



Howard Berk & Peter Berk Circa 1990

Script yields posthumous credit in novel

By Dennis McCarthy

It's 2032, crime is rampant and prisons are overcrowded. A new, genetic acceleration technology to deter crime has been developed that instantly ages prisoners the total number of years they've been sentenced to serve. If you get 40 years, you age 40 years in minutes, and are released from jail. It creates a punishment so drastic and permanent that potential criminals will be scared straight. There's just one catch — what happens if you're innocent?

"My dad and I wrote that script 15 years ago, but unfortunately it was a time when the movies getting made were all action with heavy special effects, or sequels," said Peter Berk, from his Calabasas home earlier this week. "We went on to write two more scripts together and worked on a World War II novel before he passed away six years ago. I'll cherish every second and every word forever. "It was like meeting and getting to work with your hero, but also having a great time with your dad."

Howard Berk and his son, Peter Berk, at a gathering from around 1990. COURTESY OF PETER BERK Peter was 13 in the late 1960s when his father, Howard Berk, was pounding out scripts for "Columbo," "The Rockford Files" and "Mission Impossible," some of the most popular shows on

TV “I got to watch my dad firsthand write the TV shows I loved. He inspired me to want to write, but I knew I’d never be anywhere in his league, and I’m not.”

Howard could see his only child watching him, the interest in his eyes. He was 13 now, old enough to find out if the skills of the father would be handed down to the son. How about we write something together, he asked Peter? “I remember sitting with him kicking around some ideas for Star Trek, a show I knew even better than he did. I kept thinking, ‘Wow, what a great day sitting side-by-side with your dad working together, even if nothing came of it.’”

And, many times, nothing did, but it never dampened the excitement they felt looking down at an empty page and filling it with words they shared. Peter had skills, just not his father’s skill. He knew that. He went on to write four novels, three TV pilots and a dozen screenplays, but he paid his bills as a public relations executive. Howard Berk was 91 when he died in 2016. Right up until he went into the hospital two weeks before his death, he was still writing every day.

“TimeLock” had been collecting dust in Peter’s file cabinet for 15 years. Then COVID-19 hit. “I was sitting at home thinking I was going to go crazy with all this time on my hands,” Peter said.

“I started looking through all the old projects we had written, when I came across the script and thought ‘What if I novelized it?’” He had the time and the motivation, but most of all he had his father’s words. It had been 50 years since Howard Berk asked his 13-year-old son if he would like to write something with him, and now Peter was asking his late father the same thing. How about we write a novel together, dad?

For more than a year, he poured over the words he and his father had written for a movie that would now be a book. His father, an avid reader who loved Hemingway and got a chance to meet the adventurer/novelist in Spain where the Berk’s lived for five years, would have appreciated the irony. In Hollywood, novels become movies, but movies seldom become novels. What if this novel turns out to be successful? Will it then become a movie? Will the 23-year-old protagonist sentenced to age 40 years for a murder he didn’t commit find the ugly truth about TimeLock before he’s turned into a 63-year-old man? Hey, it’s Hollywood, Jake, anything can happen.

“I did this to honor my father,” Peter said. “Whether the novel sells four copies or four million, my father’s name will be right on the cover above mine where it belongs. We’re still working together.”

Dennis McCarthy’s column runs on Sundays.