

A CONVERSATION WITH TJ TURNER about *Lincoln's Bodyguard*

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

I started writing when I was quite young. I'm not sure exactly what age I was, but I know my early writing career took a tremendous bump when my Dad brought home our very first Apple IIGS computer. I could actually type in the stories now! Mostly I wrote science fiction, and I remember calculating that I needed to get my first novel published by around 10 years old if I wanted to surpass Isaac Asimov's book count. I submitted story after story to what I believed was the only literary journal in the world, *Asimov's Science Fiction*. And that was when I started learning about rejection! I kept writing though, not daring to show anyone. During my undergraduate studies I submitted often to the campus literary magazine, under a pseudonym of course—engineers don't do creative writing, and I was in a hardcore engineering program. Finally, my wife Nancy threw out the challenge. Actually, it was an off-hand remark to the effect that I would never write a novel. In fairness to her, I hadn't told her of my secret writing life. Her comment still got to me, and in an effort to prove her wrong, I penned the first novel. It was truly terrible. But then I got an idea for another, and my writing got better. And then *Lincoln's Bodyguard* popped into my creative thoughts, and I devoted everything I had learned before it into this new novel.

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO WRITE YOUR NOVEL?

I have always been interested in American History, and in particular something has always drawn me to the Civil War era. I think it has to do with the extreme conditions at the time, the intensity of the drama that unfolded in such a short period, and the long lasting effects on our nation. The actual idea for *Lincoln's Bodyguard* came from an NPR news piece, which reported on John Fredrick Parker, one of the Washington DC police detectives who was actually assigned to protect Lincoln. Parker was on duty when Lincoln was assassinated, and various reports either place him far from the Presidential Box during the play, or even down in the tavern drinking. Either way, his incompetence contributed to an event that shook America and influenced our history. And it made me wonder, what would have happened if Lincoln lived? I know many other people have asked the same question, but it drove me to research the subject, the state of the nation, and read anything I could on Lincoln and the Civil War era. And as I answered that question for myself, I found I had a really interesting story on my hands.

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

First and foremost, I think that living a unique life provides exactly the kind of fodder that fuels the creative mind. I always think of Hemmingway when I make this point with someone. The man survived plane crashes, volunteered as an ambulance driver in the First World War, worked as a reporter during the Spanish Civil War and World War II, watched the Normandy invasion, boxed. I'm not glorifying everything about the man, but following your passions and living life provides more writing material than anything I could imagine. And perhaps that is why I've done things like volunteer for combat tours overseas, or sought out new jobs that seemed wholly unrelated to any of my degrees or official training. For *Lincoln's Bodyguard*, I wanted to explore themes that were quite modern in some aspects, and apply them to the time period of the post-Civil War era. In particular, I've spent nearly two years in Afghanistan actively fighting an insurgency. I used that knowledge to lend as much credibility as I could to what could have become active guerilla warfare across the former Confederacy. Also, as a federal agent, I've had the privilege of serving on several presidential

protection details. (To clarify, what my Secret Service friends call a protective service detail for the President and what my agency calls a protective service detail are a bit different. I'm on the outer layer of security, while the Secret Service detail is that very inner layer. But I still get to see the inner workings of those protective service missions, and in fact, my agency is charged with those duties while protecting our top generals and civilian leaders). I use that experience to make the scenes and background of Joseph Foster's life in the service of President Lincoln as real as possible.

ANYTHING AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL IN YOUR NOVEL?

A little bit, perhaps. Whiskey is my choice of drink, so it's Joseph's as well. And I studied Kali Ilustrisimo for several years, a Filipino martial art, which makes great use of edged weapons. Knife fighting was always my favorite aspect, and the Bowie knives of the American West would be a perfect substitute. So Joseph's main weapon became a Bowie knife.

ARE ANY CHARACTERS BASED ON PEOPLE YOU KNOW?

No. Some of the characters are actual people from history, like Ward Hill Lamon, and Allen Pinkerton. But the fictional characters are not based on anyone I know.

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

I really like Molly the most, or at least find her the most sympathetic of all my characters. It's a tough choice between her and Joseph, as they've both had very unfair situations thrust upon them. But with Molly, she's a strong character who has had to do awful things to survive and thrive. Despite those things, she still composes herself and acts every bit the sophisticated and refined example of what a lady was supposed to be in the late 1800's. She also pushes Joseph, and acts as his moral compass at times.

WHO IS YOUR LEAST SYMPATHIC CHARACTER? AND WHY?

On this one there is no question—Baxter. He's a despicable character, who we find out in the course of the story has made money by hunting and killing escaped children from the former Confederacy. He is a man completely lacking in any moral center, and will do anything to advance his own position.

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

The most challenging part of the whole writing process was fitting the story into the time period in a manner that was historically accurate while enhancing the story. That took an incredible amount of research, and then plotting the timelines again and again. So much changed from the first version to the last, and at times it was hard to part with scenes or passages in the novel that I had grown to love. But everything must enhance the story...

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

First and foremost I hope they have to rip through the pages, turning one after the other until they discover that's it's 2AM and then promise themselves just one more chapter... I would also like my readers to challenge their notion of what the post-Civil War era was like, and how close we came to disintegrating as a nation. I love these historical tipping points in time, places where or events where one person has (or could have) made a huge difference in altering history. I also like exploring the idea, and I think there's plenty of evidence to

support this stance, that Lincoln's assassination may have been a necessary evil to end the Civil War. It's terrible that we had to lose another life so close to the end of the conflict, and I'm not celebrating his death, but rather it had such symbolic meaning that it may have accelerated the end of hostilities. President Lincoln gave so much to keep the country together, and it cost his life in the end. *Lincoln's Bodyguard* emphasizes that point by showing what might have happened had he lived. And the outcome imagined in the manuscript, is not necessarily the pretty outcome we all have been led to believe through our high-school history classes.

WHAT WRITERS HAVE INSPIRED YOU?

Truthfully, there are too many to list, and I don't always have favorite authors as much as I have favorite works. For instance, *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien, is one of the most haunting pieces of literature I have ever read. When I finally get around to processing all of my Afghan experiences, I want to be able to write something as meaningful as O'Brien's novel. I also loved Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain*. It's more literary than the books I typically like to read, but the story and the central conflict kept me hooked. I also loved Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*. Even though it's a Civil War novel written shortly after the conflict, it still rings true in the themes and conflicts to today's modern warriors. Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* is another all-time favorite, especially for the story development and the twists he puts the readers through. *True Grit* by Charles Portis is another novel that I count on my top shelf, and have re-read several times in order to absorb his pacing and grasp of the time period. And finally, I love reading books that are so different than my own style. *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy comes to mind in this manner.

WHAT IS THE WRITING PROCESS LIKE FOR YOU?

I have no process. Whenever I tell someone this, especially another writer, or even worse, a creative writing teacher, they are shocked. The teachers normally scold me and insist that I need to find a process and stick to it. Nonsense! At least for me. I write not only when I can, but when the story tells me it's right. I have written feverishly through nights, getting no sleep for several days, to the other extreme where I won't write for a week while some conflict or theme is kicking around in my head. Typically I write best late at night, when the house is quiet and there are fewer distractions...and when I can make the coffee the way I like it!

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

Find the beginning of your story, and start there! That sounds like a completely obvious thing to say, but I think it's a universal problem for many beginning writers (I count myself in here!) For instance, on my first draft of *Lincoln's Bodyguard*, I had what I thought was a beautiful beginning that was slowly interspersing this great backstory. A good friend of mine, and a good novelist, took one look at it and told me that my story started on page 63, where Joseph first meets Lincoln again. For a week I didn't believe her, but then I wrote it again with that as the beginning...and she was right! Other creative writing teachers have said the same thing... "Skip ahead to page 50 and start the story there!" I think that's a direct quote from Les Edgerton.

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

My first writing teacher, or seminar instructor at my first workshop, told me that I needed to get up at 4AM every morning to write. Turns out, that was her process, and she thought that part of being a good teacher was imparting the fact that her students should do everything she did. (She was a fantastic instructor in

everything else though!) I can tell you where I am every day at 4AM! It's not writing... I don't think a process can be imposed upon everyone and expect each writer to have the same response to it.

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

I have several ideas that I'm mulling around. I've started each of them, and the way I work it from here is that one will take over. I guess it's evolutionary writing. Nancy Pickard was the keynote speaker at the Antioch Writer's Workshop a few years back, and she talked about how her characters speak to her directly. Finally, I thought...another nut like me! I guess I will select the story that my characters most want to have told...or whomever yells the loudest.

In general though, I have one idea to explore the lost female spy in the Culper spy ring during the Revolutionary War, and another idea about a pair of young sisters in the post-Civil War era struggling to make sense of their mother's death while they track down the disappearance of their father.

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

I'm just very grateful for all those who have helped me along this path in the writing life. It has been an awesome experience, and having a novel close to publication is beyond my dreams (at least after all those rejections from the age of 10 on!) I have plenty of more stories I would like to tell, and I believe each one will push me to be a better writer and storyteller.