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Buy the book

Businessman, author sets his sights on blockbuster sales



Staff photo by Bradley Grois

In the writing, selling and marketing of "The Takeover," Stephen Frey has encountered none of the typical publishing hassles and roadblocks.

By MATTHEW BUDMAN
Special to The Times

Some morning soon, Stephen Frey will, as he does every weekday morning, hop the train at Princeton Junction, take his seat amongst the hundreds of other commuters making their way to Manhattan and find himself next to someone engrossed in a thick gold-and-black book with a familiar mugshot on the dust-jacket. His.

With the publication date less than a month away (though a few copies are finding their way into bookstores this week), Frey's first novel, *The Takeover*, is destined to make him a star, transforming him from finance executive to best-selling author. That a major movie will be made from the novel seems inevitable; Frey is likely to see himself peering out from a variety of publications as he stands in line at the supermarket.

The Takeover could have been just another genre thriller, on and off front-of-the-store racks in a few weeks and dumped in bins marked "\$3.98 And Under!!!!" But Frey's publicists at Viking Penguin decided to make the book A Blockbuster. They announced a first printing of 75,000 copies — exorbitant for a first novel — then upped it to 125,000 and finally to 200,000.

Copies mailed to book reviewers were tucked inside canvas bags stuffed with fake \$1,000 bills, all but guaranteeing that notice would be taken.

Frey knows his life will be changing, perhaps for good.

ON A RECENT Thursday, the personable 35-year-old executive walked to an Italian restaurant a few blocks away from his midtown Manhattan office at West-deutsche Landesbank, tucked his tie into his shirt, asked for the waiter's suggestion, took it, and spent an animated hour and a half discussing his life and forthcoming book.

He's in a good mood: It's a sunny day, he's excited about giving his very first face-to-face interview, and the following morning he's submitting his second novel

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to his publisher. He's cruising on an enviable run of luck. His grin is infectious.

Frey doesn't seem nervous about the imminent wave of attention, though he does ask for advice on conducting future interviews and on which page to sign copies of *The Takeover*. His first attempt at a title-page inscription is totally illegible. "I'll have to work on that," he says ruefully.

In the writing, selling and marketing of *The Takeover*, Frey has encountered none of the typical publishing hassles and roadblocks. This all seems to be happening too quickly and smoothly. He raves unconditionally about his literary agent, his film agents out West, his editor, his publicity reps. "I've talked to people who say it's taken five, six or seven years to even get anything looked at by a publisher," he says. "My agent saw half of the book and said, 'I like this. Write the rest of it.' I wrote the rest of it. All of a sudden one day she said, 'I'm going to do an auction.' And 24 hours later she had it sold."

Frey's "fabulous" film agents sold rights to *The Takeover* quickly and have managed to generate interest in his forthcoming, second book. "The thing that kills me is that they don't even know what it's about. They have a couple of paragraphs, and that's it."

His publicists "have been so great it's been ridiculous." Penguin's vice president of marketing "is unbelievable. He's an animal." Frey shakes his head. "I'm thinking, 'Where are the bad experiences I'm supposed to have?'"

NOT THAT the process hasn't involved work. Frey's editor sent back his original manuscript heavily marked, with a 10-page cover letter.

"When I wrote a term paper in high school, I was looking for the A," Frey explains. "Well, when the publisher made the offer, and it was for a pretty reasonable amount of money, I felt like I had written an A term paper. Great! There'll be minimal edits at most. I get this thing back two months later, and there was not one page that there wasn't something written on. He sent me a cover letter that said, 'It's a great book.'

Frey

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However, you might want to consider a few things. . . And I'm reading this letter, 10 pages, and I'm seeing my grade drop from an A-plus to about a C-minus."

So how does a businessman come to write a best-seller? "I'm like everybody: I always wanted to write a book," Frey says. "I honestly just wanted to write it and see if I could make a story that even my wife would read."

And Frey had another motivation: A hit book would produce enough income to ameliorate daily pressures and give him more time to be a husband and father. Taking the 8:30 a.m. train and not returning until 8:00 at night, "I noticed that I wasn't seeing my kids a whole lot. I have a 7-year-old and a 2-year-old, and basically I don't see them during the week. So it was a desire to have another kind of lifestyle and be able to be more involved with my kids, when they're young and want to have me involved with them."

Frey's own history explains why he feels so strongly about being an active, present parent. Born an Army brat in Alabama, Frey lost his father when he was 4. He grew up in Baltimore, (where his stepfather pointed him toward finance), earned a B.A. and an M.B.A. from the University of Virginia, spent several years in New York City, and has lived in West Windsor for the last three.

He intends to stay, and, should literary riches permit, is incubating some thoughts on how he would spend any free time. Rather sheepishly he says, "You don't have to print this, but I would love to get into working with kids more, getting inside downtown Trenton and doing something there. It sounds very sixties-ish and hippie-ish, but it's not. I'd like to really make a difference. Writing is the means to an end."

FREY'S CHILDREN, it turns out, bear the lion's share of blame for their father's limited reading and writing life. Most writers relish the opportunity to opine on the relative merits of their literary contemporaries, but Frey claims he hasn't read much of anything in the last decade, "Especially in the last two years, I'd feel guilty reading something; it'd be taking time away from my kids.

"I read a lot of classics in high school, but current writers are tougher: I really read *The Firm*, and I sort of read *The Pelican Brief*. I know Tom Clancy's work. I read *Presumed Innocent*. And that's kind of where it stops."

Without benefit of outside material for inspiration, Frey drew heavily on his financial experience (including two years working in mergers-and-acquisitions at J.P. Morgan), to devise the storyline of *The Takeover*. In the novel, young executive Andrew Falcon gets caught up in a sweeping plot hatched by seven powerful conspirators; they're scheming to finance a hostile takeover which will bring down a bank and a president. Falcon finds himself going up against the Sevens, as the secret Ivy League-based organization is dubbed.

"It would be hard to imagine that that could ever really happen. It's fiction," Frey says. "But look at Barings. You had this investment bank that had been around for 230 years literally go down overnight. We could definitely have a big bank crash. And if the New York Fed governor was in on it, like in the book, all it would take would be two hours of the Fed not stepping in before the market would crater. That aspect of the book is absolutely possible.

"Now, seven guys putting this whole thing together to take down the president — I can't see it. Except that you do have this stuff about JFK — people who believe that there was a conspiracy [to assassinate the president] so that the Vietnam War would continue and all these defense contractors who were making a lot of money off that war [could continue to do so]. I think people would be naive not to believe that people at that

THE TAKEOVER

By Stephen W. Frey
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level of wealth and power don't think like that. These guys are wealthy beyond belief, and they just want to make sure that they hold on to it. A guy may be worth a billion dollars, but he'll do everything he can not to pay taxes."

THERE'S A strong sense of class consciousness in *The Takeover*. The story pits blueblood northeastern Republicans against southern Democratic sons of immigrants. And despite Frey's editor's efforts to "stay away from Republican-Democratic politics," it's greedy GOP politicians and sympathizers who are obsessed with keeping the inheritance tax low and installing a new, right-wing president, the young, attractive Bob Whitman. (Frey insists that any connection to Christine Todd is coincidental.)

It's not hard to tell the black hats from the white hats here. But that choice, Frey says, is a calculated one.

"People like the underdog. There's something to be said for the person who's wealthy and nice, but you always root for the person who doesn't have a lot of money and who's struggling. And I've noticed that people love to read about wealthy people falling — the guy who's got a billion dollars and ends up behind bars. So it's less my political standpoint than my saying, 'Hey, that's probably what works.'

"And you can't have the Democrats worrying about the inheritance tax. It just wouldn't work. Nobody would buy it."

The villain is "this really wealthy WASP type that everybody's gonna hate right away." Frey admits he didn't waste much effort in designing complex characters, but says, "I'm happy with them. You never get people to know your characters as well as you'd like, because you have to keep pages turning. It's a lot of fun to really get inside the heads of your characters. But the problem is that if you really let somebody get into the characters' heads, you lose the people who just want to turn the page.

"Someone might say, 'You're compromising yourself as an author.' Well, I'm not spending every Saturday and Sunday in my cave to sell only 7,000 copies."

FREY THOUGHT about *The Firm*, examined what made that book such a page-turner, and aimed for something equally compelling.

"I'm trying to write something that people are interested in reading," he says several times, and he seems convinced that he's found the recipe. "People want a release from reality. They want their protagonist to be Tom Cruise."

Frey's female characters are, one and all, spectacularly beautiful, and his hero, Andrew Falcon, is "over six-two, with long jet black hair, chiseled facial features, and broad shoulders." Frey laughs. "My wife said, 'It'd be great if you looked like this.'"

The Takeover's characters are driven by circumstances that are unambiguous and the plot permutations are laid out clearly. This too is part of the plan. "You've got so many things to worry about in your day that using your brain to really try to figure something out is taxing," Frey says. "If I'm not giving you *Moby Dick*, I'm sorry. But I'm giving people what they want. I'm very proud of this book; I like to entertain people. But is it literary? No. It's not incredible prose. And I think that if it were — and maybe this is a sad comment on society — it probably wouldn't get me where I really want to go.

"I describe myself as a capitalist. The bottom line is the bottom line. If something sells, then there's a market for it. I'm a reflection of what people want."