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Bill Handleman's column

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WRITER TOUTS HIS FAMILY CONNECTION

Five days a week, he works in supply-chain management. It pays the bills, puts the kids through school. Sometimes his job even takes him to exotic places, to India and Vietnam, South Africa and Haiti. Still, solving a company's inventory problems doesn't always soothe the soul.

On weekends, he writes fiction. There's no money in it, not yet anyway, and it costs him precious time with family and friends. But that's the way it goes. Supply-chain management is not for everyone.

This is why Phil Genovese spent stolen bits and pieces of the last 11 years working on his first novel, which came out Oct. 12. All those years of Sundays and holidays, of late nights squinting into a computer screen, first writing the book, then jumping through hoops to get the thing published.

Now comes the hard part: enticing people to read it.

To this end, the publishers led with their ace on the back of the book jacket. This is how they chose to promote "The Grandfather Clause": "The Grandson of Mafia Crime Boss Vito Genovese Makes a Remarkable Debut in This Suspenseful Thriller . . . A Novel Only He Could Write."

Oh, that Genovese family. Why didn't you say so?

As it turns out, this wasn't really the publishers' idea.

"It was my idea," Phil Genovese freely admits. "Is it a little exploitive? Yes. Was it a conscious decision? Yes."

So be it. You have to get people's attention somehow, he explains. The agent, the publisher, the reader -- they're all looking for a little song and dance. So you do what you've got to do. That's how it is. Create a fast pace and some indelible characters, and soon they will forget that the story sprang from the imagination of the grandson of a notorious Mafia chieftain.

Not that there isn't some loose connection between art and life.

Philip A. Genovese Jr. grew up in Shrewsbury. His father was a certified public accountant, a solid citizen, a law-abiding civilian. On Sundays when he was a little kid, Phil remembers his grandfather coming over to the house for supper. Sometimes, he says, Pop Pop Vito would go into the kitchen and cook the meat sauce for the spaghetti. Other times, Pop Pop Vito would receive visitors. Sam from Chicago once dropped by -- Sam Giancana, Phil would learn from his mother years later. Pop Pop Vito's friends used to bring toys for the kids. One man brought them a huge fire truck, Phil recalls. "To kiss up to the old man," he says.

He was 7 or 8, the oldest of the grandchildren.

"I was a kid," he says. "You remember what you remember. "

"When he came to the house, it was the way he wanted it . . . My father didn't want any part of it."

Vito Genovese lived in a modest clapboard house in Atlantic Highlands in those days. It wasn't the Park Avenue address he once called home, where you might bump into Eleanor Roosevelt in the elevator.

When the government finally had enough on him to put him away, Pop Pop Vito stopped coming over to the house on Sundays. He was away on business, the kids were told. Eight years later, Vito Genovese died in the federal penitentiary in Springfield, Mo., on Valentine's Day, 1969. Phil remembers going to Anderson's Funeral Home on Broad Street in Red Bank. He remembers "the black cars across the street with the long lenses coming out of the windows." He remembers going to St. Agnes, in Atlantic Highlands, and later "reading about this stuff, like everybody else."

By then Phil was in high school, at Christian Brothers Academy. From there he went to Villanova, Class of '74. At the time, being the grandson of Vito Genovese was considerably less important to him than being young in the age of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. He graduated from college and did what English majors were best qualified to do -- he began promoting rock 'n' roll concerts. Cool and the Gang, the Marshall Tucker Band, the Outlaws, Southside Johnny and the Jukes, some skinny kid named Bruce Springsteen.

Genovese did nothing but lose money. One time, he even got sued. The case, settled long ago, was Laurel Canyon Management v. Bruce Springsteen and Philip Genovese. Genovese still has the paperwork somewhere, buried under 30 years worth of extraneous stuff in the basement of his home in West Long Branch.

"At some point, maybe in late '76, I decided I needed a paycheck, I needed benefits," he says

.
He got his hair cut. He got a job. It was what his generation did.

Some of us were more resistant to the idea than others. Some of us could never completely disengage from our dreams.

Today his oldest son is about to become a father. A month after his first novel comes out, Phil Genovese is about to become a grandfather.

Talk about coming full circle.

Half a century ago, his grandfather was one of the most powerful men in America. He would come over for supper on Sundays. His friends would drop by, bearing gifts. Phil's parents never said much to the kids. "It was something we didn't want to talk about in the house too much," Phil says now.

Strangers thought Pop Pop Vito was a wonderful man. He used to buy ice cream for all the kids on the street in the summertime.

They loved him over at Old Orchard, where he used to play golf.

"If every old timer I've run into over the years who said he caddied for my grandfather had actually done that," Genovese says. "My grandfather wouldn't have had time to do anything other than play golf."

Was he any good? "I asked my father that one time," recalls Genovese. "He said, "Who knows? He probably always won, though.' "

You could make book on it.

Now the grandson of Vito Genovese writes a novel called "The Grandfather Clause" and while the story may have nothing to do with the old man who died in prison all those years ago, the family's scars are still there.

The family name "has cost me some pain, yes," Phil Genovese admits.

"But if people are drawn to the book because of who he was, then maybe my grandfather did me some good after all."

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ABOUT THE BOOK "The Grandfather Clause," published by Author House, is available online from the publisher, from Amazon.com and Barnes&Noble.com, or at the special order desk of your local Barnes & Noble store.

A fast-paced thriller teeming with indelible characters, the story revolves around two partners in a small trucking company in Edison. One of the partners lives in Monmouth Beach, the other in Oceanport. Local references abound.

The author, who lives in West Long Branch, is the grandson of the notorious Mafia chieftain Vito Genovese.

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