

Motivating Incidents & Primary Emotions: Bestselling Author David Morrell Interviews Debut Novelist Marcus Sakey

Acclaimed author David Morrell is the author of 28 books, including *FIRST BLOOD*, the novel that introduced the world to John Rambo. With 18 million books in print, he's considered one of the fathers of the modern thriller and is a co-founder of International Thriller Writers.

Morrell is also a friend and mentor to debut novelist (and diehard fan) Marcus Sakey, and recently interviewed him about beginnings, the publishing industry, and the passions that drive us.

DM: *My debut novel FIRST BLOOD was published in 1972. Because I set a version of the Vietnam War in the United States, it got attention, rare for a first book. I'm pleased to see that your first novel THE BLADE ITSELF is getting its own wonderful buzz. Excellent reviews. Blurbs from fabulous, heavy-hitting writers like Lee Child, George Pelecanos, and T. Jefferson Parker. You've been compared to Elmore Leonard and Dennis Lehane. But in fact, you don't imitate. You're one of a kind. What do you think makes your work distinctive?*

MS: Well, that's very flattering, as is being compared to guys like Elmore Leonard and Dennis Lehane, both of whom are literary heroes of mine.

I suppose one factor might be that while I love the genre, I read across a number of others. When people ask about my favorite writers, they're often surprised to hear names like David Mitchell, Michael Cunningham, or David Foster Wallace. My feeling is that any author that gets nominated for a National Book Award can teach me how to write a better novel, no matter the genre.

But to be honest, I don't really worry about being distinctive—I worry about writing as forcefully as possible, about crafting stories that are personal and immediate and incendiary. If you do that honestly, your voice is always going to be your own.

DM: *I like telling the story of when I was 17, a confused kid going nowhere, and how I happened upon a TV series called ROUTE 66 about two young men in a Corvette traveling the country in search of America and themselves. The scripts by Stirling Silliphant were an exciting combination of action and ideas that made me decide on the spot to pursue a career as a writer. I never looked back. Is there a similar motivating incident that made you decide to write THE BLADE ITSELF?*

MS: I have the clearest memory of learning to read. I mean the actual moment in which my head clicked over, and the squiggles on the page *became* something. It was like breaking a code, and I was immediately addicted. I actually had my first story published when I was five, a rousing tale about the tooth fairy that my mom transcribed and sent to our local newspaper. So writing and the love of words go pretty deep with me.

As for writing THE BLADE ITSELF, there actually is a specific motivating incident. I was taking classes at Columbia College, where I saw a guest speaker named J.A. Konrath (RUSTY NAIL). After his presentation, I asked him out for a beer, and we went to a local bar.

When we staggered out five hours later, something he said was seared in my brain. He'd said, "You could stay in school, and in a year you'll have an MFA. Or you could leave and have a manuscript." Put that way, the choice was easy.

DM: *I first met you a couple of years ago. We've had a lot of conversations since then. But I suddenly realize I don't know a lot about your background. Where do you live? Are you married? Did you have a day job before the success of THE BLADE ITSELF? Are you an axe murderer in secret?*

MS: Actually, I'm out of the closet about my axe-murdering. It's just easier that way.

I was born in Flint, Michigan, and now live in Chicago with my wife. I've spent most of the last ten years writing for advertising and marketing, which is a terrific training ground for a novelist: you need to pack the maximum emotional wallop into the minimum space, and you learn to view writing as work that can be improved, rather than as your-heart-ripped-bleeding-and-perfect-from-your-chest.

Since the sale of my book, I've been able to focus full-time on writing fiction. I'm actually putting the finishing touches on my second book now, another standalone thriller from Minotaur.

DM: *I had a writing teacher, the great science-fiction writer William Tenn, who had a theory that every author is controlled by a primary emotion. In my case, that's certainly true. A lot of my work dramatizes fear, the consequence of my troubled childhood. After my son Matthew died from bone cancer, I wrote a number of stories about grief. What dominant emotion would you say prompted you to write THE BLADE ITSELF?*

MS: I think fear is at the heart of most suspense writing. It's just a matter of flavor—for horror novels, the object of fear is usually a symbol of existential terror; for spy novels, it's a fear of the "other," or of a world run amok; for action thrillers, the object of fear is usually personal, the loss of something or someone that is desperately loved.

But the flip side of fear is responsibility, and THE BLADE ITSELF is really a novel about responsibility. My protagonist has built a new life, but he never paid the debts of the old one, and until he takes that responsibility, he won't become the man he wants to be.

For me, I think there will always be that one-two punch, the negative emotion that fires the positive.

DM: *For THE BLADE ITSELF, you use an intriguing tagline: THE MORE YOU HAVE, THE MORE YOU HAVE TO LOSE. It certainly gets my attention. What do you hope readers take from your story?*

MS: The idea for the novel came to me as I was walking from the train one evening. I turned down my nice street toward the nice apartment where my nice wife waited. And suddenly it hit me that the things that we love are also the things that make us vulnerable—because I had these things, they could be taken from me.

BLADE is in part an exploration of that idea. And it's also a class novel, an examination of Chicago and the inequities that are literally knit into the structure of the city: south side vs. north side, working class vs. white collar, narrow options vs. limitless possibility.

At the same time, I think a story's first responsibility is to entertain. While I'd be happy to know that the book made people look closely at the things they value, it's more important to me that they enjoy the hell out of it.

DM: *These days, there's a lot of talk in the media about promoting a novel's "platform." That can mean a lot of things. But frequently "platform" refers to the non-fiction content of a novel, the story's background, something that can be talked about almost as if the novelist is a journalist. For example, my last novel CREEPERS is about urban explorers. My next novel SCAVENGER is about time capsules and video games. The idea is that interviewers don't like novelists to talk about plot. Does THE BLADE ITSELF have a non-fiction subject that can be discussed without giving away the exciting plot?*

MS: My two primary characters are boyhood friends from the south side, blue-collar kids and small time criminals; when a robbery goes wrong, one of them lands in Stateville Maximum Security, and the years he spends there warp him.

If there's a platform to the book, it's the impact of prison and the flaws in our system of incarceration. America imprisons more people than any other nation, close to two million inmates. Many states spent more money on jails than schools. Seventy percent of inmates are illiterate. 200,000 are mentally ill. Amnesty International has actually condemned the American prison system.

And worst of all, prison is punitive. Because of the swelling population and shrinking budgets, there is almost no effort towards rehabilitation. There aren't programs to teach job skills, or even life skills. When they are released, inmates haven't learned anything except how to survive in prison.

Imagine spending seven years in maximum security. Learning to survive in a world built to hide the most dangerous of men.

And it got me wondering, what would that *do* to someone?