

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Mark Terry, author of *The Fallen*

Start to finish, how long did it take to write *The Fallen*?

The way I usually answer this is: 7 months if everything goes well and 14 if it doesn't. In this case, *The Fallen* took about 7 months to write from start to finish, maybe a little bit less.

How did you get the idea?

The main character, Derek Stillwater, is my series character who's been in two previous novels, *The Devil's Pitchfork* and *The Serpent's Kiss*. There was some unfinished business at the end of *The Devil's Pitchfork* that I wanted Derek to deal with. I also liked the idea of putting Derek into a sort of "Die Hard" situation, where he's trapped in a building with a bunch of terrorists. It also fit many of the elements I look for in a Stillwater story—limited time, distinct place, and a way to isolate Derek from backup.

Which part of the writing process did you enjoy most? Why?

All of it, actually. I know there are writers that don't like the editing part, but I like that, too. I like the joy of the inspiration of the first draft, at least when it's going well, and I like the cleaning and tidying part of rewriting.

What part of the writing process did you find most challenging? Why?

Two parts, I think. One is just to keep pushing to make it deeper and richer, both for myself and the reader. The goal is to give the reader their money's worth, after all, so hopefully I tell them a rip-roaring story but also bring a lot more stuff into it so they close the book satisfied. The other challenging part for me is the final, final copyediting that goes on months after you've completed the book and your editors come up with questions or you have to look for typos and grammatical errors. By this time, you've read the book about 30 times, and it's hard to care any more. But you buckle down and do it because you're a pro and that's what pros do.

Did you have to do any special research while writing *The Fallen*? If so, what did you research, and how did you conduct the research?

I talked to some people at a resort in Colorado that hosts high-security events (not the G8, but some UN things). I talked to a former military helicopter pilot. I did research on elevators and various weapons that get used—that sort of thing. I read as much as I could get my hands on about procedures, both security and political, having to do with how G8 Summits are run.

Do any of the characters in *The Fallen* have an autobiographical component? If so, which character, and how are you similar?

Not really, no. There are certainly components of most characters that are similar to me or people I know. For instance, Secretary Johnston's wife, who has Alzheimer's, in that my mother-in-law died this year of Alzheimer's and my mother has Alzheimer's.

How did you get the ideas for the characters in *The Fallen*? Are any of the characters based on people you know?

F-I-C-T-I-O-N. I suppose some of them are pieces of me and pieces of people I know, but I tried to imagine what sort of people work in these areas and be faithful to that concept while hopefully providing entertaining, interesting characters to read about.

What do you think is your protagonist, Derek Stillwater's most admirable quality?

Derek is a guy who does what needs to be done in a crisis, even when he would rather not.

What do you think is Derek Stillwater's least admirable quality?

I'm not sure in the context of fiction this is bad, but Derek doesn't have any patience or tolerance for chain of command or following the rules. He'll choose a path that he thinks is right and follow it, whether it's right or not, and it's not good for people around him to get in his way. He can be a little blind to the side effects and repercussions of some of his actions.

How is Derek Stillwater unlike the “typical” action hero?

He’s a lot more neurotic. He has panic attacks. He’s a bit of a hypochondriac. He’s fatalistic and believes he’ll die from a biological or chemical agent. He’s aware he’s caught a tiger by the tail, and he can’t let go, but he’s aware that his pursuit of fighting biological and chemical terrorism has wrecked his chances of having a so-called “normal” life with a wife and kids. I think it makes him both more human and more vulnerable.

How do you think you are most like Derek Stillwater?

I hope we both do what needs to be done in any given situation, whether we want to do it or not.

How do you think you are least like Derek Stillwater?

I’m not an action hero and I’m not—quite—as neurotic. I don’t know that my wife and kids would agree with that assessment.

Without giving too much of the plot away, Derek really takes a beating throughout the course of *The Fallen*. Can’t you give the poor guy a break?

What fun would that be? Part of what I’m trying to do with Derek is put him in a pressure cooker. Part of that, particularly in *The Fallen*, requires physical abuse. Sometimes it’s psychological, even spiritual, depending on the book. But in *The Fallen*, in particular, I wanted to push him to his very limits physically.

***The Fallen* is a thriller in every sense of the word. What do you think are the key elements of thrillers – as opposed to mystery, or suspense novels?**

International Thriller Writers, Inc., an organization I belong to, says a thriller should thrill. I think so, too. My definition of a thriller as opposed to a mystery—and they often overlap—is that a thriller is about preventing a crime of some sort from happening. Often it starts with a crime that will lead to another escalating crime or crimes. A mystery is about solving a crime after it happens. That said, I think a thriller is often a mystery-on-the-run.

Time is an important element of *The Fallen*, as the action unfolds over the course of one day. What was your reasoning in writing a thriller that unfolds in such a short period of time?

I love that. I’ve done it in all of the Derek Stillwater novels, especially in *The Serpent’s Kiss*, where Derek has to prevent terror attacks that occur every 4 hours. I think for the type of books I write, that’s key. For all the other dangers, mental and physical, there’s always a looming deadline and Derek tends to be even more attuned to the timetable than the other characters in the novels. It gives the books an even stronger sense of urgency. And speaking of time – your web site, www.markterrybooks.com, features a clock that counts down the time left in each day.

What’s your fascination with time?

Well, we only get so much of it, don’t we? It’s ticking for every single one of us and none of us knows when the time’s going to run out, so you’d better pay attention to what’s going on and what you do with the time you have.

What is your interest in biological and chemical terrorism?

I’m a sick puppy, I guess. I have a degree in microbiology and my first job out of college was in an infectious disease research lab. I think biological and chemical terrorism is one of the most frightening forms of warfare and terrorism because of the psychological component. Also, biological terrorism can get away from you and spread out of control. That’s really scary. 9/11 was horrific, certainly, but I also noticed that when a few people received anthrax in the mail it seemed to terrify people even more. Let’s face it, most of us are terrified of disease, and biological and chemical terrorism can really hit that fear.

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Which writers influence and inspire you?

Just about everything I've ever read, but I've been strongly influenced by Stephen King, Robert B. Parker, David Morrell, Rick Riordan, Jonathan Kellerman, John Sanford, Dick Francis, Lincoln Child and Douglas Preston, Richard Preston... the list goes on and on.

You have received some tremendous accolades from well-known writers in the thriller field. What is that experience like?

Intimidating. Flattering. Gratifying. Grateful.

If you could give an aspiring author one piece of advice, what would it be?

Read a lot, write a lot, submit a lot.

What is the best piece of writing advice you've ever received?

Write less, think more.

The worst?

Write what you know. I think this is often the worst advice writers get. Write what you're interested in. You can always learn about it.

Are there other types of books you are interested in writing, and if so, what genre(s) would you like to explore?

Well, I've been dabbling with a science fiction novel. I have a completed political thriller in need of a home. I wrote a couple fantasy novels aimed at kids. They got nibbles, but no bites. I also write tons of nonfiction and I collaborated on a nonfiction book proposal with a couple medical practice management consultants that my nonfiction agent is currently marketing.

What do you hope readers will take away from *The Fallen*?

Mostly I hope it keeps them up all night turning the pages. I hope, in some ways, it makes them think about the dangers of biological and chemical terrorism, although I'm writing primarily to entertain. If they come away with more, well, that's a bonus.

What's next for Derek Stillwater?

It looks like my publisher is going to pick up the next Derek Stillwater adventure, which has him working with a task force in Los Angeles trying to prevent a terrorism attack. And I'm thinking about the book after that, which for Derek will be very personal and a little bit—just a tiny bit—of a departure for Derek, primarily because if it goes as I think it's going to go, most of the book will take place in Russia.

What's next for Mark Terry? Any other books in the works?

Well, there's always something. Like I said, I'm still slowly working on a science fiction novel. I'm starting to research the book that probably takes place in Russia. I'm waiting for editorial comments on the next Derek Stillwater novel, and I have 200 pages of an espionage novel that takes place in China that I intend to complete someday, but it got back-burnered when some other projects came up. My agent has a couple projects still floating around, so we'll see.