

He chose his own adventure

By Scott Kraft

NEW YORK (AP) — You are practicing law in New York, supporting a family and paying the bills. But in your spare time, you also are writing children's books — in longhand, in your battered spiral notebook.

What do you do?

If you choose to remain a lawyer, this is the end of your story.

But if you are Edward Packard, you chuck the law career and create children's books in which young readers make decisions like Packard's and create their own stories.

"I psyched myself into thinking I liked practicing law. But my real persons was being a writer," Packard said in his soft, measured voice — the perfect bedtime story tone.

"Choose Your Own Adventure," a paperback series for 10- to 14-year-olds with 4.5 million copies in print, makes the reader the central character in its stories. Every few pages, a reader faces two or three options, each of which leads to more options and then to one of about 40 endings.

The series, which began national distribution last year, ranked sixth among the most popular children's books of the last two years in a Publishers Weekly survey in July. Teachers and school librarians say the adventures teach children about decision-making and help get slower readers interested in books.

"You walk into the interior of the strange cavern; then wait while your eyes become accustomed to the dim, amber light. Gradually you can make out the two tunnels. One curves downward to the right; the other leads upward to the left," reads one passage in "The Cave of Time."

"It occurs to you that the one leading down may go to the past and the one leading up may go to the future.

"If you take the tunnel leading left, turn to page 20.

"If you take the tunnel leading right, turn to page 61.

"If you walk outside the cave, turn to page 21."

Decisions. Decisions.

Children can read these books a dozen times without rereading a page; within its 11 titles the series offers some 450 different adventures. In the cave, you might talk with Abraham Lincoln, witness the building of the Great Wall of China or be locked up in a castle.

You could end up so far in the past that there is no oxygen or so far in the future that the sun is a dying ember. You could be gobbled up by Tyrannosaurus rex or left floating in a lifeboat while the Titanic sinks.

The idea for the series grew from a bedtime story Packard was telling his daughters. But it really came from the child that still lives in this tileless 50-year-old with salt-and-pepper hair and bushy eyebrows.

"I had a character named Pete and I usually had him encountering all these different adventures on an isolated island," Packard said. "But that night I was running out of things for Pete to do, so I just asked what they would do."

The girls, Caroline and Andrea, took the story in opposite directions and Packard gave each an ending.

"What really struck me was the natural enthusiasm they had for the idea. And I thought: 'Could I write this down?'"

Pete's encounters became "The Adventures of You on Sugar Cane Island." Nine publishing houses rejected it, and Packard put the manuscript away. That was 1970.

Five years later he persuaded Vermont Crossroads Press to publish the book. It did well, but Ray Montgomery, co-owner of the press, thought it needed the administrations of a larger publisher. The rights ended up at Bantam; Montgomery now writes books for the series, too.

The series has prompted several hundred letters. One mother said her 13-year-old son was inspired by



AP Laserphoto

Lawyer Edward Packard in New York law office

the books to "read more than comic books and cartoons."

After reading "Sugar Cane Island," a Vermont girl wrote: "I got a spear in my back and went in quicksand, but other than that the book was great."

The best part of the series is "that you don't know if you are going to die or not," wrote another young reader. "I died twice and I stayed alive twice."

"Kids love to die," Packard explained. "I remember my brother and I would try to outdraw each other with our toy guns. It was always more fun to go into death throes."

Packard has a contract to continue the series with more books and is

helping start a similar series for younger readers, ages 7-9.

These days, instead of drawing up legal briefs, Packard reclines on the couch in his Madison Avenue law office. Surrounded by the dark leather-bound statute books he has abandoned, he draws outlines that look like trees. Each branch carries an option, each option sprouts into more options and every leaf represents an ending. Then he writes.

Packard said he's always had urges to write — at age 12, he wrote a book on astronomy. But after earning his degree at Princeton, he faced one of those decisions that make his books so delectable. Law or writing? He chose law.

Now, after 20 years, he's turning to another page.