

Engineering

T I M E S

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Real-Life Controversy Inspires PE to Pen Engineering Thriller

By David Siegel
Associate Editor

When Richard Herschlag heard the message on his office answering machine, his first thought was, "Uh oh, here we go."

The message was from a reporter for *The Village Voice*, the leader in alternative news weeklies with a history of uncovering political corruption in New York City. The reporter wanted to find



out what Herschlag, as former chief engineer in the Manhattan borough president's office, knew about a mysterious and sudden drop in the amount of sewage flowing into the North River Waste Pollution Control Plant.

About two months later, in April 1995, *The Voice* ran a lengthy feature, detailing the cozy relationship between Herschlag's boss, Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger, and Donald Trump. The report told how Messinger ignored a recommendation from Herschlag and others that would have denied the sewer-hookup request for Trump's 5,700-unit Riverside South project until it could be determined why the already overburdened treatment plant was stinking up West Harlem.

Although the controversy forced Herschlag to resign, he says that if it were not for those events and *The Voice's* exposé, he probably never would have written his recently released novel, *The Interceptor*. The book marks Herschlag's first big break as an author.

Taking what he calls the "leap of creativity," Herschlag built upon his experiences in the Manhattan borough president's office and his 10 years as an engineer in New York City government to write *The Interceptor*. The result is a fictional mystery-thriller about a

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Engineer Designs a Thriller

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professional engineer's attempt to determine why a film executive ended up face down in a New York City sewer (see box below).

With 90,000 copies in print, *The Interceptor* has developed a small cult following in New York, says Herschlag, and it's also being shopped to the major Hollywood production companies. "I'm sort of trying to be the engineering John Grisham," he says. "I like his cynical look at the world lawyers live in, so I'm trying to take a little of that into the world of engineering and show the interface between the profession and the evil world."

He didn't know it at the time, but Herschlag's inspiration for *The Interceptor* began when he took the job as chief engineer in Ruth Messinger's office. At 29, he began working for one of the biggest names in New York City politics, and he liked Messinger's reputation. Herschlag saw Messinger as a community activist against irresponsible development, and someone who would stick up for the average citizen. "Kind of like Robin Hood," he says.

Free to operate as an engineering ombudsman, Herschlag started making a name for himself. He made the city papers for uncovering shoddy work by contractors on a major renovation project on 14th Street and for warning city officials of a dangerously unstable apartment building on 110th Street. Weeks after his report on the apartment, the building's northeast corner began sinking into the ground, forcing an emergency evacuation.

The Game

In 1994, Herschlag and environmental policy analyst Tim Forker became heavily involved with an investigation into the foul odors emanating from the North River Waste Pollution Control Plant. All development on the city's west side depends on the efficient operation of the plant, but the plant was taking in more waste than it could handle.

At the same time, Trump was moving ahead with the development of the Riverside South project and would need certification for a sewer hookup. Based on their analysis, Herschlag and Forker issued an 11-page memo recommending that the city deny sewage connection until the plant's problems could be solved. Elected and community board officials on the west side agreed, as did the Natural Resources Defense Council. The recommendation, however, clashed with the views of Messinger and other supervisors, and Herschlag quickly became the enemy.

In *The Interceptor*, Herschlag tells of protagonist-engineer Jon Kessler's struggles with city politics. Herschlag wrote, "he somehow had to get better at playing a game he despised," and it was a game Herschlag himself never liked.

Herschlag contends that he could have played the game of political expedience and been steadily appointed up the ladder, but it was a compromise he didn't want to make. "I have nothing up my sleeve. I give my facts and analysis. That's the game I play, which is no game," he says. "You have to make a decision whether you're going to play the political game or practice as a professional engineer."

After the memo was issued, Herschlag was pulled off the assignment, ignored by co-workers, and since he lived outside the city, he was told he would lose his job if he didn't move into one of the five boroughs. After a year and a half of what he considered harassment brought on by his recommendation to delay the sewer hookup, Herschlag resigned to pursue private consulting and continue writing.

The Writer

Herschlag says he always had an affinity for math, rational problem solving, and for visualizing things. "At the same time, I pretty much always knew I wanted to be a writer," he says. Since he knew it would be easier to make a decent living as an engineer, he decided on

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where he also became editor of the university's humor magazine.

Before *The Interceptor*, Herschlag had two books published. He describes the first, *Jack of All Trades*, as a '90s version of *The Graduate*. His second, *Lay Low and Don't Make the Big Mistake: The Lazy Person's Guide to Success on the Job*, was co-authored with his college friend Brian Harris and published last year. *Lay Low*, says Herschlag, is "tongue-in-cheek advocacy for one-man unions." It has earned him spots on local radio stations during the morning commute where he covers topics such as the no-sweat job search, how to handle meetings without preparation or concentration, and the art of calling in sick.

For *The Interceptor*, Herschlag's engineering background was the key ingredient. He wanted to give readers a picture of the world beneath New York's busy streets. "I tried to have not just an interesting story and interesting descriptions of technical stuff, I tried to put those together so the whole was greater than the sum of the parts," he says. "I wanted to make the infrastructure a character in the story to the point where the readers understand this maze as much as the protagonist so they can actually solve the mystery. To whatever degree I accomplished that, that's the greatest virtue of the book."

But to make *The Interceptor* true to life required Herschlag's years of engineering training and several hundred hours of research. Because access to the tunnels under the city is severely restricted, Herschlag relied on as-built drawings and his visualization skills to create the scenes. "I could have fabricated the details like many non-technical authors do, but there's this other element driving you, saying 'let's get it right,'" he says. "Thank God I can read plans."

Today, Herschlag spends about half his time writing and the other half as a consulting

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PE Pens Engineering Mystery

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engineer specializing in building inspections and environmental studies. And when he's not writing or consulting, Herschlag spends time advocating.

After the collapse of a building facade on Madison Avenue last November and the collapse of a hoist mast on a 48-story building in Times Square, Herschlag and attorney Marc Landis started the Coalition for Building Safety to advocate tougher building safety laws in New York City. The coalition is pushing for legal and regulatory reform, stricter enforcement, and

a periodic independent study of building facades.

While his writing career has taken a big jump forward since the release of *The Interceptor*, Herschlag can't answer whether he is first and foremost a novelist or an engineer. "That's like asking which is your favorite daughter," he says. However, if the writing career continues to progress, he may turn down a few more building inspections and also do more work with the coalition. "But even if you gave me a billion dollars," he says, "I'd still be an engineer in my heart."

Richard Herschlag

Born: July 19, 1962, New York, New York

Occupation: Novelist and consulting engineer

Home: Easton, Pennsylvania

Education: Princeton University, B.S. in civil engineering, 1984

Family: Wife, Sue, and daughters Rachel (5 years) and Elise (born in June)

PE Licenses: New York and Pennsylvania

Books: *Jack of All Trades* (Northwest, 1993), *Lay Low and Don't Make the Big Mistake: The Lazy Person's Guide to Success on the Job* (Simon and Schuster, 1997), *The Interceptor* (Ballantine, 1998)

Favorite writers: John Grisham, Philip Roth, Mark Twain, E.L. Doctorow

Hobbies: Men's senior league baseball, bass guitar, and songwriting

Quote: "People always say, 'You're an engineer?' As if it's impossible for someone to be creative and an engineer at the same time. They're aghast. It's almost like, 'You came from Mars? What's it like on Mars? I heard it's really cold up there.'"

