

Joseph Finder

BY PATRICK SMITH

One of the sharpest thriller writers working today, Joseph Finder (1958–) penned his first book, *Red Carpet: The Connection Between the Kremlin and America's Most Powerful Businessmen* (1983) while in his mid-20s. Calling into question the reputation of Armand Hammer, one of America's captains of industry and the CEO of Occidental Petroleum, the exposé invited threats of a libel lawsuit.

"I wrote that Hammer, when he was younger and lived in Moscow, worked for the KGB. He tried to have the book killed," Finder, who holds degrees in Russian studies from Yale and Harvard, tells *Bookmarks* from his office in Boston's Back Bay. "It was interesting to go through that process of first coming up with an idea that seemed intriguing to me and then researching it, discovering that there really was a lot more going on than I imagined, and then facing the consequences. Being threatened with a libel charge by a billionaire. That experience provided the raw material for my first novel, *The Moscow Club*." The threatened lawsuit was never filed, and Finder's interest in the thriller genre evolved from Cold War intrigue to the discontents of high finance to the highest echelons of government and the justice system.

The author credits his peripatetic early lifestyle with giving him varied perspectives on the stories that attract him. "My father set up centers for teaching English in Afghanistan and in the Philippines. He was a full-bred scholar," Finder recalls. "Before I learned how to speak English, I learned Farsi from the household servant. Being raised abroad, moving around a fair amount as a kid, is sort of like being an army brat. It changes the way you look at the world.

"After I wrote *Red Carpet*, I realized that I liked writing. But I didn't have any ideas for nonfiction. What I really wanted to do was to write a thriller. That was my favorite reading. [see sidebar]. So, I gave myself three years. If I had any success, I'd keep going. If I failed, I would move on and try something else. Within three years—just barely—I was able to get an agent and get a publisher. The transition from nonfiction to fiction was actually pretty difficult for me. Writing a novel is a lot harder than writing nonfiction."

Over 13 novels and 25 years, the relentless, driving plots of Finder's books have drawn readers in, but his focus on character—for instance, in the three installments of the Nick Heller series—distinguishes his fiction. Finder's latest, *Guilty Minds* (reviewed on page 22), which shifts focus from the author's familiar Boston to the cutthroat politics of Washington, D.C., combines the electric energy of Lee Child's Jack Reacher with the stylistic concision of John le Carré's *The Spy Who Came In from the Cold* and the documentary clarity of Frederick Forsyth's *The Day of the Jackal*. "These thrillers are about human beings. They're about

interesting people you want to root for as a hero," Finder insists. "If not, the book's not going to work. Basically all thrillers are stories about human conflict. You remember that when writing.

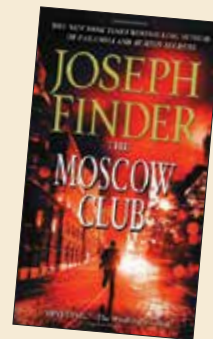
"In our business, the only thing that counts is the book you've just written."

THE EARLY NOVELS

The Moscow Club (1991)

As the Cold War winds down, Charlie Stone, a CIA analyst for the super-secret outfit Parnassus, is drawn into a cat-and-mouse game involving the Kremlin and a faceless provocateur who knows Stone—and the agent's father—too well. Framed for murder and forced to face his enemies, Stone has much more to fight for than his own life.

Finder's debut, published only two years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, was named by *Publishers Weekly* in 2006 one of the 10 best spy thrillers ever written. "[The author's] insider's portrait of the machinations of government (both ours and theirs) is often riveting, and his knowledge of the manipulative ways of statecraft is always impressive," a *Washington Post* critic adds. "Although *The Moscow Club* is a first novel, Finder shows the control and sense of pace of a veteran, giving us an entertaining, provocative and highly readable thriller, one that leaves us with profound questions about where we are all heading and just who's leading us there."



High Crimes (1998)

Tom Chapman, a financial consultant and former soldier, is arrested in a Boston shopping mall and accused of murdering 87 El Salvadoran villagers in a military operation gone bad years before. His wife, Claire Heller Chapman, a Harvard law professor and pit bull criminal defense attorney, assumes there's been a mistake. Defending her husband with his life in the balance against a top-secret court-martial, Claire must reconcile her love for the man she knows as Tom Chapman—who continues to assert his innocence—with the evidence she uncovers of a double life, one that points to his guilt in the worst military atrocity since My Lai.

Finder's portrayal of the trial in the second half of *High Crimes* "is every bit as exciting and as full of hairpin turns



as the earlier chase scenes in the novel,” notes a *Washington Post* reviewer. “*High Crimes* generates lots of inside-the-bowels-of-the-Pentagon intrigue, but it’s the psychological mystery of Tom’s identity that really ratchets up the suspense here.” The novel follows *Extraordinary Powers* (1994), an international thriller with a psychic twist that features a former CIA agent’s attempt to prove the innocence of the murdered CIA director (and his father-in-law) and *The Zero Hour* (1996), the gripping tale of a computer genius broken out of a South African prison by an American billionaire for the purpose of bringing down Wall Street.

HIGH FINANCE AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Paranoia (2004)

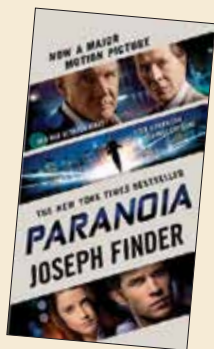
Adam Cassidy, 26, is a smart, bored, low-level employee at Wyatt Telecom. When he decides to throw a retirement party for an assistant foreman using \$78,000 of company funds and gets caught, the company gives him a choice. He can either go to jail for embezzlement or become a spy for Wyatt’s main competitor, Trion, as it prepares to launch an industry-changing product. Soon Adam finds himself deep inside Trion Systems, enjoying all the trimmings: a company car, a luxury apartment, and a huge salary. Now he simply has to close the deal by double-crossing his new boss.

Packed with twists, turns, status symbols, and high-tech gobbledegook, *Paranoia* moves with Grisham-like momentum. Many reviewers were won over by the narrator’s likable voice and empathized with his sweat-inducing (and self-induced) ethical dilemmas. *USA Today* called the novel “this year’s first contender for Page Turner of the Year. ... The corporate thriller just got an upgrade.”

“*Paranoia* was my first *New York Times* best seller,” Finder recalls after the disappointing reception of *High Crimes*. “For me, it was an important book because it was a book that I wrote using my own voice. There was a sense of humor to the book, a kind of pace that I felt was more who I was. It was about real people. *Paranoia* was a learning experience for me.”

Killer Instinct (2006)

To the chagrin of his materialistic wife, Jason Steadman, a 30-something, successful businessman at Boston’s Entronics, lacks the killer instinct. A nice guy who listens to motivational tapes, he’s not nearly ambitious enough for the corner office. A minor car accident changes his life. Kurt Semco, a dishonorably discharged Special Forces vet, tows Steadman’s car out of a ditch, and the two become fast



friends. When Steadman recommends Semco for a job at Entronics, his own career takes off. But as Steadman’s rivals in the company start turning up dead, he begins to understand the true cost of his association with Semco.

Killer Instinct won the International Thriller Writers Award for best novel in 2007, and Finder crafts a “superb story that dazzles with its heart-pounding suspense, even while posing deeper questions about the ethics of business and what we’re willing to do to get ahead” (*Boston Globe*). The novel followed and amplified the themes explored a year earlier in *Company Man* (2005), the story of a hockey hero who returns to his Michigan hometown only to fall on hard times. Both *Paranoia* and *Company Man* captured the power plays intrinsic to the business world and put Finder at the top of the corporate-thriller game.

Power Play (2007)

As a last-minute replacement for his boss, Jake Landry, a junior executive at Hammond Aerospace, accompanies the company’s senior executives to a team-building retreat at a Canadian fishing lodge. Jealousy and intrigue, as well as the new CEO’s secret investigation of impropriety by one of her underlings, undermine the collegial atmosphere. Jake’s blue-collar roots and rough childhood, including a stint in juvenile detention, sets him apart from the others, but his toughness and practical skills prove helpful when gunmen with insider knowledge of the company take over the lodge. An ex-girlfriend, assistant to the new CEO, provides a romantic element, and flashbacks reveal Jake’s own dark secrets as the plot hurtles forward to a bloody finale.

Finder at his grittiest, “*Power Play* starts cleverly and later devolves into more conventional suspense tactics. But its premise is enough to send chills through corporate boardrooms, and through civilian readers too” (*New York Times*). The author may have perfected the corporate thriller with *Power Play*, which favors plot over character.

THE NICK HELLER BOOKS

A private spy and intelligence operative based in Boston, Nick Heller has appeared in four novels to date. He “is the guy you want on your side when your corporation needs deep background or your political life needs a cleanup,” says the *Washington Post*. “Finder paints an appealing hero, engaging, in part, because he’s not a superhero.” And Heller was a Red Sox fan before 2004, an important distinction for any baseball junky or New England resident.

Vanished (2009) and Buried Secrets (2011)

In *Vanished*, the first book in the series, Lauren Heller is attacked after an evening out in Georgetown. Nick Heller, former Special Forces soldier and current investigator-for-hire, gets a panicked call from Lauren’s son (and Heller’s nephew), Gabe. As Lauren lies in a coma, Roger, Heller’s

JOSEPH FINDER'S 10 MOST INFLUENTIAL THRILLERS

THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE | JAMES M. CAIN: "The language is crisp and timeless, and the story is fast and furious and unfolds like a Greek tragedy."

PERSUADER | LEE CHILD: "Reacher is a great series hero, and Lee Child's dry, crackling prose is among the best in the business. The opening to *Persuader* is one of the best, most cleverly worked out thriller openings I've ever read."

THE GOLD COAST | NELSON DEMILLE: "A model of how to incorporate humor and attitude into your storytelling without diminishing the suspense."

THE EYE OF THE NEEDLE | KEN FOLLETT: "Hits on all cylinders: plot, pacing, love story, narrative momentum, and characters—especially a great, interesting villain."

THE DAY OF THE JACKAL | FREDERICK FORSYTH: "I think I've gone through three paperback copies already. Forsyth is no great stylist, but that's not a disadvantage here: it reads like a documentary in novel form. Plausible, realistic, authoritative, really exciting. Wonderfully executed. A classic."

MARATHON MAN | WILLIAM GOLDMAN: "This is the one that has influenced more thriller writers working today than any other, whether they admit it or not. Why? The voice—slangy, casual, intimate, fresh. The twists you don't see coming. Fast, stripped down, elegant, powerful."

RED DRAGON | THOMAS HARRIS: "*Red Dragon* is one of the scariest books you'll ever read. Harris is a wonderful writer who knows how to do exposition and incorporate detail in a completely natural way."

RED FOX | ANTHONY HYDE: "For some reason, this is all but forgotten. But it's excellent—sparse prose, linear story line, with each revelation leading to the next, and extremely atmospheric."

THE SPY WHO CAME IN FROM THE COLD | JOHN LE CARRÉ: "A simple, fable-like story, told with grace and power. It reinvented the spy novel."

ROSEMARY'S BABY | IRA LEVIN: "As far as I'm concerned, nobody in my line of work ever did it better. The work of an unsurpassed, understated, yet incredibly elegant prose writer."

estranged older half-brother, disappears. Building a backstory that follows Heller throughout the series—the trial and conviction of their father, Victor, for securities fraud—Finder drills down into the lives of the victims and discovers that the fruit doesn't fall far from the tree.

Heller returns to Boston in *Buried Secrets*, the second in the series, to help out an old friend, hedge-fund billionaire

Marshall Marcus, whose teenaged daughter, Alexa, has gone missing. Marcus receives chilling messages from a man who has put a time limit on Alexa's rescue; if they need confirmation of her kidnapping, Marcus and the rest of the world can watch live-action streaming video of the young woman struggling for her life in a coffin. Intensifying the search for Alexa, Heller, who reunites with a FBI Special Agent and former lover, learns some unsavory truths about Marcus and the powerful men behind his daughter's disappearance and sets in motion a plan that will either save Alexa or end with her worst nightmare.

Guilty Minds (2016)

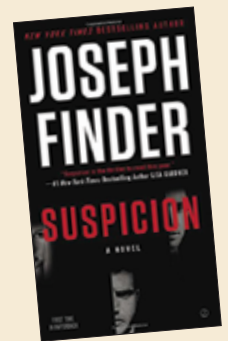
See our review on the following page.

THE BREAKAWAYS

Suspicion (2014)

Strapped for cash and loath to tell his daughter, Abby, that she will no longer be able to attend her prestigious Boston private school, widower and history writer Danny Goodman can't believe his luck when Thomas Galvin, Abby's best friend's father, offers to help by depositing tuition money—just a loan—into Goodman's account. What is a rounding error for the wealthy Galvin is a blessing for Goodman and his daughter. At first. But when a DEA agent informs Goodman that he is under arrest for laundering drug money from Mexico's Sinaloa cartel, he can roll over or fight the charges. Either way, drawn into a web of intrigue way out of his depth, he risks losing his family and his freedom. Earlier in his career, Finder was tapped as the CEO of Suspense—an effort to brand his work that the author found limiting. "In a plot twist befitting one of Finder's didn't-see-that-coming thrillers, he made an abrupt change," a *Boston Globe* critic writes. "After his last novel, *Buried Secrets*, failed to make the best seller list, the Boston-based author bought out his contract with a seven-figure check, left his longtime publisher and agent, and wrote his next novel without a signed deal in place."

The high-wire act paid off. Finder displays his range and skill in *Suspicion*, a novel that begins with a personal story and expands into a full-blown thrill ride. "Two-thirds of the way through the novel, I felt pretty much like Goodman, hurtling along with him and seeing no way to avoid a disastrous end," Alan Cheuse writes. "Despite the ordinariness of the material—troubled father, annoying daughter, all of that—Finder twists the plot to reveal secrets within secrets and dangers within dangers, and turns a mundane Boston existence into something threatening and fearful" (*Boston Globe*).



The Fixer (2015)

Talented, but underachieving, journalist Rick Hoffman, whose career has been on the downslide since his exit from the *Boston Globe*, moves back into his childhood home after inheriting a dilapidated house from his father, Leonard, a former Boston lawyer. While cleaning the house, he discovers a pile of money that will alleviate his financial problems—and cause a whole lot of others. Hoffman's new lifestyle and the target on his back leads him down a few dangerous rabbit holes, but his journalistic instincts keep him on the scent. In the process, he starts to appreciate

what Leonard, a man involved in shady dealings, did as a “fixer” to right the wrongs of his past.

The Fixer takes place entirely in Boston, the city dear to Finder's heart, and has a special connection for the author to his father. “I started writing *The Fixer* shortly after my father died. That was the impetus for the book,” Finder says. “When my dad died, I understood that one of the hardest things is realizing what you didn't know about your father or your mother. One of the most powerful experiences is to discover things about a dead parent. I wanted *The Fixer* to start with the idea of an alien parent and have the book be, in part, an exploration of what the father was really all about.” ■

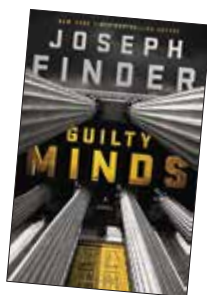


Guilty Minds

By Joseph Finder

THE STORY: In a scandal that threatens to shake the country's highest court to its foundation, Supreme Court Chief Justice Jeremiah Claflin is blackmailed by an escort who claims that the two carried on an affair. Outed by Mandy Seeger, a disgraced *Washington Post* reporter now writing for the gossip rag *Slander Sheet*, Justice Claflin admits his precarious situation to friend and legendary Washington lawyer Gideon Parnell. When Nick Heller, a former Special Forces soldier and now a sought-after PI in Boston, agrees to take on the case, he expects to resolve the problem in short order. “Lies are my business,” Heller muses. “They keep me employed.” But soon enough, he realizes that the truth lies buried deep beneath layers of deception and deadly double-dealing.

Dutton. 400 pages. \$28. ISBN: 9780525954620



Florida Times-Union



“Throw in murder, conspiracy and long-buried secrets and things get interesting. ... Fans will welcome Heller back and first-time readers won't be disappointed with this fast-paced roller-coaster.” C. F. FOSTER

Kirkus Reviews



“The book, the third and best entry in a series, is about as airtight as you can get, plotwise. ... Finder shows off his top-notch storytelling skills, moving with ease from high places to low in the nation's capital.”

NY Times Book Review



“And now to slip into something cool by Joseph Finder—not one of his slick thrillers about coldblooded masters of finance but one of his grittier series novels featuring Nick Heller, who walks and talks and uses his fists like a private eye but prefers to be called ‘a private intelligence operative.’ ... Although the content of this thriller is a bit sleazier than that of Finder's

tales of corporate shenanigans, his understated style is no less smooth and polished—and classy enough for troubled characters to pause and make a big deal about the relative merits of rye whiskeys like Old Overholt and WhistlePig.”

MARILYN STASIO

Washington Post



“Nick Heller is a breath of fresh air in the world of private investigators as he will go to any length to succeed for his clients. ... Finder provides background into the operation of internet news and online media along with the world of corporations and politics and how they mix and clash.” JEFF AYERS

Financial Times



“As Nick is tied to a chair by a nemesis, it seems that the resolution we have been impatient for is becoming less and less possible. ... Not vintage Finder, perhaps, but if the modern thriller has a future beyond globetrotting banality, it will be in the hands of writers such as him.” BARRY FORSHAW

Huffington Post



“Nick and every other character in this book are paper thin. ... In *Guilty Minds* we are concerned about the characters' safety but we do not feel attached sufficiently to them to want their company.” JACKIE K. COOPER

CRITICAL SUMMARY

Joseph Finder began his writing career in the early 1980s with *Red Carpet*, an exposé illuminating American businessman Armand Hammer's dealings with the Soviets during the Cold War. The experience prompted him to give fiction writing a shot. For more than a quarter century, the author has explored a number of different avenues in his thrillers, notably high finance, corporate sabotage, and even research into telepathy. In the Nick Heller series, Finder has successfully tapped a wellspring of crime-fighting panache. While most critics lauded his newest effort, one felt perplexed that Nick Heller “came across as much more human” in previous books than he does here (*Huffington Post*). Despite this complaint, Finder is one of a handful of the most innovative thriller writers working today, and *Guilty Minds* is among his best books.