

David Morrell: Interview with Rambo's Father

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I am here with David Morrell, the writer of *First Blood* and a lot of other cool books. This is the very first official interview for Beingsly.com. I really appreciate that and here is my first question: 1. You are one of my favourite writers by the way, which writers do you like most and what are some of your favourite novels? I'm the co-founder (with Gayle Lynds) of the International Thriller Writers organization. That makes it difficult for me to single out contemporary authors without getting into trouble by seeming to pick favorites. But if you want to know who my influences were, there are three. The first is Ernest Hemingway. I studied with Hemingway expert Philip Young when I was earning my Master's degree at Penn State. I wrote my thesis on Hemingway's style. I'm also indebted to the British suspense writer, Geoffrey Household, whose brilliant thrillers *ROGUE MALE* and *WATCHER IN THE SHADOWS* depict manhunts in dramatic outdoor settings. The forest chase scenes in my novel *FIRST BLOOD* show how I learned from him. I find it amusing that when I asked Household to provide a publicity quote for the novel, he refused, saying that he thought the book was too bloody. I guess the title would have given him a clue. The third major influence is James M. Cain, particularly his *THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE* and *DOUBLE INDEMNITY*. I deeply admire the first sentence of *POSTMAN*: "They threw me off the hay truck around noon." It compels me to keep reading. 2. Once you said in an interview that Rambo is a character, that went into something that he never wanted to be a part of and discovered that he had talents and abilities, he never thought about. You are a truly the "Father" of all modern action novels, have you ever thought that you will set the tone for that genre by creating Rambo? I was a graduate student at Penn State when I first had the idea for *FIRST BLOOD*. That was in the late 1960s when anti-Vietnam-war demonstrations were spreading across the country. The basic theme of the novel was to bring the war home and dramatize what a small version of it would feel like in the United States. Rambo was meant to be a veteran who'd been so ravaged by the war that he became the equivalent of a disaffected radical. The police chief who opposed him was meant to represent the Establishment. In the end, they both died. It was an allegory about where escalation leads, and until that time, it was hard to find that much action in a novel, which is why it has been called "the father of all action novels"; I certainly didn't imagine the various incarnations of the character. To my amazement, Rambo became one of the most famous characters of the twentieth century, as well known as Sherlock Holmes, Tarzan, and James Bond. Now the character has moved into the new century, and there is talk about yet another film. My novel was published in 1972 and has never been out of print, including around the world, almost unheard of when it comes to a 36-year-old book. No one could have predicted that kind of longevity. For that reason, I sometimes call myself Rambo's father. The way one's offspring grows up is out of a parent's control.

3. How long, on average, does it take to write one of your books, from initial idea to publication? I do a lot of research, and that can be time consuming. Also I'm a compulsive reviser. I rewrite sentences until the last minute. The result is that it takes me a minimum time of a year to complete a project. Some books have taken as long as two years, *DOUBLE IMAGE*, for example, because I needed to learn a great deal about photography. As a consequence, before I start something new, I write a letter to myself and basically ask, "Does this story justify spending a year or more on it?" There has to be something about the theme or the technique that makes me understand myself better as a person or else makes me a better writer. 4. *First Blood* is a very interesting title why did you choose it? The title *FIRST BLOOD* was meant to echo one of the rules in ancient duels that involved fencing. "He who draws first blood shall be the victor." Of course, in the novel, the escalation goes far beyond first blood. 5. What is it exactly that drives you into writing this or that particular story? Are the themes about personal anxieties and nightmares of your own or is it rather the investigation into contemporary events and preoccupations that motivates you? Graham Greene once said that an unhappy childhood is a goldmine for a writer. My father died in World War Two. My mother was unable to support the two of us and was forced to put me in an orphanage. Later, I stayed on a Mennonite farm. Eventually, my mother remarried, but my stepfather didn't like children. There was a lot of fighting in the house. I was so afraid that I slept under my bed. I found an escape in thriller novels and movies. As an adult, I discovered that they were the kind of writing that I most enjoy. They're about fear and how to deal with it. I discuss this in my writing book, *THE SUCCESSFUL NOVELIST: A LIFETIME OF WRITING AND PUBLISHING*, by the way. So, yes, you could say that I write about personal anxieties and nightmares rather than contemporary events. That might be a reason why my novels don't feel trapped in a certain time period. Readers contact me through my website www.davidmorrell.net and mention that even though a book like *THE BROTHERHOOD OF THE ROSE* was published in 1984, it feels like it's happening now. Or look at *FIRST BLOOD*. It was published 36 years ago, but it could have been written yesterday. 6. Have you seen the new Rambo and what are your thoughts about that new movie which is written and directed by Sylvester Stallone? I'm happy to report that overall I'm pleased. The level of violence might not be for everyone, but it has a serious intent. This is the first time that the tone of my novel *FIRST BLOOD* has been used in any of the movies. It's spot-on in terms of how I imagined the character—angry, burned-out, and filled with self-disgust because Rambo hates what he is and yet knows it's the only thing he does well. The character spends a lot of time in the rain as if trying to cleanse his soul. There's a nightmare scene involving vivid images from the three previous films (they indicate the emotional burden he carries). There's a scene in which Rambo forges a knife and talks to himself, basically admitting that he hates himself because all he knows is how to kill. At the start, Rambo is gathering cobras in the jungle, and he's so comfortable with them, it's as if, because of his past, the most developed part of him is

his limbic brain. He has nothing to fear from another creature of death. In the cathartic violence of the climax, he uses a machine gun that evokes the way wounded William Holden uses a machine gun at the end of THE WILD BUNCH (one of my favorite films). Indeed much of RAMBO has Peckinpah overtones while it also uses tropes from the novel (again, for example, there's an exciting sequence in which Rambo is hunted by dogs). Another excellent element involves the film's archetypal, mythic overtones. Rambo is hardly ever called by his last name. Instead, he keeps being referred to as "the Boatman" because he earns his living with a boat on a river in Thailand. But after he's called "the Boatman" enough, I start thinking of the River Styx and the journey of death as depicted in Greek myth. Similarly, the knife-forging sequence reminds me of Hephaestus, the armorer of the Greek gods (in the sequence, Rambo even talks about whether God can forgive him for what he's done). Sly is definitely sophisticated enough to embed these sorts of allusions. The earlier Rambo movies were a combination of a Tarzan movie and a western. That is also the case here. The knife (again designed by master blade-maker Gil Hibben), the bow and arrow, Rambo racing through the jungle—these scenes are primal and breath-taking. Some of you sent me emails, suggesting that maybe a younger actor would have been better for the fourth movie. But it's important to remember that Rambo (unlike James Bond) is specific to a historical period—the Vietnam War. My novel FIRST BLOOD was published in 1972. If Rambo were a real person, he would have been perhaps 22 at the time. In 2008, he would be 58. Sylvester Stallone is a few years older than that, but basically he is the correct age, and in the new movie, he interprets the character in an older way. That's one reason he put on the weight—so he would look different from the trim muscular image he had in the 1980s Rambo movies.

I think some elements could have been done better. The villains are superficial, to say the least. A lot could have been done with the connection between drug lords and the military in what the film calls Burma, dramatizing that money earned from the heroine trade motivates their ruthlessness. Instead, they're merely depicted as psychopaths. In a baffling moment, heroine somehow gets equated with meth, which is something entirely different and has nothing to do with the poppies grown in that area of the world. Otherwise, I think this film deserves a solid three stars. Even the NEW YORK TIMES treated it well, emphasizing the way the character is given depth. Rambo is no longer the jingoistic character of the second and third films. The most telling line of dialogue is, "I didn't kill for my country. I killed for myself. And for that, I don't believe God can forgive me." While that statement is in keeping with my novel FIRST BLOOD, it's jaw-dropping when compared with the dialogue in the second and third Rambo films. Some posters list me as an associate producer. This is an error. I was not involved with the production, and this time around, I didn't write a novelization for the movie. But I do receive two credits. One is a single card "created by" credit before the names of the screenwriters. At the end, after the final surprising, poetic, redeeming sequence, another credit says "From the novel FIRST BLOOD by David Morrell." Two credits aren't the way Hollywood usually treats a novelist. The second reference seems to acknowledge that the series has returned to the tone of the original novel. To say again, the violence is a solid R, but the intent is serious. I was blown away.

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