

# Interview: Finding Hope Amid Nazi Horrors in *The Umbrella Maker's Son*

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Chicago author Tod Lending's debut novel *The Umbrella Maker's Son* is a cinematic page-turner of a book. Set against the Nazis' rise to power at the start of World War II, this heartfelt coming-of-age story is full of hope and resilience, daring escapes and love, even as it takes an unflinching look at the brutal violence inflicted on the Jewish people.

Lending's skill at navigating these opposite poles of human experience is no surprise. He is an Academy Award–nominated and Emmy Award–winning documentary filmmaker with decades of experience as a producer, director, writer and cinematographer. As he stated in our recent interview:

“In a world that often seems hopeless, we're all searching for stories that give us hope.”

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## The Umbrella Maker's Son

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*The Umbrella Maker's Son* tells the story of Jewish teenager Reuven, who works for his artisan umbrella-making father in Poland when the Nazis invade and shatter their lives at the start of World War II. A harrowing journey of survival takes Reuven far from home as he searches for safety and his missing love, Zelda. Lending was inspired in part by family history: his great-grandfather was a Warsaw umbrella maker in the late 1800s. The novel was also informed by Polish Holocaust survivors Saul Dreier and Ruby Sosnowicz, the subjects of Lending's documentary film *Saul & Ruby's Holocaust Survivor Band*.

The interview below has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

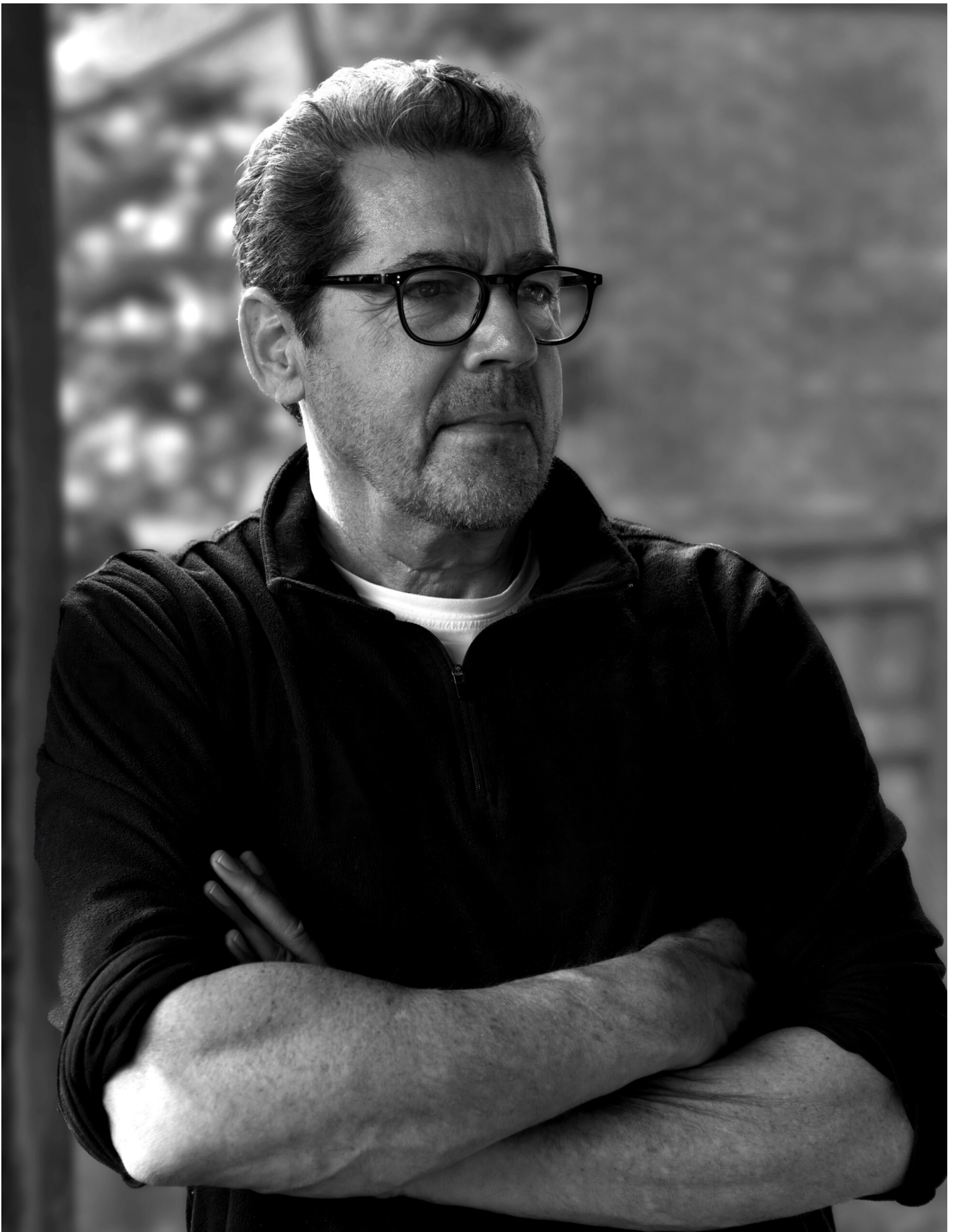
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**Q: This novel is in many ways a tribute to the legacy and history of your family. Can you tell me about your great-grandfather and what you know of your family's escape to America? In what ways is this personal history reflected in the story of Reuven's family in the novel?**

**Tod Lending:**

My great-grandfather, Rafael Lending, was an umbrella maker. In 1909, he was forced to flee Warsaw amid virulent antisemitism and violent pogroms. As family lore goes, he one day witnessed a Polish policeman severely beating a Jewish man and intervened. One thing led to another, and he stabbed the officer with a dagger concealed in the stem of his umbrella. Fearing the dire consequences of his action, he quickly gathered his wife and ten children—which included my fourteen-year-old grandfather—and fled to Hamburg, Germany, where they boarded a ship to America. They arrived at Ellis Island on Christmas Day. The title of the book and one of the key turning points in the novel were inspired by my great-grandfather's story.

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**Q:** Given your award-winning filmmaking background, I'm curious why you chose the novel form to tell this particular story versus a cinematic treatment. How did the novel take shape as you began writing? In what ways did your filmmaking work inform this book?

**Tod Lending:**

I found an entirely different approach to storytelling than I had in documentaries for the past 38 years.

Film is primarily an observational medium: you're on the outside looking in on your characters, observing their actions and behaviors, listening to their dialogue, and

sometimes hearing their inner thoughts. But in novel writing, you have the opportunity to inhabit your characters, looking out at the world from inside them. I was hungry to tell stories from this intimate perspective, and to explore the complex interior emotional and psychological layers of my characters—their vulnerabilities, hopes and desires—in a way that documentary films could not. I also wanted to examine my own creative impulses, memories and experiences through fiction writing. I have fallen in love with the art form of the novel.

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**Q: We are unfortunately living in a time when historical truths are frequently denied or diluted. Why do you think it is so important that we continue to tell the stories of World War II and the lives of Jewish families during this violent period?**

**Tod Lending:**

World War II was a watershed event in human history. Its impact on the world order, our understanding of fascism, existential threats, and the dehumanization and mass killings on an industrialized scale remain deeply ingrained in our collective memory.

I think the idea of Hitler and Nazism as the epitome of unimaginable human brutality, and the terror of one nation seeking total world domination, still looms large. And so many of the political and social events we're witnessing today—the rise of authoritarianism, the extremism of the far-right, and the dehumanization expressed in political rhetoric—pose an existential threat that reminds us of that era. For the Jewish people today, the current climate of antisemitism and far-right politics is especially disturbing. For us, after the murder of approximately 6 million Jews between 1939 and 1945—nearly two-thirds of Europe's Jewish population—and centuries of persecution, there's a tangible fear today that history could repeat itself in new and terrible ways.

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**Q: Despite your novel's unflinching honesty about the events of World War II, *The Umbrella Maker's Son* is also a story of unexpected hope and resilience. How did you thread this needle as you wrote toward the novel's conclusion? What strands of hope did you want to give Reuven (and readers) to hold onto?**

**Tod Lending:**

Revealing where hope and the hidden reserves of resilience exist in Reuven's story came naturally as I wrote. They were true to Reuven's story, and I also believe that in telling difficult narratives of human suffering, weaving threads of hope and resilience through the narrative are essential for making the story worth experiencing.

I've taken this same approach in my documentary storytelling. Almost all of my films are stories about people in the midst of struggle—whether it's trying to rise out of poverty, overcome addiction, rebuild their lives after imprisonment, or survive homelessness. I think people turn to stories to learn about others' lives, experience their suffering, and see how they find ways to rise above it. In a world that often seems hopeless, we're all searching for stories that give us hope.

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**Q: What do you hope readers take away from *The Umbrella Maker's Son*?**

**Tod Lending:**

I hope the novel will give readers a deeper understanding and awareness of the emotional and psychological layers of loss, and how the experience of profound loss affects people in different ways. I hope readers will see how love can serve as an antidote to loss, and how it can fuel resilience. And I also hope that readers will gain a deeper awareness of how persecution and dehumanization can impact an entire class of people—the Jews in this case—and apply that lesson to the persecution and dehumanization of other races, ethnicities, nations, religions, and even genders, which are occurring today.

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*The Umbrella Maker's Son* was published by Harper in February 2025, and is available at your local independent bookstore or the [publisher's website](#).