Outward Signs of Talent
by M. E. Kabay, PhD, CISSP
Associate Professor, Computer Information Systems
Norwich University, Northfield VT

I had the pleasure of listening to Bill Neugent at the annual meeting of the Federal Information Systems Security Educators Association in March 2004. Quoting from his Web site, “Bill has been a cybersecurity consultant for over thirty years. Please don't do the math. In his day job, he works for MITRE, a not-for-profit think tank that advises the federal government. At MITRE Bill is the chief engineer for over two-hundred cybersecurity experts. He has developed cybersecurity strategies for a number of agencies and was a primary architect of the Defense-in-Depth strategy that has been implemented throughout the U.S. military. He drafted the first computer security program plan for the overall intelligence community. Nowadays he advises the top cybersecurity officials within government agencies on technical and programmatic strategies. In his rowdier youth, he wrote not only the first Federal guideline on cybersecurity certification and accreditation, but also a series of humorous security articles that became cult classics. Further back, he created and taught a graduate-level course in computer security at The American University, one of the first such courses in the country.”

Not only did he give one of the best keynote speeches I've ever heard (I volunteered this quote for his Web site: “One of the best speakers I've ever heard. Brilliant, stimulating and entertaining.”), but he also told us about his 2002 novel, _No Outward Sign_. I read his book on my way home from the conference and enjoyed it thoroughly.

The story begins with the destruction of an Amtrak railway train -- a terrorist act that has a dreadful resonance given the recent horrible events in Spain. We are introduced to the brilliant FBI computer crime expert Paige Langford, who has been responsible for tracking down and convicting criminal hackers for the Bureau. Then we meet Brent Singleton, a criminal hacker with a social conscience. I have to say that I don't generally like novels in which criminal hackers are presented as heroes, but I came to like Brent in spite of my prejudices. Brent is an interesting person. He is dying from a brain tumor and has taken the last five months off from his leadership of a worldwide hacktivist network to resume his study of the 'cello. He is kind, thoughtful, passionate about ideas and values. He was married to an Iraqi woman, lived in Iraq, learned Arabic, and was imprisoned by the dictator of that country.

As the story develops, we realize that there is a serious attack in progress on the infrastructure the United States using information warfare techniques. Singleton tries his best to fight the attack but his hostility to government agencies makes him a prickly ally for Langford and other law enforcement and intelligence agents. He breaks into systems to test their vulnerabilities, annoy these corporations whose interests are threatened by honest disclosure of their technical difficulties, and courts arrest at every turn. Even his international activist colleagues have doubts about his abilities and leadership.

Nonetheless, Singleton manages to convince most of his hacktivist friends and at least a few of the government information warriors to pay attention to his warnings and accepted information at face value.
I dare not continue too far in this review for fear of spoiling a really good yarn. Suffice it to say that perhaps the greatest compliment to any writer is to say that the people he writes about become real to his readers. I found that I genuinely cared about the people in this novel and that they have stayed with me in the weeks since I finished reading it.

Nugent's ideas are sound; his warnings about infrastructure vulnerabilities need to be accepted at the highest levels of strategic thinking. Read this book if you like realistic sci-fi novels.

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Bill Neugent’s Web site is
< http://talecatcher.com >

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M. E. Kabay, PhD, CISSP is Associate Professor in the Division of Business and Management at Norwich University in Northfield, VT. Mich can be reached by e-mail at <mailto:mkabay@norwich.edu>; Web site at < http://www.mekabay.com/index.htm >.

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