



**Brian Koonz**  
Take On Life  
bkoonz@newstimes.com



BOOKMARK Print Email Font Resize

## Sometimes, a word is worth a thousand pictures

Take On Life/Brian Koonz (Commentary)  
Newstimes

Article Launched: 11/06/2008 09:59:44 PM EST

As the author of more than 100 books, including the wildly successful "Murder, She Wrote" series, Danbury's Donald Bain has made a living putting words in other people's mouths.

For years, Bain and his wife, Renee Paley-Bain, have pumped life and credibility into Jessica Fletcher, the matronly sleuth made famous by actress Angela Lansbury.

Although the TV show is available only in syndication now, Fletcher actively resides in 4 million copies of the 30-book "Murder, She Wrote" mystery series, including the latest entry, "Murder, She Wrote: A Slaying in Savannah."

But 20 years ago, as the head of communications for Pan Am airlines in New York, Bain tackled the toughest assignment of his career. He was the one Pan Am wanted to make sense out of the senseless -- the 1988 bombing of Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland.

When the counting finally stopped across the ocean, 258 people had died, including 35 Syracuse University students.

"It was the hardest thing I've ever written," the 73-year-old Bain said Wednesday afternoon. "I kept working on it and working on it. You had to meld outrage with compassion. It wasn't easy."

When Pan Am chairman Thomas Plaskett addressed the world, he spoke Don Bain's words. But the speech -- and the loss that never goes away -- stayed with the families of this tragedy.

Make no mistake, the moment changed Bain forever.

It gave him jagged and jarring insight into the darker side of humanity, the

side nobody ever wants to see, especially those high in the air on a flight headed home for the holidays.

Advertisement

The next year, with the world moving forward but not forgetting, Bain and his agent landed a book deal with Universal to write mystery novels based on the "Murder, She Wrote" TV show.

"When I first got the gig, I watched a lot of episodes," Bain said, pausing to give birth to a wry smile. "But apparently, I didn't watch enough of them."

In one of his first "Murder, She Wrote" books, Bain wrote that Jessica Fletcher drove away in a car. Of course, Fletcher rode a bicycle in every TV episode because her character didn't know how to drive.

"The fans really let me have it," Bain said. "Now, it's the ultimate compliment when a reader tells me it sounds just like Jessica Fletcher on the page."

Bain crafted the first 18 books in the "Murder, She Wrote" series by himself. He has since collaborated with his wife, Renee, for the last 12 novels.

The couple, who have been married for 16 years and together for 28, researches their books extensively.

For last month's release, "Murder, She Wrote: A Slaying in Savannah," the Bains spent considerable time at the Coastal Regional Crime Laboratory of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation.

"Details are critical to the story," Paley-Bain explained. "You have to do your research and be familiar with the characters and the setting. But at the same time, everything gets used, including details from your own life."

"Don and I work very well together because we have the same (writing) style," Paley-Bain went on.

### The Columnists

- Bob Miller
- Brian Koonz
- Eileen FitzGerald
- Linda Napier
- Sylvia Rimm
- Lynda Wellman

#### Most Viewed Most Emailed

(From the last 12 hours) **RSS**

- Letter: Voters wrong on Obama
- Man accused of driving naked on I-84 in Southbury
- Four charged with drunken driving
- Newtown man, a youth minister, charged with child porn
- Man charged with sexual assault re-arrested
- New Fairfield man faces drug charges
- Craigslist to crack down on prostitution ads
- Newtown woman charged in metals theft
- Obama's former pastor speaks in Milford
- Two charged with assaulting cop



"Writing is very musical. There's a rhythm to it," she observed. "I try to hear Angela Lansbury's voice in my head when I write."

Paley-Bain, 63, worked in newspapers and public relations before she began collaborating with her husband. Don Bain cut his teeth writing stories for men's adventure magazines in the 1960s.

The magazines had names such as "Stag" and "Saga." They were filled with testosterone and hyperbole and heroes who were tall and handsome.

As a young writer pitching ideas to these magazines, Bain often shared a waiting room with Mario Puzo, who later penned, "The Godfather" books, and Mickey Spillane, who became one of America's foremost mystery writers.

In 1967, Bain scored a hit with the blockbuster, "Coffee, Tea or Me? The Uninhibited Memoirs of Two Airline Stewardesses."

At the time, the book was as titillating as it was scandalous. It was later made into a 1973 movie starring Karen Valentine and John Davidson.

"It really captured an era of flying that was glamorous and wonderful," Bain said. "It sold 5 million copies. That thing was my annuity for 17 years."

These days, Bain is perhaps best known -- and best loved -- for the "Murder, She Wrote" books. He and Paley-Bain write two books a year and fans devour them before the ink is dry.

"Readers finish them in two or three hours, and they can't wait for the next one," Paley-Bain said. "Don and I enjoy working together, but it is work. We both want to make the books as good as they can possibly be."

Forget about video games and iPods and other electronics that enslave the imagination. As far as the Bains are concerned, books and reading are alive and well in the 21st century.

But don't take my word for it. Just ask Jessica Fletcher.

Contact Brian Koonz at

[bkoonz@newstimes.com](mailto:bkoonz@newstimes.com)

or at (203) 731-3411.

Born -- March 6, 1935 Hometown -- Mineola, N.Y. Residence -- Danbury Wife -- Renee Paley-Bain Education -- Sewanhaka High School, Floral Park, N.Y., 1953 graduate Purdue University, West Lafayette, Ind., 1957 graduate with a degree in speech and communications Named Distinguished Alumni at Purdue in 2003 Books authored or ghost-written -- 104 Web site -- [www.donaldbain.com](http://www.donaldbain.com)