

## Les Whitten

# Workaday Scribe Discovers Big Bucks, Relaxation In Fiction

*"The secrets she must know were like musk for me, an aura. I thought of her: a walking week of front page stories."*

Les Whitten in *Conflict of Interest*

In Les Whitten's 1976 Washington novel, the investigative reporter described in the above passage was eyeing the wife of the Speaker of the House. He bears a slight resemblance to his creator: a middle-aged sleuth who knows the failings of the powerful. For both Whitten and his fictional reporter, life has been filled with deadlines and the pursuit of the big story.

While Whitten may have never coveted a politician's wife, he's unlocked secrets in other ways during twenty-six years as a journalist, the last nine of them spent as Jack Anderson's chief investigative reporter. He's snared grand jury transcripts in a wiretap case involving heirs of Texas millionaire H. L. Hunt. When radical Indians stole documents from the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1973, it was Whitten who crisscrossed the country and found the

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By Bill Snead



documents, a journalistic coup that also led to his arrest by the FBI. (A grand jury later refused to indict him on charges of receiving stolen government documents.)

Most recently Whitten reported on Representative Frederick Richmond's sexual advances to teenage boys, a story he developed with another Anderson staffer even though Whitten was in the midst of a year's leave of absence.

Whitten is living what he calls "the sweet life" this year. His seventh book, *Conflict of Interest* enjoyed a \$360,000 paperback sale. He gets half of that, so he decided to take a leave to complete another novel (for which he's received a \$75,000 advance) and to devote more time to his other passion, translation of Charles Baudelaire's poetry.

"I bought Jack lunch at Trader Vic's, his turf," says Whitten. (Whitten's turf: Cantina D'Italia.) Anderson agreed to give a year's leave to his \$33,000-a-year reporter, who began sharing a byline with Anderson three years earlier. (Says

Anderson: "He's the best reporter in the country.")

"Before, I was strung like a harp every day," says Whitten. "I'd have four or five stories going, I didn't know if some FBI guy or grand jury was going to call, or if some mob guy would do a breath job on the phone. If we were working on a mob story, I'd start my car by reaching my arm in, so I'd only miss an arm if it blew up. It wasn't what you'd call your little old backyard swing by the Swanee River."

Today Whitten—more a boyish-looking writer than the cop he sounds like—treats himself to cinnamon-flavored coffee in the morning and retires to the basement of his modest Silver Spring home to write to the accompaniment of classical music.

"When I wrote *The Alchemist*, I played about three different versions of Faust," says Whitten. "For *Conflict of Interest* I played Mozart. Now, for this one I play *Rigoletto* because the hero is in Northern Italy. For action scenes I'll play Respighi—when you're writing a chase scene, no one lays a hand on Respighi."