

WHAT IS A THRILLER?

by David Morrell

In October, 2004, at the Bouchercon suspense conference in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, a group of writers celebrated their common interest by creating the International Thriller Writers organization. In fact, before I realized what was happening, I found myself elected (along with Gayle Lynds) as the co-president.

A lot happened since then. Our membership grew from around 80 to 350, with combined international book sales of over one billion. We organized strands of thriller panels at the 2005 Left Coast of Crime and Bouchercon events (this had never been done before). We arranged for an Internet Thriller Writers Newsletter. We spread the word to our members about advanced marketing techniques that are cheap but amazingly effective. We compiled a major upcoming anthology, *THRILLER: STORIES TO KEEP YOU UP ALL NIGHT*, that Mira Books will publish in June of 2006. Mira will also host a gala International Thriller Writers cocktail party at the 2006 Left Coast of Crime conference in Bristol, England. At that time, we'll announce the nominees for our ITW thriller awards. Plus, there'll be several thriller panels. Lots of things are happening.

To put this in perspective, two years ago, in 2003, I attended a major suspense conference, at which there was only one thriller panel, and that was scheduled opposite a speech by a guest of honor. The tiny room for the solitary thriller panel was at the farthest reaches of the hotel. Six people showed up. By contrast, the average attendance for each of the 12 (twelve!) thriller panels featured at 2005's Bouchercon was over a hundred. One panel drew an audience of more than 300.

Exciting stuff. But it's not as if thriller writers suddenly appeared on the scene, so the question is, why are we suddenly getting this welcome attention? The answer (appropriate for a topic about authors and readers) involves language. My first novel *FIRST BLOOD* was published in 1972. More than three decades ago. Since then, I've written an additional 27 books. Some have been about spies (*THE BROTHERHOOD OF THE ROSE*). Others have been about protective agents, undercover operatives, investigative journalists, and war photographers.

In none of my books was a corpse discovered and a detective dispatched to follow clues to discover the killer. Yet, in my long career, just about every time I was introduced at a signing or a talk, I was puzzled to be called a mystery writer. If there was a polite opportunity, I would murmur that, well, actually, I'm a thriller writer. The response to this was almost universal bafflement. What's a thriller writer? When the International Thriller Writers organization was formed, we got similar questions from readers and booksellers. What's a thriller writer? Those of us who worship thrillers and love writing them took the answer for granted. But we discovered, to our surprise, that some readers evidently have a porous view of who-done-its, crime stories, action stories, suspense stories, thrillers., etc, and group them all together as mysteries.

By definition, a mystery involves a puzzle that demands to be solved. The word "mystery" creates expectations about the sort of book one is about to read. Imagine somebody coming to my latest novel *CREEPERS* in the expectations that it's a mystery. That novel is about urban explorers—history and architecture enthusiasts who "infiltrate" old buildings that have been sealed and abandoned for decades. In this case, the deserted building is the Paragon Hotel in Asbury Park, New Jersey, a structure and a region that have complex, disturbing histories. I dramatize every instant of every breath of the harrowing eight hours that the "creepers" endure within the walls of that crumbling edifice. The novel is a mixed genre—a dark suspense story that feels like a ghost story, even though there aren't any ghosts. But with no corpse in the opening pages and no detective following clues, *CREEPERS* is bound to cause confusion if a reader comes to it because someone described me as a mystery writer.

When ITW realized the semantic problem involving mysteries and thrillers, we decided that two of our goals would be to educate readers about thrillers and to encourage our members to explore the creative possibilities of the form. So let's pose the question again. What is a thriller? It is an encompassing term into which many crime, action, and suspense stories can be grouped. It applies to a variety of types: the legal thriller, the spy thriller, the action-adventure thriller, the medical thriller, the police thriller, the romantic thriller, the historical thriller, the political thriller, the religious thriller, the high-tech thriller, etc. New types are constantly being invented. What gives them their common ground is the intensity of the emotions they create, particularly those of apprehension and exhilaration,

of excitement and breathlessness. By definition, if thrillers do not thrill, they aren't doing their job. Sometimes, they build rhythmically to a rousing climax. Other times, they start at top speed and never ease off. At their best, they have an archetypal, primordial essence (think Homer and the Beowulf poet) addressing fundamental concerns—survival, the nature of humanity, the heroic struggle between right and wrong—that date back to ancient myth.

To put the discussion in a different context, what's the difference between mysteries and thrillers? One crucial distinction is that traditional mysteries appeal primarily to the mind and emphasize the logical solution to a puzzle. In contrast, thrillers strive for heightened emotions and emphasize the sensations of what might be called an obstacle race and a scavenger hunt. It's not that thrillers don't have ideas. At their best, they explore powerful concepts that help us understand our culture and ourselves. John le Carre's fiction is a good example. But in broad terms, the contrast is between emotion and logic, between an urgent pace and a calm one. True, the two genres can merge if the scavenger hunt of a thriller involves solving a puzzle. But in a thriller, the goal of solving the puzzle is to excite the reader as much as to satisfy curiosity. It's interesting that, in recent years, some authors have blended elements of thrillers and mysteries into a hybrid (mostly involving serial killers) in which a detective's solution to a heinous crime is presented in a harrowing fashion that is more typical of thrillers than mysteries. This sort of evolution is an indication of how creative these genres can be.

If you'd like to learn more about thrillers, sign up for the first ITW reader/author conference, ThrillerFest, a gala event that will take place from June 28 to July 1, 2006, at the historic Arizona Biltmore resort in Phoenix (Frank Lloyd Wright helped design it). This will literally be a who's who of thriller writers who will give presentations and mingle with readers in the first event of its kind. Brad Meltzer. John Lescroart. R.L. Stine. Douglas Preston. Lee Child. Gayle Lynds. Barrie Eisler. James Rollins. M.J. Rose. Steve Berry. Lee Goldberg. Katherine Neville. F. Paul Wilson. JA Konrath. David Hewson. These are merely a few of the authors who'll be there. I'll discuss the evolution of my novel FIRST BLOOD into the Rambo films and analyze the cultural implications. Top thriller editors and agents will attend. There'll be all kinds of workshops about writing thrillers. For information, please go to www.thrillerfest.com. While you're at it, visit www.internationalthrillerwriters.com. Among other things, you'll find the Brian Garfield essay that John Grisham claims showed him the way to success. Happy reading and writing.

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