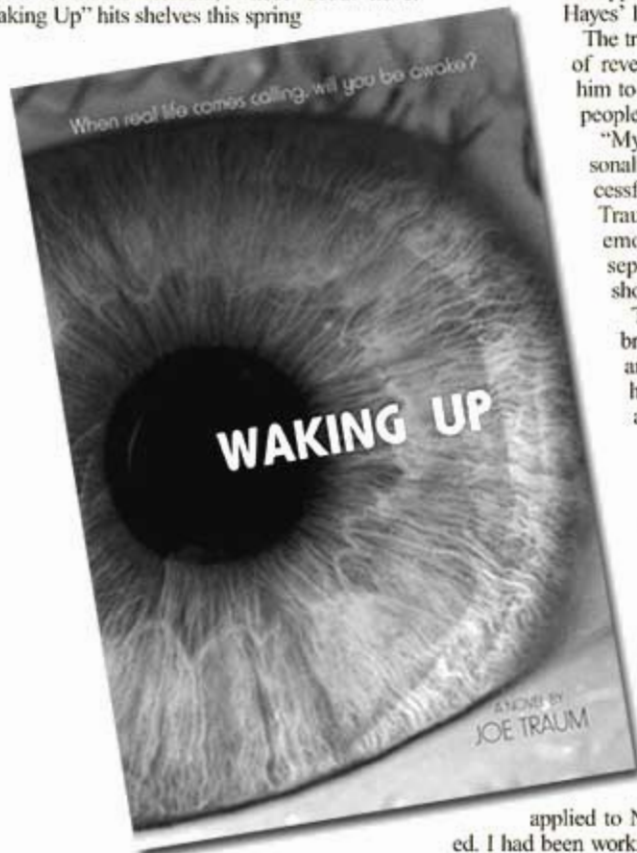


Second Act

Secaucus writer returns to his first love

By E. Assata Wright
Reporter staff writer

It took retired real estate broker Joe Traum 41 years to fulfill his dream of being a writer. The Secaucus resident, whose debut novel "Waking Up" hits shelves this spring



(Cambridge House Press), is now poised for a new chapter of his life.

The novel, which takes place in Northern New Jersey and parts of New York, is not autobiograph-

ical, but borrows heavily from Traum's career in real estate.

The story centers around Michael Hayes, a real estate broker at an investment bank who is awakened one night by a phone call from a mysterious kidnapper who takes, then later kills, Hayes' 11-year-old son, Dylan.

The tragic incident leads to a series of revelations for Hayes that force him to change how he relates to the people in his life.

"My character Michael has personality traits I think a lot of successful people who I've met have," Traum said. "He has become emotionally detached, distant, separated from people who should mean the most to him."

The trauma of losing his son brings Hayes – whose wealth and professional advancement have changed and even damaged him – back to himself.

'Life intervened'

Traum didn't experience a tragedy like the one described in his book. But he has experienced a journey that is similar to that of his character.

"I wanted to be a journalist," said Traum of his initial career plans. "I was going to go to graduate school to study journalism. I even

applied to Northwestern and got accepted. I had been working summers for my uncle in accounting, being paid \$1.50 an hour. My first [full-time] offer was for \$130 a week at an accounting job in 1964. I decided to put journalism on hold. I figured I'd work in accounting for a few years, make my fortune, then go back to journal-

ism... But that never happened. Life intervened."

Instead, Traum waited until he retired in March 2005 to return to his first love: writing.

His journey back began with the Gotham Writers Workshop in New York City, where he took several fiction writing classes over a year and a half.

Initially unfamiliar with the workshop process, where students receive verbal critiques on their writing from their peers and teachers, Traum discovered he was in for a rude surprise.

"We had this one editor who attended the workshops and would critique. Her name was Vanessa and her comments were always especially cutting. She was like [Simon Cowell] on "American Idol." She told me, 'You know, Joe, I went to Maine this weekend and my mother read your story and she told me it was wonderful. She loved it.' I said, 'Oh thank you. That's so nice of you to say.' Then she says to me, 'You have to understand, my mother is a stupid woman.'"

More constructive

Most of the feedback at Gotham was more constructive and Traum said his writing skills grew.

"In the first workshop I ever took, we were told that we were there to learn literary fiction," he said,

"In literary fiction the protagonist grows, the protagonist must be changed in some way." – Joe Traum

"not genre fiction. In literary fiction the protagonist grows, the protagonist must be changed in some way."

As is often the case with first novels, "Waking Up" began as a short story, one that Traum wrote and had workshoped toward the end of his time at Gotham.

"In real estate, a lot of times you're putting together a deal and you'll reach a point where – after all the hard work that's been done – it looks like the deal is going to fall apart," Traum said.



EYES WIDE OPEN – Secaucus resident and novelist Joe Traum

"The deal rarely does fall apart, but it will go right to the brink of not working out. I wanted to write something where I could string together a few stories of deals that almost fell through."

Some of these near disasters appear in "Waking Up."

Energized by his new career path, Traum is already working on his second novel, which will

again borrow heavily from his years in real estate.

The next book, tentatively titled "The Ultimate Betrayal," also includes a murder – one based on actual events.

Traum's book is available at all major booksellers, including online. □

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