

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Mark Terry, author of *The Valley of Shadows*

Tell us a little about yourself. How and when did you start writing?

I started writing fiction in college when I was unhappily getting a degree in microbiology and public health. My girlfriend (now wife) had graduated, moved home and gotten a job, and my roommate was doing a summer internship in Detroit—I was living alone for the summer.

I spent a lot of my free time prowling the MSU (Michigan State University) bookstores and I picked up a collection of essays about Stephen King called *Fear Itself*. There was a foreword by Stephen King called “On Becoming A Brand Name” where King talked about how he wrote stories and sent them off to magazines and how he eventually wrote a novel, *Carrie*. It inspired me to try writing a short story and I was hooked. Quite some time later I eventually started getting published, getting novels published, and eventually made a living as a freelance writer.

What inspired you to write *The Valley of Shadows*?

The Valley of Shadows is the fourth book to feature Dr. Derek Stillwater, a troubleshooter for Homeland Security whose particular expertise is biological and chemical terrorism. In books #1 and #3, *The Devil's Pitchfork* and *The Fallen*, Derek dealt with a sort of homegrown international terror group, The Fallen Angels; in book #2, *The Serpent's Kiss*, I basically dealt with what terrorism experts call a “lone wolf terrorist,” which is to say, someone not specifically affiliated with a terrorist organization or group. I decided, finally, that Derek needed to deal with what is currently the most problematic terrorist organization in the world: Al-Qaeda.

I wanted there to be some of the typical elements of a Derek Stillwater story—a race against time, escalating peril, terrorism in the U.S. I also wanted to bring in some international elements (in what is either coincidence or prescience, Pakistani Al-Qaeda), a slightly longer timeframe than the previous books, and I wanted to delve more into Derek's background, which I did by forcing him to partner with a former lover, Sandy O'Reilly, and with a former CIA contact, Greg Popovitch. I also wanted to broaden the terrorism threats from biological and chemical attacks, to the myriad other methods modern-day terrorists use—suicide bombings, dirty bombings, missiles, potentially nuclear bombs—because, although Derek has a specialty, he's an overall counterterrorism expert and I wanted this novel to reflect that.

How did you use your life experience or professional background to enrich your story?

You mean my years as a terrorist? (Just kidding). My background is in microbiology, genetics, and healthcare prior to turning to writing. In that respect, Derek and I have similar educational backgrounds, although he went on to a PhD. Aside from that, not so much, although both Derek and I are into kayaking and martial arts.

Is there anything autobiographical in *The Valley of Shadows*?

Only what I said above. Derek's martial arts background comes about from his military training—he was in Army Special Forces—and a personal interest. I'm a black belt in Sanchin-Ryu karate, but Derek has significantly more experience killing people than I do.

Are any characters based on people you know?

No, and I'm not just saying that because my attorney told me to.

Would you say that *Valley* is more plot driven or character driven?

Plot driven, although I'm not sure you can divorce the two, particularly since the novels revolve around the character of Derek Stillwater. And with each book I am attempting to bring more depth to the character. I was talking with another writer (author Jon Land) recently and I mentioned Derek and he asked me if Derek was Native American. I said, "No ... well ... I don't know ... I'll have to ask him." Derek hasn't told me yet, but it's something to think about.

Who is your favorite or most sympathetic character? Why?

Well, Derek, of course. But the character I had the most fun with in *The Valley of Shadows* was Greg Popovitch, Derek's former pal in the CIA who's turned into a black market arms dealer in L.A. There's something fun about writing a character who's so totally unpredictable and funny while having such a dark and dangerous edge.

Who is your least sympathetic character? Why?

Kalakar, the lead Al-Qaeda terrorist in the novel. I understand what he's thinking and how he got to that point, but like most Al-Qaeda terrorists, I ultimately think there's a significantly warped kind of logic and desperation that leads to justification for their actions.

What part of writing *The Valley of Shadows* did you find the most challenging?

Trying to understand Al-Qaeda.

What do you hope that readers will take away from *Valley*?

I hope they'll be entertained. I hope they'll think they got their money's worth. I hope they'll stay up late turning the pages, devouring every word, excited to be reading it. They may very well take away some thoughts about terrorism and Al-Qaeda and, given the nature of *The Valley of Shadows*, some questions about what you would do to keep your child safe, but that's just a bonus—I want them to have a great read.

How do you dial up the tension to keep your readers on the edge of their seats?

Increase the stakes. Try to get the reader to really feel for the characters, whether it's Derek, Sandy, or any of the other characters who are caught up in this tangle of plots. If I can get the reader to care about them, then I've really succeeded.

What writers have inspired you?

Tons. The late Robert B. Parker. David Morrell. Lee Child. Rick Riordan. James Rollins. Robert Crais. Dick Francis. John Sandford. Lincoln Child and Doug Preston. Stephen King. The list goes on and on and on...

What is the writing process like for you?

One word at a time! I don't outline. Sometimes a novel comes out nearly perfectly formed—*The Serpent's Kiss* comes to mind—and other times I have to dig and dig and write and rewrite and scrap scenes and rewrite scenes and try to find the story. I try to write 3 to 5 pages a day on a novel-in-progress and try not to get distracted by Bright New Shiny Idea Syndrome when the going gets tough. BNSIS is every story idea that pops into your head—usually when you're slogging through the middle of a novel—seems like a better idea than the one you're working on.

I'm a fulltime writer, so I'm typically at my desk around 8:00 in the morning or so. I take a break late-morning to go to the gym or ride my bike or go running, depending on the time of year, then after lunch I work until 5:00 or 6:00. Sometimes more in the evening and sometimes on the weekends. It just depends on how busy I am.

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

Think more, write less.

What is the worst piece of advice about writing that you've ever received?

Write what you know. It's not bad advice, exactly, but I think you should write about what excites you—you can always research it and learn about it.

What's next for you? Any new books in the pipeline

I'm working on the 5th Derek Stillwater novel. And I've got a couple other writing projects in various states of incompleteness—a sci-fi novel, an international thriller, a mystery thriller that takes place in Detroit. We'll see what happens.

Any final words you would like to say about yourself, *The Valley of Shadows*, or life in general?

If you've read any of my Derek Stillwater novels, I think you'll love *The Valley of Shadows*. If you haven't read any of my novels and you like fast-paced, edgy thrillers—what're you waiting for?