

# Environmental lawyer enters literary realm

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Longtime Harrisburg environmental lawyer Joel Burcat is authoring more than legal papers – he is becoming a bona fide novelist.

Later this month, his environmental legal thriller, “Drink to Every Beast,” will be released online, in stores and on e-readers. It is available for pre-order on Amazon for \$19.95.

Though Burcat has written five novels, it’s his first one to be published.

Not to be confused with eco-thrillers or science fiction novels, an environmental legal thriller involves a suspenseful, fast-moving legal investigation of an environmental crime. John Grisham, famous for his legal thrillers, has produced some work in the genre, like “Gray Mountain,” about a woman prosecutor who helps strip-coal miners working in unsafe conditions.

“Drink to Every Beast” features Mike Jacobs, an “everyman” environmental prosecutor in Pennsylvania’s Department of Environmental Protection, who investigates a criminal dumping of phenol, otherwise known as carbolic acid. Phenol is an organic compound produced from petroleum that is used to produce plastic and pharmaceutical drugs.

It’s a crime known as midnight dumping: where a business, unwilling to pay to dispose of waste legally, instead dumps it in a quiet location, like a drain, according to Burcat. But with most midnight dumping cases, the carbolic acid in “Drink to Every Beast” eventually ends up polluting freshwater. It meanders through creeks and streams, ending up in the Susquehanna River, where it fatally burns two teenagers out for a swim.

It’s a puzzle for Mike Jacobs, who must find out who dumped the waste, and where, and craft a prosecuting argument around his findings.

In a subplot, Jacobs sparks a romance with a young woman, a deputy attorney general investigating the man running against the governor for fraud.

Burcat speaks of his protagonist like a friend, and with good reason: Jacobs appears in three of the books Burcat has written and appears in a fourth that Burcat is currently writing.

Burcat is looking forward to having his work read by a wider audience.

“It’s one thing to give it to my daughters or wife. They said ‘We love it Dad, you’re a great writer.’ But now lots and lots of people will read it,” he said, adding he’s hoping to get more feedback from readers.

## **The book business**

It’s been a long road to find that wider audience, however.

Burcat’s publisher, West Virginia-based **Headline Books**, fields about 15 book submissions a week, and typically publishes 25 to 30 books a year, according to Cathy Teets, founder and publisher of the company.

First-time writers should expect to send pitches to many agents before getting a positive response, Burcat said, who received many rejection letters, some offering constructive feedback. In time, he moved on to other projects, setting “Drink to Every Beast” aside, where it remained for about a decade.

Headline’s process for selecting books to publish involves many stages, Teets said. “Authors usually send a query email and I generally request a short synopsis, short bio and the first three chapters of a book. If it’s a good fit with my company, I send the first three chapters of a book to my readers,” Teets said.

She usually asks three readers to weigh in: a beach reader, a teacher and someone interested in a book’s specific genre, like historic fiction or memoirs.

If the readers approve, Teets asks the author to send the whole manuscript, and if it passes the readers’ test again, she’ll discuss a publishing contract with the author.

The publisher will first edit the manuscript, and edit it again, sending it back and forth to an author with requests to rewrite or clarify passages.

All other pre-press tasks, like page design, page layout and cover design, are done in-house at Headline Books, which started publishing in 1988 and has 320 titles currently in print. After all pages are completed, Teets sends completed books to about five printers to receive a quote. Then, a book “gets in line,” for print, as Burcat put it.

Then, it’s time for marketing and distribution. Teets attends book fairs, school visits and conferences across the country to promote Headline’s titles, usually with several of her 125 total authors.

“A lot of my authors, including children’s book authors, have been in more than 3,000 schools across the U.S. They stay all day and speak to the students and do activities with them,” she said.

Burcat will attend the American Library Association National Conference in Washington, D.C., in June as his official debut, where he'll sign copies of his book, generate some interest and have the opportunity to sell to libraries around the world.

In addition to selling direct to libraries and online to consumers, Headline Books also sells to book distributors like North Carolina-based Baker & Taylor, where bookstore giants like Barnes and Noble go to purchase books.

## **‘Just like that’**

Burcat has always had stories in the back of his mind, but was too busy as lawyer to pursue them.

That changed 11 years ago when he traveled to northern Maine to help a friend open his house for the season. “There was no cell service, and awful rainy weather, and I just spent some time up there writing short stories,” he said.

Later, his friend asked how his novel was coming along. He wasn't writing one, but the question intrigued him.

“I thought, why aren't I writing a novel? I went up to my writing room, a third-floor bedroom, and starting writing a novel. Just like that,” Burcat said.

Then a practicing lawyer at Saul Ewing Arnstein & Lehr, Burcat wrote only after 9 p.m. on weekday nights, during the block of time he normally watched TV.

After NAION left him legally blind, he retired last September from Saul Ewing, where he had been a partner for 16 years. He cannot drive, but he can make out extra-bold font on a yard-wide computer screen, enough to be able to write. NAION is a debilitating eye disease sometimes called a stroke of the eye, where blood clots cut off the blood supply to the eye's optic nerve. NAION stands for non-arteritic anterior ischemic optic neuropathy.

Burcat was drawn to write about environmental issues because, he said, the problems are still current.

“A lot of mistakes I saw as a lawyer were just dumb mistakes. Most were misunderstandings of the law, which is very complicated. There's a lot of regulations companies deal with,” Burcat said. “Businesses have to be more aware of complying with the law.”

He said many companies decided to outsource work focused on health, safety and the environment, hiring outside consultants to check in once a month. But in outsourcing, they're risking a lot.

“One environmental violation could cost hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal fees,” he said, versus hiring a full-time employee for considerably less.

Businesses in all industries should be conscious of environmental law, but Burcat said natural gas companies, manufacturers and all levels of government are most often at fault for environmental violations.

While “Drink to Every Beast” deals with midnight dumping, his other novels focus on strip mining, hydraulic fracking and well-water pollution.

“Since Joel Burcat is an environmental attorney, he has a unique perspective on the story, which is why I offered him a publishing contract. It’s a page turner,” Teets said. “We’re excited to have him on board. I know he has a couple more books he’s working on. I’ll be looking forward to getting those when they’re ready.”

Indeed, if all goes well, Burcat hopes to release a new novel every nine to 12 months.



Joel Burcat holds an advance copy of his environmental legal thriller in his home office in Uptown Harrisburg. PHOTO/Markell Deloatch