

Rusty Shelton Interviews Robert Blake Whitehill

SHELTON: What inspired you to become a writer?

WHITEHILL: My father was an award-winning novelist and short story writer. My Mother is a poet. They both read to me every day. It was a matter of nature and nurture together. It was part of the DNA, and the day-to-day of my upbringing. I couldn't help myself. I started writing stories and plays when I was a kid. My folks gave me my first typewriter when I was nine. An Olivetti Underwood portable. A career in marine biology was not in the cards.

SHELTON: Though you're also a trained actor. That seems like big a detour from the writer's path.

WHITEHILL: Point taken. I got the itch. I went to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London, and the Neighborhood Playhouse School of the Theatre in New York. I was studying, memorizing, and inculcating some of the best, most powerful writing in the English language. I think part of me was shopping for a personality, an identity, from among the characters I played. In the end, the emotional exercise of acting was very hard. There are many others who are so much better at it than I am. But the power and the rhythms of the dialog really stuck. I'm not unique in this sidestep. David Mamet went to the Neighborhood Playhouse, too.

SHELTON: You're saying that being an actor helped your writing.

WHITEHILL: Yes. I still test drive every line of dialog out loud, and in many different permutations, before it ever hits the page. My wife thinks I'm a little nuts, but she's getting used to it. Sometimes I get really into it while I'm walking down a sidewalk in town. Yammering out loud like a wingnut. When people gape at me, I just point to the Bluetooth in my ear like I'm on the phone, and roll my eyes and shake my head like I'm exasperated with the person I'm talking to, and they leave me alone. Having a Bluetooth has saved me from what used to be a lot of public embarrassment.

SHELTON: But a novel like DEADRISE is more than dialog.

WHITEHILL: True. Much more. I've steeped myself in all sorts of fiction, from narrative TV to short and feature films, stage plays, to novels. I'm fully engaged in creating the very things that I love to consume. Not to mention earning a BA in English lit' from Haverford and Bryn Mawr Colleges. Besides criticism, there was a creative writing component to my work there as well.

So in addition to figuring the structure of a good line of dialog, there is a structure to each form of writing, the plot, in roughly three acts as Robert McKee teaches. And there is also a structure to a scene, and to a sequence of scenes. What I call the fractals of fiction. No matter how close up or far away you look at a story, there is congruence between the micro and macro structures of the story. McKee breaks it down very simply and clearly in his seminars.

SHELTON: It sounds like you're talking about film scripts.

WHITEHILL: A story is a story. But in the thriller genre, whether in moving image media, or on a printed page, *action* is character. You want me to tell you about Ben Blackshaw, I'm going to tell you what actions he chooses to take. In some novel genres, maybe you can navel gaze and delve into deep thoughts with a little more latitude than in a movie, but those strange interludes can be what an actor friend of mine, Diane Wilder, calls "momentum bombs" as far as your plot goes. In a Southern Gothic thriller like DEADRISE, You have to keep the pace moving. It's better to show something, *show* a character *doing* something, rather than to gas on and on about a pet topic in the abstract. Jason Sitzes is a great editor in no small part because he reminds me of this over and over again whenever we work together.

SHELTON: He works with the Writers Retreat Workshop.

WHITEHILL: Yes, but thank God he works one on one with some writers, too.

SHELTON: You were raised Quaker. Quakers are mostly nonviolent. How does that affect your work? DEADRISE isn't exactly a treatise for world peace.

WHITEHILL: Perhaps in a satirical way. Quakers are nonviolent, true. But we don't stick our fingers in our ears, close our eyes and say la-la-la-la-la to pretend violence doesn't exist in the world. David Lean, a Quaker, directed Lawrence of Arabia and The Bridge on the River Kwai, and 49th Parallel. He looked squarely at violence, and rendered it without glamor. Ben Kingsley attends Friends meeting. Yes, he played Gandhi, but he's also tackled the role of a hit man in You Kill Me. Rex Stout wrote the Nero Wolf mysteries which were somewhat violent. James Dean was raised Quaker, and was not shy about addressing violence in his work. Look at it this way, another name for violence is *conflict*, and without that, you might as well be writing a note to granny from summer camp. As for DEADRISE, if you take the mirror antithesis of anything Maynard Chalk does or says, you will find out how I feel about violence.

SHELTON: Which leads me to your work as an emergency medical technician. That has brought you through a number of harrowing situations---did that experience help you in writing this thriller?

WHITEHILL: I would hate to admit that witnessing the genuine suffering of other human beings somehow made me better at my craft, but there is no way to separate my experiences as an EMT from my work as a writer. They do fold into one another. I meet patients undergoing the worst ten minutes of their lives. There is a barely controlled urgency to those moments. First, I serve the patients as best I can. Later, I reflect. The experience becomes part of me. And I write from both my imagination and my experience. Being an EMT is great for helping me be ever-mindful of pacing, keeping things moving as a writer. One has to act, and write with all deliberate speed.

SHELTON: So you become an EMT to improve your writing?

WHITEHILL: No more than I could foresee that being an actor would improve my writing. I mean, even when I was hawking Ginsu knives in New Jersey, I was learning how to keep a sales pitch, which is like a short script, as tight and as impactful as possible. If I failed, I didn't eat. A Ginsu joint is straight commission. But as far as

responding to 911 calls goes, it isn't all adrenalin and glory. Far from it. Right now, I'm on leave from the ambulance work. I had an accumulation of difficult calls that were very disturbing, extremely stressful to me. It started to creep into my home life.

SHELTON: I'm sorry to hear that.

WHITEHILL: Thanks, but please don't be. I've just about worked through it. And that experience has helped me identify to a very small extent with what a soldier might be going through during and after his service. Now Ben Blackshaw is more authentic as a human being for my having walked the walk just that little bit.

SHELTON: It's all grist for the writer's mill.

WHITEHILL: It was the last thing I expected. I got certified as an EMT after 9/11 in order to help others. I ended up needing some help myself.

SHELTON: *If it doesn't kill you...*

WHITEHILL: [laughing] ...it makes your writing better. Okay.

SHELTON: You fly.

WHITEHILL: I love flying. So did my dad. It knits up my soul when I'm feeling out of sorts. The utter concentration it requires completely clears out the BS cobwebs. I flew to Tangier Island in the Chesapeake Bay as part of the research for DEADRISE. There is a great strip there, and wonderful food. So yes, flying is really good for my head.

SHELTON: The Chesapeake Bay is truly a character in your new book—why this setting?

WHITEHILL: That's the classic lesson of writing about what you know. You can't, and shouldn't necessarily do that in every aspect of writing. Imagination must have its place. But coming from the Eastern Shore of Maryland, and having been on the Chesapeake throughout my youth, that reduced the research workload a lot. It left room for me to learn about other things the story needed, while at the same time, it gave me some authority and authenticity in the writing.

And the Bay is so mercurial. You don't know what's going to happen next. You have to keep a close eye on the weather, which might or might not influence wave height, or killer squall lines, what have you. The Chesapeake is a wonderful place to be, but a lot of folks never fully realized her power until the waves closed over them for the last time. An unpredictable, lethal nature is so appealing in a character, right? The Bay's the thing in which to drown the nature of the bling... I just thought of that.

SHELTON: What will surprise readers about DEADRISE?

WHITEHILL: Come on, that was pretty good.

SHELTON: I'm laughing on the inside. The surprises in DEADRISE?

WHITEHILL: Okay, you're asking about the very core of good writing. Not to spout McKee-isms, but my job in the first few pages of a story is to set up an expectation of a

certain outcome, and to keep doing that at every level of the story all the way through to the end.

SHELTON: You give away the ending? I don't remember that, really.

WHITEHILL: No, I don't give away the ending. I create the expectation of one possible ending that will satisfy the reader. In the most general fairy tale terms, for instance, will it be a happy ending, or a sad ending?

SHELTON: So how does surprise factor in?

WHITEHILL: The surprises happen along the journey toward that ending. Better known as a plot twist in some instances. It's much more subtle in many other moments in the story. I need you as a reader to really expect a certain outcome from every element of the story, be it the result of a conversation between characters, or a car or boat ride, a plane flight, a gunshot, a scene. The art, or craft or whatever, is convincing you that a certain thing will happen. Then I decide as a writer whether that outcome will in fact happen. Or will I thwart or disappoint your expectation, along with the hopes of the character in a given moment. The more the reader is absolutely convinced that a certain thing will definitely happen, the more powerful the impact when that event does *not* take place after all, or takes place in a very different way than expected---or at a different time. Good characters, by the way, are not punctual. They are early or late. Never on time. That is one way to create tension.

SHELTON: Could you give me an example?

WHITEHILL: Okay, let's take a common cliché. A creepy old castle. In a torch lit stone corridor, will a monster jump out at our hero as we are led to expect, or will the black cat from act one scare the daylights out of the character and us, instead? Or will nothing happen? Or will the cat scare the character, who will, upon breathing a sigh of relief that it's only a cat after all, *then* be attacked by the monster? The double whammy. Or triple.

SHELTON: *The writer giveth...*

WHITEHILL: *...and the writer taketh away.* Sometimes. Not randomly, but only when it best serves the story.

SHELTON: So you won't tell us about any surprises in DEADRISE?

WHITEHILL: I most definitely will. I already have. You get every last one of them as part of the process of reading the book. But outside of that process, and outside of that experience, that sequence and that context, I would just be dolling out spoilers.

SHELTON: Some people like spoilers.

WHITEHILL: I wonder if they like books.

SHELTON: Are there certain authors that inspired you along the way?

WHITEHILL: Starting with Dr. Seuss, and P.D. Eastman, and going to Franklin W. Dixon who is rumored to be a series of ghostwriters for The Hardy Boys books. Love of

reading starts early, and directly led to wanting to write. I mean, Marjorie Phleger's *Pilot Down, Presumed Dead* was terrific. Hugh Lofting's *Dr. Dolittle* series was delightful. The *Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis break my heart with pleasure every time I read them. And I love the *Ring* series by J.R.R. Tolkien. Then there are Jules Verne and Edgar Allan Poe, adventure and psychology. Edgar Rice Burroughs, and Melville. What weavers they are.

Now, Alistair MacLean, he was an absolute monster! *Ice Station Zebra*, *The Satan Bug*, *Where Eagles Dare*. *The Guns of Navarone*. He owned the late 1960s and '70s in fiction and film. Neville Shute is another great. *On the Beach*? Awesome. Agatha Christie was another hyphenate writer. As well as enjoying her novels, I had a role in her play *Appointment with Death* when I was in high school.

Today, I still make time to reread Joseph Whitehill, my dad. I also read Scott Smith, Lee Child, P.D. James, Randy Wayne White, Kathy Reichs, Harlan Coben, Carl Hiaasen, Patricia Cornwell, Lawrence Sanders, and Dean Koontz. These authors are terrific. I cannot wait for them to publish their next books. And the late Patrick O'Brian's *Aubrey/Maturin* series helped me understand the Chesapeake Bay a little better.

Some lesser known writers who also have great characters that I enjoy include Arthur W. Upfield's *Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte* series with the biracial White/Aboriginal Australian detective, and Robert van Gulik's *Judge Dee* mysteries, based on an 18th Century Chinese character. Ripping great reads.

SHELTON: We touched on film. You like movies. What about writing them?

WHITEHILL: Because they are shorter than novels, writing feature scripts is great practice for getting a feel for structure, and who knows, you might get produced! Regardless, a first draft of a script might be an interesting sketch for a novel. I got an Alfred P. Sloan fellowship at the Hamptons International Film Festival for a script called *U.X.O* (Unexploded Ordnance). That was huge for me. And I co-wrote a feature script with Andrea Shane, called *The Blue Rinse Killers*. Bill Jarblum, a producer, optioned that one, and I am delighted to say it's going into production starring Olympia Dukakis, and Thom Fitzgerald directing.

SHELTON: Congratulations. And what about television?

WHITEHILL: Andrea Shane introduced me to a classmate of hers from Syracuse University, Steve Zorn. At the time, he was the head writer of a Discovery series on the use of forensics to solve actual homicide cases. That was *The New Detectives*. I wrote a sample for Zorn, and he liked it, and I got the gig. What a great show. I learned a lot about writing from Zorn, not to mention a tremendous amount about forensics. Any kind of true crime writing is a bonus for writing thrillers. The paycheck didn't hurt either.

SHELTON: What do you hope readers take away from *DEADRISE*?

WHITEHILL: I hope readers will have a deep sense of what an honor I feel it is to have been steward of a few hours of their precious time. I hope they'll feel a sense of curiosity about the people and ecology of the Chesapeake, and perhaps would visit

Smith and Tangier Islands. I cannot say enough good things about the people there. And the food! It's the best. I guess I hope readers enjoy DEADRISE enough to want to read the next Ben Blackshaw book.

SHELTON: When can we look forward to that coming out?

WHITEHILL: Anyone who coughs up their email address at www.robertblakewhitehill.com will get updates on the next book, as well a first look at some early chapters.