

Paul Engleman: Sleuthsayer

Mystery novelist Paul Engleman was born on August 21, 1953, in Nyack, New York. He spent the first two months of life in Piermont, New York, a hamlet on the Hudson where Thomas Berger now lives. He then was transplanted by his parents to Wayne, New Jersey, "to be close to shopping centers and schools," he quips. Paul is the youngest member of his family, with three older siblings, including a brother eighteen years his senior. He attended Immaculate Heart of Mary grammar school. In the eighth grade he managed to get kicked off the altar boys and the safety patrol organizations in the same week. Seton Hall inherited him for his ninth grade year, then did Wayne Valley High School, where he graduated in 1971. Engleman declares that he worked through high school at Shoe Town, giving him something to fall back on. He didn't feel like going to college, but after a four-hour job at a rat laboratory, eight weeks as a mail messenger at a bank and 90 days delivering the U.S. mail, he took a sudden interest in academics. He went to Beloit College in Beloit, Wisconsin, "which was supposed to be one of those schools without rules," says the author. Leaving Beloit in '76, Engleman moved to Chicago. After a short stint as a Kelly Girl and a longer one working for Playboy as a proofreader and later a PR man (babysitting writers such as this interviewer on publicity junkets), he turned to writing fiction.

Engleman and his wife, Barb, share a Chicago Loop apartment overlooking the Lincoln Park Zoo and the encroaching waves of Lake Michigan. When the sun rises in the morning, claims Paul, "It's like a laser off the lake." The Englemans' small living room has two pine bookcases (Barb's), one four-drawer oak filing cabinet (on loan), and lots of plants. There's a study nook with an oak desk on which sits a Kaypro II computer and Panasonic printer, along with an answer machine that spews godawful new messages seemingly daily. In the Engleman liquor cabinet you'll find Johnny Walker Red, Jack Daniels and Bombay and Tangueray gin—Bombay for tonic, tangueray for martinis—but basically the writer bypasses the hard stuff for cold beer lining the fridge.

Dead in Center Field, his first mystery, was published by Ballantine in 1983. His Ballantine editor "disappeared," and the outfit didn't renew him, but Engleman had the last yuk, winning the Private Eye Writers of America SHAMUS Award for Best Paperback. In 1986 he published Catch a Fallen Angel, an ace of a mystery novel featuring Engleman's shamus, Mark Renzler, a witty man who is one part Ring Lardner, one part Nancy Drew, one part John McGraw, and one part Paul Engleman.

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NUWER: What are the Private Eye Writers of America?

ENGLEMAN: They're a group founded by a guy name Bob Randisi, who should be close to *your* heart. He was a night clerk at a Brooklyn police station, spent his nights writing thrillers and finally went full time. He's written something like 100 books in the last five years. I think he founded the group in 1980 or 1981. It's different from the Mystery Writers of America because it's only for writers. As far as I can tell, the only reason for its existence is the group's newsletter, which comes sporadically, the awards, and two luncheons a year.

NUWER: As an author, you toss out a lot of references to things every Catholic used to memorize from catechisms. I know you're Catholic—right?

ENGLEMAN: Yeah, I was raised Catholic and attended a Catholic grammar school, but my parents didn't force it on me, for which I'm forever in their debt. Our local pastor was your basic repressed stereotype, and by the time I was in second grade my parents pretty much knew it, mainly because of his dealings with my older brother Mark, whom the pastor was grooming for the priesthood. That didn't take with Mark and the pastor knew better than to try with me. At some point my parents stopped making me attend Sunday mass, but I used to meet up with a friend whose parents made him go and we'd hang out down near the lake and smoke cigarettes together. In ninth grade I went to Seton Hall, a Catholic prep school, but mandatory weekly folk mass drove me to public school. I think if you can get through it without suffering serious mental damage, growing up Catholic has considerable benefits, because it tends to breed intellectual skepticism and resistance to authority. I think these are fine qualities. Although I personally find the tenets of Catholicism to be ludicrous, I don't harbor any contempt for people who believe in them. But I do object—and almost always have—to the exclusivity of Catholicism, the notion that it's the only flight leaving to heaven.

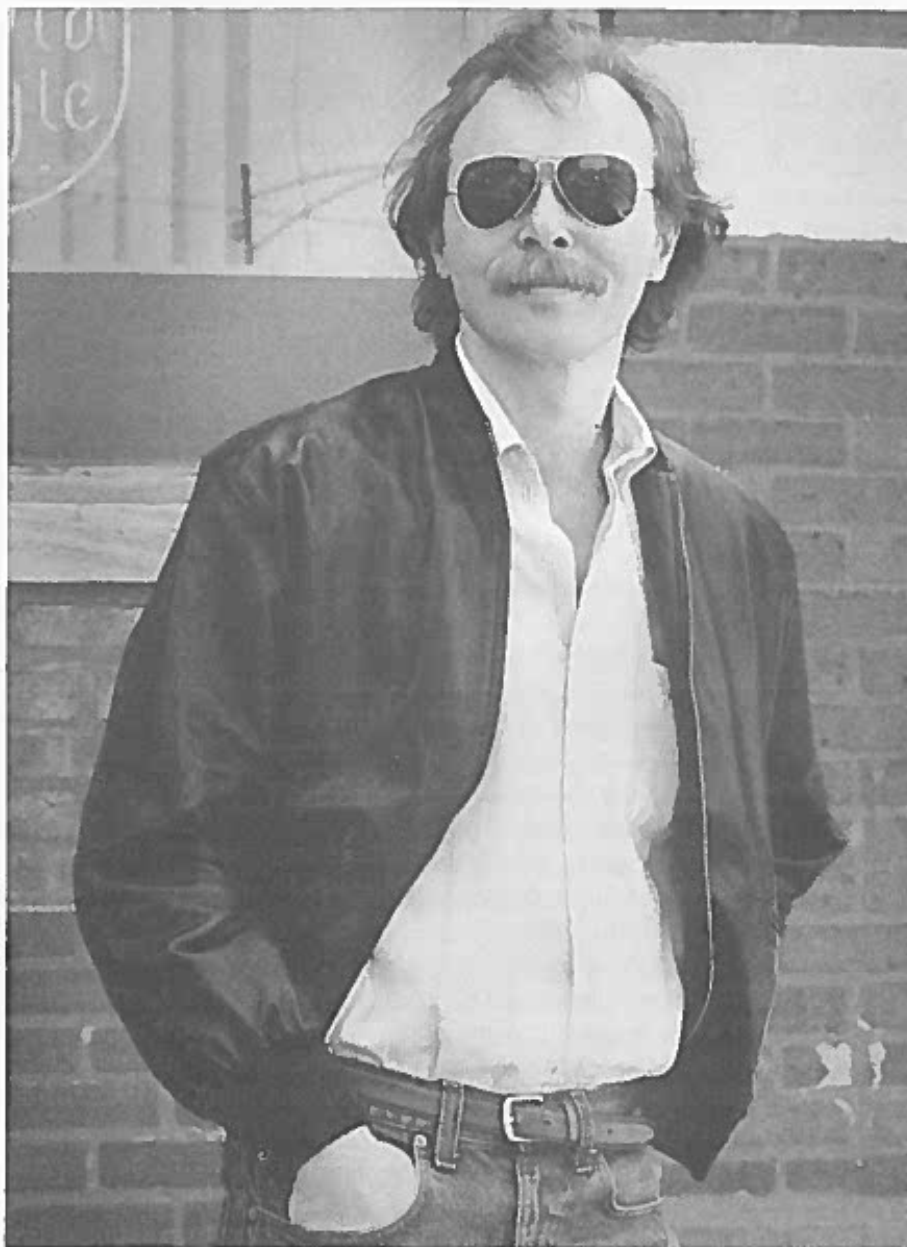
I don't use Catholicism in my writing as a way of exorcising old demons or anything like that. I just use it because I know it pretty well and hate to think that all the time I put in learning about it has to go to waste.

NUWER: You went from the Catholic Church to the *Playboy* Mansion. How long did you work in the publicity department at *Playboy* magazine?

ENGLEMAN: Nine years, from 1976 to 1985.

NUWER: That would seem the dream job of every red-blooded American boy. Yet something tells me it was probably something less than the fantasy life it might appear to be. Give some insight into your life as a Hugh Hefner employee.

ENGLEMAN: It does sound like a dream job, and, if you have to work at a job for a living, I suppose you could say that it was. It's a relaxed,



casual atmosphere where nonconformity is tolerated—at least it used to be, because I had a good boss. There are quite a few bright, talented people working there, all of whom regard the *Playboy* concept with amused detachment, some with outright cynicism.

Unfortunately, a lot of the higher-ups don't share this perspective, so you get the usual corporate politics where morons in three-piece suits are vying for power. This sort of behavior is especially ridiculous at *Playboy*, because none of them is ever going to be number one. Hefner, and now his daughter, Christie, have that locked up.

One of the most amusing things at *Playboy* was watching high-paid executives get anxiety attacks when some minion of Hef's would call on

behalf of him with a simple question. Meetings were sometimes fun because you'd get a group of people representing a million bucks' worth of salaries deliberating about how to get a Playmate booked on *Donahue*. When people forgot they weren't working on a cure for cancer, it got a little absurd at times.

NUWER: All right, we'll ask it: What are Hugh and Christie really like? Feel free to tattle.

ENGLEMAN: You're asking the wrong guy. I only met Hefner a couple of times, and for some reason I have a feeling he doesn't remember me. I've had more dealings with Christie, but I wouldn't say we know each other very well. I think she's in a tight spot. She's presiding over a company that is in what marketing types like to call the mature decline cycle. In other words, she's fighting a losing battle, at least as far as recapturing the splendor of the old days goes.

NUWER: Appeal to my prurient interest, please. What the devil do those damn little stars mean that are sometimes in the P on the cover of *Playboy* and sometimes out? When I was in high school—

ENGLEMAN: Yeah, yeah, I know, I've heard the stories, too. How many times have I been called on to crush this particular fantasy? The stars on the cover are a designation for regional editions of the magazine. The jokes going around inside *Playboy* used to be that they represented the number of times Hefner forgot the Playmate's name, got out of bed before three in the afternoon, things like that.

NUWER: Is the writing of PR releases somewhat destructive or helpful for a creative writer like yourself?

ENGLEMAN: I'm inclined to think that having to write press releases, ad copy, letters, memos, damn near anything, tends to improve your writing—at least when you're starting out—simply because you have to discipline yourself to put words on paper. This is only true up to a point, of course, and you have to be trying to do better work all the time. If you spend too many years writing press releases, the best you can hope for is to be a great press release writer.

NUWER: Is Chicago the right city for the writer in you?

ENGLEMAN: Chicago's the right city for me, period. It's got the excitement of a big city and the mentality of a small town, which is a nice combination. It also has a major-league hockey team and a couple of baseball teams, which count for a lot in my book.

NUWER: Why not live in New York?

ENGLEMAN: New York is a swell place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there. I couldn't afford to live there. The cost of beer alone would

kill me. I grew up outside New York and lived in New York about 15 years ago when I had a job as a copy boy for *The New York Times*. It's just too damn big and crowded. One of the things that's always fascinated me about New York is the sense of privilege that seems to come with being inconvenienced. People wait in line for hours to get into restaurants; the longer they have to wait, the better they think the restaurant is.

NUWER: You went to Italy to write your second book. Was that a successful trip or a disaster?

ENGLEMAN: Living in Italy was a great experience for me, because, with the exception of a trip to Canada when I was seven, I had never been out of the U.S. My wife and I lived in a farm house as close to nowhere as you can get, and nowhere turned out to be the most beautiful place I've ever been. It wasn't exactly culture shock, but it was a challenge communicating with people who didn't speak English, especially since we didn't know how to speak Italian. We learned, with the help of some really nice people.

As far as writing goes, living there definitely helped for the simple reason that there were no immediate distractions—we had to travel a considerable distance to find them. We did manage to find them, however, which is why I didn't get as much writing done as I thought I would.

NUWER: The detective genre seems perfect for a writer of your wit and somewhat caustic tongue. Do you have a helluva lot of fun writing your books or do you just fake it?

ENGLEMAN: I started writing detective novels because I thought it would be good practice, a good way to learn how to write a novel. It's easier, I think, than writing a "real" novel, because you can substitute action for conflict and there's something of a formula to follow. On the other hand, if you don't have the patience or temperament to plot out a mystery, it can be tough going.

I also like the private detective as an American character. I've got a natural inclination toward sarcasm, so I guess the genre does suit me pretty well.

NUWER: Tell how the characters of your detective, Renzler, and his pugnacious buddy, Nate, came about.

ENGLEMAN: I really don't have any idea. I wanted to have an ordinary, simple name for the protagonist, not something cute or pretentious. In private eye writing, you start with Marlowe and work from there. Nate's last name was originally Throp, which I thought sounded just fine for a heavy, but my first editor didn't like it and I didn't think I was in any position to argue so I changed it.

I didn't want Renzler to have to do much of the muscle work, so I decided to give him a sidekick. This also helps for the sections of the

stories in which, for the benefit of the reader, you have to summarize the plot. By having Nate there, I can retrace the clues in dialogue, which I think works much better than having the detective sit down and write a list. That's really hokey. Also, the two of them can keep up the patter. Nate, it seems, almost always gets the better lines.

NUWER: Renzler drinks an awful lot and Note pops amphetamines. Will you have to eventually sober up these characters as America gets more and more conservative?

ENGLEMAN: I sure hope not. As they get older, I guess I might have to curb their excesses, but for the sake of characterization, not to go along with this disgusting trend toward aerobic purity that seems to be suffocating the culture. The more conservative the mood of the country gets, the more reckless I'll be inclined to make them. You could probably find some early Catholic influence in that attitude.

NUWER: How much of Paul Engleman—witty, slightly caustic, incredibly nice guy to his friends, but yet someone who never suffers fools, period—is there in Renzler, your hero?

ENGLEMAN: Ah, come on, Hank. You're just saying I'm nice because I got you a TV booking on *PM Magazine* in Baltimore when you were a writer for *OUI*.

I don't think there's much of me in my character, but some people I know tell me otherwise. I think that's more a result of using first-person narration than similarities in personality. For one thing, I haven't slugged anybody since I was 13 years old. For another, I've never fired a handgun. But I think it's only natural that some of your attitudes come through in a character, if only for the convenience of it.

NUWER: What is the most difficult thing about your genre, the detective novel?

ENGLEMAN: The most difficult thing for me is putting together the mystery. I think you owe it to the readers to tie up all the loose ends and make the resolution fair—that's to say, you have to give them a decent chance of solving it for themselves. That's hard to me, because I don't particularly care who did it. That's never been my interest in reading detective novels, and it's not my interest in writing them—but it *is* important to most people who read them. Unfortunately, an awful lot of the readers—and the reviewers, come to think of it—seem to care little about the quality of the writing and are only interested in the plot.

To me the biggest disappointment—and it's almost unavoidable in mysteries and thrillers—is an unsatisfying ending. I think that's because when you're done reading, you don't always feel like you've just read a book; you feel more like you've just wasted an afternoon doing a puzzle. Does that answer your question?

NUWER: Yes. Do you feel most comfortable with that genre? Ever see yourself wandering to another genre or two?

ENGLEMAN: I definitely feel more comfortable with the detective genre, probably because it's easier for me. The narration is conversational, and I tend to be pretty talkative. When I hit a tough spot, I just remind myself to keep the conversation going. I don't have much interest in other categories, like science fiction or westerns. I don't have the patience to read them, so I doubt I could write them.

NUWER: Is Renzler ever going to become prosperous?

ENGLEMAN: Curious you should ask. My next book in the series, *Murder-in-Law*, is set in 1972, and Renzler has gotten prosperous, at least by his standards. He gets his money from a windfall, which seems appropriate. His partner, Nate, has finally hit the big time as a painter and achieved sudden commercial success. Renzler gets his money by selling one of Nate's paintings (Nate promises to give him another one) and investing it at the track. It makes more sense than that in the book, but not much. I think these stories have a lot of things going for them, but realism is not one of them.

NUWER: Will you ever set a story in the Eighties with Renzler, or are you pretty much stuck to the Sixties because of the advanced ages of Renzler and, especially, Nate?

ENGLEMAN: Definitely the thing that sets these stories apart is the time setting. Generally, detective novels are set either in the unstated, undated present or in the Thirties. I don't know how long this series will last, but I've thought about setting a story in the Eighties, with Nate retired from his heavy role and replaced by Renzler's nephew, Herbie, who makes his debut as a 13-year-old klutz in *Murder-in-Law*.

NUWER: I'd like to talk a little about technique. a) How do you build suspense in your novels? b) How do you drop clues for the reader?

ENGLEMAN: It's hard to explain exactly what the technique is or how successful I am at using it. I think you just develop a sense for building suspense. One thing it definitely requires is patience. You try to delay a revelation for as long as you possibly can. It's almost like holding your breath as long as you can; but if you take too long and don't deliver something worth waiting for, you'll suffocate the reader.

Dropping and thinking up clues is simply a pain in the ass, because you have to pull back and think about whether you're giving too much or too little away. Sometimes I give away too much, then go back when I'm done and delete things. Or I give too much away about one suspect, so I change the plot and come up with another suspect. I work from an outline but I don't stick very closely to it.

NUWER: I've heard good things about Mysterious Press—that Elmore Leonard, for example, published under their imprint. Has the outfit been good for your second book, *Catch a Fallen Angel*?

ENGLEMAN: I've heard good things about Mysterious Press too, which is why I'm glad to be associated with them—so far. But I don't think you can really make valid judgments about an organization until you've put in some time, so I can't comment with any certainty. Publishers can be like landlords—your contract is like a lease, after all—and I haven't gotten along too well with most of my landlords. The one thing I can say about Mysterious Press is that it's much better than my first publisher, Ballantine Books. Mysterious Press makes Ballantine look like a wet T-shirt contest.

NUWER: I think that comment left me high and damp. Speaking of *Catch a Fallen Angel*, how long did you mull over that title? What other working titles, if any, did you try?

ENGLEMAN: I had a list of possible titles, but I settled on this one pretty early on. I can't recall what the others were.

NUWER: Where did your idea for having a giant fig leaf desk in *Catch A Fallen Angel* come from—your imagination or real life?

ENGLEMAN: I thought up the fig leaf desk all by myself. It just seemed to fit in with the *Paradise* theme. Plus I wanted to make the publisher of *Paradise* magazine seem absurdly sacrilegious. We used to get fire and brimstone letters and pamphlets at *Playboy*.

NUWER: How much research did you do on the Days of Rage in Chicago for your second novel?

ENGLEMAN: Not much at all. I remembered quite a bit about it, from media accounts. A friend of mine, Tom Young, has the world's largest library of leftist books, so my research mainly consisted of taking him out for beers and pumping him for suggestions. I did read Kirkpatrick Sale's book *SDS*. I probably shouldn't admit this, but one of my main sources for researching a period is usually the *Information Please Almanac*.

NUWER: Baseball plays an important role in both books, particularly *Dead in Center Field*. Seriously, what has the game meant to your life?

ENGLEMAN: I figure that men are probably more interested in private eyes than women are, and most men like baseball even if they're not interested in other sports. It makes sense for a private eye to follow baseball, and when I wrote *Dead in Center Field* I thought it would be even more interesting if Renzler was an ex-ballplayer.

I've always like baseball, and when I was a kid I used to follow it real closely, even to the point of memorizing statistics. Back then I used to live and die on the outcome of Yankees games. When I moved to Chicago in 1976 I really took a liking to Bill Veeck's White Sox because they were so terrible. There have been periods when I've lost some interest in baseball, and I'm in one now—I think because I find it tiresome to read about guys whining about only making a million bucks a year and talking about themselves in third person. That's an irritating habit. Not that I have any sympathy for baseball owners, by any stretch of the imagination. I got annoyed with baseball players when they were so willing to cross the picket lines when the umpires went on strike a few years back. Also, in the last few years, I've gotten a lot more interested in hockey; baseball seems kind of dull by comparison.

NUWER: How well do you work under the stress of deadlines?

ENGLEMAN: I like deadlines. They make it a challenge to get things done, and I tend to rise to the occasion on most occasions. I think stress stirs the creative juices. Also I'm pretty lazy by nature, so I need something to keep me working.

NUWER: Can you see where the writer in you germinated as a boy?

ENGLEMAN: No, not really. As I got older I guess I realized I could write pretty well, but I didn't think writing books was the sort of thing ordinary people did.

NUWER: What project is under incubation in your mind right now?

ENGLEMAN: Oh, I've got lots of them kicking around. As far as detective fiction goes, I'm working on a harness-racing story called *Who Shot Longshot Sam*, and a hockey story called *Czech at the Red Line*. I'm also working up a mystery featuring an overweight female investigator. That's interesting because I have to come up with a different voice.

NUWER: Have you improved technically from your first book to your second? In other words, has it gotten easier?

ENGLEMAN: Oh, definitely. If it hadn't gotten any easier, I wouldn't have quit my job. I think the most important thing about finishing a book, not to mention being satisfied enough to put your name on it, is just being able to remind yourself that you've done it before so you can surely do it again.

NUWER: I've had the advantage of looking at your bookshelves, so I know that you like Stanley Elkin. Why is that? Who are other so-called literary authors that captivate you? Are you considering undertaking a quote-unquote serious novel some time before they tag your toe?