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The professions: from Woodstock to a novel life, in so many words

By Patricia Kitchen |
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Fans of mystery novelist and forensic anthropologist [and Producer of "Bones" TV show] Kathy Reichs may have noticed a new character in her most recent novel, "Bones to Ashes." That would be forensic linguist Rob Potter, a Woodstock rock star-turned-linguist and onetime graduate school mentor to Reichs' main character, Temperance Brennan.

The newcomer is based on one of Reichs' friends, Robert Leonard, a real-life former rock star-turned-forensic linguistics professor. Leonard, in fact, heads the Forensic Linguistics Project at Hofstra University. Professionals in that field analyze written and spoken language - including grammar, word choice, dialect and structure - in contracts, confessions, ransom notes, spoken threats, undercover recordings, transcripts of interrogations and other correspondence linked to crimes.

Think professor Henry Higgins meets Sherlock Holmes.

Leonard, of Lattingtown, also happens to be co-founder of the band Sha Na Na and played at Woodstock in 1969. He says he retired as a rock star at age 21, as many friends overdosed on drugs. His transition likely was helped by the offer of a full fellowship at Columbia University for work on his doctorate.

In Reichs' novel, the character based on Leonard is called on to analyze poems that may have been written by Brennan's missing childhood friend. "It is funny to see your alter ego with a life of its own," Leonard says. He had coached Reichs about the technical part of his work and knew pretty much what his character was up to - but nevertheless read the novel with a sense of expectation about what his character would do next.

In his own work world, Leonard has been called on to consult or comment on such high-profile scenarios as the hate-crime case three years ago in which threatening letters were sent to actor Taye Diggs and his wife, Idina Menzel, and the developments last year in the JonBenet Ramsey case in which a teacher named John Karr said he was involved in the murder. Leonard also trains FBI agents in forensic linguistics.

The field attracts people who enjoy solving problems, he says - those who can see how events fall into patterns, for instance. Interested? In addition to being an ace problem solver, you'll need a PhD in linguistics. (Learn more at the International Association of Forensic Linguists Web site, iafl.org.)
[Leonard's consulting site is www.forensiclanguage.com.]