



The Job: True Tales from the Life of a New York City Cop

By Steve Osborne

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Most civilians get their information about police work from television shows, which are pure fantasy. Here, Osborne takes us into his world, the gritty and not so glamorous life of real street cops. And along the way he finds humor and soul searching humanity in the most unlikely places. For anyone interested in knowing what a cop’s life is all about, this is a must read.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Hilarious. . . . Hair-raising. . . . [A] gruff charmer of a memoir.” —*The New York Times Book Review*

“Osborne is a sly and humorous storyteller.” —*The New Yorker*

“Riveting—like the best night hanging out at a bar with an engaging storyteller.” —*The Kansas City Star*

“Osborne is a born storyteller, and anyone expecting a cop book to be filled with action and adventure won’t be disappointed with *The Job*. But what makes this story so powerful is its compassion and bittersweet comedy.” —Edward Conlon, author of *Blue Blood*

“An enjoyable read. It’s real life, and it’s told by a gifted storyteller who also happened to be a gifted cop. . . . Osborne writes with passion about his work. . . . For a job that usually deals with the dregs of society, an unlikely strain creeps into Osborne’s tales—compassion. Osborne balanced toughness with empathy as he sought to ferret out wrongdoing while on duty.” —*The Buffalo News*

“Nobody tells a cop story better than a cop, and Osborne tells them as well as I’ve ever heard (and I’ve heard a lot of them). . . . For every bad cop there are twenty heroic ones—and Steve Osborne was one of them.” —Brian McDonald, author of *My Father’s Gun: One Family, Three Badges, One Hundred Years in the NYPD*

“Wonderful. . . . Not only was Osborne an excellent policeman (he retired as a lieutenant and the commanding officer of the Manhattan Gang Squad), he’s a fabulous storyteller, crafting his memories into well-honed tales filled with drama, humor and heart.” —*Bookpage*

“[An] engaging memoir. . . . [Osborne’s] frank and intimate voice . . . suffuses his prose.” —*Publishers Weekly*

“Raucous recollections. . . . [Osborne] comes off as an avuncular, world-weary tough guy. . . . Yet he elevates his perspective by displaying empathy for the civilians, victims and even criminals he has encountered.” —*Kirkus*

“Cops are innately good storytellers, and Osborne must be one of the best.” —*Booklist*

“Often funny, occasionally sobering and always entertaining.” —*Shelf-Awareness*

About the Author

Steve Osborne was a New York City police officer for twenty years, retiring in 2003 as a lieutenant and commanding officer of the Manhattan Gang Squad, with numerous citations for his police work. He has told his stories before packed audiences at The Moth storytelling venues across the United States. He has written for *The New York Times* and *USA Today*. Now a consultant for television and film productions, Osborne lives in upstate New York with his wife and their two dogs, Jingles and Duke.

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Introduction

I'm not quite sure how it happened, or even why, but a few months after retiring from the New York City Police Department, I picked up a pad and pen and started writing. Like most cops, I had stories to tell, and for some reason I can't explain, I felt the need to put them on paper. I had no training in writing, other than police reports, but that little voice in the back of my head—the one that kept me safe all those years—was now nagging at me to tell my stories.

For twenty years my family and friends really didn't understand what I did for a living. It was like I was living a double life, and they only knew half of it. I would go to work early in the evening, and most times I didn't return till early in the morning. Of course they knew I was a cop—but what did that mean? Most civilians get their information about police work from the newspapers, which barely get half the story right, or they get it from television shows that are ninety-nine percent pure, out-of-this-world fantasy.

Sometimes I would share some of the funny stuff about the job, but the blood and gore, and especially the danger, I needed to keep to myself. When my wife would call me at work and ask how things were going, I would always tell her I was having a nice quiet night. Even if I was sitting on some dark street, armed with two guns strapped to my hip, waiting for some perp wanted on a homicide to show up so we could jump him. My answer was always the same. I'm having a nice quiet night.

Once I was sitting in my office talking to her on the phone and there was a shooting right on the station house block. The sound of gunshots boomed and echoed through my office window, causing me to duck. This might sound unusual, a drive-by shooting right next to the station house, but at the time I was working in the Bronx, and in the Bronx, shit happens. I had to put my hand over the receiver so she wouldn't hear the gunfire and go nuts worrying. When I tried to hang up so I could run outside, she got mad at me. She was busy telling me that the bills were killing us this month and we had to watch the spending. I wanted to tell her that I had to go, because I thought something else just got killed down the block, but I couldn't do that. Instead I think I told her my stomach was upset because I ate some bad rice and beans, and I had to go to the bathroom—now! A few seconds later I was charging down the block, gun in hand, running into who knows what. The credit card bills and the mortgage were going to have to wait.

I wanted to write some of my stories down just in case I dropped dead or I crossed the street one day and got run over by a bus. I didn't want them to die with me. I don't claim to be anything special, and my experience is no different than any other cop out there. I just took the time to write some of it down. When I would get together with my buddies, mostly other retired cops, it wouldn't take long before the tales started flying, and each story was just as incredible as the last.

When I entered the police academy an old-time instructor told me, "Kid, you just bought yourself a front-row seat to the greatest show on earth." What he was telling me wasn't anything new. I think every old cop has used that line on every new cop in every city and every small town in every corner of the country. And the reason it's used so much is because it's true—every word of it. I don't care if you work in Manhattan or in some tiny village out in the middle of nowhere with just one lawman in it, we all have stories. I wish all of us would put them on paper, because there's nothing funnier or more terrifying than a good cop story.

Like most active cops, I've forgotten much more than I remembered. When I was in uniform it wasn't unusual to handle twenty jobs a night. And when I was in plainclothes, my team and I would make several felony collars a week, mostly robberies, assaults, and gun arrests. I wish I would have kept a diary or taken more pictures, then maybe I could recall more, but some stories stay with you forever. Some you never forget, no matter how hard you try.

When I was a kid my father was a cop. Not the easiest childhood in the world, but it was interesting. Whenever I would do something bad, and tried lying about it, he was always one step ahead of me. He was used to interrogating murderers, so getting the truth out of me wasn't that difficult. I usually cracked under the pressure in about ten seconds.

I grew up in a no-nonsense blue-collar neighborhood where toughness was valued as much as, or more than, anything else. And in that neighborhood, the old man reigned as king. You either loved him or feared him, and he really didn't care which it was. He was also the neighborhood problem solver. Once some pervert had flashed one of the neighborhood teenage girls and it was brought to his attention. This was the old days, so not everything was adjudicated with an arrest. When I asked him how he handled it, the only thing he said was "He'll never do that again." I'm not quite sure what that meant, but the guy was never seen or heard from in my neighborhood again.

He was also a great storyteller, as were his friends. I loved it when his cop buddies would come by the house, swaggering in with all that hardware hanging off their belts and talking about what happened out on patrol the night before. To me these were the coolest guys in the world, real men, and I wanted to be one of them. I never wanted to be a doctor or a lawyer or even an astronaut. I wanted to be the one standing over the dead guy in the middle of the street, trying to figure out who killed him. It's not that I'm a dummy or an underachiever, it's just that none of those other professions called me as much as police work did. I think that's why I was a solid C student in school. Algebra, physics, and geometry were useless to me. I was never going to do brain surgery or travel to the moon. I was going to be a cop. Deep down inside I knew I was put on this earth to catch bad guys. I just wish it paid as much as some of those other professions.

When I first started writing, I didn't know where it was going or what it would lead to. I just kept listening to that little voice in my head that told me to shut up and keep writing. After I wrote my first story, "Growing Pains," I took a chance and handed it out to a few trusted friends and relatives to get some input. If the writing sucked, and I was wasting my time, I figured I could always start a vegetable garden or maybe make beer in a home brewery to help fill up my free time. But what happened next surprised me. Almost everybody said they had a tear in their eye by the time they finished reading the story. It wasn't the reaction I was expecting, but I figured having the ability to make people cry (without whacking them over the head with a nightstick and dragging them off to jail) was a good start, so I kept at it. The next story was "Hot Dogs," and my same trusted advisers said it made them laugh. Then came "Mug Shot," and they were getting misty again.

Being a cop for twenty years makes you very cynical, and skeptical. Every day when you're on patrol people lie to you, or at least tell you what you want to hear, so when I heard those first couple of compliments I didn't know whether to believe them or not. I'm more of a meat eater than a vegetarian, so the vegetable garden wasn't really calling me, and the more I thought about making beer the less it appealed to me. It seemed like a lot of unnecessary work. Going to the store and buying a nice cold six-pack was more to my liking, so I kept at the writing.

When I was writing my next story I kept wondering if my circle of advisers was just telling me what I wanted to hear and trying not to hurt my feelings, so I reached out to a friend of mine, Liz Tuccillo, a professional writer. She had written books, television shows, and movies, so I figured she must know what she's talking about. One of her books was a bestseller and made a boatload of money, and a television show she wrote for will be in syndication forever, so I showed her my stuff. She was a little more critical, going through the finer points of sentence structure, but the bottom line was, she thought it was good stuff. A little rough around the edges concerning grammar, but the stories were great. I implored her not to be nice to me because I could get plenty of that at home. I needed an honest answer from a pro on whether I was wasting

my time or not. And just like a no-nonsense Italian chick from New York would put it, she also told me to shut up and keep writing.

About a year later, totally out of the blue, she calls me up and says that she is doing this storytelling show called *The Moth*. She explained to me that regular people get up onstage and tell a true story about something that happened in their life. I figured what the hell, it sounded easy enough. She said the producers were in a jam because it was the night before the show and some cop who was supposed to perform caught a homicide. They needed somebody who could jump in at the last minute, and they asked her if she knew anybody—maybe another cop. The universe works in mysterious ways!

I went off to a quiet corner by myself, called the *Moth* office, and pitched two stories over the phone. I'm not sure if the pitch went that great or they were just really desperate, but they asked me to come in right away. I went to the office and met the artistic director, Catherine Burns, who was very patient and caring. She was kind and sweet, almost motherly, as she got me ready for the next night. She was apparently used to dealing with novices like me who have never performed onstage in front of a live audience before. We had less than twenty-four hours before the show and there wasn't much time to rehearse, so we just did a couple of run-throughs, and hoped for the best.

It all seemed simple enough, but when I got there things changed. The show was at the Players Club in Gramercy Park, and there were three hundred frigging people in the audience. I was expecting a few hippies in the basement of a church snapping their fingers for applause instead of clapping. I never thought to ask Catherine how many people would be there, and I think she intentionally left that part out. When I looked at the crowd panic set in. I would rather have chased a guy with a gun down a dark alley than get up on that stage. This was the most terrifying experience of my life, and that includes being involved in a few thousand arrests.

When I told Catherine I didn't think I could do this, she got up into my face like a cranky old desk lieutenant, pointed her finger at me, and growled, "You just get up there and do it." She went from Mother Teresa to Knute Rockne in about two seconds.

There were five storytellers going on that night, and I was going to be number four. To use a baseball analogy, that's like batting ninth in the lineup. I was a last-minute fill-in, and the expectations for me were pretty low, but that didn't help my nerves. As I sat in my seat waiting to go onstage, things only got worse. The theme of the show was "Crimes and Misdemeanors," so one guy told a story about doing twenty years in prison for a murder he didn't commit. He told the audience how the police were corrupt and incompetent. It got a huge round of applause. Another storyteller was a defense attorney, and his tale was also about how screwed up the criminal justice system is. Then Liz got up and told a story about getting arrested at a demonstration outside the Republican National Convention by a group of less-than-friendly riot cops. She also explained how a baloney sandwich can be used as a pillow while sleeping on the dirty floor in a severely overcrowded Central Booking.

This was bad, bad, bad. The audience seemed to be a Manhattan artsy, liberal bunch, and I was sure they were going to hate me. When I had rehearsed at home in front of my wife she got worried, because in the middle of my story I made a crack about liberals. She got scared and warned me I better take it out. My own expectations for the night were pretty low as well. I figured it had all the makings for the most embarrassing night of my life, so I thought, fuck it, I might as well go down in flames. I left the line about the liberals in.

When I walked up onstage, shaking like a guy going to the electric chair, my mind was scrambling. After the last three stories about corrupt cops and an incompetent criminal justice system, I figured I was dead meat. I

had to think of something fast. As I shuffled up the steps, then bounced across the stage full of nervous energy, something happened. I don't know where it came from, maybe it was some kind of divine intervention, but the first words to pop out of my mouth assured the audience that the guy in my story was "one hundred percent guilty." I told them, "Please don't have any doubts about that." It was the last thing they expected to hear, and the next thing I know, the whole room erupts in laughter and applause. I was off and running, and there was no stopping me now.

I was up onstage for about fifteen minutes telling the "Hot Dogs" story, but I don't remember much of it, other than the microphone in my face, and the blinding white lights shining in my eyes. But what I do remember most was that out of the entire night my liberal crack got the most laughs and applause. All of a sudden I loved liberals, and they loved me. They were my people, and I was theirs. My story was the biggest hit of the night. It was like I was a minor league ballplayer brought up to the majors at the last minute and I hit a grand slam to win the game.

After the show people were lining up to shake my hand and tell me how much they liked my story. I'm not a very good-looking guy. I'm not exactly the type girls fight over when I walk into a room, so when several very nice-looking ladies came up to meet me, I got a big kick out of it. I was only in showbiz for a few minutes, but I was digging it already.

When I left the Players Club I was walking on air. It was a great experience and I met a lot of very nice people, but figured it was a one-time thing, so I went back to my regular life—and to writing. About two weeks later I got a call from *The Moth*, and they asked me if I was interested in doing a nationwide tour. To me it was a free vacation, and maybe a few more hot girls to hang out with (luckily my wife thought I was exaggerating), so I said yes. The next thing I know, I'm in L.A. telling a story in front of about two thousand people. After that it was Seattle, San Francisco, Denver, and more. I even went to Scotland to perform at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. The UK crowd almost fell out of their chairs when they heard my New York accent. Some of them must have thought I was making this shit up.

Getting up onstage in front of a live audience isn't easy, and I'm not that crazy about it. To this day it would be a hell of a lot easier, and a lot more fun for me, to chase down some guy with a gun rather than to get up onstage and tell a story. The satisfaction comes after the show, when people come up and tell me how much they enjoyed it. And, I hope, learned something from it. After retiring from the police department I thought my days of helping people were over. I figured I would drink beer, go fishing, grow old, then drop dead. I just assumed, like most cops, my memories and experiences would die with me. But maybe not.

I was lucky enough to have National Public Radio feature a couple of my stories. Afterward I would get fan letters from young people from across the country who were thinking about a career in law enforcement, and they would tell me how my story made them realize they were making the right choice. Dog lovers told me how much they enjoyed the story about my dog Griffin, and how much it made them cry. One guy told me after listening to the story about the deathbed experience I had with my father, it made him rethink, and appreciate, the relationship he had with his dad. It seemed my stories were affecting people on a much deeper level than I ever thought possible.

One day, after he heard one of my stories on *The Moth Radio Hour* on NPR, I got an e-mail from an editor at Doubleday publishing. He thought it was imperative that I put my stories in a book. I have to admit that, for a solid C student, it seemed like a daunting task. My eighth-grade English teacher, Sister Kathleen, used to beat the crap out of me on a regular basis and remind me that I was never going to amount to anything in life. Her wicked left hook to the side of the head and her humiliating and dire predictions still haunt me to this day. But it didn't stop me from being a wiseass in class.

For a guy who started out in life with a high school diploma and a driver's license, I wasn't sure I could pull this off. But my editor, another person who reminded me of a cranky old desk lieutenant, gave me the same advice my trusted circle of friends and relatives did: Shut up and write. And as usual, it was good advice, so I shut up and continued writing.

I went on the job—that's what we cops call it, "the job," because for guys like us, it's the only job in the world—in the early eighties when the crack epidemic hit like one of Sister Kathleen's left hooks, so looking back at them, the bad old days gave me plenty to write about. At the time crime was going through the roof in New York City and nobody was safe—even the cops. There were over two thousand homicides a year, and even in the good neighborhoods, you took your life in your hands walking down the street late at night. I was recently at a cop Christmas party at my old precinct. A good way to check the barometer of a neighborhood is how many street robberies are occurring. I asked one of the cops how many they were doing a month these days, and with a seriousness I found amusing, she said, "Oh, about twelve."

Twelve! You gotta be shitting me! That blew my mind. When I was there we were doing a minimum of 120 a month. And those were only the ones that were reported. Back then people figured it was useless to make a report, so half the time they took their lumps and just went home. If they weren't shot, or stabbed, or didn't have the shit beat out of them, they chalked it up to a bad New York experience. One night we had eight robberies on a four-to-twelve tour—and that was during a blizzard!

I'm proud to say that I and the cops I worked with played a part in turning the city around. Now when I walk around in some of the neighborhoods I used to work in, I hardly recognize the place. Those same streets where I would only walk around with a gun clutched in my hand inside my coat pocket are now trendy little enclaves. People sit around at outdoor cafés sipping their lattes, without a care in the world. Some of my new liberal friends might think we were a little aggressive enforcing the law—and maybe we were sometimes—but at least now you can go out at night without getting robbed or caught in the cross fire of two assholes shooting it out. Parks that were only inhabited by junkies, drug dealers, and any other type of savage criminal you could think of are now filled with moms pushing baby strollers and kids enjoying the playgrounds. New York is quite a different place from when I walked my first foot post.

The stories you are about to read take place over a twenty-year career—from my first day on patrol as a rookie in uniform to my last, as commanding officer of the Manhattan Gang Squad. Not too many cops can say they made a collar on their first day on patrol, and their last. The first one I was happy about, but the last one I definitely could have done without.

If you've ever looked at a cop standing on a corner and wondered what goes on behind that tough-guy persona, I want to take you there. I definitely don't speak for all police officers, because these are my stories, and my experiences. I also realize that I'm nothing special. I'm just an average guy who decided to pin on a shield and strap on a gun and do one of the most difficult, dangerous, and interesting jobs you could think of.

Users Review

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