

AN INTERVIEW WITH

H. Terrell Griffin, author of *Wyatt's Revenge*

How did you get the idea for *Wyatt's Revenge*?

When I sat down to write the book, one of my best friends, Miles Leavitt, had just died of lung cancer. I felt completely helpless during his 10-week struggle and knew I would miss him immensely. The death of Matt Royal's friend Wyatt gave me the opportunity to write about the effect that the loss of a loved one has on the survivors, and at the same time, remember my deceased friend, whom the character Logan Hamilton is loosely based on. However, in this instance, Matt could do something about his friend's death. I think when we contemplate revenge instead of forgiveness, we lessen ourselves. Matt Royal had to struggle with this concept and do the best that he could, given the choices he faced.

Is Laurence Wyatt based on a real person?

To some extent. Wyatt Laurence Wyatt was a professor of English at the University of Central Florida, a novelist of note and a good friend of mine. He died some years ago from a brain tumor.

In *Wyatt's Revenge*, Matt Royal finds himself facing danger both on his home turf and overseas. What made you decide to take on an international plot this time?

Frankfurt, Germany is a banking and commercial center. I lived in Germany for a couple of years and never got over my love of the country. It seemed a natural fit for the story, and I like to have Matt travel around a bit.

Did you have to do any special research in order to write *Wyatt's Revenge*? What did you research, and how?

Some research was involved, particularly the history that is mentioned in the book, and to some extent, the geography of Germany. The Internet is a wonderful tool, and I use it extensively.

Readers will see a different side of Matt Royal this time. Not only will Matt have to solve a mystery, but he'll be faced with some incredibly difficult choices about right vs. wrong and justice vs. revenge. Why?

Matt, like all of us, is a flawed human being. But, unlike many of us, he recognizes this and works mightily to overcome his baser human nature. His choices are starker than those that most of us face in daily life, but the narrative delves into the issues of how one man arrives at the solutions to the moral paradoxes he faces. He is a man of the law and a lawyer who loves the law and all that the American system of justice stands for. He has been a part of the system and knows that it, like all human institutions, is also subject to mistakes. He has to balance his respect for the law and his needs to avenge his friend's death. He knows that there is little likelihood that the justice system can right this wrong because of the burden of proof that the prosecutor must meet in order to convict. The dilemma then is what does he do to bring justice to the killers, and the question he must answer is whether vengeance is justice.

As you've written other Matt Royal mysteries, do you see him evolving/changing in ways you didn't expect? If so, how?

Matt is, like all of us, a creature of his background, his childhood, his education, his life experiences. That said, I think all humans evolve over their lifetimes. How many of us at age forty are the same people we were at age twenty? However, I also think that the basics are built in. We're either honest or we're not; we're compassionate or we're not; we're generous or we're not. The big question is how we evolve within that basic framework. Matt will evolve and change, but I don't think it'll be outside the framework that readers have come to know. His back story, his background as it were, will continue to reveal itself to give the reader a better sense of what makes Matt tick. I don't want Matt to ever become a dark character. He is in essence a fun-loving wannabe beach bum. He keeps getting pulled into dangerous situations, but he always goes back to the beach and his friends.

Do you find yourself identifying more or less with Matt Royal with each new novel? Why?

I find that I like Matt more and more. I guess I imbue him with traits I have or wish I had or try to have—the good ones, that is. I like his courage, his sense of honor, his love and respect for his friends, and his sense of humor.

Wyatt's Revenge moves at a breakneck pace. What is your secret to keeping such an intense level of action?

The writer has the luxury of inventing situations that reek of danger and that give the heroes a chance to do heroic things.

Which part of writing Wyatt's Revenge did you enjoy most?

I like the historical parts of the back story the best. It probes the soldier mentality, which I think is one of courage and honor. It also delves into what happens when a soldier has seen too much. However, these parts of the book are small digressions that are meant only to give the reader the perspective of the world in which the mystery evolves into answers.

Which part of writing Wyatt's Revenge did you find most challenging?

Trying to convey Matt's sense of loss of his friend, a loss magnified by the fact that he lost his friend to a senseless murder. It was also a challenge to write the moral dilemmas Matt faced, and how he justified his actions to himself. I'll leave it to the reader to decide whether, as a writer, I met the challenges.

How do you expect readers to react to this new—and flawed—side of Matt?

I don't think the flaws are new. Matt has struggled with himself throughout all the books. I don't want any prospective reader to think Matt spends his entire time sitting around contemplating his own failings. His approach to those failings is, I think, similar to the way all of us approach our own flaws. He is aware of them, factors them into his decisions, and then makes the best decision he can and moves on. I hope the readers will see some of themselves in Matt and realize that he is simply a human being caught up in circumstances beyond his control, much like the soldier at war. Matt does the best he can. He's not a superhero, but just a guy doing his best in trying circumstances.

Without giving too much of the plot away, Matt finds a romantic interest in Wyatt's Revenge. Why now?

Matt is a man.

Your most recent book, Blood Island, received some incredibly high praise from reviewers and was named an award-winning finalist in the 2008 National Best Books Awards. Any pressure?

I had finished Wyatt's Revenge before Blood Island was published, so there was no pressure on this one. However, I was completely blindsided by the reception Blood Island received from reviewers and award judges. I didn't expect that and was humbled by it. The book I'm writing now is certainly being done in the shadow of Blood Island, and I find the pressure incredible. I don't want to disappoint my readers, so I keep trying to do better. I learned a long time ago in the army, that you can finish the 20-mile march if you just keep putting one boot in front of the other. I try to do that with writing. I always keep in mind that the reader is the one that counts; that the reader must like the story, identify with the characters, find the writing pleasing. I promise to do my best not to disappoint.

How do you feel about the many comparisons between you and John D. MacDonald?

Humbled. John D. MacDonald is, in my opinion, the godfather of my genre. I've been a big fan of his since I first read the first Travis Magee novel, The Deep Blue Goodbye, when I was in college. I've reread those twenty-one novels many times over the years and never tire of them. John D. had a lot to say about so many things, and he said them through his characters Magee and Meyer in a way that never detracted from the story. I hope I can emulate that, but I know I'll never equal the venerable John D. MacDonald.

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Can you envision writing books that don't take place (at least in part) in Florida?

I'm in the process of writing two books, one a Matt Royal mystery that, as usual, takes place partly in Florida. I'm also writing a book in which the protagonist is Jock Algren. As my readers know, Jock is a good friend of Matt Royal's and shows up to help Matt in every book. Jock is a very secretive government agent, and in the book I'm writing (as yet unnamed) with him as the protagonist (Matt Royal is not a part of this book) the action all takes place in Europe. Florida doesn't figure into that book at all.

What do you hope readers will take away from Wyatt's Revenge?

I hope they will identify with the characters, like them, and want to read more of their adventures. I want the reader to feel that he or she has enjoyed a little excitement, a little humor, and a good story well written. If the reader finishes the book with a sense of having had a little fun, I will have done my job.

What's next for Matt Royal?

Matt will go on living, loving, and solving mysteries on Longboat Key. He'll drink a little beer, hang out at Tiny's, find love (or maybe just like), enjoy his friends, fish a little, and get into situations that he didn't want to be in and work his way out of them. We'll find out a little more about Matt as the stories unfold and hopefully understand a little better what makes him the man he is.

What's next for H. Terrell Griffin?

I will continue to write, enjoy the wonderful island of Longboat Key, hang out with the woman I love and have been married to since college, boat a little, drink the occasional beer at Tiny's, and enjoy the two most fascinating people I've ever met, my grandchildren, Kyle Griffin, age five, and his sister Sarah, age three. Life can't get any better than that.