

## DESPERATE MEASURES

Author David Morrell creates best-selling thrillers  
from the memories that gnaw at his soul.

by

Christopher McDougall

The car pulled up near a playground full of children. Do you want to go play with the other kids? the mother asked her 4-year-old son. Sure! he replied. He got out of the car and ran over to the crowded swing set. He looked back at his mother. Wait-why she was getting back into the car? He leapt from the swings and ran after her, but a woman grabbed hold of the struggling boy and restrained him as the car—and his mother—disappeared.

His mother had left him at an orphanage.

"I was utterly abandoned," recalls author David Morrell '67 MA, '70 PhD Lib. "They said, 'She'll be back someday,' but that was it." He pauses, replaying that desperately confusing moment in his mind 50 years later. "I had to figure it all out on my own," he says. Quietly, he adds, "I'm still figuring it out to this day."

Thrillers and horror are Morrell's business, but his childhood is still the most vexing mystery of his life. Several years later, as the orphanage had promised, a woman did come for young David, but was it really his mother? Or was she an adoptive parent who just pretended to be his birth mother? He could never be sure. And what about his father—was he really a British fighter pilot who'd been shot down over France, as his "mother" said, or was that something she'd made up?

Morrell has gone on to become a master of psychological intrigue as the best-selling author of 19 suspense novels and dozens of horror stories, but this is one bizarre mystery he's never told in print. On the other hand, you can say he's never written about anything else: encoded in

all of Morrell's fictions are anxieties about his murky background and his deep yearning to unravel his past. In fact, it's arguable that all of Morrell's creations—the world-famous Rambo, the deadly orphans Chris and Saul in The Brotherhood of the Rose, the lone-wolf spy Steve Decker in Extreme Denial, the father-hunting Peter Houston in Blood Oath—were born the day his mother drove away.

But if you think that this is just another parable of how a lonely boy learned to convert pain into glory, hang on—that's only the beginning. Right when Morrell thought he'd made a fragile peace with his "phantom relatives," as he calls them, and was getting on with his life, he suffered a family tragedy that not only jolted him back to the kind of misery he'd suffered as a child, but robbed him of the way he'd learned to cope with it—his ability to write.

Next year marks the 30th anniversary of David Morrell's first and most resounding literary achievement: the publication of First Blood, his story of a young Special Forces commando named Rambo who locks horns with a sheriff

in a small Kentucky town and decides to show the townspeople just what kind of carnage a Vietnam-trained soldier can unleash in peacetime. It would spawn an industry—the modern action film—and an icon—the solitary, unstoppable American underdog.

In commemoration, Morrell has released a new book called Lessons from a Lifetime of Writing. In it, he delivers a curious, implicit message: writers may be the last people on earth we should be allowing to affect popular culture. True writers are a damaged bunch, Morrell believes, a traumatized tribe who turn their obsessive memories and nervous energy into novels and scripts. The Muse of literary inspiration is usually depicted as a lovely, chiffoned damsel whispering in a poet's ear. To Morrell, she's a gnashing rodent. Morrell's mentor at Penn State, Philip Klass, told the aspiring novelist that he first had to find his deepest, darkest fear, and then make it the subject matter he would explore for the rest of his career. "But he didn't mean fear of heights or closed spaces or fire," Morrell writes in the forthcoming Lessons. "Those fears were merely versions of much deeper fears.... The fear he was talking about was like a ferret gnawing at my soul."

Rambo, for instance, was born of a waking nightmare, a vision Morrell had one August afternoon in 1968 while a grad student at Penn State. He was staring at the typewriter, trying to come up with an idea for a story. Drifting into a daydream, he imagined himself walking in a deep forest on a sweltering day and hearing a branch snap nearby. Every time he moved, he heard a menacing presence moving invisibly among the trees, crunching on dead leaves, moving closer. He felt a cold spot between his shoulder blades, right where a knife blade would enter. Someone was creeping up on him.

"I can't express how vividly I felt that I was actually in that forest—and how fearfully certain I was that someone intended to kill me," he explains in Lessons. When he snapped out of it, Morrell was surprised to find himself not in the woods but seated at his desk, bathed in sweat. Eventually, Morrell would come to understand this vision of a man being hunted in a forest as a metaphor for his own feelings of helplessness and frustration, as a driven man trying to learn how to write.

It is that ability to feed off personal fears that makes a true writer, Morrell believes. He's taken hits over the years from critics who accuse him of selling out for the action-drama dollar, instead of bending his talents to more weighty literature. But really, Morrell protests, he had no choice. Burning in his psyche is a need for control, and only in his tales of unbeatable protean warriors does he find it. "When people ask Stephen King why he writes horror, he responds, 'What makes you think I have a choice?'" Same with Morrell. "I didn't choose thrillers," he says. "They chose me."

So what is this tormented soul doing this dark and cloudy April afternoon? Trying to capture a spider with a wad of Kleenex. He could easily have walloped it with a shoe, but instead, he's patiently searching for the scuttling pest on the patio drapes of his Santa Fe, N.M., home, while his wife, Donna, watches timidly over his shoulder.

"Don't kill it," Donna urges. "Bad karma."

"Isn't this surreal?" Morrell comments, as he peers among the drapes. "The creator of Rambo, trying to rescue a little spider." Just then, he spots it and shooshes it out the door with gentle, little swipes of his tissue. "There!" he says with satisfaction, closing the door securely against the threat of future creepy-crawly invasions.

Because many of his fans are real-life spies and soldiers, Morrell has been made an honorary member of numerous associations for commandos and intelligence officers. But you have to wonder if these trained killers have ever actually seen their favorite author in the flesh. Unlike the lethal heroes he portrays, Morrell is a short, gentle man who shrinks from conflict, abhors profanity, and roams about the house displaying mementos and rare photos like a gardener puttering among roses. He and Donna, who've been together since high school, seem like male and female versions of each other, a pair of mirthful, thoughtful, grandparent prototypes.

As soon I arrive at their home, the Morrells bustle about trying to make me comfortable. Where would I most like to sit—in the kitchen, maybe, with a nice view of the desert?

Is that coffee too strong for you? Are you sure that's enough for you to eat—would you like half my sandwich? Although they are leaving early the next morning to visit their daughter and granddaughter in California, the Morrells seem primarily preoccupied this afternoon with doing little favors for others, like chauffeuring me back and forth to my hotel and making sure to be home so an acquaintance can pick up an autographed copy of Morrell's recent novel, Burnt Sienna.

Between quiet spoonfuls of soup, Morrell points out that he can barely sit through the current crop of action films, the Lethal Weapons and the Die Hards, because of all the bad language. He's no big fan, either, of some views of the National Rifle Association. "I think guns should be harder to get, and I certainly don't think people should be allowed to carry concealed weapons." Hardly the opinions you'd expect from the designated dramatist for trained assassins the world over. He has never actually served in the military, and has zero firsthand experience as a spy. A true academic, he's learned to school himself so thoroughly in whatever skills his characters require—jungle survival, demolitions, electronic surveillance—that his imagined

adventures ring true to men who've actually lived them. To master additional lingo and techniques, Morrell put himself under the tutelage of G. Gordon Liddy, the former FBI agent and leader of the Watergate "plumbers," whose Academy of Corporate Security taught him espionage tricks like picking locks and changing identities.

But one trait that Morrell shares with his Special Forces fans is the abiding sense that menace and betrayal are ever in the shadows. Ian Fleming's 007 has the gadgets and derring-do, Elmore Leonard's grifters are comical and clever, but few, if any action writers dwell so poignantly on the unspoken side of the secret professions—the loneliness and despair. Liars and killers by trade, militarists are conditioned to see deceit and treachery all around them, the way Morrell was by his unrelieved suspicions about his mother.

"The experts I correspond with always sign off with phrases like 'Keep your Condition Orange' [military slang for 'danger approaches'] or 'Watch your 360' ['guard your back']," Morrell says. "That's what I try to do—keep my guard up." He's not a bitter man, but the way he so readily

pulls up past wounds for display, like a kid showing off a gnarly scab, suggests he's learned to cultivate those wounds, the same way he preserved the awful August reverie that would become First Blood. He still talks, for example, of an old college buddy who, "with great pride," hauled out a battered copy of First Blood which he'd scrawled over with obscenities and all the reasons he hated it, and the fact that the University of Iowa, where he used to teach, rescinded his plaque from the Walk of Fame because his work was judged too commercial.

But the defining moment was the day his mother left him at the orphanage far from their Ontario home. It was so miserable that on Sundays, the nuns would line the boys up for a special treat and give each one a single kernel of popcorn.

Surprisingly, Morrell claims no bitterness toward the woman who eventually retrieved him and raised him. "Her life was as Gothic as mine," Morrell says. Her own mother had died giving birth to her; then, her father married his dead wife's sister. Blaming the young girl for her sister's death, the aunt/stepmother tormented her viciously. Once,

when she was leaving for a party in a ball gown, Morrell says, the stepmother erupted with spite and hurled the rotting cadaver of a groundhog at her, ruining the dress.

In later years, Morrell says, he could hear his mother groaning in her sleep, tormented by memories. It turned her into a driven woman, an upholstery seamstress who worked extra shifts and somehow scrimped together enough money to move them to a home in the suburbs. She gave Morrell an even more precious gift: a relentless work ethic and the conviction that if he tried, he could accomplish anything. And so, after earning his undergraduate degree at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, he came to Penn State to become a graduate student in literature.

His true ambition, however, was writing. He began pestering Penn State's Philip Klass, who also wrote science-fiction under the pen name William Tenn, for one-on-one tutoring. Klass instead told Morrell to submit a new story every week until he proved his mettle. The breakthrough came with "The Plinker," which so impressed Klass that he took Morrell out for coffee and began rattling off tips, not stopping until early the next morning.

From Penn State, Morrell became a literature professor at Iowa, where he would remain for the next two decades, even after First Blood was made into a movie in 1982 and vaulted the shy professor into the company of celebs like Stephen King and Sylvester Stallone. Although it would have been far more convenient to live near his publishers in New York or the film producers in Los Angeles, Morrell continued teaching and living the quiet, Great Plains life.

Then, in 1986, one of the Morrells' two children—their 15-year-old son Matthew—was diagnosed with a rare form of bone cancer. For months, Morrell sat by his son's side in the hospital, watching him suffering and surrounded by tubes and IV stands. It was like his woodlands reverie come to life, his son helpless and facing death amid a forest of medical equipment. Six months after being diagnosed, Matthew was dead.

For the next three years, Morrell was unable to write.

"When Matt died, a portion of my creative ability broke.

It's been 14 years now...." He trails off. Words seem to fail him even now.

So deeply did he mourn that he was tempted to suicide and suffered searing pains in his chest. One experience from that time, however, eventually helped start him writing again. "When Matt was in intensive care on life support, a ton of beeping machines around him, that was true horror," Morrell says. "Then it dawned on me that false horror, fiction, is a form of hypnosis. The pages disappear in your hands."

And so, partly to purge his own pain, partly to help the fellow grieving, Morrell wrote a very uncharacteristic book: *Fireflies*. It's an odd tale, half-imagined, half-true, that tells of Matthew's death and Morrell's struggle to come to terms with it. Nowhere in the book does he mention his own childhood, but for those who know the story, the book is even more heartbreaking: besides the terrible loss of a wonderfully gifted child, Morrell had lost the one chance he'd ever have to redeem his own miserable boyhood by fashioning a better one for his son.

In search of a place of healing, the Morrells left Iowa for the serene hills and bathing mountain light of New Mexico. It's an oddly symbolic shift, as if they'd given up on the fertility of the Iowa farmland and resigned themselves to the starkness of the desert, but the couple seems to have found peace here. Morrell, for his part, seems to even have rediscovered a flair for childishness.

He's showing me his writing room, a converted adobe shed attached to the side of the Morrells' adobe home. It's a lovely room, fragrant with the clean smell of fresh-cut wood and lined with books, many of them his, but Morrell bypasses the shelves and goes immediately to the Rambo knives. There are three of them, each bigger than the next and all handcrafted by a master knife maker to commemorate the three Rambo films.

"They're really something, aren't they?" he says admiringly. He opens the frame and takes them out, demonstrating detail work like the fishing line wrapped around the handle of one, and the maker's monogram on another. All are huge and cruelly serrated, but the last is

almost more preposterous than menacing. It's as long as my forearm, and heavier than a tire iron. "Any bigger and it would be a sword!" Morrell laughs. He's sort of poking fun at his stereotypically male response to toys, but sort of not. He's aware that he could look ridiculous, a grown man playing with fantasy weapons, but he's so enthralled that he can't help himself, just the way he could seriously chase the spider, but simultaneously laugh at himself in the process.

That ability to split his consciousness into Morrell the Actor and Morrell the Watcher may be the ultimate explanation for how he could spend a lifetime dwelling on pain, and yet remain so professorial and productive. Susan Faludi, the Pulitzer Prize-winning social commentator, spent a good amount of time analyzing Morrell for her acclaimed study of contemporary manhood called Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man. In it, Faludi uncovers the camouflaged autobiography in all of Morrell's works.

"In thriller after thriller," Faludi writes, "Morrell's orphaned heroes grapple with their fear by becoming elite, guerrilla-style soldiers in a murky military-intelligence

underworld, lone warriors trained by secret government agents who present themselves as surrogate fathers, only to be revealed as the enemy instead."

This is no big news flash for Morrell. After 22 years as a professor of literature, he's well equipped to analyze anyone's influences, including his own. He's recently been fascinated by Marilyn Monroe and is currently writing an essay about the deceased star. He has no illusions about why: "She was raised in orphanage; she never knew her dad." But why write her story, instead of dealing directly with his own?

"John Barth has a great line," Morrell replies. "'Reality is a nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there.'"

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Christopher McDougall is a writer-at-large for Philadelphia Magazine and a regular contributor to Men's Health, Worth, and Outside magazines.