

## Interview with Andy Thibault

It seems fitting that this entire interview with Andy Thibault took place either via email or over the telephone, in the latter case with Thibault behind the wheel of an auto tooling down a Connecticut road, responding to questions over a speaker phone. Thibault, who will teach “Writing for the New Media,” a new course at Northwestern Connecticut Community College in the spring 2008 semester, is an award-winning journalist who currently publishes a blog that he describes as covering “cops, courts, general news and the arts.”

Thibault’s new course will combine his extensive experience as both an investigative reporter and a private detective.

A visit to Thibault’s blog—[www.cooljustice.blogspot.com](http://www.cooljustice.blogspot.com)—discloses the intricate details of a number of gritty news stories that range from last year’s Smolinski missing person/love triangle case in Waterbury, to shady land deals in Enfield aimed at closing down a Montessori school, to a civil rights case involving a high school student whose write-in election victory for class secretary was suppressed by administrators of the school.

The noted attorney, F. Lee Bailey has described Thibault as “a gunslinger from the Old West, ready to fire at anything that moves—especially if he doesn’t take kindly to the movement...He is in a way a corollary of Robin Hood: he takes from the powerful and gives to the weak.”

Thibault is the author of three books, *Law and Justice in Everyday Life*, the most recent one, was published in 2002. Between 2000-2006, he published the “Cool Justice” column in *The Connecticut Law Tribune*. He is a regular guest on radio and TV interview shows in Hartford. He served as chief investigator for the Washington, D. C. public interest law firm, Judicial Watch, at the time of its investigation of corruption activities in the U. S. Commerce Department. In 2004, Thibault delivered the Pew Memorial Lecture in Journalism at Widener University in Chester, Penn.

Currently, Thibault is an adjunct lecturer in English and a mentor in the MFA writing program at Western Connecticut State University. He is

author of *The History of the Connecticut State Police* and *The 12-Minute MBA for Lawyers*, a consulting editor of the literary journal, *Connecticut Review*, and—as an indication of his many outside interests—a licensed professional boxing judge.

INTERVIEWER

Some students considering taking your course *Writing for New Media* are likely to wonder, “Just what am I getting myself into?” What’s your response when asked this?

ANDY THIBAUT

The blogosphere is smashing down the walls constructed by the so-called mainstream media that protect the status quo. The gatekeepers have been knocked off their perches.

INTERVIEWER

Direct as that?

ANDY THIBAUT

Now, virtually anyone can proclaim: “I have a story.”

We’ll venture into this new frontier. In this new course, we’ll write and have fun. We’ll celebrate human instincts and explode repression—both internal and external.

As an overview, we might play with the conflict between Eros and civilization and see how this impacts our writing and publishing.

INTERVIEWER

Can you explain a bit more what you mean by the conflict between Eros and civilization?

ANDY THIBAUT

By this, I mean the unnecessary conflict between play and work. As we play on a subject we enjoy, the imperatives of production and time disappear from our consciousness. Yet, we generate perhaps even greater results as we enter a dream world.

The subjects you, as a student, choose to write about are up to you. I will help with focus, reporting, writing and editing. If on occasion you are stuck for ideas, I will offer suggestions.

INTERVIEWER

How were you first drawn into this approach to writing?

ANDY THIBAUT

As a newspaper columnist, I developed a voice and a point of view. I knew I was doing a good job as a columnist for my seven years with *The Connecticut Law Tribune* when all the state judges canceled their subscriptions.

INTERVIEWER

How did you manage that? Was it your job to keep their feet to the fire?

ANDY THIBAUT

I wrote columns with headlines such as “Free The Oppressed, Exploited Judges,” “All Rise For Judge Bobby Knight,” “The Politics Of Connecticut Justice,” “The Bench Protection Association,” and “Bully In A Small Playground.”

Essentially, I showed through particular stories how there is no real oversight of judges and that they can get away with almost anything. And that they do it better and more efficiently than corrupt cops.

As for the subscription cancellations, *The Hartford Courant* published a story about them and they also cited columns by my colleague Norm Pattis.

If any students want to pursue investigative reporting or corruption stories, these are areas in which I have a lot of experience. Beyond that, I am also very interested in the arts, sports and history. Bottom line: If a story or issue is important to a student, then it’s important to me.

INTERVIEWER

Let's consider your interests and immersion in the internet and blogging—how did that come about?

ANDY THIBAUT

One of my students in WestConn's MFA writing program, Ron Samul—in the school year 2005-2006 taught me how to blog when my mobility was limited as a recovering cancer patient. Since then I've found that I learn a lot every day as a blogger and I see that my blogging has an impact.

INTERVIEWER

You speak of yourself as a “recovering cancer patient”?

ANDY THIBAUT

Without going into all the gory details, the cancer had progressed to stage three-point something and for quite a while, it was a big deal to get up off the couch and walk around. I have some permanent nerve damage and I have to go in for a lot of check-ups when various blood counts are off. I'm happy to be around rather than gone, and I deal with fatigue by resting in between outings.

INTERVIEWER

Can you give us an example of the sort of impact you encounter?

ANDY THIBAUT

My reporting on the Smolinski missing person/love triangle case last fall coincided with a request by the Waterbury police department to seek FBI assistance. Documents disclosed by order of the State of Connecticut's Freedom of Information Commission revealed that the Waterbury police did virtually nothing to follow up on a tip that Smolinski had been strangled in Woodbridge and then buried under concrete in Shelton. The FBI recently dug up several sites.

This case is still under investigation. They didn't find Billy Smolinski's body. But, an FBI agent told the *CBS Morning News* in October that there are suspects.

INTERVIEWER

What else is a visitor to your blog likely to find of interest?

ANDY THIBAUT

At my blog, The Cool Justice Report, I have about 300 links. For one thing, I activate Google news alerts for subjects that interest me—whether literary or political—and one thing leads to another and to another and to another...It's a wild trail out there in cyberspace and I enjoy following it.

INTERVIEWER

What's an example of what you look for tracking in cyberspace?

ANDY THIBAUT

In the Doninger free speech case, I simply followed the trail every step of the way. Newspapers used to do this for major cases, but they don't any more.

Also, over the course of 30-some years of reporting, I have developed an instinct to confront lying public officials. Newspapers used to do that, too. Now, all too often, they are merely transcribers, inflicting vomit on their readers.

As an advocate for free speech rights, I wrote with a point of view and posted the opinions of others at the Cool Justice Report.

INTERVIEWER

Where can we look to get a quick sense of what your approach to blogging involves?

ANDY THIBAUT

Here are some links of interest:

<http://cooljustice.blogspot.com/2007/11/lary-bloom-douche-bag-column-pdf-link.html>

<http://cooljustice.blogspot.com/2007/11/schwartz-aruba-trip-postpones-foi.html>

<http://cooljustice.blogspot.com/2007/11/can-u-digg-it.html>

<http://cooljustice.blogspot.com/2007/10/we-protect-far-more-than-just-polite.html>

<http://cooljustice.blogspot.com/2007/10/watching-over-our-children.html>

<http://cooljustice.blogspot.com/2007/07/guinea-pigs-poetry-fest.html>

<http://cooljustice.blogspot.com/2007/01/blog-edition-readings-ct-center-for.html>

<http://www.andythibault.com/interviews-articles/Judge-Law%20Tribune.htm>

<http://www.andythibault.com/columns/Cool%20Justice%20-%209-4-00.htm>

<http://www.andythibault.com/columns/Cool%20Justice%20-%2010-2-00.htm>

INTERVIEWER

Let's go back to that wild cyberspace trail you mentioned a moment ago. Your background suggests that you're someone who's fascinated in knowing how the world runs, someone who wants to know exactly what's going on. How would you describe this side of yourself?

ANDY THIBAUT

I like to give a voice to those who have no voice. There are countless victims of injustice, including innocent people in jail. There are countless victims of oppression—in the workplace, in small towns and

big cities and in schools. I like to stand up for these people and stick it to The Man.

INTERVIEWER

How do you account for what led you to go in this direction? Was there a turning point of some sort?

ANDY THIBAUT

When I was a little kid I told my mother I wanted to be a priest for the bums, not the rich people. I guess I have always been inclined to favor the underdog. I also like the challenge of beating the odds, whatever the endeavor.

As an undergrad at Boston University, I began to learn the difference between reality and what was taught in the official history books and on the corporate-controlled news.

My first big story as a reporter was on the cover-up of a hit-and-run death in New London on Christmas Eve 1973. This story taught me a lot about police, political and judicial corruption.

More recently, I wrote about the punishment of prisoners at the Niantic jail for trying to cope with their lives through a therapeutic writing program. The program resulted in two books by Wally Lamb: *Couldn't Keep It To Myself*, and *I'll Fly Away*. I was very honored to be mentioned in the acknowledgements for the second book.

To this day, I am on the lookout for those who get shafted by the system and the powers that control it.

INTERVIEWER

What sort of writers do you think will find your *Writing for New Media* course an engaging fit and why?

ANDY THIBAUT

Whether you're someone who likes music, sports, politics, video games, or any of the various arts, there are blogs for you. In this class we will teach each other. We will encounter many new sources of information, evaluate them critically and learn from them.

One of my strengths is networking. Even if I don't know much yet about your particular interest, I am eager to help you connect with new sources and help you enhance your expertise and develop your voice. The range of my interests is reflected in the links at The Cool Justice Report, and I try to increase that range all the time.

INTERVIEWER

Tell me something about your approach to teaching.

ANDY THIBAUT

As an editor for newspapers, including *The Hartford Courant*, I employ a "writing coach" method of teaching. By this I mean the editor and writer discuss the concept of a story before any work is done. What moves you? Why do you care about this story? Why would anyone else care? What's the focus? What people sources and documents will you need? Then, at each step, the editor and writer review progress. Most of the editing is done before a word is written.

Since 2002, I have taught various writing, reporting and communication courses at the University of Hartford and at Western Connecticut State University in Danbury. I have gained useful knowledge during all these classes, including the proper pronunciation of the names of various rappers.

INTERVIEWER

Your spring semester class starts the week of January 22—what can your students expect to be busy at early on?

ANDY THIBAUT

In our class I expect we will all create individual blogs and a collective blog. One reference point to compare what we'll be aiming for can be viewed at the Trinity Bloggers link at Cool Justice, which can be reached at <http://trinblogwarriors.blogspot.com/>

We'll learn how to post videos and photos and deal with all the issues that affect "mainstream" writers, including slander, libel, plagiarism, and copyrights.

###

*Note: The interview with Andy Thibault was conducted by Bill Hunt, an Assoc. Prof. of English at Northwestern Connecticut Community College. It took place off and on over a week-long period in late November 2007.*