

Arty tales painted on the page in words

BY AILEEN JACOBSON

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Harvey Rachlin never was able to sell a song he wrote, back when he tried in the mid-1970s. But he authored a best-selling handbook advising others how to. Since then, he's written 10 more books on diverse topics, and two were adapted for a hit History Channel series, "History's Lost and Found."

None emerged from his biology major at Hofstra.

Rachlin's latest is "Scandals, Vandals, and Da Vincis: A Gallery of Remarkable Art Tales," to be released this week as a Penguin paperback original. True to form, Rachlin, who lives in Valley Stream with his wife and son, had no expert credentials.

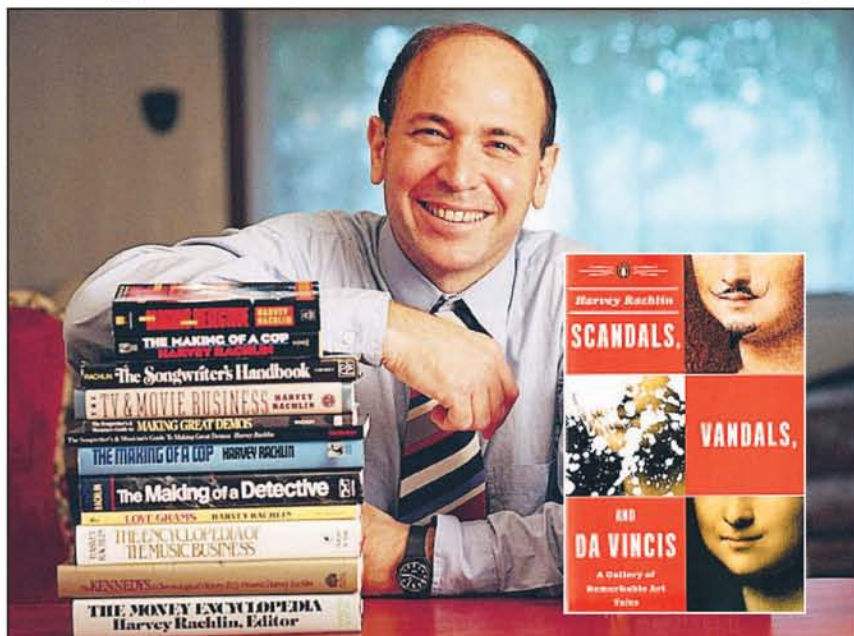
"I knew nothing of art, but I have a passion for history," says Rachlin. "I always imagined that masterpieces would have fascinating stories behind them." He asked curators, historians and professors worldwide for exciting anecdotes.

Thud. Responses, if they came, were tales he'd heard before or too much like them: paintings rediscovered at flea markets, forgeries unveiled, war booty recovered.

"I wanted stories people hadn't heard before, obscure stories," says Rachlin. The books he wrote that inspired the History Channel series contained such tales about artifacts: "Lucy's Bones, Sacred Stones, and Einstein's Brain" and "Jumbo's Hide, Elvis's Ride, and the Tooth of Buddha."

"I began to feel very frustrated," he says. But he had a contract, so he plowed ahead.

He had access to obscure books and manuscripts from all over the world, sent to him through the library at Manhattanville College in Purchase, N.Y., where he is a lecturer in music. He visited a dozen or so public libraries throughout the



NEWSDAY PHOTO / KEN SPENCER

Valley Stream's Harvey Rachlin has tackled old bones, stones and brains.

South Shore of Nassau County.

"I easily went through 2,000 art books," including ancient tomes that crumbled on his desk, says Rachlin. After 15 months, he completed a manuscript.

"The day after I turned it in, I had this 'Eureka' moment," he says. "I figured out the key to doing this book: I would do as much research as I could about any painting that interested me, then identify a theme related to human nature and flesh it out with history." Six months later he had a new book focusing on people behind the paintings.

His chapter on J.M.W. Turner's 1840 "Slave Ship," showing dead and dying slaves thrown overboard as a typhoon approaches, explores what happens when a painting's owner can no longer bear to live with a work because of its subject matter. Gainsborough's 1775-77 "The Honorable Mrs. Graham," Rachlin writes, "represents one of the greatest love stories ever to be reflected on canvas." In contrast, Whistler's 1875 "Nocturne in Black and

Gold: The Falling Rocket" is notable because it led to an acrimonious libel suit filed by the painter against the critic John Ruskin.

"I don't see this as an art book, but as a book of short stories," says Rachlin. He'd like to write more and, he says, dreams of seeing them on TV as full-fledged dramas.

"I dream in my basement in Valley Stream," he says, "That's where I do my writing, too. . . . You really have to be obsessed."

Two wars and a novel

Salvatore Esposito wrote his first book after serving in the U.S. Army right after he graduated high school in Farmingville, where he grew up. He wasn't sent to a war zone then, in the early 1990s. But he spoke with many Gulf War veterans and partly based his novel, "Revision," on their stories.

After 9/11, Esposito re-enlisted. This time he was a medic in an Army Reserve combat support hospital unit that was sent to Iraq in 2005 and helped

to clean up the mess at the infamous Abu Ghraib prison. The Queens-based unit contained many Long Islanders, says Esposito, and provided the detainees there with "better medicine and care than our senior citizens and veterans at home."

Still editing his book, which he self-published through AuthorHouse, during his second tour of duty, he thought of moving the setting for his novel's beginning from

Somalia to Iraq. In the end he kept the book as it was.

It is the story of a kind, literature-loving Texan who joins the army right out of high school and becomes friends with an older, more cynical soldier from Long Island. After the younger man's death, the older one visits Texas and, clued in by the Texan's journal, confronts his best friend and girlfriend about a betrayal. (See more at salesposito.com.)

"All four of them are me," says Esposito, who kept a journal during both tours (his second ended in June) and loves to read. The book, he says, is about the personal development of the Long Islander, who "starts out a little more hard-hearted" than Esposito was when he entered the army. Esposito, now 35 and living in Holbrook, says he learned about embracing different cultures and diversity while growing up in Farmingville, but became "more forgiving, more charitable" in the army, as his character does.

"Long Island opened up my



Salvatore Esposito, below, drew on Gulf War vets' stories for "Revision."



mind, but being in the army opened up my heart," he says. He volunteers with the Wounded Warrior Project, which helps severely injured veterans.

He's writing his second novel and plans always to write, he says. But it's not a living. He's considering becoming a New York police officer or working in homeland security, he says, "something where I can keep helping people." Or he might join the Coast Guard, "so I can stay on Long Island. . . . I love Long Island and I would never leave it."