

*Suspense, Mystery, Horror and Thriller Fiction*

# SUSPENSE MAGAZINE

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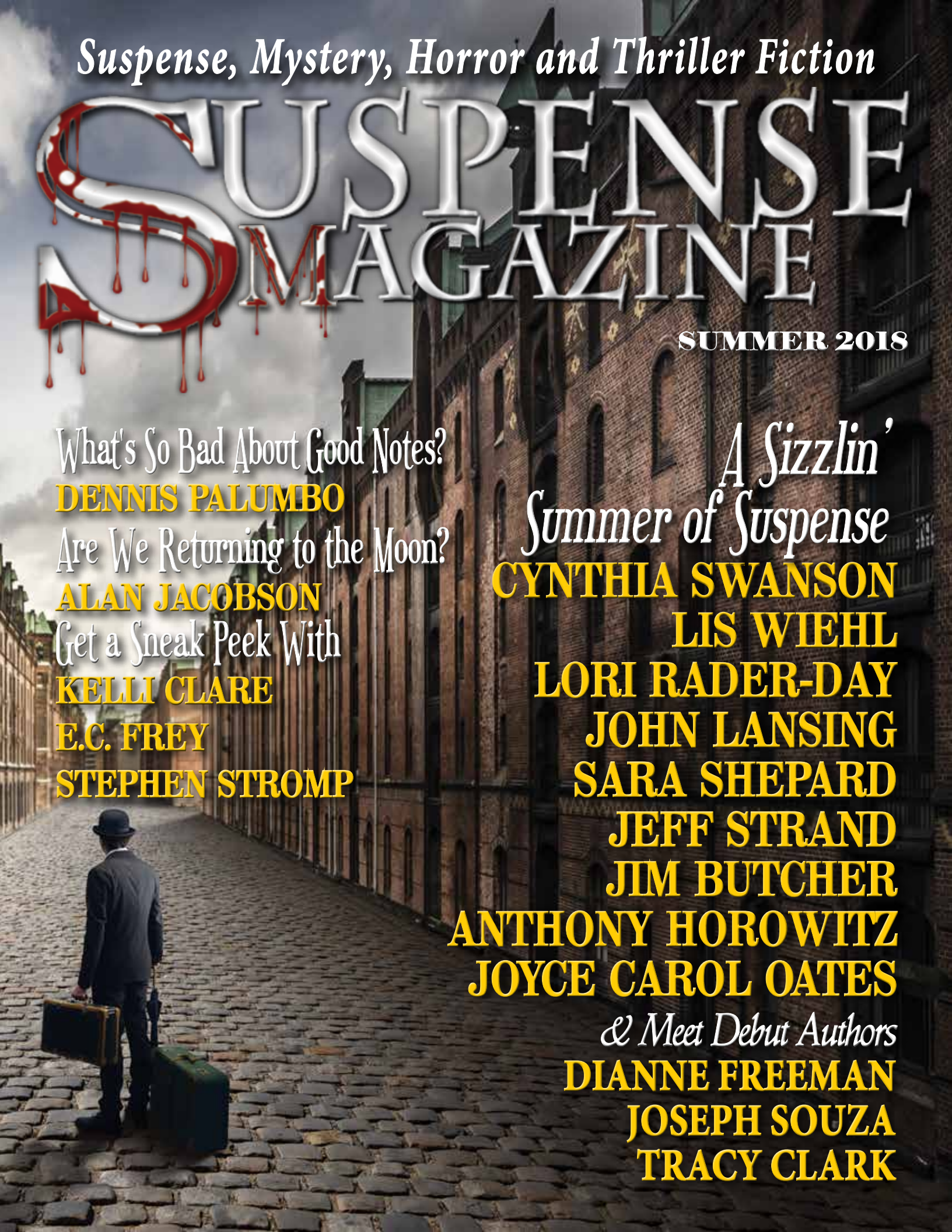
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# MEET THE FOURTH GUNMAN AUTHOR JOHN LANSING

Interview by Patrick Whitehurst for *Suspense Magazine*  
Press Photo Credit: Kara Fox



Believe it or not, John Lansing never dreamed of becoming a best-selling crime novelist; he thought he'd live and die an actor. Having worked on both Broadway and in Hollywood, it certainly seemed his career was headed that way. John played the beloved part of Danny Zuko on Broadway's "Grease" and subsequently played a lead role in the 1979 George Lucas film *More American Graffiti*. When he took a course at UCLA in directing, however, he discovered a taste for screenwriting, which led to a fifteen-year career in the industry.

John's imagination turned to literature in 2010, when he co-authored the true crime book "Good Cop, Bad Money" with former NYPD Inspector Glen Morisano. That instinct for solid suspense writing evolved into his *Jack Bertolino* series, beginning in 2012 with "The Devil's Necktie," followed by "Blond Cargo" and "Dead is Dead." Book four, "The Fourth Gunman," was released earlier this year. With his new book now in the hands of readers, John took a break to sit down with *Suspense Magazine* to talk about his incredible path leading him to the writing world.

*Suspense Magazine* (S. MAG.): Let's talk about the shift from screenwriting to novel writing. How did it happen?

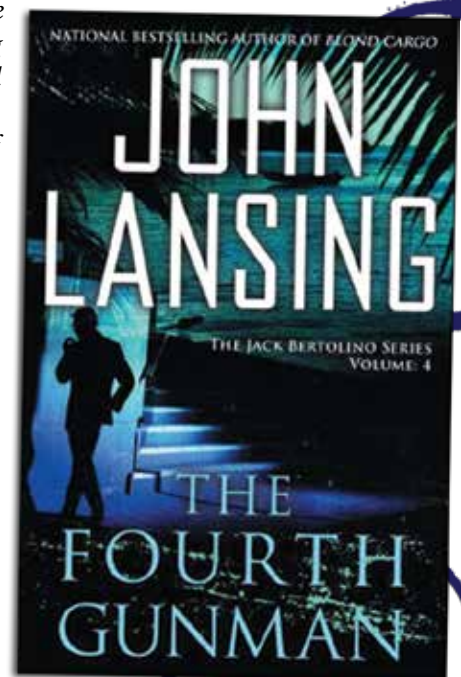
John Lansing (J.L.): *While I was studying directing I'd committed to shooting a short film. Spencer Eastman, a good friend, and successful screenwriter, offered to write the script. A serious illness forced him to leave the project and I decided to give it a shot and write the script myself. It was during that process I discovered my passion for writing and the joy of getting in the zone and creating a project.*

*When things slowed down, I switched gears and moved from working in front of the camera to behind. I got lucky and started booking television jobs with my talented writing partner, Bruce Cervi. All of the television and film scripts I was involved in over a fifteen-year period were co-written with Bruce.*

*It was exciting to step onto a set and watch the cast and crew bring life to a script I had co-written. The move from interpreting characters to creating characters opened a new creative outlet for me. It was an unexpected career move and an incredible experience.*

*My acting career helped inform the characters I wrote about in my television work. The craft of acting helped me understand the emotional roadmap I needed to flesh out complex characters, characters that would hopefully be compelling enough to maintain a readers, or viewers, interest. It also gave me an ear for dialogue that rings true.*

*Series television work taught me discipline, writing on a schedule, and collaboration. It hammered home the type of characters I enjoyed creating, characters I wanted to spend time with. It was a perfect tutorial for my next career move, writing crime thrillers. The greatest challenge I faced writing novels was writing alone for the first time.*



S. MAG.: Tell me about your series: What led to the creation of your Jack Bertolino character?

J.L.: *As great a gig as it was writing for network television, it was often creatively constricting. We wrote a character that wore a white hat. There was little nuance. It was a formula that was wildly successful and that was our edict, don't reinvent the wheel.*

*After I left the show, I spent a year researching the life of a decorated NYPD cop before writing his memoir, "Good Cop, Bad Money." It was first-hand schooling in police procedure. I came out of that experience with an idea for my own detective...and a simple question that became the impetus for my first novel: How does a cop, who's spent twenty-five years of his life taking down drug dealers, money launderers, killers, and thieves, retire? Bad guys have long memories. I thought there was a good chance there'd be retribution. And then there was the possibility of mind-numbing boredom.*

*My protagonist is an ex-cop who still has "the sickness." He's so caught up in the adrenaline rush of the job, he chooses career over family, friends, and his own personal safety.*

*Jack started his career as an undercover narcotics detective and worked his way up the political ladder. He ran a group of Narco Rangers responsible for putting multi-ton quantities of cocaine on the table, millions of dollars of laundered cash, and shutting down major cartel kingpins. If it wasn't for a violent on-the-job injury he'd still be carrying a badge. After three unsuccessful operations and months of painful rehab, he promised never to go under the knife again.*

*Jack was a man standing at the crossroads. Shooting pains ran down his six-foot-three frame on a daily basis. He was damaged goods, recovering from a contentious divorce, and self-medicating chronic back pain with a daily cocktail of Vicodin and Excedrin. He decided to leave his hometown of Staten Island and move west to reinvent himself.*

*I've always been drawn to flawed characters—in fiction and in real life. Men and women, fighting demons, who were hell-bent on reinventing themselves. Well, men make plans and God laughs. Twenty-five years of taking down bad guys came back to bite Jack and shook up his newfound state of bliss in Marina del Rey, California.*

*Karen Hunter was the publisher of the memoir. She had a deal set up at Simon & Schuster and asked if I wanted to come along and write, well...anything I wanted. She didn't have to ask twice. I write what I love to read. Crime fiction.*

S. MAG.: Can you give readers a look at your day-to-day routine?

J.L.: *When I'm working on a first draft it's a 24/7 experience. It's impossible for me to shut it off at the end of the day. I go to bed trying to problem solve, wake up in the middle of the night thinking about the story, and jump out of bed in the morning with an answer, or at least an approach that might lead to the answer. I'll sketch out those thoughts longhand on a yellow pad. Then I'll meditate, feed and walk the dog, eat some breakfast, and get back to writing, transferring my first ideas of the day to the computer, rewriting as I go, for maybe an hour or two. When I hit save, and the computer beeps, my dog runs over and lets me know it's time for another walk.*

*I pretty much keep cranking it out the same way, every day, until I'm finished with a rough first draft. I'm very goal oriented and don't really relax until I deliver the final manuscript to my publisher.*

S. MAG.: Do you do anything special to get inspired?

J.L.: *I'm always on the lookout for the next Jack Bertolino story. It has to be an event, a case, a murder, something wild that my cast of characters can work into organically. I have a folder filled with articles I've collected through the years—news and current events that have caught my interest. Stories pulled from newspapers, magazines, television and personal conversations. I never know what I'm going to spark to, but I recognize it when I see it. Sometimes it's a simple premise or a situation that I know will create conflict for Jack Bertolino and draw him out of his comfort zone and onto a case. I'll write a chapter or two and then go over the work. If it grabs me in the first five pages, I'll be inspired to keep writing.*

S. MAG.: Speaking of conflict for Jack, what's next for him?

J.L.: *I'm in the process of writing the fifth book in my series, entitled, "The Unseen." I went to a Mystery Writers of America lunch for an afternoon discussion of an anthology titled, "Anatomy of Innocence." The "Innocence Project" is a great organization that re-litigates cold cases and works to exonerate death row inmates who were falsely accused, convicted, and imprisoned for most of their adult lives.*

*By the end of lunch that afternoon I had the beginning of an idea and an exciting way into the next Jack Bertolino book...*

Which is one book readers cannot wait to find out about. If you wish to explore the world of Jack Bertolino and his creator, John Lansing, head to [www.johnlansing.net](http://www.johnlansing.net). ■