

## Interview with Alan K. Austin, author of “The Adagio”

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to be joined by Alan K. Austin, who is here to discuss his new mystery novel, “The Adagio.”

*Alan Austin has produced, written and narrated nine documentaries for PBS, and his investigative documentaries for WCCO-Television in Minneapolis received two national Emmys, a Columbia University-Dupont Silver Baton, a Sigma Delta Chi Public Service award, a Peabody and two IRE awards. His reporting from Vietnam, Cambodia and Northern Ireland was awarded a Columbia University-Dupont Silver Baton, two Sigma Delta Chi Public Service awards, a Peabody and two RTNDA "Edward R. Murrow" awards.*

*From 1982 to 1985, Austin taught radio and television news reporting at the University of Minnesota as guest lecturer. He has a daughter, Jeni, an actress in Los Angeles, and a son, John, who attends the University of Minnesota in Duluth.*

**Tyler:** Welcome, Alan, and thank you for joining me today. To begin, will you grab our attention by telling us what about the plot of “The Adagio” will draw the reader in?

**Austin:** Even though it’s a mystery, it never had a plot. It begins as a spooky puzzle—a recording of an exquisite piece of classical music in which the hero (some might say anti-hero), Jack Duncan, hears a woman’s scream. In attempting to track down the source of the scream Duncan strays into terrible trouble. I had no ending, nor even any middle, in mind; I simply latched onto this strange-ordinary young man, knowing little about him, and hung on for dear life as he dragged me into a hellish odyssey. The “plot” evolved naturally, if crazily, as Duncan’s character revealed itself and he became entangled with other characters, some beautiful, some treacherous, some both. In other words, the characters did all the work and the progress of the story was as much a mystery to me, from page to page, as I hope it proves to be for readers.

**Tyler:** Can you tell us a little bit about whom you found out Duncan was? It sounds like in writing the book you were unraveling both the mystery of the story, as well as the mystery of who Duncan is?

**Austin:** Yes. Both were works in progress, journeys of discovery. We know early on that Jack is aimless, acerbic, with little respect for authority—flaws that may prove fatal. He may also be drifting into cynicism and have a callous streak. Even as his character begins to reveal itself and deepen we’re never really sure whether he is hero, villain, or something else. And neither is he.

**Tyler:** What is the situation when “The Adagio” opens? I know Duncan is with some friends listening to a piece of music when he hears the scream. Who are these friends?

**Austin:** No one is with him when he hears the scream. In fact, no one else ever does hear it, although Jack doubts that that’s true...and he may turn out to be right. The “friends” Jack is with when he first listens to the recording (and doesn’t hear a scream at that point) are his lover, who is his acting co-star, and her husband, who has witnessed their transgression. The husband, oddly enough, gives Jack the record. But that may not be what he has actually done. Later, in a sanity-doubting scene, Jack plays the piece for his long-time friend and he hears no scream. Or does he? Are you confused?

**Tyler:** A little, but tell me about the piece of music that “The Adagio” centers around and why you chose it to be a focus of the novel?

**Austin:** It began life as one movement of a string quartet by Samuel Barber. But after Arturo Toscanini and then Leonard Bernstein recorded it, it was such a hit that everyone forgot about the rest of the quartet and just about everything else Barber wrote. It's only ten minutes long. It begins softly with three-note progressions up the scale, gradually—violins, violas and cellos. It becomes more and more intense, finally reaching a series of chords so dense the music is almost overpowering in its beauty and intensity. And that's where the scream goes...if there ever was a scream. It had been a favorite of mine for years and finally wrenched this bit of imagination out of me.

**Tyler:** Would you describe yourself as a music lover? Has music influenced your writing?

**Austin:** Absolutely a music lover, but by no means an expert or much of a musician. I've always detected something musical in great writing and hoped that, without trying to, my own would have bits of that quality.

**Tyler:** Why did you choose the setting of Nebraska in the 1960s?

**Austin:** I did some radio and television work there in the sixties, and some amateur acting, all of which serve as settings for the beginning of the story.

**Tyler:** The novel's setting actually moves around, taking the main character to several places, including Carnegie Hall. How did you decide to plot out the book to include the different places?

**Austin:** Again, it was the character and the various predicaments he got us into that took us to jail and prison, to New York, to a hobo jungle, to Carnegie Hall and other places. By then, I had the feeling of not just tagging along with Duncan, but of being trapped inside his rather jangled brain.

**Tyler:** Writers often say characters have minds of their own and they will do what they want? Is that how you felt about Duncan. Did you make any decisions for him, or did he tell you what he was going to do?

**Austin:** To a large extent he was on his own. His ill-considered words and actions put him almost automatically into deeper and deeper trouble, and it seemed as though I were only finding him locations. Although, in reality, of course, I was really in charge, but in charge as if I were steering through his eyes.

**Tyler:** What did you find to be the most difficult aspect of writing a mystery?

**Austin:** Finding—or rather persuading Jack Duncan to find—a way out of our fix and a solution to the mystery of the scream. The most difficult and the most enjoyable.

**Tyler:** The main character, Duncan, feels haunted by the scream he hears. Will you tell us more about the impact of that scream on him? Does this haunting make the novel a psychological thriller?

**Austin:** He is haunted by it, as I believe I would have been, because of the incongruity and horror of its interference in a piece of sublime music. The fact that the recording was given to him by the cuckolded husband of his lover increases the trauma and mystery...and gets the story going: Did the husband have something to do with the scream, and did he now present a danger to his unfaithful wife? Was Duncan imagining things, or was he involved more deeply than that? Whether the story is more psychological thriller, mystery, or adventure I couldn't say, but there is some of each.

**Tyler:** Alan, you are best known for the many documentaries you have written and narrated. Will you tell us about that award-winning work you have done? And how did it affect your turning to write to fiction?

**Austin:** The documentaries and other reporting ran the gamut from Vietnam to the Los Angeles pornography industry to the scourge of giant drift net fishing in the south seas. But more often than not it involved crime and criminals, jails, prisons and death rows, some inhabitants of which were innocent (one of whom was exonerated by our reporting—the highlight of my days in journalism).

As the hero(?) of "The Adagio" plunges from one predicament into another, he naturally encountered the sorts of unpleasant places that had become familiar to me. I had spent so much time in prisons that I had begun to feel

almost institutionalized and now and then mentally cringed when “corrections officers” passed by. I had even begun to plot bizarre ways of escaping from the prisons I visited. I think my immersion in this life gave Jack Duncan a deep pool to swim in. And in the process of writing his story I discovered that he was returning the favor. The liberty to report as though from inside the mind of an imaginary character let me convey Jack Duncan’s experiences in prison more truly and effectively than I had ever been able to as a journalist. I could write it as he felt it—the smells, the sounds, the blows and the hopelessness of being caught up in a heartless, broken system. As a result, even though I had set out only to tell an interesting, maybe comic-horrifying story, that story began to lay bare in very personal terms some awful injustices in our justice system. My little plotless mystery had turned out to be about something. This novel-writing stuff was turning out to be fun.

**Tyler:** Would you say you prefer writing novels to being a journalist, or that you just enjoy the different ways each type of writing can view a situation?

**Austin:** Well, as I indicated earlier, I sure liked the extra element of being able to tell the story as someone else, as it was happening to that character—a luxury journalists don’t have. I enjoyed imagining my way (our way) out of seemingly impossible fixes when, in real life, the outcome was fixed and often mundane.

**Tyler:** Would you say you had any influences among other novel or mystery writers, or are your writing style and ideas more influenced by your documentary and journalism background?

**Austin:** Both were heavy influences. Documentaries and fiction both offer journeys into the unknown (or should, in my opinion) and both want accurate writing. I suppose every piece of fiction I’ve read—and liked—influences me, especially Dostoyevski, Kafka, Philip Roth and P.G. Wodehouse; for mystery, Scott Turow. I don’t try to pattern my writing after any of them, but now that you’ve brought it up, I think there may be something Kafkaesque about the system Jack Duncan stumbled into in my story.

**Tyler:** What is next for you, Alan. Are you working on any more novels or documentaries?

**Austin:** Yes. Another novel. It involves the same central character. It doesn’t involve music this time, but Shakespeare. A Shakespeare you might not recognize.

**Tyler:** Thank you for joining me today, Alan. Before we go, will you tell our readers about your website and what further information can be found there about “The Adagio”?

**Austin:** The website is: [alankaustin.com](http://alankaustin.com). It includes a bit more biography, some more about what the story is about, an artist’s view of a key scene in the story (Carnegie Hall from across the street, the possible villain staring down from a window of the Hall), a just-beginning-to-develop schedule of appearances, readings and book signings; and, perhaps most important, the various ways and places one can buy the book. Thanks very much for the conversation, Tyler.

**Tyler:** You’re welcome, Alan. I’ve enjoyed talking to you. I hope you’ll come back and tell us about your sequel to “The Adagio” when it’s published.

[Read Review of The Adagio](#)