

Q: You've said that Red Sky in Morning is based on your father's World War Two experiences. Have you taken liberties?

A: Well, all sailors need a liberty now and then, right? The thing is, my dad's experiences always seemed like the makings of a good yarn - I knew that for years. But I had trouble getting a fix on how to approach it. My father's specific duty is mentioned toward the end of the novel - he was stationed on what was called a "hotel" ship, which was a ship without an engine, between the islands of Leyte and Samar. My idea for the mystery aspect of the novel - a closed environment mystery, where a murder of a white officer put the other officers in a precarious position with the many, many black sailors under them - would be better served by getting them out on a ship at sea. Isolated. I wanted two explosive situations: the racial one, and the ship itself, loaded down with explosives. Had a murder happened on Dad's hotel ship, Port Authority personnel from the nearby islands would have come to investigate.

Q: Were there any real ships with black crews and white officers?

A: Yes, the USS Mason. That ship provided me with the precedent. I should say that my father's experiences also tapped into two novels I read in junior high that were favorites of mine - The Caine Mutiny and Mr. Roberts. Looking back, I was probably attracted to those novels because of my dad's wartime duty - it was a way I could learn about what he went through. In a way, Red Sky in Morning is The Caine Mutiny with a black crew...and a murder.

Q: You obviously had the idea for this novel for a long time. Why did it take you several decades to get around to writing it?

A: I admit to being intimidated by the material. I've never served in the military, and I wanted to get the Navy stuff right...and knew that would be hard. Plus, dealing with African Americans of that period was tricky. What happened was, several other books of mine (under my real name, Max Allan Collins) paved the way. Murder by the Numbers is largely about the black numbers racket in Cleveland in the '30s; Neon Mirage features a tough black Chicago detective who is the first cousin of Sarge Washington, the second lead in Red Sky. The Million-Dollar Wound deals with Guadalcanal, Road to Purgatory with the Philippines. Then over the last several years, I've written the novel versions of several major WW 2 movies, notably Saving Private Ryan, Windtalkers, and U-571.

Q: Was it difficult writing about your father?

A: Pete Maxwell is based on my father, but he isn't my father. I had to get around that immediately, since there's a sex scene involving Pete and his wife in the first chapter, and if I were writing a sex scene about my dad and mom, I would either go mad or be arrested. Anyway, Pete is probably more me than my dad, as I might have been in that situation - I only hope I'd have had as much class as Dad did. Pete's wife raises another interesting issue - I didn't want the book to be strictly a "boy" book; I didn't want to do a military hardware novel, since that's not my style or strength. So I wanted a strong female character to give women readers someone to hang onto. Since most of the book takes place at sea with a shipful of men, that's not easy. I think I came up with a good way to give Kay Maxwell a major role when she isn't really always around.

Q: What's the story behind the Patrick Culhane penname? As Max Allan Collins, you're a New York Times bestselling writer, with some very famous credits, including the graphic novel Road to Perdition that led to the Academy Award-winning Tom Hanks film.

A: That byline, which first appeared on Black Hats, is an attempt to create a brand-name for standalone historical thrillers. A lot of what I've done as a mystery writer has been series, and I continue to do series - in fact, I'll be resuming the Shamus-Award-winning Nathan Heller series soon, and recently have done novels in my Quarry and Ms. Tree series. Plus, there are the many tie-in novels I do - novels associated either with movies or TV. The movie novels are adaptations of the scripts of a film, like my recent X-Files 2 for HarperCollins. The TV novels tend to be original novels, like the current Criminal Minds books. With my byline associated with these other areas of work, we wanted to set the Culhane novels apart as something if not more serious, certainly different. Perhaps more major.

Q: Why the fascination with history?

A: It's the "story" part of the word, I guess. I was always the kind of person who, after seeing a historical movie or reading an historical novel, went straight to the source materials to see what really happened. I suppose this began with The Untouchables on TV, wanting to read about the real Eliot Ness and Al Capone - an obsession that led many decades later to my play and film (now on DVD!), Eliot Ness: An Untouchable Life. Oddly, when my career started, I was known for doing topical material - that was my trademark when I was writing the DICK TRACY comic strip. The MS. TREE graphic novels of the '80s and '90s were topically driven - gay bashing, date rape, abortion clinic bombings.

Q: So how much research do you do?

A: There's more research than writing! It's an ongoing thing - I began collecting books and magazines for Red Sky probably twenty years ago. I do have help, though - often it's been my Nate Heller series research associate, George Hagenauer, who was involved with this novel, but the primary researcher here was Matthew V. Clemens. Matt was involved with this book every step of the way, helping on the plot, too. He and I have done lots of tie-in novels together, including all of the CSI and Criminal Minds books.

Q: What's next for Patrick Culhane and Max Allan Collins?

A: I'm just noodling with another Culhane right now - I have an historical idea that I hope my editor will like. There's lots of movie interest in Black Hats, which could lead to a sequel. As for Max in real life, I have several books out right now under the M.A.C. byline, including Strip for Murder, which combines a prose novel with graphic novel elements. I've been writing a cozy series about antiqueing with my wife Barb, under the name "Barbara Allan" - the third of those, Antiques Flee Market, will be out before Christmas. There's a movie I wrote, based on my novel The Last Quarry, called "The Last Lullaby" that should be out sometime in 2008.

Q: What's the story on your association with the late, great Mickey Spillane, dean of noir mystery writers?

Mickey was my literary hero as a kid, and we became friends early in my career. I did a bunch of projects with Mickey, mostly anthologies we put together and also a comic book called MIKE DANGER. During the last several decades of his life, Mickey had numerous books going in several offices, and left a surprising number of half-finished manuscripts, usually with extensive notes. In the last week of his life, he asked me to take these manuscripts and finish them. The first one, a crime novel called Dead Street, was published last year by Hard Case Crime to incredible reviews. And I'm completing at least three Mike Hammer novels (two more half-complete manuscripts await after that) for Otto Penzler at Harcourt, starting with The Goliath Bone in the fall of this year. This is a labor of love for me and a great honor. Mickey knew about Red Sky, incidentally, and was anxious to read it. That's a real sadness for me - that neither of my fathers, the literary one or my real one, lived to read this book.