

# our life

Mind, Spirit  
August Issue

Soul Searching

Column in this issue

Aug. 16, 2018

## ER doctor writes suspenseful medical novels

by **SUE WEBBER**  
Contributing Writer

An opioid epidemic is rampant. Sky-rocketing pharmaceutical costs are an increasing concern. Medical care is a topic of daily discussion.

In addition to their modern-day headline importance, these real-life issues lend themselves to compelling, suspense-filled medical fiction stories.

Who better to write about those issues than a physician?

Tom Combs, a 28-year resident of Plymouth, has done just that. Following a 25-year career as an emergency room doctor in Minneapolis hospitals, Combs has begun a new career. He is the author of three medical fiction suspense thrillers, a series that features Dr. Drake Cody, an emergency room doctor and medical researcher who faces gripping personal and professional crises. The books have been independently published.

Reviews of his books have been laudatory. Commenting on his first book in 2014, "Nerve Damage," Midwest Book Review said, "A riveting read from beginning to end...the kind of novel from which blockbuster movies are made. Very highly recommended."

The Journal of Emergency Medicine commented, "Dr. Combs has captured the essence of what doctors, nurses, police, firefighters and medics do on a daily basis and intertwined that with the suspense and thrills of a murder mystery."

His second book, "Hard to Breathe," published in 2016, is more of the same intense, fast-paced drama.

The third book, released in July 2018, is titled "Wrongful Deaths." Its suspenseful story puts readers on the front lines of the opioid epidemic.

Combs traces his passion for reading back to what he calls "a fantastic teacher" at Christ the King Catholic school in Minneapolis who read to his third-grade class in a soft-spoken voice.

"I read everything in the school library, and I've continued reading my whole life," Combs said. "I read all sorts of stuff – historical fiction, science fiction, adventure, mysteries and suspense thrillers."

Working his way through college and intending to pursue a business degree, Combs had jobs using jackhammers, chainsaws, and heavy machinery. At the University of Minnesota, he earned an undergraduate degree in biochemistry, which he terms "the absolute best foundation for medicine," while working as a biochemistry teaching assistant. He also worked as a security supervisor at an art museum and as a technical writer for a technology firm.

"I wrote for nine months, and that was the end of my writing for 30 years, other than educational things," Combs said.

His medical internship was served at Hennepin County Medical Center where he was trained in emergency medicine. He then served as a helicopter rescue flight physician in the University of Cincinnati residency program.

A 25-year career as an emergency room physician in the emergency room followed, at North Memorial Medical Center in Robbinsdale, and also a stint as an associate clinical professor at University of Minnesota Medical School.

In 2007, Combs suffered an aneurysm and almost died. He spent 10 days in the intensive care unit, where he said his appreciation of nurses' skills and modern medicine was renewed. But he was unable to continue practicing medicine. He now regularly works out on the treadmill, swimming laps, and biking.

During his recovery, he began to hone his writing skills, with the help of 30 courses and seminars at the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis.

Among a list of many go-to references and front-line consultants

-- doctors, paramedics, police officers and firefighters throughout the country he contacts by phone and email as he is writing -- is his brother, a 25-year police officer who has

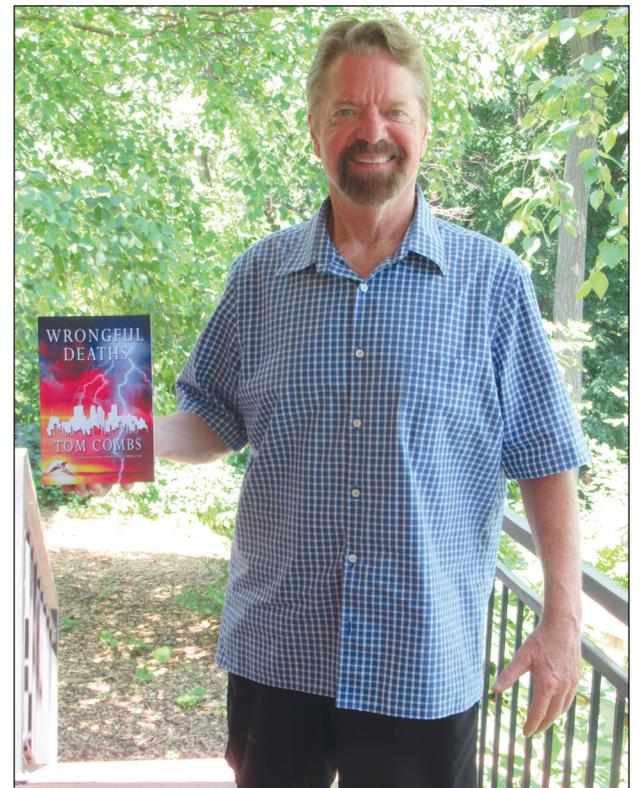
"done it all," Combs said.

Now he writes most every day and says he has the beginnings of a fourth book in his head. "If I'm not writing, I'm thinking about it," he said, adding that much of his writing is done from the deck of his home, which gives him frequent viewings of bald eagles, herons and wild ducks. "I'm a nature guy," he said.

He began researching opioid use, specifically fentanyl and carfentanil, several years ago, following reports of the drugs that killed Prince.

"The plot of my newest book involves Drake Cody finding himself in a hospital that is experiencing mysterious deaths that don't add up," Combs said. "Drake is tasked with getting to the bottom of it. My books are about high-stakes, exciting, compelling things.

"I don't consider my books just medical stories. They are suspense thrillers, with significant elements of law and business, though medicine is central. They are totally readable for non-medical, non-science people. I



(PHOTO BY SUE WEBBER)

Author Tom Combs has just released the third book in a series of medical suspense fiction thrillers.

want people to read my books. The reader is the test, the validation."

The characters are not based on any one person he met during his medical career, Combs said. "They're hybrids, amalgams," he said, adding that he writes from a combination of his experiences and the people he has known, adding imagination and creativity along the way. "What I show is real," he said.

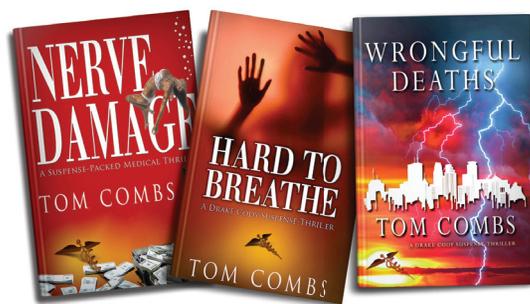
The majority of his book sales are on Amazon, and also through his website: [tom-combs.com/](http://tom-combs.com/)

His training at Hennepin County Medical Center and the University of Cincinnati has given Combs top-notch experts with whom he is in contact as he writes his books. "Those two hospitals have two of the best emergency rooms in the world," he said.

Police officers, emergency room doctors, nurses, and ambulance and helicopter medics see the whole gamut of serious accidents and illnesses, plus people who have significant problems with mental illness, Combs said.

During his years as an emergency room physician, Combs was repeatedly named one of the Twin Cities' "Top Doctors," featured annually in Mpls.-St. Paul Magazine.

He and his wife, Michele, who is an oil painter, have an adult son and daughter and three grandsons.



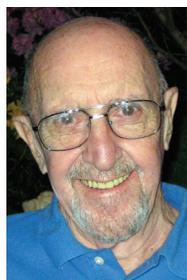
# A time for soul searching

When I was a little kid growing up in Kansas, the night-time airwaves were dominated by a tiny radio station in Del Rio, Texas. During the daytime, the station operated below the radar; but at night, it overwhelmed competing stations in several states. I listened to it every night huddled beneath the covers.

The trademark of the station was selling stuff to listeners. One of the most popular items up for sale was a life-size statue of Jesus Christ that glowed in the dark. That was an image that haunted me late at night.

To some, I'm sure the statue was a cherished religious icon. But it scared the bejeebers out of me. My worst nightmare was waking up in the middle of the night to see a glowing Jesus standing by my bed.

But this was the beginning of a curiosity about the spiritual side of life,



**BOB RAMSEY**

Guest columnist

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which eventually led to questions about a higher power, religion, the church, the meaning of life and this thing we call the "soul." At some level, most of us have such questions which we revisit periodically. But we seldom dwell on them very long.

After all, our youthful years are de-

voted primarily to growing and learning. And our adult years are spent largely on developing our families and careers. By the third act of life, however, it's time to get serious about things of the spirit.

Pierre De Chardin explains that "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience, we are spiritual beings having a human experience." That's why some authors and theologians suggest the later years are a good time to take an MRI of the soul. It's a time to settle on what we really believe and don't believe and to get our spiritual house in order (with or without the aid of illuminated statuary).

Eventually, most seniors make peace with their doubts, questions and fears. To assist in our soul-searching, French novelist George Sand urged us to, "Try to keep your soul young and quivering right up to old age." I like that idea,

but I'm not sure I know what it means.

If it means continuing to feed your soul by doing the right thing, helping others and remaining true to your values, I'm all for it.

I also agree with the unknown writer who said, "To know what you prefer; instead of humbly saying Amen for what the world tells you you ought to prefer, is to keep your soul alive."

So if you haven't put your questions about your spirituality, your beliefs and your soul to rest, today might be a good time to start. There is peace of mind in finally agreeing with yourself about what is most important in life.

Many months ago, I attended a fundraiser for a local eating disorder clinic. One speaker was a young woman who had successfully completed treatment. She wore a T-shirt that read, "All is well with my soul." It doesn't get much better than that.



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## Did you know?

Over the last decade, seniors have become increasingly more savvy in regard to social media usage. The Pew Research Center found that, in 2015, around 35

percent of people age 65 and older reported using social media.

That's a large jump from just two percent in 2005. As of 2016, 65 percent of people between the ages 50 and 64 reported using social media, according to Pew.

Social media usage among se-

niors continues to climb, although young adults still comprise the demographic most likely to use it. Among seniors ages 50 and older, Facebook is by far the most popular social media platform used, followed by Pinterest and LinkedIn.

PAID ADVERTISEMENT

# Hearing Loss and Dementia Linked in Study

Seniors with hearing loss are significantly more likely to develop dementia over time than those who retain their hearing, a study by Johns Hopkins and National Institute on Aging researchers suggests. The findings, the researchers say, could lead to new ways to combat dementia, a condition that affects millions of people world-wide and carries heavy societal burdens.

Although the reason for the link between the two conditions is unknown, the investigators suggest that a common pathology may underlie both or that the strain of decoding sounds over the years may overwhelm the brains of

people with hearing loss, leaving them more vulnerable to dementia. They also speculate that hearing loss could lead to dementia by making individuals more socially isolated, a known risk factor for dementia and other cognitive disorders.

Whatever the cause, the scientists report, their finding may offer a starting point for interventions — even as simple as hearing aids — that could delay or prevent dementia by improving patients' hearing.

"Researchers have looked at what affects hearing loss, but few have looked at how hearing loss affects cognitive brain

function," says study leader Franklin, M.D., Ph.D., assistant professor in the Division of Otolaryngology at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. "There hasn't been much crosstalk between otologists and geriatricians, so it's been unclear whether hearing loss and dementia are related."

To make the connection, Lin and his colleagues used data from the Baltimore Longitudinal Study on Aging (BLSA). The BLSA, initiated by the National Institute on Aging in 1958, has tracked various health factors in thousands of men and women over decades.

The new study, published in the February Archives of Neu-

rology, focused on 639 people whose hearing and cognitive abilities were tested as part of the BLSA between 1990 and 1994. While about a quarter of the volunteers had some hearing loss at the start of the study, none had dementia.

These volunteers were then closely followed with repeat examinations every one to two years, and by 2008, 58 of them had developed dementia.

The researchers found that study participants with hearing loss at the beginning of the study were significantly more likely to develop dementia by the end. Compared with volunteers with normal hearing, those with mild, moder-

ate, and severe hearing loss had twofold, threefold, and fivefold, respectively, the risk of developing dementia over time. The more hearing loss they had, the higher their likelihood of developing the memory-robbing disease.

Even after the researchers took into account other factors that are associated with risk of dementia, including diabetes, high blood pressure, age, sex and race, Lin explains, hearing loss and dementia were still strongly connected. "A lot of people ignore hearing loss because it's such a low and insidious process as we age," Lin says. "Even if people feel as if they are not affected,

we're showing that it may well be a more serious problem." Warning signs of hearing loss include difficulty hearing in noisy situations, like restaurants, trouble understanding women's and children's voices, needing to ask people to repeat themselves, problems hearing on the telephone and having to turn the radio and television louder. If you suspect there may be a problem, it is recommended that you get your hearing tested.

The research was supported by the intramural research program of the National Institute on Aging

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