

A winner of awards in three careers

Prepared by John Horsefield, Cowra U3A



Sidney Sheldon (February 11, 1917 – January 30, 2007)

was an American writer who won awards in three careers —a Broadway playwright, a Hollywood TV and movie screenwriter, and a best-selling novelist. His TV works spanned a 20-year period during which he created *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965-70), *Hart to Hart* (1979-84), and *The Patty Duke Show* (1963-66), but it was not until after he turned 50 and began writing best-selling novels such as *Master of the Game* (1982), *The Other Side of Midnight* (1973) and *Rage of Angels* (1980) that he became most famous.

Sheldon was born Sidney Schechtel in Chicago, Illinois, to parents of Russian Jewish ancestry, Ascher "Otto" Schechtel (1894 - 1967), manager of a jewelry store, and Natalia Marcus. At 10, he made his first sale, \$5 for a poem. During the Depression, he worked at a variety of jobs, attended Northwestern University and contributed short plays to drama groups.^[1]

In 1937 he moved to Hollywood, California, where he reviewed scripts and collaborated on a number of B movies.^[2] After serving in the military during World War II as a pilot in the War Training Service, a branch of the Army Air Corps,^[2] Sheldon returned to civilian life and moved to New York where he began writing musicals for the Broadway stage while continuing to write screenplays for both MGM Studios and Paramount Pictures. He earned a reputation as a prolific writer; for example, at one time he had three musicals on Broadway: a rewritten *The Merry Widow*, *Jackpot*, and *Dream with Music*.^[1] His success on Broadway brought him back to Hollywood where his first assignment was *The Bachelor and the Bobby-Soxer*, which earned him the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay of 1947.



When television became the new hot medium, he decided to try his hand in it. "I suppose I needed money," he remembered. "I met Patty Duke one day at lunch. So I produced *The Patty Duke Show*, and I did something nobody else in TV ever did. For seven years, I wrote almost every single episode of the series." He also wrote for the series *Hart to Hart* and *Nancy*. Most famously he wrote the series *I Dream of Jeannie*, which he also created and produced, which lasted for five seasons from 1965-1970. It was "During the last year of *I Dream of Jeannie*, I decided to try a novel," he said in 1982. "Each morning from 9 until noon, I had a secretary at the studio take all calls. I mean every single call. I wrote each morning — or rather, dictated — and then I faced the TV business."

In 1969, Sheldon wrote his first novel, *The Naked Face*, which earned him a nomination for the Edgar Allan Poe Award from the Mystery Writers of America in the category of *Best First Novel*. His next novel, *The Other Side of Midnight*, went to #1 on *The New York Times* bestseller list as did several ensuing novels, a number of which were also made into motion pictures or TV miniseries.

His novels often featured determined women who persevere in a tough world run by hostile men. The novels contained a lot of suspense and devices to keep the reader turning the page:

"I try to write my books so the reader can't put them down," he explained in a 1982 interview. "I try to construct them so when the reader gets to the end of a chapter, he or she has to read just one more chapter. It's the technique of the old Saturday afternoon serial: leave the guy hanging on the edge of the cliff at the end of the chapter."

Most of his readers were women. Asked why this was the case he said: "I like to write about women who are talented and capable, but most important, retain their femininity. Women have tremendous power — their femininity, because men can't do without it." Books were Sheldon's favorite medium. "I love writing books," he commented. "Movies

are a collaborative medium, and everyone is second-guessing you. When you do a novel you're on your own. It's a freedom that doesn't exist in any other medium."

Sheldon was married for 30 years to Jorja Curtright Sheldon, a stage and film actress who later became an accomplished and well known interior designer. She died of a heart attack in 1985. He then married Alexandra Kostoff, a former child actress and advertising executive of Macedonian origin 4, in Las Vegas in 1989.

He struggled with bipolar disorder for years; he contemplated suicide at 17 (talked out of it by his father who discovered him), as detailed in his autobiography published in 2005, *The Other Side of Me*

Sheldon died from complications arising from pneumonia at Eisenhower Medical Center in Rancho Mirage, California at age 89.

He was cremated and buried in Westwood Memorial Park in Los Angeles.

He recycled his own jokes sometimes. Toby Temple (Stranger in the Mirror) says to one character inside a lift ' what happened to the morals charge?' and this was repeated later in *Windmills of the Gods*.