



An Interview with Robert Blake Whitehill Author of Tap Rack Bang

by Natasha Lee Martin

Natasha: Tap Rack Bang is the third book in the Ben Blackshaw Series. Can you tell us a little bit about the series as a whole?

Robert: The Ben Blackshaw Series follows a man who is trying to battle his way back home to hearth and kin. In all his missions, he must make impossible decisions and take incalculable risks that would unravel the psyche of a man with less fortitude. A cast of bloodthirsty psychopaths comes at him from every vantage while dogged by enemies within.

A few ancillary themes that crop up in the Ben Blackshaw Series include assaults on the environment, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, co-conspiracies of government, international drug economy, child soldiers, and genocide. Not fluffy stuff, but I always try to weave a few fibers of these disturbing aspects of modern anti-culture into the larger tapestry of a fast-paced, entertaining story.

Ben Blackshaw is a former U.S. Navy SEAL hailing from Smith Island, in the middle of the Chesapeake Bay and a wildlife artist, working in sculpture and paint. He and his fellow Smith Islanders endure a very lean, almost hardscrabble existence. Financial ends do not always meet so sometimes the ends justify clandestine, even nefarious means. Just seventy miles from the halls of power in Washington, D.C., Blackshaw and his fellow islanders speak with a singsong accent and syntax preserved from the Elizabethan era. The people of Smith and Tangier emigrated from Cornwall, England, where one of their most vibrant industries was piracy.

The Ben Blackshaw Series begins with Deadrise, in which Blackshaw is diving the chilly Chesapeake Bay for oysters right after a late season hurricane. Through the murky, silted waters, he glimpses the very recent wreck of a speedboat mired on the bottom; it is laden with twenty very heavy cases, like aluminum footlockers. To Blackshaw's astonishment, nineteen of them are packed with gold bullion. At the speedboat's helm is the body of a man he has not seen in fifteen

years: his father. Blackshaw contends with rogue government operatives hell-bent on recovering the sunken boat's cargo without regard for the cost in blood. Should he fail to defend the cargo and his home, it could mean the start of World War III.

Nitro Express involves a worldwide cat-and-mouse hunt in which he has been asked to track and eliminate a serial sniper. Blackshaw accepts the mission only to realize under fire that his name has been added to the killer's list on orders from the highest offices of the U.S. government. When Blackshaw discovers the identity of his deadly quarry he gains a shocking new understanding of his own dark family history.

With Tap Rack Bang, Blackshaw is swept into the bloody rescue of a young girl trafficked into the United States. He finds himself once again at odds and facing the loss of the one person he holds most dear. That grave prospect guts him, and in his vulnerable state of mind, the results might prove fatal.

Natasha: How many books will there be in the series?

Robert: Thanks to the Freedom of Information Act, three Ben Blackshaw missions are currently declassified and available to the public: Deadrise, Nitro Express, and Tap Rack Bang. Geronimo Hotshot is in

the works. I've committed to writing ten Blackshaw thrillers, but it is very likely there will be more.

Natasha: What makes *Tap Rack Bang* different from the first two books in the series?

Robert: Tap Rack Bang deepens the reader's understanding of the inner demons Blackshaw wrestles with, while pitting him against the wickedest, most brutal, disgusting array of human monsters. Human traffickers take the Ben Blackshaw Series into a darker realm than the first two missions.

Natasha: What inspired you to write this book?

Robert: I am often forlorn to my depths when I consider man's inhumanity to man; this includes human trafficking, particularly of children. Though Tap Rack Bang is fiction, its central theme of depravity echoes a real tragedy of our culture. It is happening here in the USA.

Natasha: What was your biggest challenge in writing *Tap Rack Bang*?

Robert: I have worked as an Emergency Medical Technician on the ambulances of Montclair, New Jersey. Responding to 911 pediatric calls to find children who have been abused so I had to work very hard to step back from my own visceral responses to these tragedies in order to craft a story that was neither mawkish nor melodramatic because I was still too close to the horrors I encountered. It is possible that writing Tap Rack Bang is another phase in my own reckoning with the results of the savagery I have witnessed.

Natasha: This book touches on themes including the human trafficking of children. How did being a father affect how you broached this topic?

Robert: Not long after my son Beau was born, I began seeing him in light of some horrible 911 pediatric calls. I could not compartmentalize well enough to do my job. I could not look at these abused kids without thinking "There, but for the grace of God, goes Beau."

It was my hope that somebody reading this story might be moved to take action. Maybe they would donate time and money to organizations like The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, or even take an extra moment to really look at a missing child poster, or to be a bit more vigilant during an AMBER Alert.

Natasha: Your books are set in the Chesapeake Bay area. Why did you choose this setting?

Robert: I was born on Maryland's Eastern Shore Peninsula, which forms the east land boundary of the Chesapeake Bay. It is a very special place to me, and I wanted to share it with others. Within this unique region, the people of Smith Island struck me as particularly fascinating, with their anachronistic accents, quirks of speech and syntax, as well as their grim, determined individualism in the face of many grinding hardships.

Natasha: What research went into writing this book?

Robert: I am no soldier so to credibly write about arms and military tactics, I rely upon my cousin, Walter Whitehill, a decorated Viet Nam veteran, and Adam Gubar, an arms expert, for advice. Documentary filmmakers who have dealt with the subject also gave me important new perspectives. I also spent time at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum (<http://www.cbmm.org>) Of course there is no substitute for visiting Smith Island by boat, or flying myself to the airstrip on Tangier Island.

Natasha: You come from a family of writers. Did you always know you wanted to write?

Robert: My mother, an elegant editor and poet, and my father, who was an award-winning short story writer and novelist, showed me the daily life of a writer, the disciplines. After studying at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London, and at the Neighborhood Playhouse School of the Theater in New York City. I discovered a feel for structure (with Robert McKee's guidance), and a joy in crafting decent dialogue. As a writer, if I can't say it myself with deadly conviction, I won't make a reader endure it, or a true actor struggle with it.

Natasha: What advice do you have for aspiring writers?

Robert: For younger writers, I would suggest to find exciting, inspiring writing teachers, to read voraciously from the best of every century, and then to write anything and everything. For a person coming to writing later in life, I would suggest that accomplishment comes after the first ten thousand pages. Also, a tough editor should be viewed as an integral part of the writing team. Engage in the services of an excellent public relations firm like Shelton Interactive (<http://sheltoninteractive.com>) to help your work find its rightful audience.

Natasha: Do you have any specific advice for people looking to write a series?

Robert: A series, particularly in a popular genre (mystery, thriller, suspense, romance, science fiction, young adult, or fantasy, for example) has a better chance at garnering sales, because you can build an audience over time.

A series affords a writer at least one character, likely more, whom readers can get to know more deeply beyond the covers of a single book. I have received flaming hate mail from folks to whom I have shown early drafts, particularly if I have dared to jeopardize a beloved character. Listen closely to that feedback. It relates directly to later sales.

Natasha: The Ben Blackshaw Series was optioned to be made into major motion pictures. Tell us more about that.

Robert: As an award-winning screenwriter, I always hoped that the Ben Blackshaw Series might be considered for adaptation into feature films. I began reaching out to every film industry professional I knew. I reconnected with a classmate of Haverford College named Stephanie

Bell, now a producing partner at HatLine Productions www.hatlineproductions.com. She did not hesitate to agree to read the first two thrillers in the Ben Blackshaw Series, Deadrise, and Nitro Express. She was immediately hooked. Then I sent her the third book, Tap Rack Bang, in manuscript form. One of the terms of my agreement with HatLine includes that I will adapt the novels into screenplays myself.

Natasha: What advice do you have for someone who wants his or her book to be made into a move?

Robert: Once the book is proven to resonate loud, hard, and strongly with readers, it is possible that Hollywood might call an agent can help with this strange form of business-to-business marketing. As Joanne Zippel, www.zipcreative.net asserts, writers can mine interested readers with film making connections from among their own contacts.. Include actors and directors in your list of potential champions to whom you might introduce your work. You never know which beloved character actor has standing deal with mini or major studios, distributors and financiers who are eagerly waiting to be introduced to a vehicle that inspires fresh excitement in a genre. Do good work. Market it hard. Manage your expectations. Keep writing.

Natasha: What's next in the series?

Robert: The next novel in The Ben Blackshaw Series, entitled Geronimo Hotshot, takes Blackshaw to the American Southwest. I love that area, and it injects Blackshaw into unfamiliar territory. The first chapter of Geronimo Hotshot is available at the end of Tap Rack Bang.

Natasha: Where can we learn more?

Robert: Readers can learn more about Smith Island, the Chesapeake Bay region, the Ben Blackshaw Series, and about me at www.robertblakewhitehill.com. Twitter via @rbwhitehill.

Facebook to learn about book signings and readings.

<https://www.facebook.com/RobertBlakeWhitehill>

Robert welcomes emails from readers as well at rbw@robertblakewhitehill.com.



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