Face Time: Jim Howaniec: On poverty, his first novel and honor (your honor, that is)

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Attorney James Howaniec has an office on Lisbon Street in Lewiston. For four years in the 1990s, he was mayor. He also served as assistant attorney general, prosecuting some of the area's most notorious criminal suspects. Now he's a defense attorney, working on the other side of the courtroom.

Does Howaniec know a little bit about character?

Yes, your honor, he does. Enough to fill a book.

Howaniec has rolled his experiences into a novel, "Lisbon Street: A Novel," a thriller with a backdrop you might recognize.

What's your book about? It is about a criminal defense lawyer in poverty-ridden central Maine. The story is set during the year following the September 11th terrorist attacks. It features a killer, a love interest and a poignant custody case involving a boy from Argentina, that is based loosely on actual events. It has some dark humor and some disturbingly violent scenes, but I would call it more cerebral than action-

packed. The protagonist is a flawed character, but generally sympathetic. If it were a movie it would be a cross between Al Pacino's ". . . And Justice for All" and something directed by Jim Jarmusch.

I wanted to accomplish two things: I wanted to write a legal novel that is as realistic as possible. Some of the most successful books, movies and TV shows about lawyers are pretty entertaining, but not very realistic. I also wanted to write a story about the effects of poverty in Lewiston and central Maine. We are living in a gilded age of an America in decline. Enormous wealth is accumulating into the hands of a small percentage of super-rich, and everyone else is getting left behind. I have been practicing law for 25 years and I have never seen anything like the hopeless, structural, generational poverty I'm seeing daily in the local courts. Our broken government can bail out the Wall Street bankers and fight three wars, but it can't help someone living on a $650 Social Security check each month. I wanted to write a reality-based story about life in poverty on the streets of Lewiston.

What was your writing schedule like? I had been conceptualizing the novel for about five years. I would run into (former Lewiston mayor) Paul Dionne about once a year and we would jokingly ask each other how each of our novels was coming along. He beat me last year with his publication of "The Priestess and the Pope." His story is about saints, mine is about sinners.

I wrote most of the novel in the past year and a half, usually between 5 and 8 o'clock in the early morning. I spent a large part of last summer out on the back deck doing a lot of writing. I've been editing it and reworking it for the past three or four months with the help of a lawyer friend down in Portland. Now I'm subjecting it to a final round of edits and comments from about a dozen friends and colleagues here in town.

What was the funnest part of the writing process? It really is amazing how attached you get to some of these characters that you've been living with as you create and develop them. It was really fun to watch how my characters developed.

What part was a drag? Writing is really painful. I actually found it physically exhausting. It is especially tough when you have a busy trial practice. So just finding the time to write and dealing with writer's block were the hardest parts, but I'm sure that is the case with most writers.

Now that you're going to be a published author, will you demand that judges address YOU as "your honor?" Judge (John) Beliveau has been calling me "your honor" for years. We're kind of bonded as former mayors in Lewiston. As for the other

judges, I think I'm still going to have to work on them. I'll tell you what: You can tell Judge (Rick) Lawrence to call me "your honor."



Caption

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