



## Insurgent Publishing for the Resistance

Timothy Sheard

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There are many ways to resist the current vicious attacks on the working class perpetrated by the Republican regime and their ruling class masters. One simple way is to ask someone why they have told a joke that relies on racist, sexist, homophobic or anti-immigrant stereotypes, and then engage the individual in a conversation centered on listening. Another is to join in mass demonstrations, political and grass roots organization building. Or send letters, emails, and phone calls to representatives on the different levels of government.

As a writer, writing mentor, and publisher, I see Story as a powerful medium for informing, inspiring and mobilizing large numbers of people. A mysterious alchemy of the mind comes into play when we read a good story, or watch it in a movie or TV show, or listen to a ballad as it is sung. Since the protagonist is a sympathetic character, we tend to walk in the character's shoes. We see their life as it unfolds (or unwinds), suffer in their defeats and feel their pain. We laugh and cry with joy when they overcome terrible odds. We mourn when they die. Indeed, studies of brain activity show that when we are immersed in a good book or watch an engaging movie or television show, our brain function mimics that of a sleeper's dream. We slip into a daydream, and it is that dream-like quality that allows the story to touch a deep emotional chord.

Reading stories promotes empathy for the class or community in which the characters struggle to find safety, security, love, peace, or redemption.

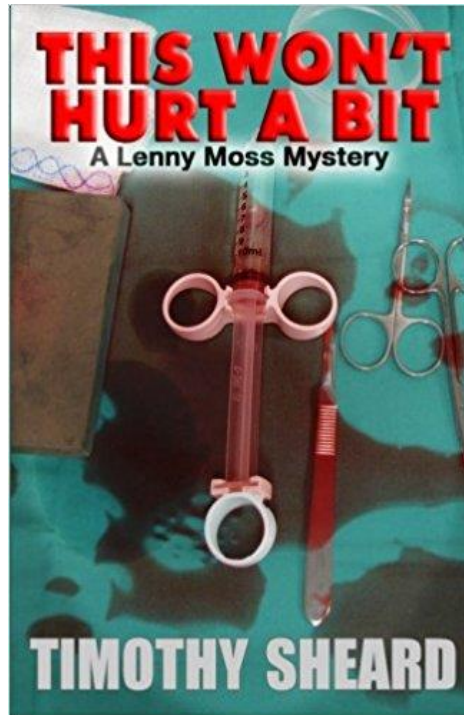
My efforts to contribute to the aspirations of the working class began with writing novels about hospital workers. A nurse with decades of hospital duty, I saw that in the majority of stories that were published in books or aired in movies or on television, the heroes were doctors or

psychiatrists. The service workers who maintained the institution and provided most of the services were either absent from the plot, window dressing or foils for the professional classes.

I knew the real hospital world was different. Like an old English country village, the occupational groups in the hospital are divided along strict class lines. When I first worked in the hospitals, nurses still talked of the recent past, when they were required to stand up and give their chair to a physician should he approach the nursing station.

I decided to write about the overlooked, underappreciated hospital workers: the nursing aides, messengers, cooks and dietary aides, the ward clerks, morgue attendants and custodians, and the nurses along with the doctors, to be sure. Since the books are murder mysteries, I needed a detective. The idea for my hero jumped out at me one day as I was having lunch with a custodian friend who was a militant, courageous and imaginative shop steward in 1199. Who better to investigate a murder than a *shop steward*? Any amateur sleuth must have the standing in his community to question suspects and potential witnesses. He/she must also have the skills needed to evaluate the testimony, examine physical evidence, and tease out the truth from the web of lies and omissions found in any investigation. My shop steward friend did all of that and more. And as a custodian wearing blue work clothes and handling a mop, he went about the hospital unnoticed, a perfect opportunity to investigate wrongdoing.

So was born Lenny Moss, hospital custodian, union steward and fearless detective.



In the first novel, a racist security guard stops a black worker at the hospital exit and searches the young man's bag. But the guard does not search the bag of a white doctor leaving at the same time, triggering an angry outburst from the black worker. I began the novel in 1991 (it was published in 2001), long before the phrase "walking while black" was in the mainstream discourse. Having witnessed the scene in my own hospital and been angered by it, I made it the opening of the first book.

When the white worker is found murdered, the police arrest the young black man (of course). His friends go to their best, most militant shop steward, Lenny, and ask him to free the accused from jail. When Lenny asks how he is supposed to do it, his friend replies "You gotta find out who killed the doc."

Along the way, Lenny represents workers accused of hospital infractions before frontline managers. He joins with his co-workers to march on a boss's office to protest an unfair labor

practice (“Always bring a crowd.”). And he encourages other workers to support the union by taking initiative in their department.

After publishing my third Lenny Moss novel, I worked at informing other labor unions about the series. The idea was by giving the books to workers in their facilities, reading would inform and encourage rank-and-file members to become more active in the union. By the time my fifth book was in print, I was hearing feedback from some labor activists that the books indeed were helpful in their campaigns.

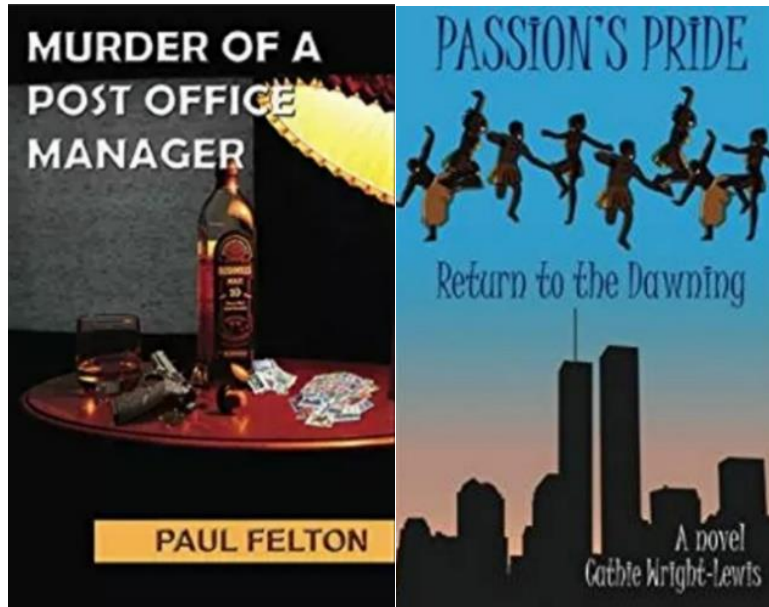
One steward in a California hospital came up to my book table at a Labor Notes conference. He told me, “Oh, yeah, you’re that Lenny Moss guy. We had trouble for a long time getting our members to volunteer as stewards. So, I gave away my copies of your books, and pretty soon we had more volunteers than we knew what to do with.”

The power of Story.

### **Building a Working-Class Publishing Company**

At labor conferences around the country, I met activists who had manuscripts languishing “in the drawer that mainstream publishers had rejected. A sucker for a good cause, I agreed to look at first one novel, then another, then a memoir, and then a book of case studies of organizing campaigns. Having learned how to reprint my own novels, all of which had gone out of print, I thought, “Why not? I’m learning the technique of producing a book. Why can’t I become a publisher, too?”

Each book required some measure of revision. A novel about a dedicated steward in a big postal facility (*Murder of a Post Office Manager*) needed the dialogue punched up a bit.



A novel about the link between the Twin Towers falling on September 11, 2001, and America's history of slavery (*Passion's Pride*) had divergent threads that needed to be brought together in the end. A book about organizing and education (*What Did You Learn at Work Today?*) needed some of the academic jargon replaced by common language so that a worker with a high school education could readily understand it. A wonderful historical novel about coal miners (*Sixteen Tons*) that was rooted in interviews of retired miners needed to move beyond the actual historical facts, because in the first draft too many characters were dying off!

As my catalogue grew, it became clear I had to take the business side of the enterprise more seriously and not treat it as a fun hobby. It's a labor of love, certainly, but it can't continue to lose money year after year, which it been doing. I was about to retire after 43 years of hospital duty, and I would no longer be able to afford subsidizing the charity work.

### **Print-On-Demand Publishing**

The technological breakthrough of print-on-demand publishing (POD) has enabled me and scores of other writer-editors to set up a publishing company on a shoestring budget. For those with really

no money to underwrite a book production, POD allows an editor to upload a book to the print and distribution company for free or for a small fee. Ingram's Spark charges \$49 to upload a book, for example, and their catalogue reaches booksellers worldwide.

Once the book is in publication, the publisher does not have to maintain any inventory at all. When a customer orders a book from a bookshop or from Amazon.com, the wholesale company prints and ships the book. When a customer orders the book directly from the publisher's web site, the editor can tell the printing company to print the book and ship it to the customer.

At times I have fulfilled book orders sent to my web site while on vacation far away from my home and office.

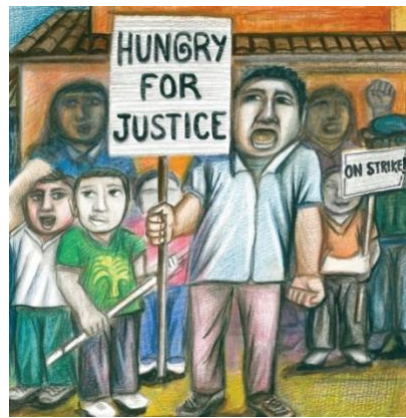
### **Social Justice for Elementary School Children**

Elementary school educators describe the profound impact that stories have on young children: "If they can see it, they can be it." In other words, if children see a boy or a girl acting in a courageous or intelligent or honorable way, they will believe that they can grow up to be that kind of person. The corollary, chilling in its import, adds, "If they *don't* see it, they will never believe they can be it."

If little girls and boys grow up with stories where the girl is not the heroic, fearless hero, but instead is a passive observer of the action or is absent from the story altogether, members of both genders will believe that girls cannot be independent, assertive, confident actors in their own storyline. They will never believe the cowgirl can rescue the cowboy tied to the railroad tracks as the train comes barreling down toward him.

I love a woman who can kick ass.

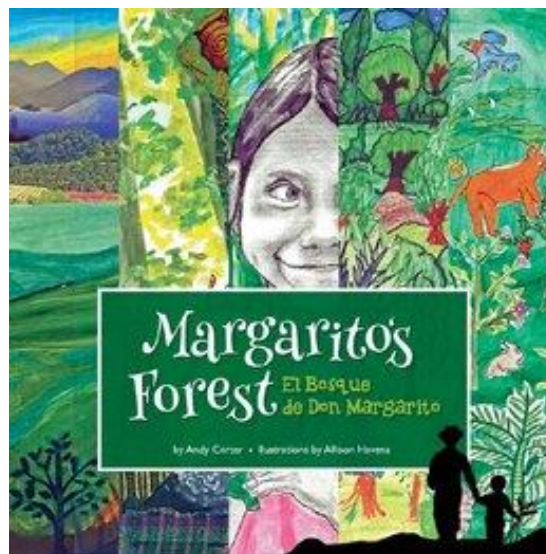
With the lesson of “If they can see it” in mind, I considered publishing children’s books. Ann Berlak, a retired elementary teacher and lifelong social activist, pitched a book about fast food workers and the Fight for \$15 for age 4–10, *Joelito’s Big Decision*. She asks, “If we can teach children how a caterpillar transforms into a butterfly, why can’t we teach how a society can be transformed into a just and peaceful world?” That was good enough for me, I worked with her on the story, adding a little suspense and translating the text into Spanish to provide a bilingual book. An organizer in Miami pitched a sweet story about a boy who is forbidden from picking the mangoes growing in the apartment building courtyard, *Manny and the Mango Tree*. Because some of the adults are undocumented, the boy’s mom is afraid to complain to the building owner. So, the children organize their own protest march, with *no* grownups. In the end, the owner relents, and the families have a big mango party.





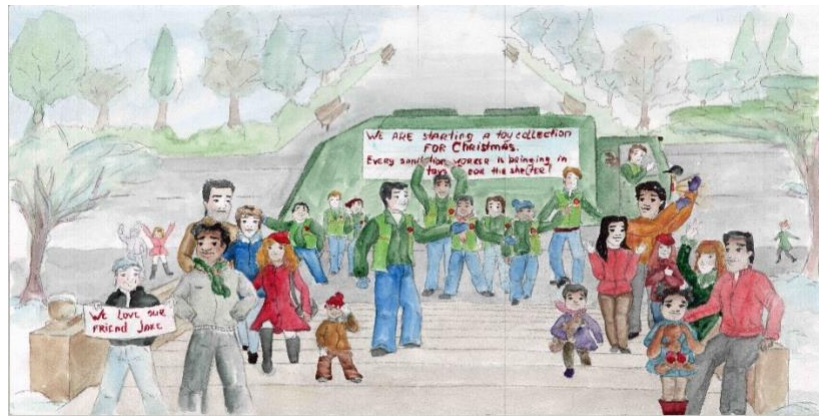
More stories came my way: *Jimmy's Carwash Adventure* is about a little boy who supports the carwash workers (los carwasheros), even though his dad is not sympathetic to their strike. Jimmy rides his little pedal car all the way to the carwash to support the workers, teaching his conservative dad a lesson in social solidarity.

*Margaritot's Forest* is a gorgeous book about a Maya village whose members had been chased up into the mountains by the military junta. There a young man begins planting trees. Though teased by his neighbors, he continues, as do his children, until they have a beautiful forest which they nurture and revere. I thought the book would inspire children to plant trees in their own neighborhood.



*Good Guy Jake* is a story that teaches young children (and their parents and grandparents) how a union advocates for a wrongly terminated sanitation worker. “Good guy” Jake has for years been taking toys from the trash, a violation of city regulations. Jake repairs and paints the toys, then he gives them to poor children in a local shelter at Christmas. Jake’s union takes the case to arbitration, where the union lawyer calls in a bevy of children with their toys. The children testify

before the arbitration judge how much Jake inspired them and taught them to believe they were loved and valued in the city.



With more children’s books in production, Hard Ball Press invites children to read about racial discrimination, the roots of climate degradation, the role banks play in robbing communities of control over their own wealth (“finance capitalism”), and a new look at Cinderella who, a year after marrying the prince, realizes she has joined a family of oppressive, ignorant, sexist wankers. Should she run away, or should she try to change the kingdom’s social structure? The wonderful transformative gift of story.