



HOME-BREWED

Those grim publicity shots on his book jackets make him look like the stereotypically moody writer, but in real life Harlan Coben is as friendly as he's prolific. "I always have this serious, angry look on my face in my author photos because they send me to New York City for a four-hour photo shoot, even though I keep telling the photographer, 'Dude, I don't get better-looking,'" Coben quips. "Besides, it's hard to capture my raw animal magnetism in photography."

It's exactly that kind of self-deprecating charm that makes Coben, 45, so likable. Easygoing, warm, completely down-to-earth, in jeans, sneakers, and a casual sweatshirt, Coben's unspoiled niceness is difficult to synchronize with his meteoric success as a bestselling writer.

Author of more than a dozen suspense novels, the Livingston native often sets his page-turners in his hometown. Coben's books have been called "ingenious" (*New York Times*), "poignant and insightful" (*Los Angeles Times*), "consistently entertaining" (*Houston Chronicle*), "superb" (*Chicago Tribune*), and "must reading" (*Philadelphia Inquirer*).

HARLAN COHEN'S THRILLERS PROVIDE A JOLT OF CAFFEINE TO REGULAR SUBURBAN JOES, IN OTHER WORDS, FOLKS JUST LIKE HIM

STORY BY ROBIN FRIEDMAN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SUNNY YELLEN

While such raves have earned him his stunning home in Ridgewood — a 1860s-era Second Empire Victorian in hues of blue and grey that he jokingly describes as "repainted Addams Family" — he looks back fondly on the Essex County suburbs known as MetroWest.

"Is this the MetroWest paper I grew up with?" he asks his interviewer from *New Jersey Jewish News*. "Hey, I was once your athlete of the week. Do you still do that?"

The local suburbs of his childhood — and adulthood — provide endless backgrounds and foregrounds in which to explore his passions and set his stories.

"New Jersey is a bastion of the American suburban dream," he says. "You buy your house, have your 2.4 kids, your two-car garage, your white picket fence. The suburbs are a great place to raise my kids and do the things I poke fun at — but that I also do."

It's that veneer of suburban surface calm that Coben finds so inspirational, a place both real and imagined, where inconvenient truths and surprising secrets wait to be unleashed on unsuspecting residents like himself and his neighbors.

COBEN'S COZY HOME LIBRARY does tell a part of this story. Overflowing with floor-to-ceiling shelves sagging with books — with a pool table set in the center (“I haven't learned how to play yet”) — it features such eclectic writerly souvenirs as a black-and-white glossy signed by actress and villainous Catwoman Julie Newmar, a framed New Jersey Senate resolution honoring his contributions to his home state, and two old-fashioned brass keys to the city from fans in Hoover, Alabama, and Fort Worth,

into his writing.

“I'm not religious by any stretch,” Coben says. “My Judaism is more of a wisecracking outlook on life. It comes through on the page and shows in my characters.”

In *The Woods*, Coben's newest thriller, protagonist Paul Copeland, county prosecutor of Essex County, is a more obvious Jewish character with Russian parents. The suspenseful story explores the secretive traumas of a 20-year-old murder case come back to haunt “Cope,” as he's known, and his family.

BORN IN NEWARK AND RAISED in Livingston, Coben became a bar mitzva at Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in Short Hills. He grad-

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Texas. Among the books are some of Coben's own, including a collection of foreign translations of his bestsellers.

“How many Hebrew copies can you keep around?” Coben asks, holding up a sample. “At least these are easy to give away. It's the Thai ones that are hard. The Chinese ones I can give to my friends at Baumgart's.”

He shares his home with his wife, Dr. Anne Armstrong-Coben, a pediatrician, and their four children, Charlotte, 13, Ben, 10, Will, 8, and Eve, 5. Inside are many romantic touches, such as hardwood flooring, plush rugs, stained glass, beautiful artwork, and sleek wine bottles tucked into standing cellars.

“If the kids need help with sentence structure, they come to me. If it's a sore throat or stitches, it's all on Mom,” Coben says, then displays his characteristic wit again by adding, “My parents wanted me to be a nice Jewish doctor, but it was easier to marry one. No MCATs, no medical school, and no organic chemistry.”

When asked how they met, he replies, “In college. She seduced me.”

It's precisely that kind of Jewish humor that Coben infuses

uated from Livingston High School, where he was captain of the basketball team (Coben is 6' 4") and president of student council. But don't mistake these teenage trappings for All-American popularity.

“Every adolescence is a war,” he says. “I wasn't happy. I was miserable like everyone else. It's part of the process. All the insecurities.”

A middle child, Coben is flanked by older brother Larry and younger brother Craig, both graduates of Yale University and Harvard Law School.

“They're the two geniuses and I'm the dope in the middle,” Coben says with a sly smile.

Neither sibling still works in law, though. Larry is an archeologist; Craig is an investment banker. Coben graduated from Amherst College with a major in political science.

Coben writes under his real name, though the surname used by his grandparents and changed by his parents is “Cohen.”

As for his first name, “My parents wanted to honor my grandfather, whose name was Chaim, but it wasn't going to be



Harry or Harold, so they picked Harlan,” he says. “Harlan Fiske Stone was a Supreme Court justice and well-known anti-Semite. Ironically, I lived in a dorm at college named for him.”

Coben’s father, Carl, was a labor attorney and his mother, Barbara, nicknamed “Corky,” worked in the family travel business. It was this line of work that actually gave Coben his first opening shot at authorhood.

“I used to work during the summers when I was in college as a tour guide,” he says. “I was in Spain one summer and I decided to write a novel about a cool tour guide and his dumb clients. It was pretentious, pompous, and self-absorbed — everything a first novel should be.”

The writing bug had bitten. And it wouldn’t let go.

knob”), but most of the time he’ll set up shop at different Starbucks cafes in the area, as well as public libraries. (Yes, like most writers, Coben likes coffee, and drinks two to three cups a day, though he isn’t loyal to any brand, so long as it’s “strong.”)

When he’s engaged in a story, though, his writing quota whirls into a bona fide streak.

“I’ll write day and night,” he says. “I wrote the last 50 pages of *The Woods* in one day.”

What more could Coben want out of his dream life?

“I’ve never been on any ‘sexiest list,’” he says, displaying that smile — and that wit — once more. “It’s based on looks and that’s so unfair.”



Harlan Coben’s favorites

TV SHOW: *American Idol* (“a show you can watch with your kids”), *Scrubs*

MOVIE: *Annie Hall*

FOOD: Kung pao chicken from Baumgart’s, a combination Chinese-delicatessen fixture that Coben can’t get enough of

COBEN’S FIRST NOVEL, *Deal Breaker* (not the one he wrote in college), introduced the exploits of sports agent Myron Bolitar. It was accepted with an advance of \$5,000 and went on to win an Anthony Award and be nominated for an Edgar Award. Coben has since won the Edgar Award, Shamus Award, and aforementioned Anthony Award — in fact, he’s the first author to win all three.

“It’s the greatest job in the world,” he says of his writing life. “Yes, it’s hard and lonely, but it’s still better than working for a living. I wasn’t meant to do anything else. I have the organizational skills of a salad fork.”

Coben starts his writing days around 8 a.m. and finishes up around noon. His daily stay-at-home dad duties keep him centered in his family life, though he doesn’t like to write at home because of “the phone and other distractions.”

“I don’t like being here by myself. I like white noise when I write,” he says. Sometimes he’ll curl up in the living room by the fireplace to write (“the fire starts with the turn of a

