

A CONVERSATION with Tj O'CONNOR about *THE CONSULTANT*

TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT YOURSELF, HOW AND WHEN YOU STARTED WRITING.

I first began writing in the 5th grade. I had a tough childhood at times and I escaped by reading everything I could get my hands on. I hid with *The Hardy Boys*, *Mystery of the Witches Bridge*, and *The Mystery of the Haunted Mine*. I can't tell you how many times I reread the books I had.

So, after reading *Mystery of the Witches Bridge* by Barbee Oliver Carleton, I knew I wanted to be a writer. As I grew up, I took on bigger novels very young including the one that sealed the deal on my writing and my profession in intelligence and anti-terrorism—*Six Days of the Condor* by James Grady. After that, it was all about Alistair MacLean, the classics including Christie, Chandler, and Spillane. I wrote plays and short stories in high school, was the editor of my school paper from the 8th grade on, and even finished my first—and totally *worst*—novel a year out of high school.

I couldn't afford to write full time, nor take much time at all over the years as I chased profession and family. But some ten years ago, I got very serious and began trying to get published. It finally happened with a light-hearted cozy mystery called *Dying to Know*. That book was actually my fourth written, and I wrote it only for my daughter. It was never meant for publication. Funny, though, it got me my wonderful agent and my first book contract.

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO WRITE YOUR NOVEL?

My world. My mentor. My love of thrillers over all. My life's work has been in anti-terrorism, investigations, and national defense. My mentor of more than 25 years, one of the last OSS agents—Office of Strategic Services—and former deputy director of CIA was one of my few heroes and inspired me to write a thriller about terrorism coming to a small town. I wrote the first draft years ago and let it sit while I finished my first contract for the mysteries. But when my mentor passed, he told me on his deathbed that he wanted me to finish *The Consultant*. He loved the book and one of the main characters, Oscar LaRue, is, at his core, my mentor Wally Fetterolf.

HOW DID YOU USE YOUR LIFE EXPERIENCE OR PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND TO ENRICH YOUR STORY?

Oh Lord, the entire story—as with most of my works—steal real life from my life. Each of the characters are based on people I've known—including those I've jailed, loved, hated, and chased. They have been my coworkers, my heroes like Oscar LaRue, and my adversaries. Even the plots have some factual basis from my life's work. Oh, I'm careful not to violate any security rules or smear any former coworkers. But, there is very little on the pages that I've not caressed with real life.

ANYTHING AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL IN YOUR NOVEL?

Yes and no. Clearly, Hunter has a lot of me—the smartass nature, the recklessness here and there, and his total independence. He's a loner cast into family. My wife would tell you that's me. Hunter's relationship with Oscar LaRue is almost a mirror image to that of Wally and me. Their nitpicking back and forth. Oscar's omnipotent guidance and often condescending tone. Even the hidden love they share that neither would nor could ever speak. I spent the weekend at Wally's side in the hospital when he died. We laughed, cried, told stories, and talked about my books all night long. That evening, just six hours before he succumbed, he gave me that gun-finger and said, "Finish the damn thriller. Do it." We never said goodbye or exchanged softer words. We just agreed that we both knew. That sentiment is throughout *The Consultant* and will be a permanent part of the sequels.

WHO IS YOUR FAVORITE OR MOST SYMPATHETIC CHARACTER? AND WHY?

I love all the characters including the villains. My two favs are Oscar LaRue, because he is my former mentor and I get to relive my relationship with Wally even now that he's gone. I can have conversations, adventures, and even bicker with him in my books two years after his passing. I even get to win some of those arguments now! The second is Noor. She's an Iranian refugee who married Hunter's brother, Kevin, and adopted an Iranian refugee son. She's tragic as she loses Kevin, and must face the thought of losing her son, Sameh. She's beautiful and smart and begins to get close to Hunter, but the two won't give in because of Kevin's loss. I love her character because she is good and bad, an American and a refugee, and she's in pain because her once-neighborly friends now look at her as the enemy when the terrorist attacks begin. In the end, she learns that terror hurts a small town and small family far more than it could ever hurt a nation.

WHO IS YOUR LEAST SYMPATHIC CHARACTER? AND WHY?

Detective David Bond. He's a pukey deputy sheriff chasing Noor and trying everything he can to take Hunter down. It's all pure jealousy and envy and a lot of small-town politics. He's an ass and I knew him well a few years ago. I hate dissing law enforcement, but it would not be genuine or realistic if every cop were a superman patriot. There are a lot of bad cops, and they stain the profession. Bond is that stain.

WHAT PART OF WRITING YOUR BOOK DID YOU FIND THE MOST CHALLENGING?

Rewriting it. My first draft was okay but it got confused as a mystery and thriller combined. Too confused. My agent told me to tear it into two books because there were conflicting subplots and themes of mystery vs. thriller. I realized my mistakes. But, I loved all the subplots and characters and writing. So, tearing it into two different novels and staying with the thriller was hard. It was also hard because I'd just lost my mentor and rewriting it meant I had to say goodbye all over again. It was also a bit good because I wrote more chapters for Oscar LaRue and I got to heal a bit.

WHAT DO YOU HOPE THAT READERS WILL TAKE AWAY FROM YOUR BOOK?

A lot. I want them to see that terrorism isn't an international issue. It's a hometown issue. It affects families and individuals more than nations. I want them to see that the refugee crisis is that way, too. You can't untangle that mess with Congress. It's personal. Every decision on that crisis will have consequences. Many of those consequences will hurt those who are NOT refugees more than those who are. And, perhaps the most, I want Hunter to be real person—not one of those CIA types who never runs out of bullets or never loses a fight. He doesn't have cool comebacks or the best karate moves. He's normal. Fallible. He's one of us who just has some cool training and some guts at the right time. He cries. He bleeds. And more than anything, emotions totally screw him up.

WHAT WRITERS HAVE INSPIRED YOU?

Too many to count, but here are the biggies:

Barbee Oliver Carleton – *Mystery of the Witches Bridge*

Gordon D. Shirreffs – *Mystery of the Haunted Mine*

All the fake Franklin W. Dixons for their Hardy Boys.

Alistair MacLean – his life’s work

Agatha Christie – her life’s work

Nelson DeMille – his life’s work

But mostly, James Grady – *Six Days of the Condor*, and his willingness to reach out to an unknown like me.

WHAT IS THE WRITING PROCESS LIKE FOR YOU?

The love of my life. I write at 5 am, lunch, after work, and all day on the weekends. I take my notebook with me on travel and try to at least edit while on the road. At home, I’m surrounded by my Labs—Annie-Rose and Toby—and often a 4-year-old grandchild. It’s tough sometimes, but I love the process. Often, I’m playing swing music and I get lost in my work. It’s simply what I love to do.

As far as process, I generally start by a one-page summary of what I think the book will be. I add in character descriptions and key organizations (like the Russian SVR) and do a bit of preliminary research. I set up folders on my computer to put research and other notes in. I also keep a daily draft in the file so I never overwrite anything. By the end of the book, I have months of versions building one day after the other. Then I begin to write. I generally outline about 10 chapters at a time, but as I write, my characters and plot take on a life of their own. Each day, I update my outline from what I thought I’d write to what I actually did, adjust the future chapter outlines, and press on. I usually stop around page 100 and begin an immediate rewrite so I try to get the opening as close to what I want as possible. Then I charge to the end. Of course, that’s when the real work begins—the hateful rewrites!

WHAT IS THE BEST PIECE OF ADVICE ABOUT WRITING THAT YOU’VE EVER RECEIVED?

Just write. Start or you can’t finish. That and write what you know. Of course, many authors are writing something outside their real world. Me, I’m right where I belong.

WHAT IS THE WORST PIECE OF ADVICE ABOUT WRITING THAT YOU’VE EVER RECEIVED?

There are so many. But the one that irritates me is “*Never, ever combine voices of first person and third person in the same book. Pick one and keep it.*” I actually rewrote a novel because of that advice early on, then discovered that not only did I not like it, there were some great authors out there doing just that in order to break up the pace and POV to make the novel better.

WHAT’S NEXT FOR YOU? ANY NEW BOOKS IN THE PIPELINE?

I am currently rewriting one of my favorite traditional mysteries, *The Killing of Tyler Quinn*. It’s the story of a war journalist believed killed by the Taliban in Afghanistan. He returns five years later to find his entire life stolen by his former best friend and co-correspondent at his hometown newspaper. As he tries to adjust to his new life back home, a series of murders take place, beginning with his former best friend. He’s not only the suspect, but PTSD keeps him wondering if he isn’t the real killer.

However, given the coming publication of *The Consultant: Double Effect*, I'll shelf Tyler Quinn for now and start on a sequel tentatively titled, *The Consultant: Threat Assessment*!

ANY FINAL WORDS YOU WOULD LIKE TO SAY ABOUT YOURSELF, YOUR NOVEL, OR LIFE IN GENERAL?

I love writing. I'd write even if I never got published. I try to write novels and make the characters real, from my world. That means they are not always perfect, rarely have the answers right the first time, and often make things worse for themselves. I know some novels the main characters are larger-than-life, but in my world, that's too much fiction. To replace the lost "super hero" focus on this type of thriller—the 007 concept—I try to give my characters some wit and fun and make them very fallible. I hope I succeeded.