

John LESCROART

**THIS LOCAL NEW YORK TIMES
BEST-SELLING AUTHOR FOUND
SUCCESS THE OLD-FASHIONED WAY:
THROUGH HARD WORK.** BY CATHY CASSINOS-CARR

A “Jimmy Buffett for President” bumper sticker hangs prominently in the office of John Lescroart, which, depending on how you look at it, could mean a lot of things. Certainly it tells you he’s a fan of the “Margaritaville” man. With any luck, it also means he’s managed to remain down-to-earth despite his lofty literary leap to the stars.

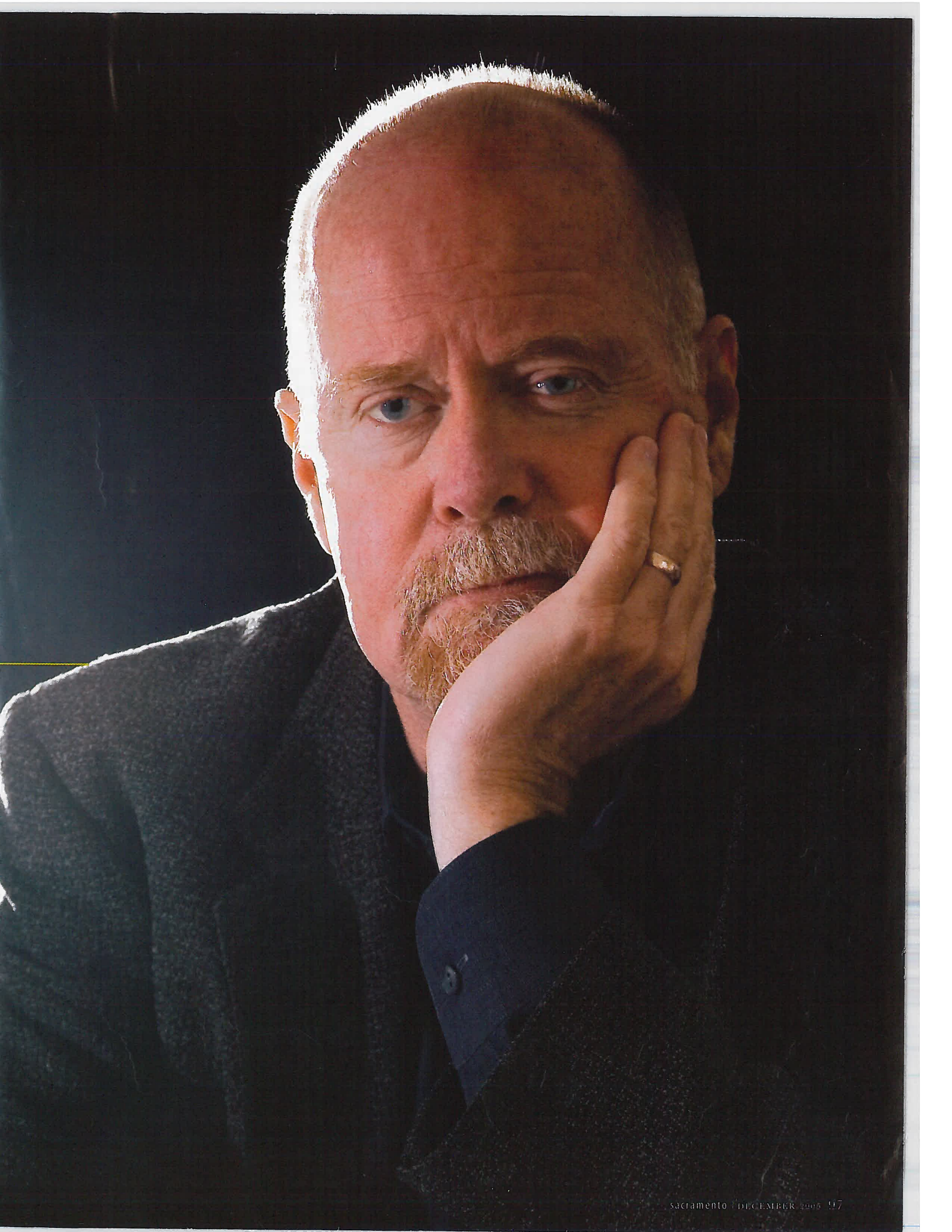
That second part, to his credit, also proves to be true.

“Don’t be nervous,” he says reassuringly, as I race in five minutes late, quickly maneuvering onto a comfy brown leather couch and fumbling for my tape recorder. I don’t like to be late, I tell him. He sympathizes, he says, because he’s exactly the same way. Wow. What a nice surprise. Here he is, a *New York Times* best-selling author, and there isn’t a speck of snobbery in his satchel.

Grounded, tenacious, intense—all of these words describe Lescroart, but hardworking seems to say it best. Before becoming a “20-year overnight success,” as he jokingly calls it, Lescroart (pronounced “less-kwah”) worked more jobs than most people do in three lifetimes. He’s been a bartender, ad director, computer programmer, moving man, house painter, legal secretary, word processor, fundraising executive and management consultant. He wrote his first novel while still in college, the second a year after graduating from UC Berkeley’s English department, with honors, in 1970. Problem was, he didn’t know the first thing about the publishing business, so his manuscripts sat around gathering dust for more than a decade.

“I always wanted to write,” reflects Lescroart, “but I had no idea of how to publish. What do you do? Do you send it to somebody? I thought

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NIN HOANG



books appeared on bookshelves by people who were already famous. I didn't know how to make that leap from suburban rat to book author." Although he spent most of his childhood years in Levittown, N.Y.—a proverbial stone's throw from Manhattan—the New York City publishing scene “might as well have been Timbuktu for me,” he says. “It was a very foreign idea.”

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Sitting today in his spacious, well-appointed office in downtown Davis, it's hard to imagine there was ever a time that the 57-year-old mastermind

behind a bevy of popular legal thrillers didn't have a clue. But like a lot of young adults without a map, Lescroart fell out of college not knowing which way to go and ended up on the road to misery. “I was really miserable—as only, I think, 20-something-year-olds can be,” remembers Lescroart. At his first post-college job as a programmer with the telephone company, he grew “really depressed. I was wearing a suit and tie every day, but I knew I wasn't meant to be a young executive.”

So he quit and headed for Africa, where he quickly discovered there are worse things than hating your job. “I had malaria, dysentery, pneumonia and E. coli, all at once,” he says. The near-death experience prompted Lescroart to find his purpose in life—fast—and he began pouring his energy into music, frequently pumping out songs at the rate of one a day. “I was a big hit in Spain,” says Lescroart, who still keeps an acoustic guitar stashed in his office. “I was living large.” By the time he moved to Los Angeles to continue the musical quest some three years later, he had “300 to 400” songs to call his own.

Although he ultimately switched his focus from writing music to writing novels, Lescroart has always understood the importance of having a vocation—a concept he first

learned through the teachings of Catholicism. “I think being raised Catholic really did make a huge impact on me, especially the idea of vocation,” he says. “It taught me that what really made for an A+ life or a self-actualized life was a job that was not really a job—like a priest or a teacher or a writer—something in which what you did was who you were.”

Owing his ruddy complexion to his Irish roots (he's three-quarters) and his French name to his father, Maurice, Lescroart grew up the second of seven siblings and, despite frequent geographical moves, enjoyed his childhood. “It was a happy childhood—odd for a writer, I guess,” he quips. Born in Houston on Jan. 14, 1948, Lescroart moved to New York when he was 3, then back to Houston, and finally to Belmont, Calif., where the family spent “a whopping six whole years in one place.” Although his father was a decorated World War II hero and remained in the Army until gravitating to the life insurance business, Lescroart says he was “not a fan of war. We actually grew up in a kind of pacifistic family. I'm not a particularly military guy today.”

Maybe not, but his work ethic demonstrates the kind of discipline normally reserved for the reserves. Like clockwork, Lescroart typically churns out a book a year (17 so far); his latest, *The Hunt Club*, is due out in January. “For about the last 12

BOOKS BY

John LESCROART

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|----------------------------------|--|
| <i>Sunburn</i> (1981) | <i>Nothing But the Truth</i> (1999) |
| <i>Son of Holmes</i> (1986) | <i>The Hearing</i> (2001) |
| <i>Rasputin's Revenge</i> (1987) | <i>The Oath</i> (2002) |
| <i>Dead Irish</i> (1989) | <i>The First Law</i> (2003) |
| <i>The Vig</i> (1990) | <i>The Second Chair</i> (2004) |
| <i>Hard Evidence</i> (1993) | <i>The Motive</i> (2005) |
| <i>The 13th Juror</i> (1994) | Coming in
January 2006:
<i>The Hunt Club</i> |
| <i>A Certain Justice</i> (1995) | |
| <i>Guilt</i> (1997) | |
| <i>The Mercy Rule</i> (1998) | |



years, I've handed in an outline for a book on Sept. 1, then the book itself on May 1," he says.

His daily schedule is the stuff of saints: He's at the gym by 7:30 every morning for a rigorous round of sit-ups, stretches, aerobics and Nautilus; by 10 a.m., he's at the office, pounding the keyboard until 5 p.m. His appearance also reflects a certain dedication to perfection: His beard is neatly trimmed, his jeans look nearly ironed, and his teal-green shirt is buttoned up. But this is the small stuff; what matters most to Lescroart are his wife and kids (Justine, 18, and Jack, 16), which is why you don't see anything here about him working nights or weekends. In the acknowledgments for *Hunt Club*, he calls wife Lisa Sawyer his "mate, friend, partner and muse . . . the best lifelong companion imaginable." They've been married 21 years.

It was Lisa, in fact, who was the catalyst behind Lescroart's first hardcover book deal. *Son of Holmes*, the book he had written straight out of college, had been yellowing for 14 years when Lisa urged him to cast the manuscript cross-

"I'M A JUSTICE FREAK," SAYS LESCROART, WHO NEVER ATTENDED LAW SCHOOL BUT HAS WORKED IN PLENTY OF LAW FIRMS.

country to the big fish in New York. Although Lescroart thought the book a "joke," six weeks later he was taking his first bite out of the Big Apple. But *Holmes* was actually his second published novel, and it was the first—*Sunburn*—that really lit the fire in Lescroart's belly. When *Sunburn* won the Joseph Henry Jackson Literary Award for the best novel by a California author, beating out Anne Rice's *Interview With the Vampire* (plus 279 other entrants), it gave Lescroart a reason to believe.

"That was it," he asserts. "That's when the toggle switch went in my brain and I said, 'I don't know how I'm going to publish yet, but I know I'm going to try and be a writer.'" It was 1979 when he received the award for *Sunburn*; the previous year, he had



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decided to quit the music business, reasoning "if I hadn't made it by the time I was 30, it was time to do something else." He wasn't kidding: On his 30th birthday, he quit Johnny Capo and His Real Good Band. "I was happy being Johnny Capo," he says. "But we didn't land a recording contract. I've always been pretty pragmatic." While music remains a big part of his life—he still performs, and has even started a record label, CrowArt—it's mostly all about the writing.

And writing. And more writing. And more close calls: In 1989, Lescroart had a second brush with death when he contracted spinal meningitis after body-surfing in contaminated water at Seal Beach. In a coma for 11 days, Lescroart calls the experience "the turning point in my career." He quit the last of his day jobs and moved to Northern California, where his commitment to writing took on a renewed intensity. "It was all just 'keep slugging, keep plugging through,'" he says. "I didn't give up. Say what you will about me, I didn't give up."

But he must have been really tempted. For the next several years, Lescroart was publishing books but still struggling like an average Joe, pulling only \$20,000 a year while feeding a family of four and paying the mortgage on their El Macero house (just east of Davis). "We were \$250,000 in debt, not including our house," he says. Although his wife was working as an architect and he was writing his life away, "we just couldn't keep up. It was grueling." Then Lescroart got a new agent, and everything changed.

"We won the lotto with Barney Karpfinger," he says, still looking surprised by his good fortune. "He's the best agent in the world. We literally went from \$20,000 one year to nearly a million the next—actual cash in hand." Karpfinger had passed on two of his books before *The 13th Juror* changed his mind. "He wrote me this really great letter saying, 'I rarely admit mistakes, but it was a mistake not signing you. If you're not happy with your representation, give me a call.'" Although Karpfinger did not act as agent for *The 13th*

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Jurox, he came on two books later, for *Guilt*—and for every book since.

His agent is hardly his only fan. Lescroart's books have been translated into 16 languages in more than 75 countries, attesting to his international popularity. "His readers circle the globe," notes Gayle Lynds, the co-president of the International Thriller Writers Association, who has known Lescroart for close to 20 years. "He's a rarity: a literary writer plowing the fields of popular fiction and seamlessly blending the best of both."

Lescroart's soon-to-be-released novel, *The Hunt Club*, represents a departure from the long-running Dismas Hardy/Abe Glitsky series that has played a key role in cultivating his cultlike following. Yes, it's a risk. "I'm going to take such grief from so many readers about this—readers who love Hardy and Glitsky," Lescroart acknowledges. "But you've gotta go on." Although the book is, in Lescroart's words, "a fun, fast story," it's still full of his trademark nail-biting suspense, and law and justice remain the central themes. "I'm a justice freak," says Lescroart, who never attended law school but has worked in plenty of law firms. "And writing is a good way to kind of exorcise that demon." His best friend and constant collaborator Al Giannini, a violent-crimes prosecutor in the Bay Area, adds: "John uses the backdrop of the criminal justice system as a laboratory and crucible to get into the heads of readily recognizable characters. His real 'genius,' if you'll forgive the word, are the vivid people he creates."

Lately, Lescroart has decided he'd like to do more than pay attention to the people on the page. He recently donated \$50,000 to the graduate program in creative writing at UC Davis, a gift that will support two programs, including the Maurice Prize in Fiction, named after his father, who died in 1986. "I wish I could help young people more," he says. "But I think if I told them my story, they'd give up, because it takes fortitude. More than almost anything else, it takes fortitude."

And how.