

# Mark Safranko

## The making of a multi-faceted artist

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**H**ands in his pockets and a smile on his face, Mark SaFranko is not how we pictured him. Before we met the author, we all speculated on what he would look like and of course it was fuelled with stereotypes. "I'm sure he's nonchalant and sad all the time. I can see him writing about suicide while drinking his fourteen year old scotch and listening to Jazz music." Maybe there is some part of truth in our prejudices; however you can't judge a book by its cover.

Born and raised in a very industrial New Jersey town, far from the privileged neighbourhoods and from the libraries, Mark SaFranko never thought he would become a writer. Despite his culturally deprived background, the author describes himself as a "very imaginative kid, who always seemed somewhere else". Then his curiosity brought him to read Dostoyevsky who "exploded" his consciousness and gave him the "horrible idea to become a writer". Horrible indeed, considering how hard it is to write for a living.

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**"There are five bestselling novelists in the United States and then everybody else struggles"**

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American culture is very different from ours. Either you make money or you're on the street, which is why Mark SaFranko, like many before him, took on one dead end job after another, from deliveryman to journalist until he finally became a writer. He never stopped writing though. He wrote all his ideas in his notebooks, hoping that one day, he would be published. It was only at the age of 45 or so that he finally obtained the sacred status of writer. The process was extremely long, partly because the publishing system is flawed and very competitive. There is no way to break in if you don't have the connections, and some artists give up because of the constant rejections. The core of the problem lies in the fact that, sometimes, editors and agents do not take them seriously because they convinced that they can't sell their book or simply because they don't know the author. They're more interested in profits than in artistic values. "In the end, writing or painting or music is for those who have no other choice. And a great price has to be paid for the dedication to

### Quick Facts

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**90**

The Number of short-stories Mark SaFranko has written.

### *The Suicide*

One of his 8 novels. It will be translated as part of the ARIEL project and published by Éditions Inculte in 2019.

### *Max Zajack*

Mark SaFranko's alter ego and main character of his books *Hating Olivia*, *Lounge Lizard*, *God Bless America* and *Dirty Work*



whatever discipline you have chosen. Unless you're unusually fortunate, it's not going to be easy. This is why you have to be in love with what you're doing. Because the business at the end of it will kill you." said Mark in an interview for *Freedom Fiction Journal*. In other words, unless your name is Stephen King, you struggle a lot to have your writings published, whereas in France, publishers are more willing to give new authors a chance. But competition is something we too have in France, the main difference, according to Mark, is our perception of the work ethic. It is true that Americans, and people of other nationalities too, think we are lazy and always complaining about work. And the many strikes of the past few years don't help our case. According to an *Ipsos Global and Reuters* study, 89% of French citizens take all of their allotted vacation time, against only 57% of Americans. That makes America the fifth most workaholic country on Earth, and France is way behind.

However, when it comes to writing, we often think that authors just sit on their hands and wait for inspiration to come. It's actually a misconception, says Mark, "I usually work two hours a day, but I never stop until I have written at least three pages." No time to procrastinate, writers are hard-workers. Of course they write mainly for themselves, yet it's not a "hobby": when you get paid for it, it's a job. The vast



majority of writers are freelance, but they still have "employers" who decide on how and when the work must be done. First the publishers, but also, and maybe more importantly, the audience.

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**"Writing about my character Max Zajack became tricky. People like the character, which is a good thing, but now I have to continue writing Max Zajack's books and I'm afraid it has become a sort of product."**

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Authors often receive letters from fans saying how much they appreciate their work, and sometimes daring to give advice on how they should write.

Even though the writer forged his own identity and developed his own style, he can't help but think about the reception of his work. Ideally, people like it the way it is, yet it's more difficult when they're attached to a character that has been developed in several novels. Authors like J.K Rowling faced the same issue. Asked about the fans' expectations of 'Harry Potter and the Cursed Child', she said "it was daunting. [...] For seven years that world

was entirely mine - not a living soul knew anything about it." And now she has to share her work with people who are not always on the same page. When you put so much work into something, your project kind of become your "baby", and it is hard to let go and accept criticism. And it doesn't matter whether you're a bestselling author or not, the pressure is the same. According to Mark, the novel or short story he gives to his editor is "a final product". He always asks his wife to read it before, thus there is no need for modifications, he says, because his wife already gave him her opinion. Mark likes to say that "editors have not much power" but deep down he knows they do: without editors you can't sell your work, and since they invest money, they too have a say. They have style guidelines and quality standards that they adhere to. If your editor publishes "underground short-stories", you can't give him a novel. Mark once made this mistake and he regretted it because he had to change everything. It is hard to change entirely what you thought was a finished product. And that's one reason why many authors give up. But Mark never did.

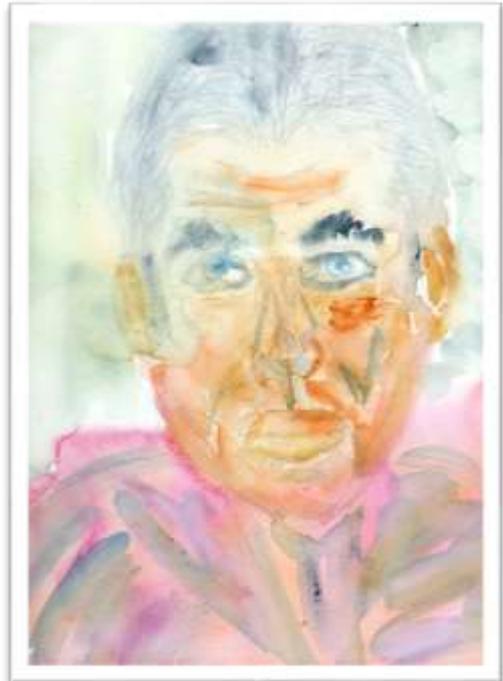
For this strong mentality, he can thank his education and his background. Mark grew up in the 60's, a time when anything was possible, when people didn't necessarily tend to restrict themselves. Bob Dylan inspired him in the way that he embodied this mentality of "you can do anything": he was a singer, a writer, a painter and even tried to be a movie star. He tried everything and Mark followed in his footsteps.

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**"The first thing I wanted to be as a young boy was a musician. It's a desire that's never left me. More accurately, a composer, and I still write songs and instrumental music."**

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Before discovering his passion for writing, Mark SaFranko played music. He was in a band and played in bars for years, rehearsing in his basement. His passion for music arose at the age of five and it never left him. It is surprising to see the difference between his music style and his writing style. It's truly the kind of music you listen to while working or writing. Peaceful and soothing. The acoustic guitar and the jazzy influence in



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### *Optioning*

The process of getting a book to become a motion picture (or any other form of content).

### *A Better Place*

1997 indie film in which SaFranko plays a secondary role as Todd's father.



### *1992*

When his one-act play *The Bitch-Goddess* was selected Best Play of the Village Gate One-Act Festival in New York.

### *Chinatown*

The thriller masterpiece that inspired Mark SaFranko's gloomy universe and actually his favourite movie.

the melodies convey a sweet sense of melancholia that reminds you of rainy days. Listening to John Cage, one of Mark's inspiration, we feel the nostalgia and melancholia that feeds his work, musically and literary. Indeed, one of his short-story collection, published in France is called *Léger Glissement vers le Blues*, which refers both to a music style and a feeling of melancholia. And we also get this peaceful impression in his paintings. The use of pastel and the abstract touch are soothing. Looking at those piercing eyes is disturbing, as if the person depicted was looking into our soul, discovering all of our secrets. When we look at his self-portraits, we notice that they are all called *Portrait of the self*, as if he had different selves, different personalities: not just someone who works in different media, but also someone who – in each of the media he uses – is always exploring a certain multiplicity of identity. He told us he uses different parts of the brain to write his books and to paint or compose. Maybe these parts are the sign of his multiple personalities. Every human being has their own sort of multiplicity. It's not necessarily a Manichean vision of good and bad, but most of us feel we have a darker self. In a way, SaFranko's books are a sort of catharsis, Max Zajack being his own personal Mr. Hyde. As for his paintings and music, they reflect a much lighter mood, more reassuring. Thus, whether it is gloomy or upbeat, stress-inducing or soothing, by expressing his emotions, he gives the audience a better understanding of themselves, because they can recognise their own dualities.

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**“If I weren't a director, I would want to be a film composer.” – Steven Spielberg**

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When we listen to Mark SaFranko's whole discography, we noticed that one of his album is called *Music from an Unmade Movie*. Quite an odd title, right? His relationship with cinema was channelled through his music, and as he told us during an interview, “music can change the whole atmosphere of a movie”. It adds to the life of the story, and it can ultimately make or break an audience's experience. Have you ever watched a horror movie without the sound? Not that scary to be honest. Could you imagine *Psycho* without its stress-inducing violin? Great movies are often associated with iconic music. The filmmaker can choose his soundtracks among songs that already existed, like Quentin Tarantino and the famous dancing scene in *Pulp Fiction* and Chuck Berry's "You Never Can Tell". Nevertheless, some directors never use popular songs as soundtracks, but rather opt for orchestrated scores that became even more iconic. Take Star Wars, Jurassic Park or Harry Potter “Hedwig's Theme” for instance. As

for Mark SaFranko's *Music from an Unmade Movie*, it could actually be the soundtrack of a real movie. The most melancholic songs would be in perfect harmony with the greasy nights of American nightlife depicted by Roman Polansky as well as Mark SaFranko himself, in his writings. It is even easier to imagine one of his novels adapted on screen, since he told us he already wrote screenplays. Yet even with a lot of passion and strong-will, it is hard to find your way into the vast and competitive industry of cinema.

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**“There’s a million people involved in what you do. So in a way sometimes it’s hard to have a finished product looking like what you had imagined.”**

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Mark SaFranko already struggles with his writings but Hollywood is a whole new level. He told us about the process of optioning and how many times directors wanted to adapt one of his novels. Being a film-lover, he of course accepted every time. Yet when you write a screenplay for someone else, or if a producer buys the rights of your books, it won't necessarily be adapted. One of his screenplays was once bought but he only shot half the film because he had conflicts with cast members who didn't want to read his lines, but mostly because the director had financial issues. We can't help but have a sense of déjà-vu, hearing this, because the author had the same problems with his writings. Funds and other people's perceptions of your work always seem to be an obstacle. Mark told us how disappointed he was: “this industry is so complex, there are so much people involved in your project, it's difficult to have a say.” Such a shame. As readers, we would have loved to see his work in live-action. His novel *The Suicide*, for instance, would work perfectly adapted by Roman Polanski or Michael Mann. Nowadays, detective movies and police dramas are still in vogue. Just look at the Netflix programme: *Mind hunter*; *Making a Murderer*; *Ozark...* all are famous TV series with the same atmosphere as Mark SaFranko's novels and short-stories. Yet the author found the perfect way to meet his dream halfway: instead of the screen, Mark chooses the stage. *Minable*, his first play ever translated into French, features his own composition and a title, Seedy Song, made just for the play. In keeping with his other work, the seven-act representation undercuts the beloved conception of American dream. As always, SaFranko focuses on those who are left behind in the race for success. Those, like him, who love America even though America doesn't love them back.



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