAD MOUSE*, *WHACK A MOLE*, *HELL HOLE*, and *MIND SCRAMBLER*. This May brings the sixth in the series, *ROLLING THUNDER*. In addition to his John Ceepak series, Chris has published a holiday thriller series featuring Christopher Miller and an award-winning ghost story series for middle grade readers. A former president of the New York Chapter of Mystery Writers of America, Chris keeps his improv skills from growing rusty by working as the auctioneer each year for Bouchercon's charity auction. He also helps encourage a love of reading in youngsters through his "Every Picture Tells a Story" presentation for middle school students. Somewhere amidst all his responsibilities and commitments, he found time to sit down and chat with me. It is with great pleasure that I share with you my interview with Chris Grabenstein.

JF: Much to my relief (and I know many others as well), Ceepak is returning in May for book number six, *ROLLING THUNDER*. And for those who don't know, we should say that I am relieved because there was a possibility that *MIND SCRAMBLER* would be the end of the series. So, why don't you share with us how Ceepak got a second chance.

Chris: Well, it's thanks to readers and fans -- especially the mystery mavens on the DorothyL listserv. For the inside-baseball crowd, here's a little behind the scenes peek at publishing. The first three books (*Tilt a Whirl*, *Mad Mouse*, *Whack a Mole*) were published by Carroll & Graf, a terrific imprint, very famous for its mysteries. Their parent company, Avalon, was sold to a company called Perseus, which only publishes non-fiction. So, as soon as they took over Avalon, they shuttered the three fiction imprints. The series was then snatched up by an enthusiastic acquiring editor at St. Martin's Minotaur, who, about three months later, went off to write his own thrillers. As is often the case, my two-book deal was more or less orphaned within the house. If you don't have a true champion rooting for you, you can kind of fall by the wayside. And by the wayside we fell. So, I thought I'd keep Ceepak alive with short stories. That's when I wrote "Ring Toss," the first ever John Ceepak short story, which will appear in the June 2010 issue of Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine. Then there was a very touching outcry from Mystery Fans and a very influential critic saying Ceepak deserved a new home. My agent asked me if he should look around. I said, what the hey. Fortunately, a small but classy publisher called Pegasus was very interested. In fact, many of the folks at Pegasus used to work at Carroll & Graf, including the cover designer, which is why *Rolling Thunder* looks like the direct descendant of the first three books. I must say, Pegasus may be small but they are HUGE on making writers feel loved.

JF: Can you tell us a little about that "Ring Toss"? How did it come about? Where does it fit in the Ceepak timeline? Are there going to be others to follow?

Chris: Yes, *RING TOSS* (2010 was my year for RT titles) will appear in the June issue of Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine. I actually wrote the story during the period of time when I thought the Ceepak novels were dead. I figured it might be a way to at least keep the characters alive.

I wrote the story to introduce folks to Ceepak and Danny who maybe never heard of them. And, since it was a short story, I made the crime a robbery instead of a murder. I also dialed up the humor, I think, a little bit more. I didn't feel like I could, in ten thousand words, realistically sink into some of the darker spots the books delve into. So, you get to see Ceepak get exasperated with the brawling DePinna family who are driving Danny's long-time friend Becca Adkinson crazy by having their family reunion at

her Mussel Beach Motel. I imagine that *RING TOSS* actually takes place a little after the events in *ROLLING THUNDER*. I had a lot of fun writing the short story, so I hope I can find the time to do more. I re-read the story for the first time in months last night and I had forgotten how amusing that Danny can be!

JF: Since the Ceepak series has moved around a bit with publishers, the Ceepak "look" has gone through some changes. But for *ROLLING THUNDER* you have a bit of a retro cover -- it resembles the first three novels more so than novels four and five. Can you talk about why that look has returned and how you feel about that?

Chris: Right. That's because Michael Fusco, the original cover designer, is back on the case. It's like getting classic Coke back after the New Coke experiment. I love the new old look. As a former ad man, I learned a thing or two about branding when I was a wee corporate lad. We had a look. Bright neon colors. Skeletal carnival images, almost X-rays. The grungy type (now everybody is using it). The other night at a Pegasus party, Michael told me that of the hundreds of covers he has designed, the Ceepak books are the ones everybody remembers!

JF: Not only do you remember them, but if you've never seen a Ceepak novel before and you walk down the mystery aisle of the bookstore, they stand out amid the sea of black book jackets that line the walls. They are certainly attention-grabbers!

JF: You started out in advertising writing commercials. How did that writing help you when you shifted to writing fiction? And on the flip side of that, what would you say were some habits or skills you acquired that you had to break to be successful with novel writing?

Chris: My first publisher once said to me, "We like ex-advertising writers; you don't waste people's time." I guess there is something to be said for that. When you are writing television commercials, you have 70 words max in a thirty-second spot. And, you have to win the viewer's attention in the first few seconds. You really learn to open with a bang and keep things moving. There is an interesting list of ex ad writers who have become authors: my first boss at J. Walter Thompson, of course, James Patterson; my boss at Young & Rubicam, Ted Bell; Marcus Sakey, Louise Ure, Clive Cussler, Dorothy L. Sayers, James Segal, Stuart Woods -- the list goes on and on. The habit of sitting down every day at the keyboard for 7-8 hours is unbeatable.

As far as bad habits, I guess it's making sure your words aren't too flashy. In advertising, you want your slogans to pithy, punchy, and memorable. "Wham Is Good Ham" comes to mind. As an author, you want to disappear and not draw undo attention to the unseen hand.

JF: Well, Chris, you seem to have that flashiness under control. In all of the Ceepak novels there is a very delicate balance between the humor and the gravity of the plot. And while the balance is delicate, I also think it is that balance that ultimately makes the series as strong as it is. How do you make sure you consistently strike that balance?

Chris: Well, thanks for saying that I do. I try to keep Danny's narration light, especially at the top of the books. But then, surprisingly for some readers, all the stories venture into some pretty dark and horrific places. When we're down in the darkness Danny stops cracking wise. I can thank Michele Slung, the genius editor of my first five books, for teaching me very early on when to shut up. I should show you the edited manuscript of *Tilt A Whirl*, where, near the end, she scribbled in the margins, "this is very funny but Danny needs to be quiet now."

JF: One of the elements that I feel really distinguishes this series in the world of crime fiction is your titling. It isn't unusual for a series of books to have a theme that connects them all. For the Ceepak books that connection is theme park attractions. But, the titles are far more dynamic than just functioning as a common theme. So what's the process for coming up with the title and coordinating it with the plot and the themes? It isn't like you can write the book and then pluck something out of thin air that

functions like WHACK A MOLE or MIND SCRAMBLER, tying everything together.

Chris: You have a good eye! I actually start with the title and then use it for inspiration. For instance, in *Mad Mouse*, I do all sorts of thematic riffs on are you a man or a mouse, what happens when a mouse goes mad, how the ride makes you feel (that you're going to fly off the edge of the track and die, which is fun at first, but then scary if you really think it might happen). In *ROLLING THUNDER*, I was playing with the notion of lightning striking and then thunder rolling out from the strike point; the ripple effect that unanticipated bolts out of the blue can have.

JF: The title of the new book is *ROLLING THUNDER* and this is a new roller coaster that is being built in Sea Haven. And this is a wood roller coaster. Being from North East Ohio, home of Cedar Point, I immediately thought of the Gemini. Is the *Rolling Thunder* based on a specific roller coaster?

Chris: I actually based it on several but the closest to my New York City home is the *Rolling Thunder*, an all-wood coaster, at Six Flags Great Escape in New Jersey. There is something raw and jarring about the wooden coasters. Plus, I like the way that, at certain angles, the scaffolding looks like a mountain of wooden crosses -- and all the imagery that brings with it.

JF: It's fun that you mention imagery because imagery is extremely vivid in all of the novels. And it isn't because you spend so much time detailing description but more in the way the elements of the novel work and blend together. Does this possibly go back to your commercial-writing background? Do you visualize scenes as though you are going to shoot them for film? Or how do you ensure those images pop on the page?

Chris: I actually do use some of the techniques we used to use in commercials when I write. For instance, if I'm writing about a wooden roller coaster, I find all sorts of photographs and cover the seven or eight corkboards I can see from my keyboard. In a way, I storyboard all my scenes before I write them. I also "cast" like we did for commercials. Except for Danny and Ceepak, I find an image for every character in the book. I think this helps me be consistent and allows me to pinpoint one or two telling details -- like the neon thunderbolt sign outside the *Rolling Thunder*, which I got from a roller coaster called the *Thunderbolt*.



JF: Another soldier in the army of elements that, in my opinion, makes this series so strong is the first sentence. And *ROLLING THUNDER* does not disappoint, "The day starts like so many others with John Ceepak: we bust an eight-year-old girl for wearing high heels." We've talked informally about how that first sentence is actually where you start and the story rolls from there. Can you talk a little more about your writing process? I believe there are a lot of note cards and four-legged assistants involved; is that correct?

Chris: Yes, I do find I obsess over the opening line. Again, it goes back to advertising and my journalism training. That first sentence in a story or headline in an ad has to grab the reader by the eyeballs and convince them something fun/interesting/entertaining is coming. I carry the philosophy James Patterson taught us when we wrote advertising copy: Nobody wants to read what you write; you have to earn their attention.

Once I get rolling on a story, I plot out four tent poles for major twists and turns. Then, I do stuff my pockets with note cards and Sharpie pens. On dog walks and runs around the park, I day dream about what my characters are up to and jot down all the things that pop into my mind. That's why my office is such a mess. All those photos of character faces, places, and notes cards. This is what my office looked like when I was writing *THE HANGING HILL*, the second in my *Haunted Mystery* series for younger readers:



JF: So, lots of pictures and visuals influence the development of the characters and setting, but music plays a role in the development as well. I believe Bruce Springsteen is a major influence for the *Ceepak* novels. Did you start out with an idea stemming from Springsteen or did you start out with *Ceepak* and he channeled Springsteen for you?

Chris: Before there was *Ceepak* or *Danny* or *Sea Haven*, there was a snatch of a Bruce Springsteen song rumbling around in my head, a line from "Sandy: 4th of July, Asbury Park":

And you know that tilt-a-whirl down on the south beach drag

I got on it last night and my shirt got caught

And they kept me spinnin', didn't think I'd ever get off
I was a disc jockey when Bruce Springsteen's *BORN TO RUN* album first came out in 1975. So, I spent a lot of long shifts falling in love with his lyrics. I thought that one about the tilt a whirl was a great idea for a mystery -- the sleuth is kept spinnin' and doesn't think he'll ever get off the ride of deceit.

So, I had the title of the book, and a notion of how to "brand" the series with titles related to amusement park rides before I knew anything else. Then, Springsteen became, at first, the only thing *Danny* and *Ceepak* had in common.

JF: If you were going to give *Ceepak* a theme song, what would it be? *Danny*?

Chris: *Ceepak*'s would be Springsteen's *Independence Day* with a touch of *Land Of Hope And Dreams*. *Danny* would be Springsteen's *Promised Land*, mostly the verse about "I'm not a

boy, no I'm a man, and I believe in the promised land," which I used as a frontpiece in *Whack A Mole*, when Danny comes into his own as a cop and actually saves Ceepak.

JF: John Ceepak is a very unique character in crime fiction with his code. First, what made you decide on Ceepak's code? And what kind of challenges (if any) does this create for you as you're writing the series?

Chris: Well, another thing I learned in my advertising years is "don't do what the other guy is already doing." I figured the world had enough terrifically written burned-out bitter ex-cops who drank too much, were divorced, and lived by no code but their own. I purposely set out to create the polar opposite. An overgrown Boy Scout who eats bran flakes for breakfast, works out, and lives his life by the West Point Cadet Honor Code: he will not lie, cheat, or steal nor tolerate those who do.

This creates a whole host of fun challenges for me as an author. Ceepak, who some have suggested is borderline autistic, can not tell even a white lie. He won't allow himself to "cheat" or take short cuts. What is interesting, I think, as you get to know the character is that this Code is imposed only on himself. He does it to control his darker impulses because he does not want to end up like his father.

JF: Now you've mentioned that Ceepak is a composite character in that he was based on a few different people you know: your nephew, a member of the New York Fire Department, even a "Jon Ceepak" from Ohio (who,oo, go Buckeyes!). But, do any of your own characteristics sneak into Ceepak?

Chris: Hmmm. Well, I was a Boy Scout until I discovered the theatre and girls. Only made it to the Life rank (one short of Eagle). I think I am much more like Danny, looking at these heroic guys and wondering, "how the heck do they do that?" How can my buddy Dave run into a burning building when everybody else is running out? How could my nephew Dylan drive around Iraq looking for buried boobytraps and tell me "it's all good?" I think Ceepak is who I wish I could be. I'd love to bust chops and bring justice like he does in some of my favorite scenes -- there's one in *Whack A Mole* where he tells a restaurant full of whiny customers to pour their own coffee for a few minutes because he has to interview the waitress. I'd love to do that some time.

JF: How about Danny? I've heard you talk about the inspirations for Ceepak, but I don't think I've ever heard you talk about who, if anyone, inspired Danny.

Chris: When I first started writing Danny, I adopted the "beery" voice we used to put in our brains when we were writing Miller Lite beer commercials: Bill Murray from *STRIPES*. As the series has grown, so has Danny. What I like about him is his humility. He always gives Ceepak credit for cracking the cases, but, if you look around the edges, you'll see that he does a lot of the smart thinking, too. And, he never brags about the fact that he might be a better marksman than his mentor.

JF: In each of the novels, both Ceepak and Danny grow, as you mentioned. But in *ROLLING THUNDER*, Danny is really forced to step up in a way that he hasn't been called on to do before. Without giving any spoilers (if that's possible) is this going to have an effect on not only Danny as an individual but on the relationship between Ceepak and Danny in future novels?

Chris: I don't think it will change too much. I like the dynamic between the two characters. Danny has gradually been stepping up to bat as the books have progressed. Think about what he did in *WHACK A MOLE*. Then, in *MIND SCRAMBLER*, he had to step in and stop Ceepak from doing something horrible (if justified). Now he steps up even more...because he has to. What's interesting, I think, is that none of these heroics ever go to Danny's head. He always figures Ceepak would have done the same thing and probably done it better.

However, I think there have been enough bad things happening in Sea Haven for the PD to open a detective bureau. Ceepak could get a promotion. Danny, too.

JF: Up until *ROLLING THUNDER*, Ceepak was really the main hero of the series but you opted to have Danny narrate the books. What made you decide to tell their stories from this perspective? Have you ever had any thoughts of giving Ceepak the reigns? Or even alternating perspective between the pair?

Chris: No, I don't think I'll ever change. Danny is my Watson because, in some ways, Ceepak is a lot like Sherlock Holmes. I would not want to hear those stories narrated by Sherlock. He's a bit arrogant, a bit too much. Ceepak, I think, would be much the same. Plus, I like keeping a lid on Ceepak's deepest thoughts and emotions and only letting them bubble up from time to time. His character is all about control. If he ever uses a "bad word," pay attention. He's letting his guard down for a second. (It happens once in *ROLLING THUNDER*, once in *MAD MOUSE*).

JF: Ceepak's inner character may be mysterious, but the themes surrounding him are not. Throughout all the novels, the theme of family is present, but in *ROLLING THUNDER* we experience quite a few different dimensions of family. Was this an intentional objective of *ROLLING THUNDER*? Or was this something the characters brought out as they helped you develop the plot?

Chris: I think one of the most consistent themes in the Ceepak books is the meaning of "fatherhood." As you might have noticed, Danny's dad is never in the books (he's a brief mention, but that's it). In *Rolling Thunder*, we have all sorts of fathers to study. The best father figure in the books, of course, is Ceepak, who is teaching Danny (and others) what it really means to be a man. Creating the crazy Irish O'Malley family was an exercise in constructing a classic mystery cast of suspects. Also, I often ruminate on the nature of family. Sometimes, the friends we gather around us in life become our real family.

JF: We see that idea of friends as family with the relationship between Danny and Ceepak, but at one point Ceepak has to say to Danny: you're a close friend of ours, but technically, you're not family. On one hand that scenario is humorous because Ceepak is misunderstanding what Danny is saying. But at same time for me (at least) as the reader it brought to the forefront the fact that there is a distinction between friends and family, no matter how close. Is this a detail I found too much meaning in or is this something that may reoccur?

Chris: I think it's just Ceepak being rigid in his definition. I believe Danny's philosophy of family is closer to my own. Some of that comes from years spent in the theatre and doing improv where the folks you go on stage with (and share crummy dressing rooms with) become very close and almost more like family than family.

JF: Danny's family remains a bit of an enigma as you mentioned. They are still around, just not in Sea Haven anymore. His parents have retired and moved away. Will there come a time where they play a role? Where we see the dynamics of Danny and his family?

Chris: I don't think so. They retired to Arizona, which is where Jersey Shore people go when they're sick and tired of humidity. In the same way, I don't think we'll ever meet Ceepak's mom. I like to let readers fill in some of the blanks. What's funny is a reader at a recent library event asked me, "When will we see Danny's brother again?" and I had to say, "Danny has a brother?" I forgot that I had mentioned him in one of the early books. So now I'm thinking about that brother a lot...

JF: Well, I certainly love the fact that you're thinking about Ceepak and Danny. *ROLLING THUNDER* comes out in May. Is the next chapter in their lives brewing? We Ceepak junkies need to be able to plan for our next fix!

Chris: The folks at Pegasus Books have hinted that *ROLLING THUNDER* has been so much fun to work on that "we should do it again." I hope there's another book. In publishing, you just never know. But I'm extremely grateful, thanks to so many mystery mavens, that, with *Rolling Thunder*, Ceepak has made it through his first six pack.

These days Chris resides in New York City with his wife J.J., their famous dog Fred, and three cats. He's traded in his old Smith-

Corona typewriter for a Mac and is out snapping pictures for his next book. You can learn more about Chris and his writing at www.chrisgrabenstein.com/