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*Editor's note: We are saddened to hear of Mr. Cannell's passing in October 2010 and honored to be one of his final interviews.*

**Somewhere in Los Angeles, while the city sleeps and the joints are closed, and the rats and killers are in their holes, Stephen J. Cannell flips on his IBM Selectric.** Using his fingers like loaded Glock pistols, he fires ideas, clack-clack-clack, then pulls out the page and tosses it over his shoulder. Maybe you've seen the toss. In the 1980s, it was the end piece for TV shows produced by Stephen J. Cannell Productions.

The best-selling author, Emmy-winning TV writer and producer is responsible for hit shows like *The Rockford Files*, *The Greatest American Hero*, *The A-Team* and *21 Jump Street*. Specializing in crime shows and action-adventures, Cannell's work has played a big role in redefining how we view those genres.

"I've been very successful at selling my things, but I've also been getting up at 4 in the morning for 40 years," Cannell tells *SUCCESS* from his home in L.A. "I write on Saturdays and Sundays. I never stop." His recurring theme? Get up every day and do what you love. Successful people find joy in the doing.

Cannell, 69, favors a black-leather jacket and black turtleneck on his 6-foot-2-inch, 195-pound frame. He has a deep actor's voice, an ear for slang, and a direct gaze that could numb a cobra. He enjoys "spitballing ideas" with a stable of industry friends (he and buddy Steven Bochco were once the youngest writers on the Universal lot). The actual writing he does alone, because his private authorship is strong, he says. It's not a boast. Cannell doesn't see himself as a big deal.

"Most of my things strike to the same theme, which is not to take yourself so seriously that you can't grow," Cannell says. "I'm generally a very happy guy because I'm doing what I want. I'm willing to tell you that there are people who are much better than I am in writing. I don't have to be the fastest gun in the West."

Somewhere deep in his head, he's still the guy who was once the stupidest kid in school.

### 'Nothing from Negativity'

Cannell grew up in an upper-middle-class household in Pasadena, but a life of privilege—private schools, ski trips at Christmas—didn't shield him from pain. Like crime-fiction writer Agatha Christie before him, Cannell has severe dyslexia that went undiagnosed. He knew he was failing but had no idea why. Going to school was like swimming in sandpaper, a rough ride with scrapes.

"I started flunking every third time I was at bat. I flunked three grades before I got out of high school," Cannell says. "I'm the guy who, when I write something, I get a 'see me office hours' note on it. I'm also perceived by most teachers as not being very good. Throughout my whole early development, that was my take on myself."

His father, Joseph, was an entrepreneur and self-made businessman who developed several companies and co-owned Cannell & Chaffin, a well-known California furniture and interior design company. When Cannell was 13, his father insisted he start working in the family business. It was one of his father's many lessons in how to "think straight" and learn core values. Let the other school kids zip tennis balls and swing their golf clubs. If school didn't work out, hard work would prepare Cannell for a different kind of life—moving long couches up circular staircases.

"My dad was my best friend," Cannell says. "I worshipped him. All of my success in life really comes from him. He believed that you get nothing from negativity. Zero." It was an unusual sentiment for the survival-of-the-fittest, West Coast mentality. "So many people get involved with carrying grudges and having these moral battles with people, where they cast themselves as the righteous and the other guy is the dirtbag. They waste tons of energy on it, create all kinds of darkness around themselves and the

other person. It gets you nothing. So I instantly forgive anybody and generally don't look for a heavy in an equation."

## Heavy Lifting

In high school, Cannell's skill at running back earned him a scholarship to the University of Oregon; his low grades prevented him from keeping it. But he remained enrolled at Oregon and stuck with it. There, a professor recognized his creative writing as a rare gift and encouraged him to use it. "Ralph Salisbury planted the idea that I could do what I loved doing, that there was some talent there. It wasn't that I was just grinding sausage; it was that I was doing something different. He didn't care about the sloppy handwriting, the spelling," Cannell says.

He graduated in four years and married his eighth-grade sweetheart, Marcia Finch. During the day, Cannell did heavy lifting in his father's store. At night, he'd write for five hours, mostly TV scripts on spec. Five years later, he sold his first story ideas to *Mission: Impossible* and his first script to *It Takes a Thief*. He quickly built a reputation as a fast and visionary writer. While banging out a script for the series *Toma*, he created a character named Jim Rockford, which eventually turned into the pilot for the NBC series *The Rockford Files*. From there, Cannell's TV accolades become too long to list.

With success came the drive to push the bar a little higher. It wasn't enough to be a hired gun for a studio; Cannell wanted to compete with the studios and maintain creative control over his own material. In 1979, Cannell left Universal to form Stephen J. Cannell Productions, and seven years later, the Cannell Studios in Vancouver, British Columbia, where he experienced the crush of a string of flops.

## Keeping Ego in Check

If he'd learned anything, it was not to pass the shoe; to keep betting on himself—and on others. When calling on the networks to present ideas, he would take writers with him, would throw the glory into their laps—demonstrating he cared as much about their careers as he did his own. "Part of my methodology was to put other writers forward—not to let my ego as a writer suffocate them. I also did eat my own ego a lot. My rule, when you're dealing with a lot of creative people, is the best idea, not the biggest title, wins the argument. I would foster that. All of a sudden, people are energized by that. They'd think, 'Hey, it counts what I think around here.' It engenders a tremendous morale inside your own company."

That mindset helped him stay friends with just about everybody in ego-maniacal Hollywood: actors, writers, producers, directors, even network executives. "I wanted the network guys to like my shows. I wanted them to be happy with me. When I went over there, I wanted them to feel it was fun doing business with me. So I was willing to make compromises, and at the end of the day, I never held a grudge. The result of it was I had a very long career that allowed me to stay in the game much longer than most," Cannell says.

From the day he wrote author under the word ambition in his high-school yearbook, he wanted to become a novelist, so he worked at it with the same bang-bang-bang that had propelled his TV scripts. In 1995, he sold the studio to move forward with the writing.

This fall, Cannell introduces the 10th novel in his critically acclaimed Shane Scully series, *The Prostitutes' Ball*, published by St. Martin's Press. Scully is a die-hard detective with the Los Angeles Police Department who's been gagged, bagged, dragged, drugged and gotten his teeth kicked in, and still manages to cuff the bad guys. Other stand-alone mystery novels take readers on journeys into worlds Cannell never experienced growing up. To get the feel right, he studies a multitude of subjects—SWAT teams, special ops, military forces, human anatomy, gangs, fast cars, narcotics, music. Street slang and technology have changed since the days when Jim Rockford had an answering machine and would snap, "Oh, stow it!" Cannell uses books on vernacular and slang from the Web to help create his lightning in a bottle, where everything comes together.

## Playing Cops and Robbers

In the Cannell workday, he writes, runs a few businesses, does movie work, develops some TV, does a little acting. He's a co-producer with Ridley Scott and Jules Daly on the recent movie adaptation of his 1980s hit TV show *The A-Team*. How does he get so much done when he can't spell many of the words in his own life story? It's all about committed daily effort—those five hours set aside just for writing—leaving the afternoons for his other pursuits. Cannell has a “mop and pail crew” of crack assistants who unscramble his pages, check his facts and do “endless manuscript cleanup,” he says.

“One of my work ethic traits comes from the fact that I absolutely love what I do. I've never felt that writing was work. If you look around at people who are really successful, you find that most are people who love what they're doing. True happiness has to come from inside you; it can't come from outside,” he says. Fame is a pair of rolling dice: always a new face, always a crapshoot.

He doesn't think in terms of success or of failure, that contagious disease. He thinks about having fun. “I get up every morning, and I'm not going to work, I'm going to play. I get to play cops and robbers. Even the research, even when I'm not writing well, it's still better than any other kind of work that I can think of doing,” Cannell says.

“At the beginning of your career, you're gonna be paid less than you're worth, and at the end of your career, when you're senile and not worth anything, they're gonna be paying you your biggest bucks ever. It all balances out at the end.”

Just like Detective Scully and his handcuffs. *Click-click-click.*