



Robert F. Sibert Medal Acceptance Speech Too Many Stories

Steve Sheinkin



*Steve Sheinkin is the winner of the 2013 Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Medal for *Bomb: The Race to Build—and Steal—the World's Most Dangerous Weapon*, published by *Flash Point*, an imprint of Roaring Brook Press. He delivered his acceptance remarks at the American Library Association Annual Conference in Chicago on July 1, 2013.*

About three years ago, I started writing a book. It opened late one night in San Francisco, November 1870, as two dusty miners walk into the office of a prominent businessman, George Roberts. Introducing themselves as Philip Arnold and John Slack, the visitors glance nervously around the room. Arnold pulls out a small leather bag, saying he and his friend need somewhere to stash it until banks open in the morning. Roberts asks what's in the bag; the men won't say. Roberts insists. Finally, reluctantly, Arnold opens the bag and tilts it and out pours a cascade of uncut diamonds.

No, Arnold and Slack did not later become atomic physicists or Soviet spies. The book I set out to write was a Wild West scam caper, starring two veteran gold miners who construct a phony diamond mine in the Rocky Mountains, then show up in San Francisco and begin selling shares, patiently hooking bigger and bigger fish until they've got the financial elite of both coasts begging to buy in.

A fantastic story—but I got stuck. There's just not much information available about the con men Arnold and Slack. There's no way to know what these guys were thinking or feeling at any point along the line, making it tough to build a compelling nonfiction narrative around them.

So after a certain amount of complaining, and a few conversations with Deirdre Langeland, my amazing editor at Roaring Brook, we turned to a totally different idea—spies in the Manhattan Project. Almost as soon as I started digging in, I realized I was facing the opposite problem I'd had with the diamond hoax. There was *too much* source material, too many characters, and stories. Good problem to have.

At the heart of the action is a set of unconventional heroes—the physicists, led by Robert Oppenheimer. Beat up as a kid for writing poetry and collecting minerals, Oppenheimer becomes a new kind of superhero, using the power of his

brain. And some of the physicists turn out to be spies—Klaus Fuchs, the owlish loner, and Ted Hall, the whiz-kid sent straight from Harvard to Los Alamos at age 18.

Scientists and spies—that's more than enough material right there. But as I read on, the stories kept coming. You've got Ruth Werner, a KGB agent in Britain who smuggles radio transmitter parts in her kids' stuffed animals. And Knut Haukelid, a Norwegian Indiana Jones on skis, who is instrumental in sabotaging Germany's atom bomb operation. And Moe Berg, a retired baseball player sent on a secret mission to Switzerland to assassinate Germany's top physicist.

With a first draft deadline coming into view, I tried to cut myself off. But how could I leave out Enrico Fermi and his grad students building the world's first nuclear reactor in a squash court at the University of Chicago? I couldn't. What about the unflappable KGB courier Lona Cohen sneaking bomb plans across the country in a tissue box? Throw it in. How about the moral ambiguity underlying the whole bomb race? Oppenheimer's team “wins” by building a weapon of mass destruction—and must then face the implications as their creation is unleashed on Japanese cities. Can't leave that out.

“Throw it in” may not be a formula for success. I'm pretty sure it's not. But I wanted the book to be a global thriller, with lots happening at once, and I wanted young readers to be as excited and as challenged by this material as I was. My hope was that with careful structuring, and lots of back and forth with Deirdre, it would all come together.

So I owe a huge thanks to Deirdre and everyone at Roaring Brook and Macmillan. And a massive thank you to Sibert Medal Committee Chair Kathie Meizner and the entire committee. The Sibert Medal is an enormous honor, and a great incentive to get back to work and find more stories—with any luck, too many stories. ✂