

# PERMANENT DEADLINE



**MARK FRITZ**  
WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

**A 30-page excerpt from the  
new novel by Pulitzer Prize-  
winning journalist **Mark Fritz****



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*An excerpt from the novel  
by Mark Fritz*

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## THE AUTHOR

**Mark Fritz** won the 1995 Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting for his work on the ethnic violence and slaughter in Rwanda. He has worked for Associated Press, *Los Angeles Times*, *Boston Globe* and *Wall Street Journal*. His previous book *Lost On Earth: Nomads of the New World*, a *Salon.com Book Award* winner in 1999, is a history of the years that followed the fall of The Berlin Wall and the collapse of Communism.

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## CHAPTER ONE

# A Desperate land

**T**HE INTERIM PRESIDENT TAPPED A FINGER atop a conference table made of Bolivian Bloodwood, waiting for the girl on his left to stumble her way through another bad translation. She was slender and tall and pretty and very blonde, very pale, very frightened. She was seventeen years old going on twelve. She was nervous and naïve and awkward and perhaps the worst translator since the first human learned a second language. The interim president was willing to endure this girl's incompetence only because he was curious about the motives of the man who had hired her.

That would be Frank, a gifted master of understanding complex events that unfolded quickly and unpredictably, albeit often after the fact. The interim president was cool and relaxed as Frank coached his terrible translator. "Ask him again," Frank told the girl, a towering waif named Olga. "Ask the president about his crazy boys." Olga's big eyes begged Frank to reconsider. She stammered and stalled. "But he says he does not understand the question," she said. Olga was terrified of the interim president. But, by now, Frank was more amused than mortified by her attempts to translate two languages she spoke almost perfectly yet

couldn't connect with much speed and even less coherence. He no longer cared if the president was insulted by Olga's translation attempts or Frank's slouching insouciance. He'd spent the last week meeting with people who had positioned themselves to be rulers of leaderless little population clusters that self-anointed warlords declared were now sovereign nations. Frank concluded the whole lot – “interim presidents-for-life” he liked to call them – were just profiteers and poseurs who used violent, directionless boys yearning for a surrogate father who offered them a reason to exist in a new era that wanted no part of them. The self-proclaimed president gave these guttersnipes guns and girls and used them as hooligan militias with a half-baked sense of nationalism heavily dosed with holy book hokum while promising regular folks that he would protect them from the post-pubescent police force that the interim president-for-life had used to seize power.

“Just try again,” Frank told Olga, sick of this assignment and ready to just wrap up a story about little men in little lands creating conflict as a means of procuring fortune and privilege. “Just ask the guy about his boys. Nail him and I promise we'll do the Black Sea and you and me can go play on the beach.” Frank already was figuring out where to put the paragraphs about this tiresome tyrant in what would become a story of one small piece of a chaotically reconfiguring new world. The interim president was polite but formal and, despite a conference table ringed by stocky men carrying Kalashnikovs and wearing Soviet uniforms (or, in some cases, leather trench coats), the new leader's

attitude was pragmatically welcoming. He was attempting to legitimize his dime-sized dictatorship. Frank heard vaguely reassuring crowd noises coming from the square outside, where people clamored for attention and stood on crates because the interim president had granted the locals one week to form parties and select candidates who had no chance of winning.

Frank was usually in tune with the tenor of a potentially dangerous situation. But he'd taken a pounding the past few years. Occasionally, somebody would mention entire assignments he could scarcely remember. He stopped saying "Nice to meet you" when he got sick of hearing "We've met, man. Like, four times" or the more mortifying "Jesus, you asshole, we slept together." Uncharacteristically, he failed to sense the slight shift in the interim president's body language during this latest attempt to get Olga to ask the close-out question. He may have felt punchy, annoyed, a bit less sharp, but mostly he was sick of summoning even minimal deference to yet another wrecking ball to some unruly region's potential to form a civil society. Frank was also drunk. Earlier than usual, and reeking of the Johnny Red that was a popular global currency, just like the American dollar or a carton of Marlboros. The interim president watched Frank seemingly confuse the girl rather than guide her. "The shootings, rapes, the crazy," Frank went on, slurring his words. "Pin him down. Tell him the humanitarian community knows that these kids are just his front lines because they're stupid and expendable. Let's get out of here. Just ask him again and we go to the Black Sea

and swim and knock on the doors of the nicest dachas and talk to the party elites about the end of the party. “As part of an effort to distance himself from the crush the girl had on him, Frank added: “And, you can meet some boys your own age.” Frank actually was hoping to fly Olga back to Moscow and head – alone, with a better translator – to the Caspian Sea to investigate a series of low-intensity skirmishes over oil reserves claimed by more than a half-dozen pretend nations.

“I’m not interested in boys,” Olga said with a flirt disguised as a mild scold, forgetting for a moment her fear of the interim president and flashing her most winning smile at Frank. She thought he was so brave, so unbowed by these warlords who were shredding the Soviet empire down to scraps like this one on the greasy, oil-stained northern slopes of the Caucasus Mountains. Olga so wanted to do well and knew she was failing. She remembered Frank’s constant prodding to ask questions as Frank, not Olga. “Pretend you’re me and pretend you are the person I’m interviewing,” Frank had told her repeatedly. “Don’t say “He ask why...” or “He say this...”

Olga thought: “First person. I must be Frank.” Olga leveled her big, almost bulbous blue eyes at the interim president-for-life, who looked only at Frank. Frank smiled and put his hands behind his head, leaned back in his chair and let out a laugh just loud enough to be insulting after, based on what little Russian he’d learned on this trip, he heard Olga start her question with “He ask why...?” She must have spent a full minute talking. When she stopped

she fiddled with her hands and looked over at Frank, whose smirk started to fade when he finally felt just a bit of the intuitive warning signal that was reasonably reliable. If this were a checkpoint on a road in a war zone, he would have punched the gas.

The interim president, a bald fellow with a round head and a pointy goatee that made the entire noggin resemble a word balloon, stared at Frank in silence for what seemed like a much longer time than it took for Olga to ask Frank's question. Frank looked around the conference table and re-evaluated the men with an array of automatic weapons. As the interim president stared at Frank during a silence that stretched beyond awkward, the guards seemed to tighten up and move a bit in an escalating manner of almost nervous menace. Frank spotted at least three exit opportunities. The first seconds were always the most vital, a lesson he'd learned more times than were really necessary.

But there was Olga to worry about, damn her.

The interim president-for-life leaned across the conference table made of that Bolivian or Brazilian or whatever he said was called Bloodwood. He gently lifted the laminated badge that hung from a chain on Frank's neck. "So, Francis Reznak," the interim president said, suddenly speaking better English not just than Olga, but Frank. The interim president looked back at the press badge, then up again at Frank. "Tell me, Francis, do you like living in New York?"

"Frank, uh, Frank is just fine, and yeah, yeah, New York is fine," Frank said, looking first at the open window three stories above the stone square, then at the open door that led

to the stairs down to the lobby and out of the building. He looked again at Olga, whose eyes no longer seemed bulbous but surreally beautiful. She smiled bravely and stared back at him with a sense of serenity and affection born only of her blind faith in Frank's ability to keep her safe. She didn't seem to notice that Frank and the interim president were speaking to each other in English, without her help. The interim president leaned back as he let the laminated badge around Frank's neck drop to his chest. Then, the interim president-for-life reached into the pocket of his blue suit jacket and pulled out a palm-sized, .40-caliber Croatian XD semi-automatic pistol. He pointed it at Olga.

"Hey," Frank shouted, jumping to his feet. The interim president: "Sorry, buddy, I don't speak English. Remember?" he said, switching from Oxford English to idiomatic American, his look of dispassion giving way to a tight smile. The president pulled the trigger and put a nickel-sized hole in the center of Olga's forehead. She rocked in each direction in spastic indecision, awkward to the end, never losing her stock look of utter befuddlement.

"Now that I have your full attention," the interim president said. "You are going to tell me why you are the second man I have met this week who is named Frank Reznek."

## CHAPTER 2

# A Stranger's Hand

**F**RANK WAS BASED IN BERLIN WHEN THE Agency asked him to spend a month in the splintering Soviet Union. This was nearly two years after the Berlin Wall supposedly fell, and one year after the two German nations theoretically united. None of it was true. Slipshod history says the Wall fell on a specific date in November of 1989. That was merely the day when a deadline-driven sentence of fantastical foresight created a mythical moment. It was a message from the future, filling in nicely for the past as prologue. Cause and effect merged briefly to spark a skip in time. The man who brought down the Berlin Wall was a dashing Viennese womanizer named Ingomar Schlitz, the only white person in Berlin who maintained a year-round tan. Schlitz spent a decade dating hundreds of East German beauties who were assigned to spy on him. He accidentally married a gorgeous Canadian human rights investigator with a body to thrill and, it turned out, a KGB license to kill. A big part of his brain was below his belt, but he eventually accumulated enough trace evidence to realize that he was an unwitting asset not just of the local secret police, but the entire Soviet spy apparatus.

The myth of the fall of the Berlin Wall came on the day Schlitz covered a press conference in which an East Berlin press functionary had a crumpled Politburo pronouncement in his pocket. It was short and vague and devoid of specifics. The functionary was reluctant to release it until he could figure it out. The press session was ending when Schlitz sidled up to the spokesman, who knew this reporter too well to trust. Schlitz asked if there had been progress on persistent demands by street protesters that the Politburo ease travel restrictions. The functionary sighed and pulled out the paper that said travel restrictions, indeed, would or should or could be lifted. The press functionary couldn't say when or how or under what conditions this freedom would be allowed. Confused Western reporters peppered the flustered spokesman with increasingly angry questions. But Schlitz extrapolated what he believed was obvious: The Berlin Wall has fallen. He ran to his office to file the one-sentence bulletin that went global in minutes. The Schlitz bulletin was ripped and read by every broadcast outlet in the world. The Berlin Wall was open. Hundreds of thousands of people rushed to every checkpoint. East German guards stood aside for their own safety. The East German authorities kept a low profile thereafter, emerging only to announce a free election in the hopes that they would not be prosecuted for Stalinist sins. And to meekly offer themselves up as a party the people should consider on election day.

Frank Reznick showed up two months after Schlitz told the world that the Wall had fallen. The Agency chose Frank to replace the clinically paranoid Schlitz, who had not only

been spied upon and seduced purely for strategic reasons, but carried the historical burden of being reprimanded by The Agency for jumping to a conclusion that his deadline-driven reporting had made a reality. Schlitz had spent too much time as The Agency's main man in East Berlin. "It made me crazy in the head. I'm still not right," he told Frank, handing his successor treasured files of contacts ranging from reliable to imaginary. And though the Fall of the Wall was stitched into a specific date, Frank was surprised that free travel remained restricted for months after his arrival in East Berlin. The class of people who claimed to be most attuned to the forces that moved the world – diplomats and journalists and academics who made rare trips into the field – continued for many months to pay to have their passports stamped when they subserviently passed through the traditional checkpoints staffed by snickering border guards. Everyone else essentially ignored the checkpoints and walked through holes yards away that had been punched out by masses impassioned enough to pile-drive through the deadliest, most heavily fortified prison on the planet. The Berlin Wall didn't fall in a day; it maintained a psychic hold on many and still instilled fear among even more. Engineers with a knack for inventing traps – robots on rails that shot circular razor blades at anybody who tripped a sensor – spent three decades making the space between what was actually two walls the most dangerous ring of real estate on earth.

Builders devoted their careers to creating concrete compounds and metal alloys that held together Nobel-

worthy re-inventions of rebar. It took generations to tear down that Wall, which created a caste system that relegated the former East Germans to second-class status. The burden of simply removing the architecture of oppression left a legion of workers with chronically bad backs.

Frank Reznek did a decent job covering the one year that East Germany went from Communism to sovereign democracy to dysfunctional rump of a Germany united only on paper. He had to change his driver's license three times purely for bureaucratic reasons, but the stamps and signatures were processed by the same people. Fireworks and speeches and signed proclamations did not result in anything resembling actual unity. After the countries became one at the stroke of a particular midnight, Frank dutifully referred to East Germany as former East Germany. He regularly wrote about fundamental differences that grew more as polar opposites tried to become similar. Frank was fascinated by how much anarchy and lawlessness and extremist riots seemed to run counter to paperwork that insisted the two places were now one. "Germans who once embraced at the broken Berlin Wall are now checking to see if they still have their wallets," he wrote.

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ONE YEAR AFTER UNIFICATION DAY, NEW YORK ASKED Frank TO use his experiences as the East Berlin correspondent to report for a bit about the ultimate ripple effect of The Wall's collapse: The imminent implosion of the Soviet

Union. Frank flew to Moscow in October of 1991. The Agency embraced a logical philosophy of cycling in staffers to help cover a big story that was so intense that reporters stationed in the heart of any given epic moment became bleary-eyed and burned-out as events drained every drop of adrenaline. Frank thought he had friends in Moscow. But bureaus whose members bonded during minute after minute of white-knuckled deadlines felt they were being “big-footed,” in the jargon of meatball-a-minute journalism. The presence of an outsider who was asked to help out was considered by some as a Home Office commentary on the quality of The Bureau’s coverage. Frank’s arrival was as welcome as a Russian winter.

It took a few hours before Frank Reznick realized the intensity of the resentment. He had done some preliminary reporting back in Berlin about German banks uncomfortable with the German government’s plans to build thousands of houses for Soviet soldiers leaving the Soviet bloc. He had tried the hale and hearty approach, but his presence was considered an insult and his ideas an affront to seasoned Kremlinologists. Even a reporter whose career he’d rescued in Berlin by writing breaking stories under her byline refused to make eye contact. Frank spent the first few hours of his first day being collegial. He was relieved when his good cheer was rebuffed. He was happy to be hated so he could deliver what The Agency remorselessly demanded, always on deadline. He was at peace with his role as a pariah. He was at his best when driven by anger. He was sullen by nature. He was liberated by dropping the burden

of saying “good morning” when he stomped in the office. He was exiled to a card table in a far corner just large enough for his laptop. He used it only to write what he reported when he returned from the field. The only other part of The Bureau he bothered to approach was the space where a sink, a microwave oven, and a tiny refrigerator constituted a kitchenette.

On Frank Reznek’s third morning in Moscow, after quickly moving from happy-to-be-here helper to enemy invader, he sauntered into The Bureau and swerved toward the so-called lunchroom for a cup of coffee. A freshly printed sign above the coffee machine said: “Coffee Available Only to REGULAR Bureau Staffers.” Frank looked at the sink and grabbed a recently washed cup that was taped with a name that wasn’t his. He poured the off-limits coffee into the cup owned by someone else. He welcomed confrontation, but reporters in general were more inclined to exhibit passive-aggressive behavior. Frank leaned against the counter and stole Bureau coffee one very small sip at a time, because it was ridiculously hot. Viewed preemptively as a threat, he chose to become a nightmare. He saw stories everywhere. Crushing his colleagues with humiliating efficiency was just a bonus for doing a job he adored in principle but hated in practice.

He blew on the lava-hot cup of coffee and glared nowhere in particular. In the corner of his eye, he noticed a woman, leaning against a column that separated the eating area from the section reserved for the photo staff which made it a point of pride not to coordinate their work with the writers.

Shooters considered writers to be soft and weak. Shooters, paid badly and pressed to take pictures at frontlines, considered the pencils – the favored word for writers – to fall into the universally recognized category of pussies. Frank tried to ignore the woman leaning on the column, watching him sip coffee in what became more manly but increasingly excruciating gulps. Frank finally looked to his left when the woman let out a low-pitched laugh. She stared at Frank with an off-kilter smirk. “Yeah?” Frank said.

“So, you must be the new Bigfoot,” the woman said. “I have to say, you dropped whatever political skills you may have had in record time. I am terribly impressed. I’ve been hated here for six weeks, and I’m still pleasant as hell. Welcome to my club of one. I’m radio.” Frank’s glance at the radio woman was followed by a Tex Avery-cartoon-style double-take. The woman who said she came from radio chuckled. “I’m Julie Angelus,” she said. “Agency Network News.” Frank took her hand and gazed with slack-jawed awe into her big brown eyes. He felt the bloodlust that fueled his mission of annihilation begin to ebb. He finally found a way to respond. “I’m Frank. Julie? A pleasure,” he said, lost in whatever dimension in which Julie Angelus existed.

The radio woman disabled Frank’s defenses with an even more adorably lopsided grin. “The pleasure is, obviously, all yours, babe, considering how long you’ve been holding my hand.” Julie Angelus kept his hand company until Frank realized he probably should let go. They said nothing but wondered the same thing, which is whether Frank had the ability to say anything, ever, again. He recovered well enough.

“Care for a hot cup of hot coffee?” he asked, grabbing the cup that belonged to the Bureau Chief and filling it with a forbidden beverage. “Can I steal some cream or sugar packets for you? I’ll take the blame and I’ll do the time,” Frank said, trying to smile even though he was serious as hell. He absentmindedly took a deep gulp from his own stolen mug. He burned off layers of flesh in his mouth and sent an explosive spray from his nose that splattered against the white ruffled blouse of Julie Angelus. A beautiful friendship blossomed from this romantic encounter.





Mark Fritz

## INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

# An epic adventure in an alternative reality

**W**E LIVE IN A WORLD OF ENDLESSLY OVERLAPPING deadlines of our own creation, worrying about time wasted, time lost. We re-imagine memories of missed moments yet we lose sight of the ultimate deadline: when our time is up.

After a seven-year hiatus, Pulitzer Prize-winning war correspondent Mark Fritz resurfaces with *Permanent Deadline*, a wildly entertaining yet unsettling war story about life on the clock. Seven people with conflicting agendas and shared deadlines collide spectacularly in the final days of the Cold War. Fritz upends accepted notions about heroism, piety and patriotism in ways darkly comic, disturbingly real, and provocatively offensive. He uses half a century of history as a backdrop for the autumn of 1991, when the core characters – built from dozens of people too real to be believed – share an epic adventure in an alternative reality. It is a road trip with stark, hard-earned truths about war, religion and family, revealing time-tested tactics by media lackeys who skew the view of an unraveling world in ways cheaply packaged and fed to oblivious masses.

*Permanent Deadline* is Fritz's first work of fiction, defying genres while accidentally creating a new one: Post-Cold

War Fiction Noir. Mark Fritz is a Pulitzer Prize-winning war correspondent and the author of the award-winning book, *Lost On Earth: Nomads of the New World*. He was the first recipient of the American Society of Newspaper Editors' Jesse Laventhol Award for Deadline Writing and has covered national and international news for the *Los Angeles Times*, Associated Press, *Boston Globe* and *Wall Street Journal*. Fritz covered the unification of Germany, collapse of the Soviet Union, and wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Rwanda, Somalia, Chechnya, Liberia, Bosnia, Mauritania, Mali, and Lower Manhattan. He has written extensively about the medical establishment's fleecing of the elderly, the role of propaganda in wartime strategy, the uselessness of laws based on emotions, the generational conflicts triggered by the aging population, the epic routes taken by massive amounts of immigrants, the impact of changing demographics on the environment, and the genetic engineering of the food we eat.

### **Why did you leave your journalism career behind?**

Well, the real money was in freelancing as a typist.

### **Seriously?**

I got sick of the sound of my own voice shouting at my immediate superiors – and their even-more immediate superiors – about the chronic moral compromises that weren't just tolerated, but encouraged, ingrained in a job enshrined by the First Amendment. Fudging facts, stealing ideas, editors demanding artificial angles instead of what

organically existed, and constant questions, such as “so, who’s the bad guy here?” There are plenty of good people in journalism, but they are a beleaguered minority.

At the *Wall Street Journal*, for example, (probably the only news organization to actually improve after a Murdoch takeover) I was frustrated by clumsily biased editing and an adherence to an antiquated set of stupefying, shop-worn formulas. I wrote a piece about the evolution of the common feeding tube, which was invented in 1978 as a simple and effective way to feed prematurely born children – the same tube that wound up keeping Terry Schiavo and her walnut-sized brain alive. I heard from a doctor that Nancy Reagan had refused such a tube for Ronald Reagan. It took me a long time to track that down and verify it, but it was cut from each iteration of the story. At the time, state legislators nationwide were proposing laws that would require the use of a feeding tube for elderly people on the brink of death.

I returned to the AP in 2003, but quit in the middle of a major project about the Sahara: the creeping southward desertification that was emptying cities; the U.S. military’s increased presence and U.S. support for monsters far worse than Saddam, like President Taya of Mauritania. As a courtesy, I copied in the West Africa bureau chief at the time when I filed the first of a nine-part series. She plucked a few hundred words of the best material and filed it under the name of their supposed stringer, who was in fact a Taya information ministry flunky. Do I sound angry and bitter?

**“Done” sounds more appropriate.**

The perspective of time makes the whole journalism career misadventures seem hilariously grotesque. Like, watching the cheesy movie “Attack of the Killer Tomatoes.”

Some of my best stuff from Iraq and Afghanistan was downplayed because I supposedly “went rogue.” The suits wanted the print, pictures, radio and television people to travel together in caravans. Even a hack like me didn’t want to be part of a group hug in which everyone was at the mercy of the weakest link. I bitched about this stuff constantly and pretty much napalmed every career bridge I’d crossed. Media behavior was abysmal. Star correspondents sending expendable stringers into harm’s way, then poaching the byline without leaving the office.

In 2003, during “Operation Bechtel Cost Overruns,” I went to the US military headquarters in Baghdad to cover a relatively peaceful protest by soldiers who wanted their paychecks for letting the Americans win the war against them (weird, I know, but I briefly tried out an agent who cryptically insisted that fiction must be more believable than fact). Anyway, a Humvee gunner freaked out upon arrival and shot two protesters to death. I crossed razor wire repeatedly to get both sides. I filed a story by sat phone and when I got back to the AP’s plush hotel suites, the story had somebody else’s name on it. Wire service reporters are largely anonymous anyway, but that’s just one example of how routinely some media meathead would blithely poach a byline from somebody who actually put his life on the line.

Journalism, for me, went from a calling to a source of outrage to, finally, just the theater of the absurd. You could really grasp why combat veterans such as Joseph Heller or Kurt Vonnegut chose to portray war as surreally dark comedies filled with characters oblivious to their absolute lack of honor.

### **What have you been doing since then?**

Well, I lived foolishly for a while, then finally buckled down and started writing again. I could not let go of non-fiction. My agent rejected all my book ideas, which subsequently became trends. My favorite: I consider myself a student of generational conflict, the young against the old against the older. The graduated driver's license, the crackdowns on elderly drivers. Prosecuting children as adults. It was called *Generation Landslide*. My agent rejected it because he "had another client working on a similar idea." Never saw that book in print.

I guess the fact that the Internet was dealing crippling blows to the music, newspaper, and entertainment industries helped me realize it was idiotic to follow the formulaic, redundant and ultimately stunted paradigm of the sodden publishing industry and the cozy, incestuous relationships with professional "agents" who were just cogs in the same outmoded machine. The mantra was always the same: What other book is this like? Joyce, Faulkner, Heller and an honor roll of our most entertaining writers would not (and, in fact, did not for years) get published in this stuffed-shirt, formula-driven factory that produces unreadable nonsense

that is edited by committee and marketed like a Kardashian kielbasa.

### **Why did you decide to write fiction?**

Props to the agent! In one email I sent half a dozen ideas to the guy. I threw in a paragraph about a novel that was essentially *Permanent Deadline*. Initially it was called *Sounds Like Thunder*, which is what non-combatants often say when they hear the approach of artillery fire. Like my first book, *Lost on Earth*, you'll probably see a lot of books titled *Sounds Like Thunder* if anybody reads this interview.

My old-timey agent glommed onto the pitch of fiction, which was more a vessel of selected slivers of truth. He was a connoisseur of "literary non-fiction," but I guess non-fiction fiction was trending that day.

Only about a year ago did I find the rhythm and beats that became *Permanent Deadline*. I could use stories that were real, stories I never finished – just a fraction of the stuff I'd experienced – and I had a flood of ideas for future novels. The five characters at the core of *Permanent Deadline* were built from dozens of people too real to be believed, all of them sharing an epic adventure in an alternative reality.

The most bracing part of the process was how much it amused me. I could poke a stick at every sacred cow I'd seen behaving badly (no offense to real cows). The story took on a life of its own – a road trip with personal observations about war, religion and family, And the process of publishing *Permanent Deadline* fit perfectly with the book's absurd vision of this sorry little world. I delivered "Permanent

Deadline” to my agent long after the book’s premise had piqued his interest. After he read a chunk of it, he could not put his finger on why he didn’t want to represent it. It had good pacing, great action, well-developed, but not all that likable characters.

**What’s wrong with a book devoid of likable characters? Sounds like real life.**

He concluded it was essentially the work of a journalist unable to make a transition to fiction. Among the old-school publishing class, “journalists unable to make the transition to fiction” became a buzz-off phrase that popped up again and again. Two other agents and a former honcho at one of the big houses said essentially the same thing. And they were all connected. There is this anthology titled “The Mammoth Book of War Correspondents: 100 of the Greatest War Dispatches ever Written.” I have a piece in it, along with other hack war correspondents who couldn’t make the transition to fiction: Stephen Crane, Hemingway, Orwell, Kipling, and many more morons who just could not grasp that concept of “genre” through their reality-hardened heads.

**How did you come up with the title? What’s the meaning?**

Everybody is on a deadline. I’m one of the people who sincerely believes that time is an artificial construct invented by organic beings to count off the time they have left to live. At the AP, the motto was “Deadline Every Minute.” AP kept stats to the second on how many seconds you were

ahead or behind of, say, Reuter.

We live on deadlines. Time to go to bed, time to get up, time to pay taxes, time to go to work, time to pick up the kids, finish the project, write a perfectly formed story in your head and get it out first. We live in a world of chaos and random luck and serendipity. We can control enough variables to influence our individual timelines to achieve our goals, but then, we can get hit by a bus. The ultimate deadline is death, and what we want to do with our lives before our time is up is the most daunting deadline of all.

### **What's the message? (there always is one)**

The message was discovered by Frank Reznick. In the absence of a belief in religion, in destiny, in fate, he built a belief system on a code of honor and truth. Do the right thing. The message is about the purity of secular humanism. Embrace the good within and live an honorable life. The message is that you don't need a pre-fabricated belief system. You just need honor and truth. I tell my best friend's kids: Dare to be great, but choose to be good. Talk to that kid standing alone at a party. It might not change your life. But it might change his.

### **If there is a book in existence that you want PD to emulate, which one is it?**

*Catch-22. At Play in the Fields of the Lord. Gravity's Rainbow. Confederacy of Dunces. The Sound and the Fury. Slaughterhouse Five.* In that order. But mostly *Catch-22*.

Heller lived what he wrote. I don't really want to emulate anybody. I have the gathered wisdom of having had season tickets to the changing of this current iteration of life on Earth. Everything I write is my own thing. I admire some authors and am influenced by some authors. But I've got too many of my own scars to emulate anybody.

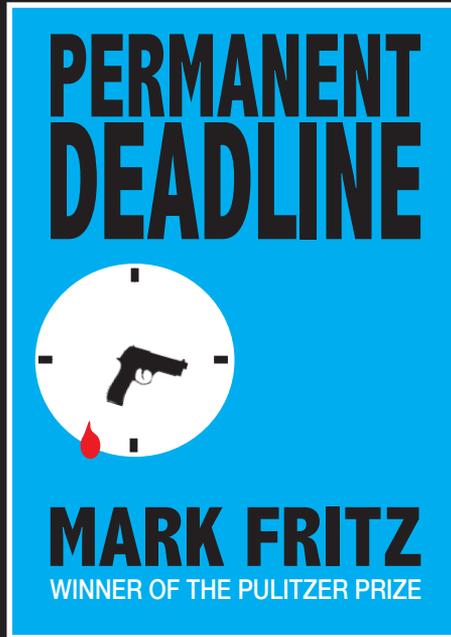
### **Define your audience.**

Me. I read this book and I loved it. I stopped reading fiction years ago. Most of my news consumption these days comes from primary sources (NGO field reports, blogs in Third World countries, discussion groups of nurses discussing end-of-life issues, etc.)

I can't get two pages into most of what I tried to read. Just from the quick flood of contacts on so-called social media, I see a cross-section of smart people looking for something that breaks the formula. I wrote a book for the demographic who can't find anything relevant, exciting and unbelievably believable to read.

*PERMANENT DEADLINE is a wildly entertaining yet unsettling war story about life on the clock.*

*Seven people with conflicting agendas and shared deadlines collide spectacularly in the final days of the Cold War*



Pulitzer Prize-winning war correspondent Mark Fritz, who covered every significant global event since the fall of the Berlin Wall, upends accepted notions of piety and patriotism and exposes a media machine's clownishly inept coverage of a world unraveling

**Buy it at: <http://amazon.com> Price \$14.99**