

Interview with Eliot Sefrin, Author of *Under a Cloud*

Reader Views welcomes Eliot Sefrin, author of the law enforcement thriller, *Under A Cloud*. Eliot is being interviewed by Juanita Watson, Assistant Editor of Reader Views.

Juanita: Thanks for joining us today, Eliot. We are happy to have the chance to hear more about your book, a law enforcement thriller, *Under A Cloud*. Would you start by giving us a synopsis of your book?

Eliot: The storyline revolves around a shooting that takes place in a poverty-stricken, minority neighborhood in Brooklyn, NY. In the incident, a hearing-impaired black teen is killed under questionable circumstances in a dark apartment building cellar by two white police officers – one male, one female – responding to a reported burglary-in progress and believing they are under attack. Readers soon learn, however, that the teen in question is innocent of any crime; that the shooting, in reality, is nothing more than a tragic accident; and that the officers, like the victim, are unwitting victims of circumstance.

The facts about the shooting, however, seem irrelevant. The incident immediately becomes the flashpoint for virulent racial tension, fueled by stereotypes and years of bitter confrontation between police and local residents. Protestors see the shooting as a rallying cry, and immediately protest what they charge have been years of racially-motivated, brutal, unjustified and unpunished police actions. On the flip side of those protests are the arguments of police advocates, who contend that the shooting was not a callous, criminal, racially-motivated act, but rather an unavoidable accident – a byproduct of instances where police are called on to make pressure-packed, split-second, life-and-death decisions, often in surroundings where judgment is impaired.

Typical of cases like this, the shooting becomes a political hot potato, as city officials launch exhaustive investigations, and pro- and anti-police demonstrators line up on both sides of the issue, largely along racial lines.

As the confrontation rages amid a backdrop of violence, controversy and chaos, both the officers and the family of the victim become immersed in intense inner crises, as they struggle to come to terms with the tragedy. As the story unfolds, readers, like the main characters, experience first-hand the stereotypes, history and passions that often divide us as a people – as well as the actions and emotions that can ultimately bond and help us heal.

Juanita: Eliot, this is your first novel. Would you give us a little background into your professional career, and what inspired you to write this particular book?

Eliot: I began as a journalist, working as a newspaper reporter, then as a feature writer, columnist and editor. Newspapers, I found, were a tremendous training ground for the kind of creative writing I've always been drawn to. Newspaper writing pushes you to do the most important thing writers need to do: write every day. It forces you, at the same time, to identify the guts of a story and confront the demands of deadlines and space constraints.

The newspaper job eventually led to work as a magazine editor and publisher, even though I've always hungered to write fiction. *Under A Cloud* is a story I'd carried around inside me for years, ever since I met my wife, who was then one of the first female police officers assigned to street patrol in New York. At the time, she related a police shooting incident that took place at the precinct to which she was assigned. *Under A Cloud* was inspired by that, as well as by similar incidents in New York and elsewhere.

I've always felt there was a rich minefield to tap into as a writer – and a great deal to learn – from those incidents, which are generally reported by the press in a very superficial, sensationalistic manner. I tried to go deeper than that. I wanted to examine the incident, in an unbiased, balanced way, from many perspectives – the arguments on both sides of the case, the political dynamics, the legal and civil rights issues, the relationship between the city and its police officers, the impact of the shooting on a poverty-stricken neighborhood and its residents.

I also wanted to look at the incident from a human perspective. I wanted to portray the people involved in the case not as symbols or cardboard cutouts, but as good, caring, even heroic individuals who suddenly face intense and conflicting emotions, enormous pressures, and a nightmarish, life-altering crisis that threatens to destroy their lives. I wanted to take readers into the hearts and minds of these characters: How they're forced to live in the white-hot glare of the public spotlight; what happens to them after the headlines die down and public attention shifts.

Juanita: *Under a Cloud* is set in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, NY, in 1973. What makes this the perfect setting for your book?

Eliot: I wanted to paint a portrait of an impoverished minority neighborhood – the kind of breeding ground where stories like this could take place. Brownsville, in many ways, serves as a metaphor for the decaying American inner city of the 1970s. It was also a neighborhood in which there was a great deal of racial tension between police and local residents, much of it festering, like a time bomb, just beneath a patina of order and calm. The issues of poverty, racial tension, frustration, resentment, despair and rage – are closely tied to much of what unfolds in the novel, so it was important to place the story in that kind of setting.

The timing of the shooting depicted in the book is also important to the plot, because the 1970s were especially ripe for a story like this to unfold. There was almost a “perfect storm” of conditions present at the time. The political atmosphere in the city was electric – even *toxic*. Times were tumultuous. Inner-city neighborhoods were being transformed by important social changes, and rocked by new forms of community activism. Racial tension was running high. Law enforcement was under siege, with cops being attacked regularly on the streets. It was also a period of enormous transition. Issues raised in the '60s were being addressed in terms of public policy. Police departments were being

subject to massive, often gut-wrenching, forms of reinvention, including the advent of women on street patrol.

I wanted to set the novel within this bubbling cauldron, so that the storyline would be especially plausible. However, I hope readers are not so much *taken back* in time as much as they simply *forget* about the time frame entirely. I hope people feel the story could have just as easily happened today, or even tomorrow, because, sadly, many of the same conditions still exist. In fact, we see stories like this happen all the time, with similar circumstances and similar outcomes.

Juanita: How often do shootings like the one depicted in your story really happen? Are the results today the same as they may have been during the '70s?

Eliot: Even though they receive intense media coverage, police shootings are actually *rare*. In fact, something like less than one percent of encounters between police and civilians involve the use of force. By and large, police officers do a commendable job in exercising restraint. Most, in fact, never fire their gun over the course of their entire career.

Despite this, police do kill several hundred people a year in the line of duty. For the most part, the shootings are ruled as justifiable. But more than a few over the years have involved questionable acts that violated either departmental policy or the law.

Experts say there are several ways these shootings can be minimized: by expanding the use of less-lethal weapons; through training; tougher firearms policies and a weeding out of officers who are violence-prone. And I think law enforcement has taken steps along all those lines since the '70s.

Despite those strides, however, many questionable police shootings continue to take place. In truth, police decision-making in many of these incidents is a complex calculus. Often, the shootings take place in high-crime neighborhoods. The officers are emotionally charged. Lighting conditions are poor. Identities are blurred. Intent is ambiguous. Actions are misinterpreted. Commands are ignored. It's hard for even the most experienced officers to distinguish reality from perception. Often, the officer finds himself in an ambiguous, nightmarish, no-man's land, with gut-wrenching, split-second, life-and-death decisions to make...or simply to react on instinct. And sometimes, yes, decisions are colored by racial stereotypes and abstractions and history.

In that sense, incidents like the kind depicted in *Under A Cloud* are probably an inevitable and tragic byproduct of a difficult job. It's impossible to eliminate confrontations between officers and civilians in dark locations. Similarly, it's impossible to eliminate fear, confusion, racial stereotypes and references to past cases where officers either killed wrongly, or were killed themselves because they hesitated to shoot.

The more important question, I think, is: how should we *react* to these incidents, and what should we learn from them? How do we avoid instantly labeling them based on blind assumptions colored by race and hysteria? How do we investigate them swiftly and impartially and judiciously, and with fairness to all sides? How do we avoid overlaying an injustice on top of a tragedy through politically motivated knee-jerk acts of discipline? Most importantly, how do we, as a society, eliminate the

conditions and the mindset that result in the kind of explosive racial confrontation depicted in the novel?

I think we need to react by asking all those questions, and assuring that the answers are satisfactory. I think we've made progress as a society in changing the way we react to many of these cases, but clearly there's still a long way to go.

Juanita: Who are your main characters, and would you give us some insights into their personality and contributions to the story?

Eliot: Most of the storyline focuses on the two officers involved in the shooting, as well as on the father of the slain teen.

Matt Holland, who fires the fatal shot, is a highly decorated veteran officer who was once hailed for his heroic rescue of two children caught in a building collapse. An honest, hardworking officer, he is highly respected by fellow cops and throughout Brownsville, where he has served 13 years. Married and the father of three children, Holland, 34, is considered among the top Field Training Officers in the city. He has a spotless record and, despite making hundreds of arrests, has never fired his gun in all his years on the job. He has also worked actively to improve police-community relations.

Rachel Cook, 23, is a dedicated, idealistic rookie who is being trained by Holland. Single and on the job a mere 11 months, she has been assigned to Brownsville as part of a bold and controversial initiative to deploy females for the first time on street patrol, during an era of court-mandated, burgeoning opportunities for women. Viewed as a potential superstar who is being groomed for an elite NYPD anti-crime unit, Cook has graduated number one in her Police Academy class, and is being hailed as a symbol of a newly defined, more diverse, modern-day NYPD. One of only 200 women in a 30,000-person department, she has embraced police work largely to break free of the restrictive stereotypes attached to young women with similar middle-class Brooklyn backgrounds.

Charles Johnson, 48, is the father of C.J. Johnson, the developmentally-challenged, hearing-impaired teen who is accidentally slain. A subway token clerk who moved to Brooklyn to escape the bigotry of the Deep South, Johnson has always been determined to explode the destructive stereotype of the shiftless black father. He took a major hand in raising his son, the victim of lead poisoning as a toddler. Mourning a son he deeply loved, struggling to separate fact from hysteria regarding the shooting, Johnson is thrust into the forefront of a groundbreaking civil rights case contesting the previously unchallenged police practice of racial profiling, while finding himself torn between his desire to support community activists and discovering the truth about the nature of his son's death.

Although their personal journeys differ widely, all these characters face essentially the same struggle: how to cope with the impact of the tragedy on their lives; how to move forward with their lives in the face of overwhelming odds; how to give meaning to everything that has happened. Each of these characters face grave personal crises. Each, shaped by their backgrounds and personality, react to the shooting in a very different way. Each, in different ways, emerges from the tragedy as very different people.

Juanita: What happens when stereotypes, hatred and revenge take over in a community?

Eliot: When that happens, chaos, violence, injustice and an ugly form of politics can easily reign, with an impact that can be devastating to communities and people's lives. I tried to illustrate that in *Under A Cloud*. As the story unfolds, we see how the truth can be instantly obscured by a rush to judgment shaped by history, abstractions, controversy and political pressures. We see how lives and communities can be destroyed by racial stereotypes and hysteria that blind and divide us. We see how violence can be fueled by a lethal combination of rumor, innuendo and intolerable living conditions. We see how injustice can be fueled, and how facts can become irrelevant, under the weight of hatred, bitterness, mistrust and fear..

In *Under A Cloud*, Matt Holland and Rachel Cook – two good and caring officers – are instantly presumed to be guilty, assumed to be racist, merely because they are white and the victim black. Holland is demonized, tried, convicted and crucified in the court of public opinion before the facts are even in. He unfairly becomes the symbol of all prior police abuse in Brownsville. He faces multiple investigations, months of legal uncertainty. His career is all but destroyed. His family is torn to pieces. And he goes through months of emotional torment typical of officers involved in line-of-duty shootings. All because he fit the “stereotype” of the callous and brutal white cop. Similarly, community activists charge, the officers shot and killed the black teen solely because, in their minds, he fit the “stereotype” of a criminal.

We've got to rise above all that when we view these cases. Investigations need to be conducted *swiftly*, thoroughly, impartially, free of politics. Judgments need to be withheld until all the facts are in. Political agendas need to be put aside as we search for the truth.

Juanita: I understand that your wife was a major inspiration for your character Rachel Cook. Would you explain why? What did her insider view of being a police officer add to your depiction of law enforcement dealing with the volatile issues on the streets?

Eliot: Having been closely connected to a similar shooting incident when she was a cop, my wife was able to communicate what it was like trying to work in Brownsville at the time. She was able to give me a unique insider's view of the profound impact the incident had on the neighborhood, the city, its police department, and the people who lived and worked in Brownsville. She opened my eyes to many of the issues surrounding cases like this, and gave me a kickoff point for exploring those issues. Her stories, and the emotions she expressed about the case, were invaluable in helping me find a voice for the police officers in the story – not only Cook, but Holland and many of the others. Having been born in Brownsville many years earlier, she was also able to communicate what the neighborhood was back then, so I could draw a stark comparison to the present. At the same time, she was able to relate the challenges faced by women in law enforcement. I very much wanted to tie all that into the story of Rachel Cook.

Juanita: Would you say that your novel is more character driven, or plot/message driven? Which came first for you in the writing process?

Eliot: I'm not sure the two are mutually exclusive, and I'm just as unsure about which came first. When I conceived the novel, I obviously wanted to tell a powerful personal story, a journey of the human heart. I also wanted to communicate a compelling, thought-provoking plot that had several clear-cut messages. But even the best plot is empty unless you populate the story with compelling characters who readers can connect with and root for. I tried to construct *Under A Cloud* layer upon layer, intertwining character and plot in a way that one can't function, or have any real meaning, without the other. If my storytelling is successful at all, it's not just because I've been able to convey a plot or deliver a message – it's because I've able to convey what happens to the characters.

Juanita: What happens in the heart and mind of a police officer and their families after an emotionally demanding situation such as an accidental shooting, as well as the public outcry, and court battle? How is this portrayed in your book?

Eliot: Controversial and tragic line-of-duty shootings can be emotionally devastating to police officers. They can, in fact, result in a wound to the psyche that can be every bit as debilitating as a physical wound, and far more lasting and unpredictable. Those wounds, if unaddressed, can crumble family relationships, and result in acute physical symptoms, along with a wide range of psychological disorders and addictions, even suicide.

In *Under A Cloud*, I wanted to illustrate the wide range of symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) through two officers who are attempting to cope with the aftermath of the tragic shooting of a young boy who'd been lead-poisoned as a toddler. That's about as bad as it could possibly get for police officers, who generally see themselves as guardians and protectors of the innocent.

In Matt Holland's case, he suffers from guilt, remorse, disbelief, despair and self-pity. His entire belief system is shaken to the core, and his most basic assumptions are tested. He withdraws almost entirely, and finds himself a prisoner to feelings he is unable to express and afraid to share – an imprisonment common in a police culture that shuns displays of emotion and efforts at help. Holland's family also becomes secondary victims of the tragedy, as Katie Holland, the officer's wife, attempts to hold their family together, even as she copes with her own frustrations and fears.

Even though she didn't pull the trigger, Rachel Cook, in many ways, has it even worse than Holland. She manifests symptoms that include flashbacks, panic attacks, depression, night terrors, betrayal, paranoia, shock, frustration, numbness, disillusionment and apathy. Like Holland, she withdraws, starts to see the whole world differently, finds it difficult functioning, and loses interest in things she loves. At the same time, she struggles, like most rookie officers, with the job's intense, conflicting emotional demands. Facing a loss of innocence, wearing the psychic armor adopted by many cops, confronting newfound fears, she finds that the job has profoundly reshaped her, as she sees her hope for a bright career seemingly evaporate.

But there are even broader issues facing police officers involved in line-of-duty shootings, particularly in controversial cases that involve alleged civil rights violations or alleged police brutality.

For one thing, the way shooting cases are handled can be grossly unfair to officers, who are often demonized and unjustly pre-judged as guilty in the court of public opinion – simply by *accusation* – well before the outcome of investigations and possible trials. At its worst, the process of investigating a police shooting can essentially rob a cop of the Constitutional guarantee of due process. Officers accused of misconduct are not entitled to the same presumption of innocence that any other citizen enjoys when charged with a crime. In most cases, they’re either automatically suspended from the job, stripped of their firearm, or assigned to modified duty, pending the outcome of the investigations. They also often face multiple investigations – departmental, criminal and civil rights probes, for example – each with differing burdens of proof . . . in effect, double and triple jeopardy. Whether they’re found guilty or not, they’re forced to go through an emotional hell, while living under a cloud of suspicion, criticism, personal threats and legal uncertainty. Careers have been unjustly destroyed. Families, reputations and personal lives have been shattered.

Moreover, these cases generally become highly political, as various factions vie for public support and control of the police, engage in race-baiting or anti-police bias, or attempt to advance a political agenda. Innocent officers with long-held perfect records and impeccable reputations have been made a political scapegoat as a tradeoff for neighborhood peace. Racial considerations have been given more weight than the truth. Decent, competent unbiased cops have been unfairly maligned.

In *Under A Cloud*, I try to point out the emotional, legal and personal crises resulting from shootings like the one I depicted. I hope readers gain an insight into those issues.

Juanita: Racial tension, and poverty, as well as the dividing lines between police officers, criminals and the innocent all play strongly into your story. Do you think there will always be a fragile co-existence of these situations? Has it improved since the '70s? What will it take to improve further?

Eliot: I think, sadly, that there will always be an uneasy and fragile peace in many troubled inner-city neighborhoods like Brownsville. As a novelist, I wanted to explore just how *fragile* that peace can be . . . how a single incident could instantly become the flashpoint for an expression of deeply-rooted grievances and emotions among both blacks and whites.

In *Under A Cloud*, readers are exposed to a raw and ugly racial tension that exists just beneath a surface of calm. We also see how this tension is a product of years of bitter confrontation, mutual hatred, mistrust, anger, fear, racial stereotypes.

I think conditions *have* improved since the 1970s, thanks to many things: Advances in civil rights; fundamental changes in police procedures; a more enlightened approach by law enforcement to minorities; the impact of community outreach programs; a younger, better educated, more diverse and culturally-aware police force. We’ve also learned, I like to think, from history and past incidents like those I depicted in the book.

Clearly, the most progress has been made in those communities where both sides work hardest at a true peace; where both sides have made an effort to heal old wounds, and keep them from being re-opened; where both sides try to lift themselves above the emotions that divide us and focus on the

actions that can bring us together. If we have any chance of improving it further, a lot more work along those lines needs to take place.

Juanita: The grueling drama that ensues in your novel, along with the strong underlying themes, must have posed an interesting challenge in the writing process. What was the hardest part for you to write and/or communicate in this story?

Eliot: The most difficult thing for me was to try to get into the hearts and minds of the characters who lived through the tragedy. Writing about the details of the shooting, the political implications and the impact of the incident on the city, was less challenging than trying to put myself into the heads of the characters and describe how the incident sent them on a tortuous emotional journey, reshaping their lives, affecting their relationships, altering their view of themselves and the world. Most of us are fortunate that we never have to experience a tragedy like that. Living through it, as a writer, and then trying to communicate it to readers, was a real challenge.

Juanita: Would you comment on your book's theme of recovery and healing?

Eliot: Healing and recovery is a very important message I hope to convey. I think the capacity of people to heal from even the most traumatic of occurrences – or at least to recover well enough to carry on with their life – is remarkable, if not miraculous. This isn't to say, of course, that many people *don't* recover, or that they don't carry scars around with them all their life. But others find themselves lucky enough, or insightful enough, or courageous enough, or strong enough, to heal – by reaching out to others, by looking inside themselves, for love courage, communication, understanding, wisdom, a sense of closure. Ultimately, I think's *other people* who can help pull us through trauma and tragedy.

The message I try to convey in *Under A Cloud* is that people – by seeking help, admitting to their feelings, reaching out to others, finding the things that give their life meaning and balance – can put trauma *in perspective*, learn from it, make it part of the *past* instead of a daily torment. By the end of the novel each of the book's major characters – either through love of family, religion or peer support – manages, after a prolonged ordeal, to somehow find a way to put the tragic incident behind them, and find a way to carry on. Even the city, the NYPD and the neighborhood – so ravaged by the event -- are on the path to recovery. I want readers to be left with the feeling, as tragic as the story was, that there's a reason for hope . . . that things that were learned . . . that improvements were made, that people managed to find a way to move forward. I hope that's what readers feel. I hope they see that *Under A Cloud* is, ultimately, about the resiliency of the human spirit; about the notion that we can all discover a way to carry on.

Juanita: What are you hoping readers learn from your book?

Eliot: I hope different readers take different things from the book. Police officers and their families, I hope, can gain insights into the nature of the job and how they need to cope with its pressures and trauma. Female officers will relate to the issues I raise about the struggle for acceptance in a male-dominated profession.

The shooting in *Under A Cloud* illustrates how a single incident can become the flashpoint for an expression of deeply-rooted grievances and emotions among both blacks and whites. We're exposed in the novel to a raw and ugly racial tension that exists just beneath a fragile surface of calm in many poverty-stricken minority neighborhoods. We see how easily this racial fault line can be disturbed, and how easily people can close their eyes to its very existence.

The message – aside from pointing out that these emotions exist – is that we need to understand what triggers them, if we're to ever live together peacefully and build stronger communities. We need to somehow figure out a way to heal old wounds, and keep them from reopening. We also need to understand the factors that contribute to incidents like this, not only so we can avoid them, if possible, in the future – but so we can learn to respond to them objectively, free of emotion, racial prejudices and knee-jerk reflexive actions, and on a case-by-case basis, free of hysteria and knee-jerk reactions driven by false and bias assumptions. We need to learn that the most important thing we can go is embark on an unbiased quest to discover the truth, not just automatically take sides.

I think the novel provides us with a glimpse of who we *are* as a people . . . and who we're *capable* of being. In the context of the tragic shooting that takes place in the book, readers, I think, are exposed to emotions that can blind us to the truth, stereotypes and abstractions that can divide us, and actions that can haunt, and ultimately diminish us, as people. Similarly, through the novel, we witness actions and emotions that are capable of lifting us above stereotypes, hysteria, mistrust and history – actions that bind us, enable us to heal our wounds, persevere and build stronger communities. If nothing else, I hope readers hear that message.

Juanita: A reviewer stated that your book reads like a book version of “CSI meets Hill Street Blues.” Would you comment on the atmosphere, and pace of *Under a Cloud*?

Eliot: *Under A Cloud* is written in three distinct parts, each with a separate sense of closure. Alternating between real-time events and flashbacks, **Part 1** details the shooting incident, introduces readers to the two officers, and hints at the dire consequences likely to result from their actions. **Part 2**, told in real time, addresses the impact of the shooting on both Brownsville and the entire city, and examines the key issues that generally surround controversial police shootings. **Part 3** details the deepening emotional crises faced by the characters, and how they cope with their inner torment as events continue to unfold around them.

The atmosphere surrounding the characters, and present throughout the story, is that of a neighborhood ravaged by the incident, and a racially-divided city swirling in chaos and controversy.

In some ways, I think the title of the book, *Under A Cloud*, sums it up well. The title was derived originally from a reference to how police officers facing departmental or criminal charges are forced to live under a cloud of doubt, suspicion, uncertainty and guilt – often for years – while prolonged, agonizing investigations unfold and their cases are adjudicated. As I wrote the book, however, it occurred to me that the title also applied to a neighborhood living under a cloud of violence and discord, a family living under a cloud of grief, and an city living under a cloud of racial tension, anger and divisiveness. It isn't until the end of the novel that readers get the sense, I hope, that this terrible cloud is finally lifting.

Juanita: Eliot, it has been fascinating talking with you today. Your book sounds like a great and relevant read, and we certainly encourage everyone to look for “Under a Cloud” at local and online bookstores. How can readers find out more about you and your book?

Eliot: Readers can visit my web site, www.eliotsefrin.com, write to me at esefrin@yahoo.com, or review an excerpt of the novel at www.iuniverse.com. The book can be ordered online at amazon.com, barnesandnoble.com, and iuniverse.com.