

A CONVERSATION WITH RAYMOND BENSON

The Black Stiletto: Endings & Beginnings

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

I “fell” into writing. I was a theatre major in college and spent a decade in New York City directing plays and composing music for musicals; but since there was no money in that, I became a writer. ☺ This was the early 1980s. My first book was a non-fiction encyclopedic work about the history of James Bond, a bio of Ian Fleming, and analyses of all the 007 books and movies up to that point. *The James Bond Bedside Companion* was published in 1984, was nominated for an Edgar, and established me as a “Bond expert.” Surprisingly, though, my career took a sharp left turn, for I got involved on the ground floor of computer games. Between 1985 and 1997 I was a computer game designer and writer, creating role-playing adventure style games, many of them award-winning. To use a movie analogy, I was the screenwriter and sometimes director. It was only when the Ian Fleming Estate came calling in late 1995 that I started writing books again. Since John Gardner was retiring from the gig as Bond author, they asked me if I’d like to give it a shot. While I wrote my first novel, *Zero Minus Ten*, I remained employed at Viacom New Media as a game designer. But after the book came out in 1997, I quit the day job and became a writer full time.

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

Two locations of the novel—Chicago NW suburbs and Odessa, TX—are all places where I have lived. I also know Los Angeles very well. I know them like the back of my hand, so my knowledge informs the story. As for the plot and characters, they simply emerged from my imagination. I’ve always been a comics and graphic novel fan, and my idea was to create a graphic novel/comic book in the form of a prose novel.

Most importantly, though, my mother-in-law died of Alzheimer’s—in the same nursing home where Judy Talbot (the Black Stiletto) lives in the novel. The experiences my wife and I had dealing with her mother directly inform the novel. Everything in the book that happens regarding Alzheimer’s is real.

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

Judy Cooper, the Black Stiletto—she is very likable, if I do say so myself. I managed to write from a female perspective and make it believable. One female reader told me she never would have known a man had written it. I tried to make Judy tough and vulnerable at the same time, someone with a sense of humor and a worldly outlook—and yet place her in a time period in which women of that ilk were kept in their places.

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

Getting the period accuracy correct. Since I never lived in Los Angeles, this was a challenge.

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

My hope is that The Black Stiletto becomes a popular series character. The plan is to do five books to tell the entire arc of her story. There is plenty of franchise material here to transcend the book—into TV or film, comics, action figures, etc. So, in short, I want readers to think the Black Stiletto is a super-cool character and that they will hunger for more.

HOW DO YOU DIAL UP THE TENSION TO KEEP YOUR READERS ON THE EDGE OF THEIR SEATS?

Good storytelling and structure is what thriller-writing is all about. There are all kinds of technique-tricks, such as utilizing a crisp, fast pace, using “timebomb” structure, ending chapters with cliffhangers, and keeping things moving.

WHAT WRITERS HAVE INSPIRED YOU?

Ian Fleming, Ruth Rendell, Stephen King, Richard Adams, J. D. Salinger, Michael Connelly, Lee Child, Stieg Larsson, John Sandford, and Neil Gaiman.

WHAT IS THE WRITING PROCESS LIKE FOR YOU?

I liken it to building one of those 1000+ piece jigsaw puzzles. You do it one piece at a time. You “build” a novel, you don’t write it. There are definite phases—the conceptual phase, the initial research phase, the outline phase, the nitty-gritty research phase, the writing phase, and the revising phase. I outlined this in my article “The 007 Way to Write a Thriller” in the November 2010 issue of *The Writer* magazine.

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

Certainly. Just don’t know what, yet.

WHAT OTHER INTERESTS DO YOU HAVE? WHAT PASSIONS —OUTSIDE OF WRITING THE STILETTO SERIES —DO YOU PERSUE?

I have many interests and try to utilize them to make money. For example, I’m a film historian. So I teach Film History (credit course) and other film courses at the College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn, IL; and I write articles and reviews for *Cinema Retro* Magazine. With Chicago film critic Dann Gire, I present a monthly live show called *Dann & Raymond’s Movie Club*, which is growing more popular each month. I also write reviews and articles for the *Daily Herald* newspaper (Chicago).