

Your BioNovel Life

By Edén Unger Bowditch

Did you ever think that your own life- maybe these years living abroad or evacuation during the revolution or odd coincidences of finding friends on the opposite ends of the planet- might look good on the big screen? What about taking that film and putting it in a book? Steven Weiss-Smith is a filmmaker-turned-author. Seeing life in moving pictures is what he brought with him to his new obsession. Now, instead of the screen, he has turned to the page.



Smith Family circa 1973



Smith Family circa 2013

EUB: Can you tell us about your work in film?”

SW-S: I grew up writing short stories and making movies with my friends. I always thought one day I could be a filmmaker. I backpacked around the Middle East – Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Greece. I was fascinated by the rich history and people’s stories. I worked at Warner Bros Television for many years, then left to write and produce movies independently. Lucky for me, my wife, April, was also a producer. So, we produced my first film together - “Dear Me, A Blogger’s Tale”. It was a comedy about an aspiring young copywriter who cures her anxiety by writing in an anonymous blog. Oh, and did I mention that my wife was seven months pregnant at the time! But that didn’t

stop her. I remember this great moment when a crewmember was complaining to me how tired he was. I simply turned to him and pointed to April who was on her feet for 12 straight hours that day. He looked back at me and said, ‘I’m not that tired anymore.’

I later shifted gears and worked on an incredibly inspiring documentary about elephant landmine survivors called “The Eyes of Thailand”. It’s the story about one woman’s struggle to create the first elephant sized prosthetics for these beautiful, gentle giants.

When my film career took off, many approached me and said, “My life would make for a great movie!” But I couldn’t make a movie for every person I met. It was a natural transition to start writing novels.

EUB: Tell us more about working with your wife, April.

SW-S: I’ll admit that I was petrified. We were newlyweds. I felt like either the movie would fall apart or our marriage would fall apart. But we actually started reading each other’s minds. Plus, I got the awesome pleasure of going to work everyday with my wife! So, now when people ask what’s the best way to make a movie on time and on budget, I say, “Make sure your producer partner is 7 months pregnant!”

EUB: How did you get involved in “The Eyes of Thailand” production?

SW-S: A producer friend of mine told me about a documentary he was working on about an extraordinarily brave woman in Thailand fighting to save elephant landmine survivors. She had discovered a way to create the first elephant sized prosthetics to help them walk again. I burst into tears when he showed me some early footage. Her story reminded me of why I wanted to make movies. Once the word got out, the movie was finished at George Lucas’s sound studio, Skywalker Ranch. Ashley Judd even came on to narrate. I am very proud to have been part of something so important.

EUB: What was the first novel you wrote?

I was adapting an autobiographical book for the big screen when a children’s book publisher approached me. He wanted to see if a screenwriter could write a children’s entry-level reading book. I jumped right in. I realized that the best research was right smack in front of me – my 5 year old son. I listened to the way he and his friends spoke. They had their own vernacular. That’s when I really started thinking



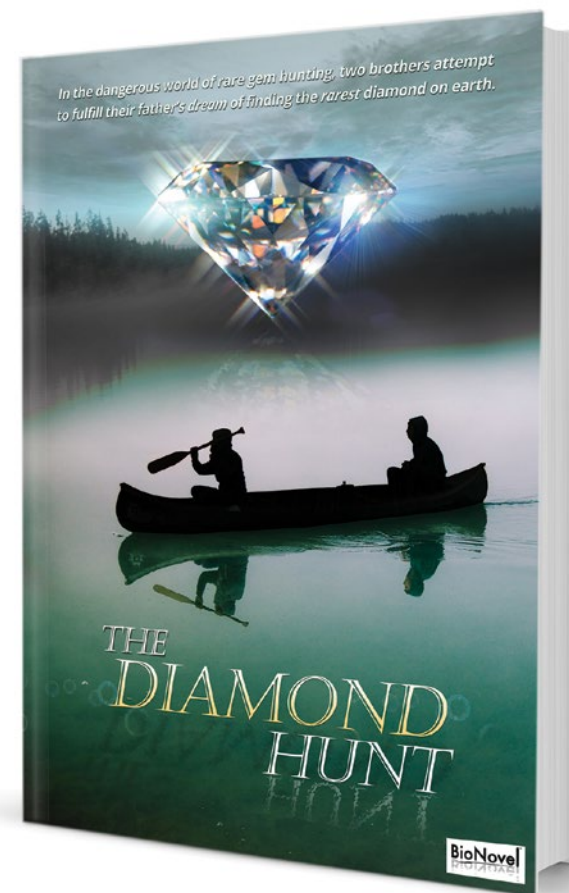
about my dad. I wondered what he would’ve thought. Not just about this, but about everything. I saw an opportunity to combine my skills as a screenwriter and an author. That’s when I started BioNovel.

EUB: What is a BioNovel?

SW-S: A BioNovel is your life story transformed into what reads like an entertaining novel. It’s not fiction, it’s your life written the way you experienced it. I lost my father when I was only 13 years old. I was too young to know who my father truly was when he died. Then, I became a father. I wished I had my father around to ask how he would’ve answered a question or handled a situation. I searched throughout the memoir and biography world. I didn’t want to read a timeline of events. I wanted to be entertained. I created BioNovel to fill a void that I felt existed.

EUB: Do you feel your history as a screenwriter has helped you create a living story?

SW-S: Absolutely. My experience as a screenwriter taught me what makes a story come alive. Screenwriters need to know their characters inside out. We have to hear their voices in our heads as we write. This lends itself perfectly to writing other people’s lives.



EUB: What are some particularly exciting or emotionally charged moments you can share?

SW-S: Well, all interviews are confidential, so I can’t be too specific. But this story stands out:

I had a set of retired brothers whose family history goes back five generations in the jewelry business. Hunting for rare jewels was their everyday life, so they didn’t see the excitement of this one story about discovering a diamond market beneath the streets of communist East Berlin. I mean, back in the late 60’s, anyone found performing capitalist transactions was dealt with violently. They never really told that story to anyone, “No big deal. It was just business,” one brother told me. The more I asked about that story, the more extraordinary it became. Soon I learned that they had a gun pointed at their heads by a dirty cop and street thugs! I raced back to my office and wrote. Because BioNovels are written in 3rd person, meaning it’s from another person’s perspective; they were suddenly able to understand how others would see the danger, the James Bond-esque aspect of their story. They were so proud to share their life stories. These guys were no longer just Grandpa or Great Uncle. Everyone

was shocked to learn who they really were and it really pulled the family closer together. It was such a rewarding experience for me too.

EUB: For an expat, in particular, who has led a rather unusual life, can you envision a novel that can embrace a personal narrative?

SW-S: Very much so. Expats have experienced things that their families in the UK, the US, Sweden, Tangiers, France, Italy or wherever else they call home, would never know about or be able to relate to. I’ve experienced the frustration in expat’s eyes when they repeatedly say, “It’s nothing like what you see on TV”. Even though an expat’s family might be far away, when they read these stories it’s like they’re experiencing their life. They suddenly understand so much better how different and similar it is to back home.

EUB Do you feel that everybody has a novel-worthy life to share?

SW-S Absolutely. That’s why I do this. We are natural storytellers. Where would we be without our history? I hear far too often how people wished they had captured a loved one’s stories before they passed away. Many of my clients that think they don’t have interesting stories to tell soon discover they have lots to share.

Edén teaches at The American University in Cairo and is an author herself (www.younginventorsguild.com). She has lived in Cairo with her family since 2006. For more information about BioNovel visit www.bionovel.com.