

Interview with Wolf Wootan **Author of *Crown's Law***

Reader Views talks with Wolf Wootan, author of the mystery/thriller novel “Crown’s Law.” Wolf is being interviewed by Juanita Watson, Assistant Editor of Reader Views.

Juanita: Thanks for talking with us today Wolf. We are interested in hearing more about your mystery/thriller novel “Crown’s Law.” Would you start by telling us the storyline?

Wolf: There are three main plot threads, all character related, and all intertwined. There is Sam, a 48 year old aging “dude” who lives at the beach, surfs, and birddogs the bikini crowd. Then there is Becky, who has a great influence on Sam and the story, and Bo Trout, the love interest and mother wannabe who is smitten by Becky.

A former highly-decorated Marine, Sam had worked for the Orange County Sheriff’s Department for 17 years, a homicide investigator for most of that time. He had quit after being called in and chastised for shooting a pistol-wielding junkie.

After leaving OCSA, Sam sets up shop as *Mickey Malone Investigations*. While on a stakeout, Sam witnesses the murder of an 18-year-old hooker and apprehends the killers. The hooker’s 13-year-old sister, Rebecca “Becky” Rogers was sitting in their car at the time, but has disappeared by the time Sam goes to talk to her. He finds her nearby, discovers that she and her sister have been living in the car, so he takes the orphan to his parents’ house, where they discover that she is a mathematical genius. They keep her, and as her legal guardian, Sam is slowly trained — reluctantly, because he avoids responsibility for others — by Becky to become the father she had never known. By 16, Becky is about to get her PhDs in math and physics, and since she can’t share her world with Sam, she becomes involved in his — a dangerous place to be.

When a murder victim is found with a Mickey business card in his pocket, the cops start knocking on Sam’s door looking for Mickey — a man who doesn’t exist. Sam gets dragged into a murder investigation he doesn’t need, and soon finds that he — and his 16-year-old ward, Becky — are targets of the killers. He becomes entangled in espionage and smuggling and finds himself in a race to find the killers before they find him.

When Sam runs a couple of fingerprints through the national database, the FBI is on him like an old wetsuit. Beautiful FBI agent Bo Trout enters the case and sees Sam as a womanizing flirt who consorts with outlaw bikers. As the violent noose tightens, Bo witnesses Sam deliver a large dose

of Crown's Law. As usual, I have an unexpected denouement! You don't know who *really* done it until the very end.

But remember, in this type of book, it's all about the protag, not the crime. This is best exemplified by Robert B. Parker's Spenser series and Lee Child's Jack Reacher. When I read a Reacher novel, the only thing I'm interested in is what Reacher will do next to fix the problem, not necessarily the problem itself (although, the better the "problem," the better the story). An unusual or unique storyline can't hurt.

Juanita: Where does it take place, and what makes this the perfect setting for your book?

Wolf: Most of it takes place in Orange County, California. I lived there for 38 years: 8 years in Tustin and 30 in Capistrano Beach. I had a beach house right on the ocean and my kids and grandkids have good memories of growing up there. I thought it would be fun to write about the area. They say, "Write what you know," and there's no area I know better than Orange County. Also, a P.I. who lives at the beach makes for some fun situations and great imagery. Since I know the area so well, it allows me to give the reader a strong sense of place. Here's an example from the book:

"The waves were large now, and they started building quite a ways out from the shore, so the rides were long and frothy. The sun had disappeared into the water behind Catalina, but the few clouds on the horizon had turned to various shades of red, orange, and purple — a phenomenon that only people with an unobstructed view of the sea experienced at sunset. Bo stood staring at the ocean, letting the last vestiges of the sunset seep into her, relax her. The dark mass of Catalina Island had loomed up on the horizon as the sun slipped down into the sea. Even San Clemente Island made a murky appearance."

Sam Crown knows the area well, too, and this fact is key to solving the case.

Juanita: How did you come up with your lead character, Sam Crown? And, would you please give us some insights into his personality and background?

Wolf: My original intent for the Sam Crown character was a guy who was a mixture of Mike Hammer and the Charles Bronson character in the "Death Wish" movies. A guy who took the law into his own hands, using lethal force if necessary. But, as with all my characters as I develop them, he didn't really want to go there. In character-driven books (at least in my case), the characters take on a life of their own and become who they really want to be, and often take me places I hadn't thought of. That's what makes the writing such fun. The ultimate Sam Crown character is an advocate for the victims of crime, but still tries to play within the law when he can. He has a strong moral code of "right and wrong," but he gets to define it his way. He avoids taking responsibility for the welfare of others if he can. Becky entering his life changes that. She changes his views on a lot of things.

Juanita: What other characters make their mark on this story? What are their contributions?

Wolf: There are several, but the character that makes this different from most P.I. mysteries is Becky, a super genius with a ton of insecurities. Sam saves the 13-year-old from the streets after her sister is murdered and takes her home to his parents for the night until he can decide what to do with her. They keep her and raise her, with Sam acting as her legal guardian. The progress of their relationship makes for some good drama. Another key player is Rainbow “Bo” Trout, the beautiful FBI agent who comes to town and becomes drawn into the Sam/Becky world and becomes Sam’s new romantic interest. Those are the three key characters, but there is an eclectic collection of others: Sam’s enigmatic ex-CIA father who can still do mysterious things with a phone call; his rich mother, a powerful society matron who sees to it that Becky gets the proper upbringing; Sparky O’Hara, who runs the seedy biker bar in Santa Ana; Boomer, the leader of the motorcycle club populated with ex-felons; Pearl Cooper, Sam’s Girl Friday at Mickey’s; and Danny, the drug lord who lives in Little Saigon in Westminster. All of these people contribute to the climactic ending where Sam deals with the bad guys.

Juanita: I understand that Becky presents a strong sub-plot to the ongoing mystery/thriller story. Would you comment on their relationship?

Wolf: Some readers of “Crown’s Law” have told me that they consider Becky the main character. That shows how much impact she has on the story. Once she is certain that her future with the Crowns is secure — that they are not going to put her in the foster care system — she wants more. She admits she is “greedy,” but she wants a real father and mother to love — something she has never had. Being a manipulative sort, she steers Sam into the father role, then tries to get him to find her a mother. But the women Sam dates are not really mother material. He is not looking for someone to marry. As Becky says, “He’s a bed and breakfast sort of guy. He takes them to bed, feeds them breakfast, and you never see the again.” When Bo enters the picture, Becky does everything she can to make them a couple. Sam realizes what she is doing, but there is not much he can deny her at this point.

Juanita: What is the mood/atmosphere of “Crown’s Law”?

Wolf: Much of the book is actually pleasant and light-hearted — with dash of humor — especially the scenes where Becky and all of those around her are sharing the happiness she brings to their lives. Life on Capo Beach is always good: barbeques, surfing, swimming, guitars strumming around beach bonfires. They all celebrate the *joie de vivre*. The office banter between Pearl and Sam is upbeat, though sarcastic at times. The book turns dark when violence occurs and causes Sam’s rage to surface, especially when his loved ones are threatened.

Juanita: What is Crown’s law?

Wolf: I knew you were going to ask me that. It’s never really defined in the book, but there are several hints, so the reader can form his/her own view of it. Sam does define Crown’s Law Number One as — to paraphrase — “Thou shalt not mess with Becky.” It is mostly his core values, his definition of what’s right and what’s wrong, even when they are not society’s norm.

Juanita: Wolf, you are forthright in saying that “Crown’s Law” isn’t your typical PI novel. How so?

Wolf: One, it is not written in the first person. Since I write character-driven novels, I find it easier to develop *all* characters using the third person. This allows more than one point of view to be expressed. The typical PI story is told entirely from the PI’s point of view.

Two, Sam Crown only partially fits the definition of the “classical” PI. SJ Rozan, a former president of Private Eye Writers of America, wrote an article that attempts to define “the mythical meaning of the PI.” She defines the “default” PI as “the straight white male, born to power, who gives up that privilege as too corrupting, and remains in the allegorical underworld rescuing others.” Sam Crown has a very rich mother, and though he stays away from her high society life, he does not give up his sizable trust fund; hence he is not poor, a requirement of the “default” PI. Sam’s reason for becoming a PI was mainly so he could carry a gun legally. He made too many enemies on the mean streets when he was a cop. He does remain on the mean streets rescuing others, however.

Three, this novel is not just about finding the bad guys, as we just discussed. It has a lot to do with relationships.

Juanita: I understand that you also venture out of the norm for this genre by emphasizing a character driven storyline. Would you comment on your divergence in this area, and how it personalizes your storytelling and strengthens the narrative?

Wolf: First, let me say that I write the kind of books I like to read. There are bound to be people out there that won’t like them. But I don’t think you can have a book in any genre be a “page turner” without well-developed, believable characters that the reader comes to care about. I think there are those who say all the possible plots have been used up, so to interest your readers, you need more than just plot. For example, underneath, all police procedurals are the same. A crime is committed, the protag doggedly tracks the criminal, and ultimately catches him. What makes each book different is the “veneer” the author lays on, if I may use a furniture analogy. But when you tear off the veneer, underneath is the inexpensive pressed wood. Occasionally, however, you will find a book that has no veneer. The finish is several coats of varnish hand-rubbed into a good hard wood. It’s part of the furniture. I would be presumptuous to say my books are that good, but let me give you an example of an author that is: T. Jefferson Parker. His book “California Girl,” which also takes place in Orange County a few miles from where I lived, is a police procedural about solving a 30-year-old cold murder case. The plot itself is not that intricate. It has four brothers involved. Their stories lead you to the ultimate conclusion. Trying to remove any of these characters destroys the overall story. Hence, there is no veneer. It’s an integrated whole. I think “Crown’s Law” is that way — no veneer.

Juanita: “Crown’s Law” truly is a fast-paced read. Wolf, you have really captured a progressive writing style that has a unique way of moving quickly forward, and taking the reader along for the ride. How do you do this, and how does your writing flow onto paper (or computer screen)?

Wolf: This is a by-product of the character-driven storyline. Suspense does not work if the reader doesn't care about the characters. A speeding car chase with flying bullets is just ho-hum if you don't care what happens to the characters. The characters and what they do, and how they interact, are more important than the plot itself, in my opinion. This keeps the reader turning the pages. Also, I use a lot of dialogue to engage the reader. People who "skim" books, skipping what they consider boring, will usually read all of the dialogue. Dialogue creates a more "friendly" page because there is more "white space." Page after page of narrative ("black pages") tend to put the reader back in skimming mode. Again, this only works when the characters are well-developed and the reader wants to see what they have to say. I always include some of my brand of humor, and not all readers get it, but many do. I try to keep my descriptive passages terse, using short brush strokes, leaving it to the reader to paint the rest. Waxing literary for too many words doesn't quite fit the pace of a thriller.

Juanita: What is the underlying theme/message of your book?

Wolf: The simplest answer is *Crown's Law*. But we both know that's a cop out, because I've already hedged on its definition. I think it's about allowing the readers to immerse themselves for a few hours into an adventure they would never see in real life. To feel what it's like to be a person who really stands up for what he believes in regardless of the consequences. Maybe it reminds them of the schoolyard many years ago when they stood in the shadow of someone like Sam because the school bullies gave him a wide berth, lest they find themselves taking more punishment than they could dish out. It lets them walk in the shoes of a man who knows what is really important in life and will risk anything to protect it. They can follow along as Sam's unwavering value system changes Becky's life and gives Bo a new perspective on her own life. The heroes in my stories have been referred to as "bigger than life." This is certainly true of Hatch Lincoln in "Edge of Tomorrow" and Proctor, the enigmatic assassin in "Return of the Assassin." It is true that the average person will not meet a man like Sam Crown at a company picnic. But by presenting him as an ordinary person living an ordinary life in a great setting, I allow the reader to actually identify with such a person and fantasize that they could have a life like that. I don't expect anyone to change by reading my books, but I do expect them to be entertained. That's what it's all about.

And just to add, I personally have been fortunate in knowing some bigger than life people. It is quite an awesome experience. For many years, I knew Col. Aaron Bank, often referred to as "The Father of the Green Berets." He died a couple of years ago at age 101. In the movies, he was played by John Wayne, but in real life he was 5'6" and wiry. He wrote a memoir called "From OSS to the Green Berets." Some of the stories he told me of his exploits are "bigger than life."

Juanita: I've read rave reviews for "Crown's Law," with many readers hopeful for a sequel. Do you have any plans to continue Sam's adventures with another book?

Wolf: Yes. I am currently working on the next Sam Crown mystery. The working title is "The Disappearing Jury." So far, I'm quite pleased with its progress.

Juanita: Wolf, I understand that you've been a writer for many years, but only recently started writing novels. Would you give us a little insight into your background and your decision to start writing novels?

Wolf: Sure. My first exploration of the world of fiction was in high school, of course, where you are required to write short stories for your English teacher. I found that I liked it, and was good at it. I graduated from high school at age 16, and that summer I wrote a lot of short stories just for the fun of it. Then came college with a heavy technical study load so I didn't ever get to revisit fiction writing. My business career allowed me to do a lot of writing, but it was all technical non-fiction. In the year 2000 I found myself bored with what I was doing, so I decided to try my hand at writing a novel. I had two stories in mind, one a P.I. adventure, the other a spy novel. As I made notes and began devising plots, the spy novel won out and I wrote "Edge of Tomorrow." While I was shopping that manuscript, I started on "Crown's Law." I like to be writing something at all times, and the time from finishing a manuscript to actual publication takes a very long time.

Juanita: What draws you to writing in the mystery fiction genre? Have you always been a fan of mystery/thrillers?

Wolf: Yes. My first mysteries were Poe, Ellery Queen and Sherlock Holmes. I read these in my early teen years. Then in the mid-1940s, I discovered Hammett and Chandler and much preferred the rough private eyes to the rather sedate clue chasers. Then came "I, the Jury" by Mickey Spillane, my all-time favorite. Mike Hammer was my kind of guy. Throughout the years, the private eye mystery is still one of my favorites, though good spy novels are right up there.

Juanita: What books/authors are you particularly fond of?

Wolf: I read a lot of authors of the best-selling ilk. T. Jefferson Parker, Paretsky, Patterson, Sue Grafton, Ludlum (RIP), Baldacci, Clancy (in his early days), DeMille, Grisham, the Kellermans, Deaver, Robert B. Parker (Spenser), Lee Child (Jack Reacher). And many others. Lately I've been sampling a few of the mid-list authors I've learned about in my on-line mystery clubs. These range from absolutely terrible to very good. One I could mention that falls into the "very good" category is Betty Sullivan LaPierre. I just read "Angels in Disguise," the latest in her Hawkman series, and am working my way through the backlist. Here's a PI I had never heard of before and am interested in finding out more about him.

Juanita: Wolf, how can readers find out more about you and your endeavors?

Wolf: The best place is my website at www.wolfwootan.com. I have a lot of information there about my published books and my works-in-progress. There are a lot of reviews posted there, as well as the first chapters of all of my books and some excerpts from "Crown's Law." And of course, my bio if readers have any interest in what I did before this incarnation. You can browse the entire book at iUniverse. I have a link on my website that takes you there.

Juanita: Your particular departure from the typical mystery/thriller format has garnered you both male and female fans. What is it about your writing that allows for this?

Wolf: I'm not sure. When I finished the manuscript for "Edge of Tomorrow," my wife asked to read it. Since she reads only historical romances, I told her she probably wouldn't like it. I wrote it for macho men. She read it anyway and really loved it. I was surprised. Then the professional reviewer Roberta Austin said in her review, "Mr. Wootan's exceptional writing style has the unique ability to appeal to both men and women readers." I think it's a combination of things. The characters, certainly, and I always have a romance thread. I'm a sucker for Hallmark Hall of Fame dramas and I always give my readers a happy ending, just as they do. My wife now reads all of my manuscripts and gives me constructive criticism. If she likes the final product, I'm sure most women will like it.

Juanita: Wolf, it has been great talking with you today. We have enjoyed hearing about your new book "Crown's Law," and encourage readers to look into your unique brand of mystery novel. Do you have any last thoughts you'd like to share today?

Wolf: I want to thank you, Juanita, for selecting me for this interview. It is very difficult for new authors to get noticed by "industry professionals" no matter how good their books are. Hopefully, some of these people will read this interview and be tempted to read my book. Again, my heartfelt thanks to everyone at Reader Views.