

GAUpdate

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Guidelines

An Evolutionary Process

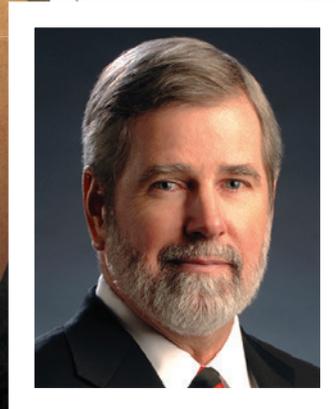
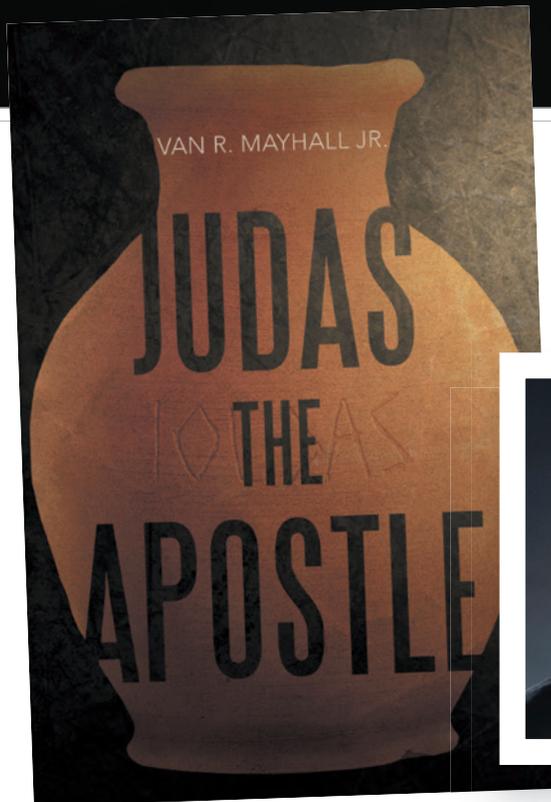
Lessons Learned

Part II

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From Louisiana to the End of the

Van R. Mayhall Jr. talks about his novels and gives us a sneak



Van R. Mayhall Jr. has worked in the guaranty system for almost 25 years as the Legal Counsel for the Louisiana Life & Health Insurance Guaranty Association (a position now co-filled by his son, Van R. Mayhall III). A Senior Partner with the Breazeale, Sachse & Wilson law firm in Baton Rouge, Mayhall is also a published author, having written the thrillers *Judas the Apostle* and *The Last Sicarius* (available on his website, <http://vanmayhall.com/>, as well as on Amazon and other retail sites). He was kind enough to discuss his passion for writing with GA Update.



the World

preview of the next book in the series

GA Update: *How would you describe your novels? Would “religious thriller” be accurate?*

Mayhall Jr.: They’re not religious books per se. I think of them as biblical thrillers. They really leverage off of biblical events, documents, characters, and things of that nature. *Judas the Apostle*, for instance, is about a 2,000-year-old relic that the father of the main character, Cloe Lejeune, finds in an oil jar in Africa during the Second World War. He brings it back, and it sits on the mantelpiece for 60 years. One day he’s murdered in his home. And so the mystery begins—what’s in the jar, who wants it, and what will they do to get it?

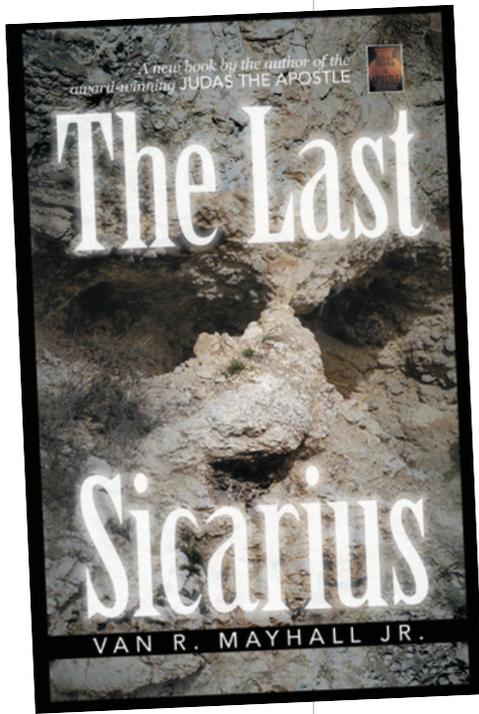
GA Update: *On your website you give a nod to Dan Brown and The Da Vinci Code, but what inspired you to start writing?*

Mayhall Jr.: The book was inspired by a faith journey. About 20 years ago I decided I needed to know more

about my religion and about all religions, so I’ve been in the process of reading the great religious works—the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Koran, etc. In reading the Bible, I came across the figure of Judas, and there just were some fascinating inconsistencies about him. And consequently, I decided to write a novel wrapped around those biblical inconsistencies, you might say.

The book contains lots of really interesting tidbits about the character. But the big thing that got me started on it was when Matthew quotes Jesus as saying, “Better for the man who betrays me that he never would have been born.” I thought about that, and I said, “Well, what would have happened if Judas had never been born? How would the salvation story have played out? Would it have been somebody else? There had to be a Judas.” It was just interesting to me. There are no real answers to it.

So you’ve got *Judas* and the three main characters in the book: Clotile Lejeune, or Cloe, as we call her;



the monsignor, who is a mysterious Vatican operative; and Cloe's son, J.E. J.E. is a military intelligence officer—interesting kid, about 25, 26 years old. The three of them are the principal characters in all three books.

GA Update: *You take your characters from Louisiana to different countries all around the world. What kind of research goes into a book with that sort of scope?*

Mayhall Jr.: Let me take it in phases. The books all begin in Madisonville, Louisiana. It's a little town on the Tchefuncte River in St. Tammany Parish. The Lejeune family lives there. For those portions of the books, all of that research—all the restaurants, all the places—that's all firsthand,

in-person research. A good portion of the books take place in New Orleans and Baton Rouge. All of that, once again, is firsthand research. For instance, the Church of St. Mary and the Ursuline Convent in New Orleans, we've been through that a couple dozen times just taking notes and pictures and whatnot.

The rest of it—Lyon, France; Jerusalem; the Turkish-Armenian border; Masada in the second book—that's really all online research. There are just marvelous resources available out there, and I sourced everything through at least two credible sources. Because if you're writing fiction, you make up characters, but you can't make up Jerusalem. Jerusalem is a given fact, and lots of people have been there. So you have to get the places right, get your facts right.

GA Update: *What made you decide to base much of the story in Louisiana?*

Mayhall Jr.: Well, they say "write what you know." My business is law, but I didn't want to write about legal matters, so I started off writing about Louisiana. And a lot of the places in Louisiana have odd connections to other parts of the story. For instance, Lyon, France, has a connection with the Ursuline Sisters in New Orleans. Now, it's a couple hundred years old, but I found that interesting. The church of St. John, where several different scenes take place, has an ancient connection with the establishment of Christianity in what was then Gaul, now France.

And these all have connections with Armenia. Irenaeus, the Second Bishop of Lyon, France, was from the Kingdom of Armenia. The world wasn't that big back then, and a lot of these places were interconnected. So I just sort of connected the dots. I always knew where each book would begin and end. It was just a matter of the journey and filling in interesting places along the way.

GA Update: *You knew where the books would begin and end. Did you let the story take you wherever it wanted to go between those two points, or did you have a pretty solid outline of the plot points you wanted to hit and where you wanted things to happen?*

Mayhall Jr.: You've got your finger right on it. There are two types of writers. One is an outliner, and the other is a "seat of the pants" writer. I'm a "seat of the pants" writer. The story flows through me, and my job in the first draft is to capture the story. I don't care about punctuation, I don't care about syntax. I don't care about anything but story. I have the idea of a story I want to tell and I know where it starts, and then the story takes me along with it.

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GA Update: *Speaking of the writing process, do you have any suggestions for aspiring writers? I'm sure in the guaranty community we've got more than a few people who get home at night and fire up their computer to write.*

Mayhall Jr.: First of all, writing is not about creativity or genius. Most people have enough creativity and enough smarts. Writing is about discipline and practice. I write one hour a night, every night. At 9:00, I turn off the TV or whatever I'm doing and I go into my home office, light up the computer, and I write for an hour. Sometimes it's 50 words, sometimes it's 500 words. But whatever it is, it is. The story bubbles in my mind all the time, but at night I get it on paper. It's the discipline of doing something like that that I think people need to know. Write, write, write. Don't worry whether it's good or bad. It will get better. But do it with a disciplined pen.

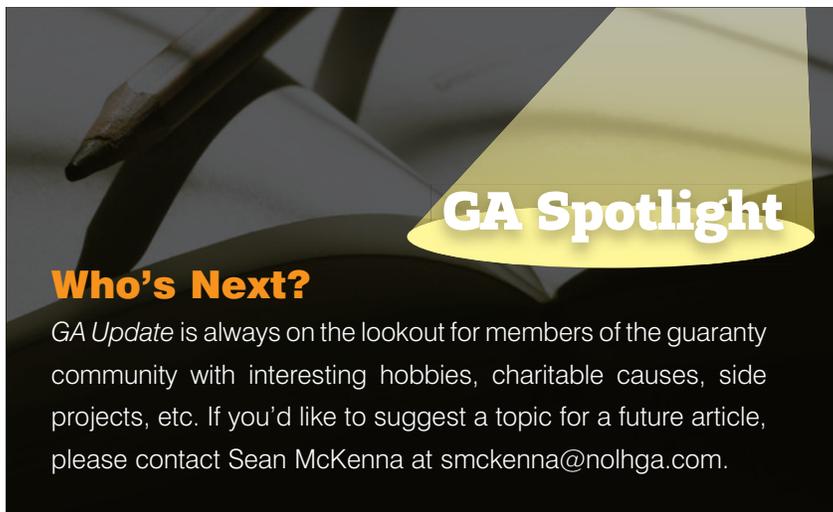
GA Update: *If you're writing a thriller about someone preventing a nuclear war or a takeover of the government, that's one thing. When you're doing a biblical thriller, you're on more sensitive ground with some readers. How hard is it to balance a respect for the feelings many readers have about the Bible with your need to tell a compelling story?*

Mayhall Jr.: You know, that's come up often in book clubs and book signings. And, first of all, the research is precise and is sourced well. So nobody has been able to come up to me and say, "Hey, that's just not in the Bible." They may want to talk about my conclusions, but they can't talk about my facts because I'm very careful with them.

Beyond that, I'm not trying to preach to anybody. I'm not getting into theology or religion. And I stay away from any kind of stereotype. In *Judas the Apostle*, the chief bad guy is an ex-arms dealer called The Kolektor who just had terrible experiences and grew up with a big hate complex against the church. There's no ideology—everybody can agree he's a bad guy.

GA Update: *When you base a novel in your hometown or local surroundings, you run the risk of people saying, "I know which character I am—why did you make me the bad guy?" Has that happened to you?*

Mayhall Jr.: Not in that way, but there are some things hidden in the books. In *Judas*, for instance, the monsignor's name is Albert Roques. If you knew my family really well, you would know that Roques is my



Who's Next?

GA Update is always on the lookout for members of the guaranty community with interesting hobbies, charitable causes, side projects, etc. If you'd like to suggest a topic for a future article, please contact Sean McKenna at smckenna@nolhga.com.

I had one of my law partners come to me and say "I think my dog ought to be in your book."

mother's maiden name. And Cloe's father, who was in World War II, shares some traits with my father, who was also in World War II.

Now, what I do have is people coming to me and saying, "Can I be in your next book?" My seven year old grandson—he calls me Big Papa—said, "Big Papa, when are you going to write about me in your book?" And I said, "Van, you're going to be in the next book." And so I've got a little seven-year-old boy named Robby in the third book, which is being edited now. Writing Robby's character was just a wonderful experience.

I had one of my law partners come to me and say "I think my dog ought to be in your book." So in the third book you'll find a little dog among the new characters.

("Mayhall" continues on page 20)