

# My Twin Passions: Writing Books and Saving Sight

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Author of *Saving Sight* and *Two Sons of China*

I have no doubt that my high school English teachers were shocked to learn that I became an author. This is because, for the first three decades of my life, I showed no significant interest in writing, and in high school, I devoted more time to CliffsNotes than to the assigned novels. But if there's one thing I've learned in life, it's that finding and pursuing one's passion can enable each of us to accomplish surprising things.

All of my friends have passions, though some might decline to classify them as such. These passions may include their careers (if they're lucky), being an outstanding parent, experiencing new cultures through travel, coaching youth sports or physical fitness – to name a few. I was lucky

to discover my own passion at a very young age.

It was history.

I'm not joking. In elementary school, I read all the history and biography books I could find. Visiting Civil War battlefields with my family felt like a trip to Disneyland. Watching historical films, especially war movies, was the best.

There was no doubt that I would study history in college. I dreamed of writing historical tomes like David McCullough, or perhaps creating documentary films like Ken Burns.

But there was a problem.

My father was a doctor. An interventional cardiologist. And in the small city in central Illinois where I grew up, it wasn't unusual for random people to approach me and my dad on the street or in the mall and thank him for saving their lives or the lives of their loved ones. Those experiences left an indelible mark on me. It was obvious that being a physician was something very special.

So when it came time to decide whether to go to graduate school in history or medical school, I chose the latter. And I've never regretted it because I love being an ophthalmologist. But – I never gave up my desire to share my passion for history with others.

One night, as a resident staffing the graveyard shift in the Emergency Department, a thought occurred to me. I'd learned a lot about America's war in China during World War II, and I'd often wished there were more books on the subject. I knew I didn't have the time to write one myself – yet – but that night, I realized there was something I had plenty of.

Imagination.

What if I wrote a historically based novel set in China during World War II? I could dream up an exciting story, full of action, adventure and romance, and, in the process, highlight this period in history, as well as the stories of a few real-life, unsung American World War II heroes. I had plenty of time for something like this; I could think about the story anywhere – in the car,

in the shower or in the middle of the night sitting in the ER.

About nine years later, that idea led to the publication of my first novel, *Two Sons of China*, which won a Foreword Reviews' Book of the Year Award, has been published in Europe and has attracted interest in a film based on the story. There were long gaps in that period when I didn't think about the book at all. Along the way, I completed a busy retina fellowship and my wife and I had four children. But I'd keep coming back to the book, writing, revising and editing. I eventually got a literary agent to represent it, and finally, a publisher.

Meanwhile, during my ophthalmology residency, I became curious about how our surgical techniques had been developed. Who had devised modern-day cataract surgery? It was such an elegant and life-changing operation. How had LASIK, our most futuristic sight-saving procedure, been invented?

As I learned more about the innovators in my field, I was blown away by their stories of serendipity, perseverance, courage and defeat. I'd unearthed a half-dozen medical heroes that most people knew nothing about. A man who'd been inspired to invent the artificial lens after examining the eyes of a wounded pilot during the Battle of Britain. A doctor whose inspiration for phacoemulsification came from seeing an instrument at his dentist's office.

I went to my literary agent and told her I was really excited to do a nonfiction book on ophthalmology's heroes.

She turned me down flat.

People aren't likely to buy a book about medical nonfiction, much less ophthalmological nonfiction, she thought.

I was crestfallen, but I didn't give up. What if I blended the history with exciting stories from my surgical training? I could take readers into the operating room to see what it's like to save a patient's sight, or perhaps more interestingly, what it's like when things go wrong or when a surgeon isn't sure what to do.

Doing this helped the book, *Saving Sight*, get picked up quickly. It's been a best-seller on Amazon, and ultimately, I think this honesty about what it's really like to be a surgeon is what has helped the book become so popular.

Many people ask me how I find time to write. I think if you have passion for something, you just make time. It's especially important for physicians to make time to develop and pursue interests outside of medicine, because our work is becoming increasingly stressful and – some would argue – less satisfying. Physician burnout is a real and increasing phenomenon. In today's climate of increasing government regulation, third-party payer demands and a public that is more likely than ever to view physicians as mere technicians, we are all susceptible to emotional fatigue, lack of independence and dissatisfaction that can ultimately lead to a diminished view of ourselves and our accomplishments.

When we make a point to enjoy our lives beyond medicine, and especially when we strive to learn new things, we become healthier people and far better doctors.

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