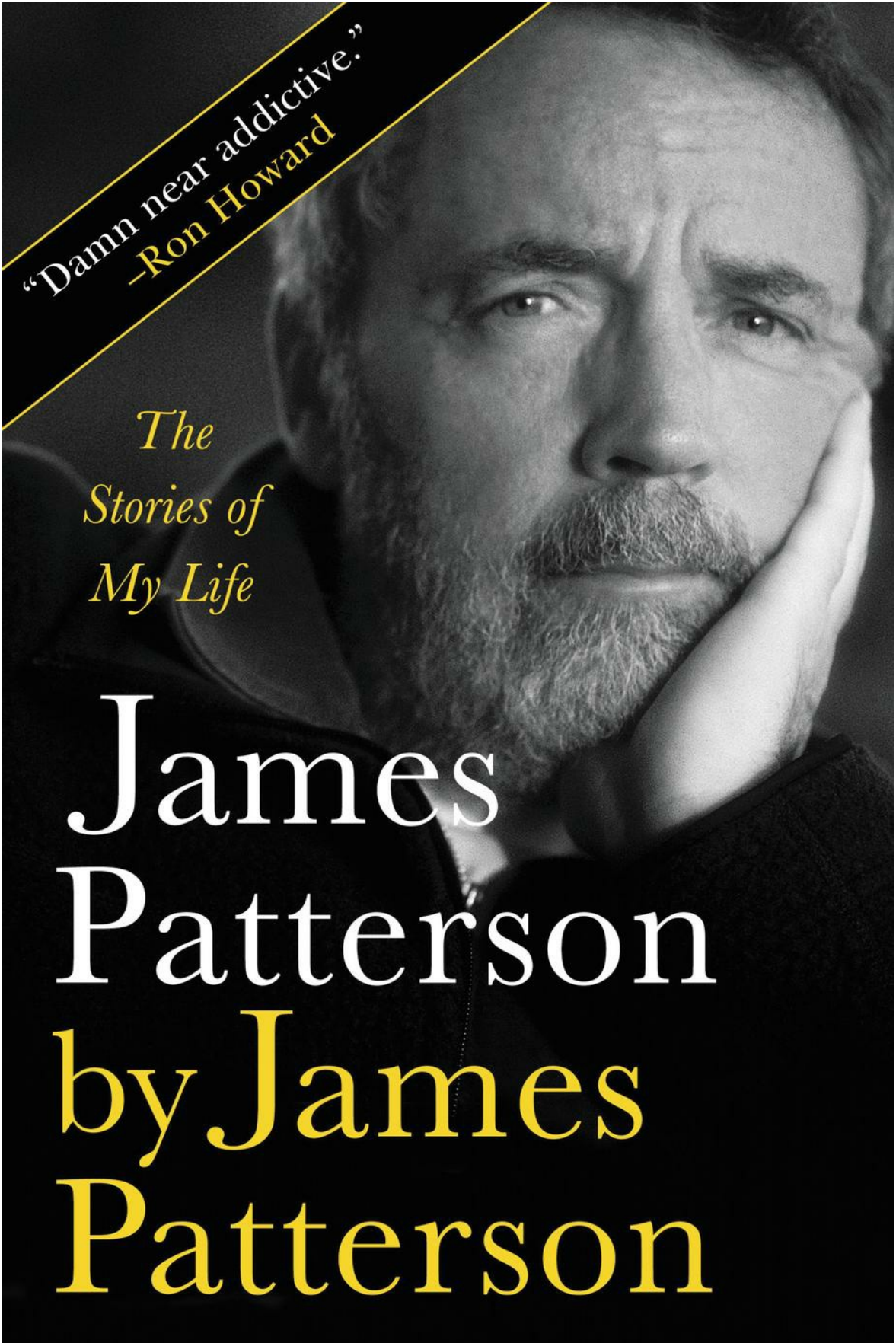
A black and white close-up portrait of James Patterson. He has a beard and is resting his chin on his hand, looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is dark and out of focus.

*“Damn near addictive.”*  
*—Ron Howard*

*The  
Stories of  
My Life*

James  
Patterson  
by James  
Patterson



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*The Stories of My Life*



Little, Brown and Company

*New York Boston London*

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LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

i want to tell you some stories  
...the way i remember them anyway.

## hungry dogs run faster

THIS MORNING, I got up at quarter to six. Late for me. I made strong coffee and oatmeal with a sprinkle of brown sugar and a touch of cream. I leafed through the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. Then I took a deep breath and started this ego-biography that you're reading.

My grandmother once told me, "You're lucky if you find something in life you like to do. Then it's a miracle if somebody'll pay you to do it." Well, I'm living a miracle. I spend my days, and many nights, writing stories about Alex Cross, the Women's Murder Club, Maximum Ride, the Kennedys, John Lennon, young Muhammad Ali, and now *this*.

My writing style is colloquial, which is the way we talk to one another, right? Some might disagree—some vehemently disagree—but I think colloquial storytelling is a valid form of expression. If you wrote down your favorite story to tell, there might not be any great sentences, but it still could be outstanding. Try it out. Write down a good story you tell friends—maybe starting with the line "Stop me if I've told you this one before"—and see how it looks on paper.

A word about my office. Come in. Look around. A well-worn, hopelessly cluttered writing table sits at the center, surrounded by shelves filled to the brim with my favorite books, which I dip into all the time.

At the base of the bookshelves are counters. Today, there are thirty-one of my manuscripts on these surfaces. Every time journalists come to my office and see the thirty or so manuscripts in progress, they mutter

something like “I had no idea.” Right. *I had no idea how crazy you are, James.*

I got infamous writing mysteries, so here’s the big mystery plot for this book: How did a shy, introspective kid from a struggling upstate New York river town who didn’t have a lot of guidance or role models go on to become, at thirty-eight, CEO of the advertising agency J. Walter Thompson North America? How did this same person become the bestselling writer in the world? That’s just not possible.

But it happened. In part because of something else my grandmother preached early and often—*hungry dogs run faster.*

And, boy, was I hungry.

One thing that I’ve learned and taken to heart about writing books or even delivering a good speech is to tell stories. Story after story after story. That’s what got me here, so that’s what I’m going to do. Let’s see where storytelling takes us. This is just a fleeting thought, but try not to skim too much. If you do, it’s the damn writer’s fault. But I have a hunch there’s something here that’s worth a few hours. It has to do with the craft of storytelling.

One other thing. When I write, I pretend there’s someone sitting across from me—and I don’t want that person to get up until I’m finished with the story.

Right now, that person is you.

let's start with  
something crazy



## five years at a cuckoo's nest

MY WRITING CAREER unofficially began at McLean Hospital, the psychiatric affiliate of Harvard Medical School in Belmont, Massachusetts. It was the summer of 1965 and I was eighteen. Fresh out of high school. I needed a job, any job, and McLean was hiring. I spent a good part of the next five years at this mental hospital. That's where everything changed about how I saw the world and probably how I saw myself.

*I wasn't a patient.* I swear. Not that I have anything but the highest regard for mental patients. I just wasn't one of them. Besides, back then I couldn't have afforded a room at McLean, not even space in a double room.

I was a psych aide. I think I was hired because I have empathy for people. You'll be the judge of that. The heart of the job was to talk to patients and, more important, to listen to them. Occasionally, patients tried to hurt themselves. My job was to try and stop that from happening. In addition to my usual daytime shift, I worked two or three overnight shifts a week, from eleven p.m. until seven in the morning. Most nights I just had to watch people sleep. Which isn't that easy.

I had never liked coffee, but I started drinking the awful stuff just to make sure I stayed awake, since there were usually patients on suicide watch at Bowditch or East House in the maximum-security wards where I regularly worked. For hour-long stints I had to sit outside their rooms, watching them flop around in bed, listening to them snore, while I fought off sleep at three or four in the morning.

So I had a lot of free time. I started reading like a man possessed during those long, dark nights of other people's souls.

Two or three times a week, I'd go the three miles or so into Cambridge and make the rounds of the secondhand bookstores. I especially loved tattered, dog-eared books. Books that had been well loved and showed it. The used books cost me a quarter, occasionally a buck, even for thick novels like *The Sot-Weed Factor*, *The Golden Notebook*, *The Tin Drum*.

At the time, I wasn't interested in genre fiction, the kind of accessible stuff I write. I had no idea what books were on the *New York Times* bestseller lists. I was a full-blown, know-it-all literary snob—who didn't really know what the hell he was talking about.

My ideas about how the world was supposed to work had been framed growing up in Newburgh, New York, and the somewhat parochial outer reaches of Orange County. As I read novel after novel, play after play, my view of what was possible in life began to change.

That first summer at McLean Hospital, I read a lot of James Joyce and Gabriel García Márquez, plus as much Henry James as I could stomach. I was into playwrights: Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Ionesco, Albee, Israel Horovitz. I read novelists like John Rechy and Jean Genet (*Our Lady of the Flowers* will get you thinking). Also Jerzy Kosinski and Romain Gary. I loved comedic American novelists. Stanley Elkin and Thomas Berger got me laughing out loud. So did Bruce Jay Friedman. John Cheever. Richard Brautigan. Vonnegut.

But the novel that influenced me most was Evan Connell Jr.'s *Mrs. Bridge*, the story of an ordinary middle-class family living in Kansas City. *Mrs. Bridge* is told from the point of view of India Bridge, a wife and mother. A companion novel published ten years later, *Mr. Bridge*, tells the same story from the point of view of Walter, her curmudgeonly lawyer husband. A reviewer in the *New York Times* wrote, "Mr. Connell's novel is written in a series of 117 brief, revealing episodes. The method looks and is rather unusual....It enables any writer who uses it to show, with clarity

and compactness, how characters react to representative episodes and circumstances.”

*Mrs. Bridge* and *Mr. Bridge* helped inspire my writing style (don't blame Evan Connell). So did Jerzy Kosinski's novels *Steps* and *The Painted Bird* (don't blame Kosinski). Short chapters. Tight, concise writing (hopefully). Irony and wit (occasionally).

During the time I worked at McLean Hospital, I read everything (except bestsellers, God forbid) I could get my hands on. Then I started scribbling my own short stories, hundreds of them. That was the beginning of the end. I was now officially an addict. I wanted to write the kind of novel that was read and reread so many times the binding broke and the book literally fell apart, pages scattered in the wind.

I'm still working on that one.

## cuckoo's nest east

EVERYTHING ABOUT BUSTLING, sometimes overwhelming, Harvard-centric Cambridge, Massachusetts, and McLean Hospital, in nearby Belmont, seemed fresh and new, and the experience woke me from what felt like an eighteen-year coma, or at least a very deep sleep.

What made McLean most interesting were the patients.

James Taylor was a patient at McLean. The musician checked himself in for depression as a prep-school senior and stayed for ten months. He wrote “Knocking ’Round the Zoo” about his time at McLean. His breakout hit, “Fire and Rain,” was a sad, beautiful tribute to a friend from that time of his life who’d killed herself.

And Taylor definitely was Sweet Baby James. Long blond hair, stunningly handsome, musician, poet. His sister, Kate, was also a patient at McLean. So was his brother Livingston. Both Kate and Liv also went on to record albums. There was actually a small school on the grounds of McLean and I sometimes escorted Liv or Kate to classes. My only experience with James was hearing him sing several times in the hospital coffee shop. Free admission, good acoustics, great seats ten feet from Sweet Baby James himself.

The poet Robert Lowell checked into McLean twice while I was working there. Lowell would do private readings in his room for an audience of three or four patients and staff.

He would read his poems and occasionally explain what he was trying to accomplish in them or complain about the hospital food or that he wasn’t admired enough by some critics and peers he respected.