

Hollywood courts local thriller writer

Barbara Silverstein
Special to The CJN

The buzz about David Rotenberg's new book, *The Placebo Effect*, has spread as far as California.

The Toronto-based writer says he recently went to Los Angeles because there was interest in turning *The Placebo Effect* (Simon & Schuster), the first book in The Junction Chronicles, into a television series.

He says he was "in conversation" with a producer of the Emmy Award-winning show *Justified*. But Rotenberg's containing his excitement, because "there no wedding yet," as he puts it, and he's been courted by Hollywood before.

Rotenberg, a master acting teacher and retired York University professor, is a prolific writer who also wrote the Zhong Fong detective series, which takes place in modern China. The five books were published in Toronto by McArthur and Company from 1996 to 2004, and his epic historical novel, *Shanghai: The Ivory Compact* (Viking Books, 2008), was a Canadian bestseller.

The Placebo Effect, the first book Rotenberg has set in Toronto, is an international thriller with much of the action taking place in the United States. New York landmarks figure prominently.

The story centres around Decker Roberts, a Jewish acting teacher with a special gift – he can determine if people are telling the truth.

While he has parlayed this gift into a lucrative sideline – he consults to big corporations for large fees – Decker keeps his identity a secret, sporadically making furtive trips to U.S. cities.

He's unaware that he's being tracked by a U.S. national security agency, as well as by an unscrupulous chief at the helm of a major pharmaceutical company.

Decker narrowly escapes death, when his home in the Junction area of Toronto is burned down. The fast-paced thriller continues as Decker tries to unravel why he's a

target and who's trying to kill him.

So what gave Rotenberg the idea for this book? He says publishing giant Simon & Schuster asked him to do a book that was not based in China.

One day, he was walking around his neighbourhood – he's lived in the Junction for 23 years – when he noticed there are more churches in the area than any other part of Toronto.

He checked into the area's history and discovered that when the Junction joined the city of Toronto at the turn of the century, some of the police records disappeared. "I thought, 'What awful thing happened here that some police records were lost?'"

He suggests that this amalgamation provided a convenient pretext for losing those records, because the police were probably "protecting some wealthy people who had done something wrong."

Rotenberg says he integrated these suspicions about the Junction with his interest in "synaesthetes," people who have special abilities due to a mixing of two or more functions in their brains. "They cross-reference sensory functions in their heads."

Decker, his protagonist, identifies with synaesthetes, because of his uncanny

ability to detect the truth.

Many details of his personal life mirror those of Rotenberg's. For example, they are both acting teachers and both directed a couple of shows on Broadway.

"I think you write about what you know," Rotenberg says. Decker also runs the Professional Actors Lab on Stafford Street in Toronto, which happens to be the exact name and location of Rotenberg's acting studio.

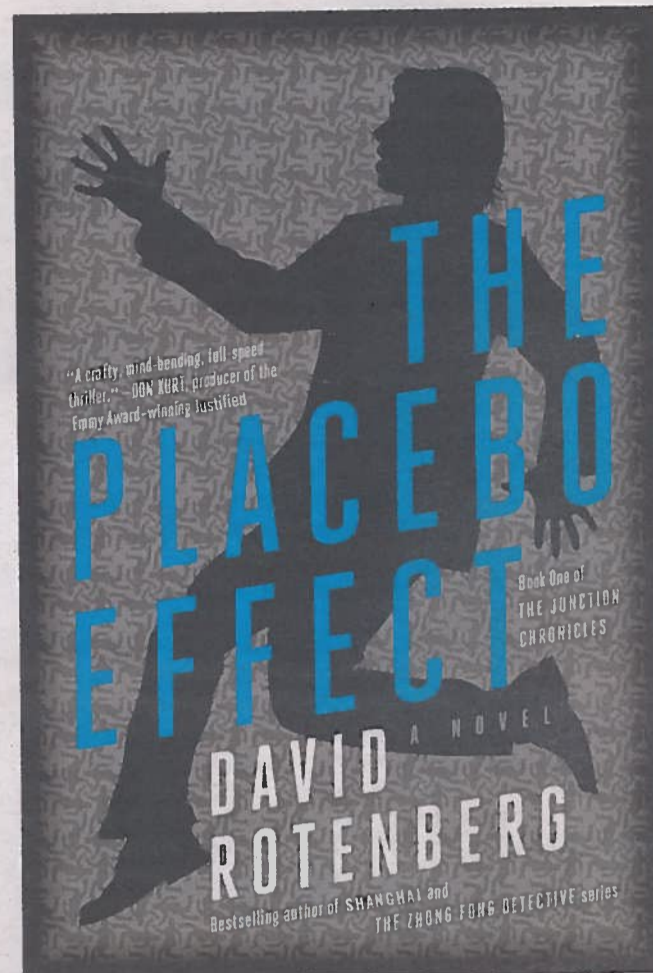
Known for his unique training style, Rotenberg has worked with a roster of well-known Canadian actors that includes Rachel McAdams, now a Hollywood star.

Rotenberg did a master's degree in fine arts, specializing in directing, at Yale University. He spent 14 years in the United States, directing shows in New York and working in regional theatres.

He also has an extensive academic career that includes a stint at Simon Fraser University and Tulane



David Rotenberg



University in New Orleans.

But York University lured him back to Toronto with "an offer I could not turn down," he recalls.

He also wanted to live closer to his parents and three brothers, and he felt Toronto was a good place to raise children. His daughter Beth, 23, was born just months after he arrived in Toronto with his wife, Susan Santiago, and his son, Joey, who's now 26. "It was new house, new job, new child – all at once."

The move cost Rotenberg the bulk of his directing career, he says. But in 1994, he spent 17 weeks in Shanghai directing, in Mandarin, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* by George Ryga. "I directed the first Canadian play people ever produced in the People's Republic of China."

In Shanghai, he says he stumbled upon a situation that inspired the creation of the Zhong Fong series: he accompanied a stranger to the hospital and this experience became the kernel of his first novel.

Penguin later approached him about writing a historical fiction on Shanghai. "They said, 'If you like James Clavell, could you do for Shanghai what he did for Hong Kong?'"

He says he found a children's book with a line about Silas Hardoon, an Iraqi Jewish opium trader, who married his Chinese mistress. "That line was the genesis of *Shanghai: The Ivory Compact*."

Hardoon and his heirs figure prominently in this fictional saga, he says, noting that they were a powerful force from the 1880s to the 1940s.

Since 1995, Rotenberg has written a novel every 16 months. The second book in The Junction Chronicles is already completed.

"I'm really excited about the series. There's big-time interest," he says. "When I think of the series, I think of doing six or seven books."

"I'm 62. It may not be the last big project I do, but it's close to it."

Rotenberg will be reading from *The Placebo Effect* at Authors at Harbourfront Centre: Crime Showcase on March 21, 7:30 p.m.

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