

Interview with Matt Hilton by Viviana Giorgi for Thriller Cafe
(<http://www.thrillercafe.it>)

To begin with, let me rhetorically ask:

Why do you action-thriller writers have to create such beautiful characters? Romantic, lonesome, restless-spirited heroes, errand knights? Irresistible bastards and cads? Female readers can't help falling in love with them all! And let me tell you, it is really upsetting! And your Joe Hunter is no exception. Having said that..., let's start with the interview.

To answer the rhetorical question, I guess I'd have to say that they're also the type of men that appeal to our egocentric side. Who out of us all wouldn't like to be like Jack Reacher, Mitch Rapp or Joe Hunter?

1) Joe Hunter is a stand alone, ex military special op, a tough, ass-kicking guy with a strong sense of justice voted to the good side of the force. "Someone may call me a vigilante. I just think I've problems to fix", he says. What makes him different from the many standalones we already met in our reads? I think of characters like Joe Pike But particularly I think of Jack Reacher. Like your fellow countryman Lee Child, you chose the US as Joe's wandering waste and western land. Why the US? Are all the first five Joe novels set in America?

I think that out of all the characters you mention above Hunter is probably most like Lee Child's Jack Reacher in that he's a retired military man who straddles the USA in an uncompromising and lawless manner. However, Reacher and Hunter are very different as characters. While Reacher is very methodical and analytical in his approach to a problem, Hunter tends to go flying in and doesn't give much thought to the consequences. Most of the characters that you mention are either detectives, police or active military personnel – with the exception of Rain who is an assassin – and even Reacher is still a detective in his own way. Hunter on the other hand is driven by a need to repent what he sees as his own sins by helping others less fortunate than him. He has set himself up as a champion for victims, a bit along the lines of a wandering master-less Samurai warrior or wild west gunslinger. If I'd to choose a character from your list who most resembles Hunter in this respect, I'd have to choose Joe Pike.

I chose the US due to the fact that I read mostly American crime fiction and am familiar with the cinematic action style of American thriller authors. The USA is such a huge landscape, one that everyone's familiar with through Hollywood movies, but it is also so diverse and mysterious to many readers. I wanted an arena with dramatic changing scenery that would in itself become a character in my books. Setting Hunter's adventures in the UK where I live would have seemed small in

comparison.

2) I realise you answered so many times the following questions, but I have to ask you. You were in private security and then a police officer. How does your previous experiences influence your writing style? How much of Matt is there in Joe? Were you as tough as Joe is? Do you ever miss being on the field after the bad guys?

The last thing I wanted to do was write about my 'day job', so I steered clear of the police procedural type crime fiction that is prevalent in the UK. I wanted to write cinematic action style thrillers, without bogging the story down with the protocol and detail necessary to write a detective or police novel. That was the reason why I made Hunter an ex Spec-Ops soldier, and retired him from the military. In that respect I didn't need to keep up with all the procedures and politics, and could give him free range to do whatever he wanted to solve a problem. I'd say the most important thing I learned from my previous jobs, was the way in which fear and violence can affect a person. I carry this understanding into my writing to add an element of realism to scenes of conflict.

I suppose I share many of Hunter's old fashioned values, and his moral stance. I don't like bullies, and I believe they must be stood up to. Both Hunter and I are highly trained martial artists and we've both had a few fights in our time, but I don't think I'd last more than a few seconds against Hunter. I have been in some pretty scary situations and had to defend myself, but I'm nowhere near to Hunter's standard!

3) You've chosen to write in the first person books 1 to 4, but switched to third person in book 5. Why? And what about the next novels?

It's interesting that you mention this, and I guess you must have been reading my blog where I recently gave the game away. In books one through four I wrote the Hunter sections in first person as you say, alternating with third person where another character appears in the narrative. Although I found this works well, it's difficult to convey anything deeper about Hunter and I wanted to flesh him out more as a character. Sometimes the villains were more rounded than Hunter was. When I sat down to write book 5, I wanted to delve a little into Hunter's character and psyche but without it sounding like a constant monologue and chose the third person perspective to do this. Can I just say that this has just been an experiment, and I obviously still have to have agreement from my editor, so book 5 may well end up with Hunter's distinctive first person voice by the time of publication. The same will probably apply to any further books in the series, but I will definitely return to first person.

4) How, when and where do you write? How's your writing schedule?

I write on a laptop computer at a desk in my living room. I look out onto an old abandoned railway line, which sounds romantic but isn't. All I can see is the sweep of grass on an embankment. It's good in that it doesn't distract me too much. I usually have the TV playing away in the background with my pet dog keeping me company when my wife's out of the house. I work long hours, writing for four or five hours in the morning, then taking a break to late afternoon when I start again. I often

write late into the evening, and generally this is a seven day a week rule. It's not all writing the books, as I update my blog, run a short story website (Thrillers, Killers 'n' Chillers), answer emails and, as I'm doing now, do interviews and publicity work.

5) It seems to me that the market is trying to smooth differences between British (Irish too) and American crime thriller authors, to homologate their work, presumably to enlarge the target, - you know, the global thing? - What's your opinion on it? IMO, do style peculiarities still distinguish English from American crime thriller authors (and I'm not speaking about writing colour with or without a u)?

You're right. A few years ago it would have been impossible for me as an English author to write books for - and to be accepted by - the American market as well as the UK one. It wasn't done. But I think that times have changed and it is now far more acceptable, maybe even desired. A bestseller in all countries is great for any publisher I'd say. We're starting to see great authors like Lee Child, John Connolly, Ken Bruen and RJ Ellory writing books that anyone would swear were written by an American author. When looking at style though there is a very distinct feeling to an English crime book when compared to its US contemporary. There are the traditions for a start, police procedurals in the UK against the PI tradition of the American novel, but these are starting to blur considerably. The main difference I find is in the grittiness of English books. They seem much darker and foreboding than many American books do. Then there are idioms in speech that don't translate well, I occasionally find myself having to explain something Hunter says to my US editor. I'm not sure English irony translates too well to the American.

6) Are there any substantial differences between the UK and the US editions of your books?

The UK editions are grittier and a little darker in content, though the books are very much the same. Interestingly the US edition of *Dead Men's Dust* retains the prologue which was cut from the English edition. Four letter words seem to be more acceptable to the UK market than they are the US one. I find it funny when Hunter, who is an ex-British soldier - who are famous for their barracks room bad language - says things like 'Damn you' in the American edition. I don't advocate bad language and cursing, but it is a fact of life. Interestingly you won't find a four letter word in a Lee Child book, but you must remember that Reacher was an academy trained Major, while Hunter was just a lowly grunt (a grunt is a British term for a low ranking soldier). They come from different backgrounds, so Hunter is obviously going to swear. Another thing slightly toned down in the US edition is the final scene where Tubal Cain has Hunter's brother at his mercy. It is less gory than the UK edition.

7) What do you know about the Italian market and what do you expect of Italian readers?

The Italian title is *L'inseguitore*, that is the Pursuer.

IMO, the deep meaning of the original title - that I have adored - is gone with the desert wind. Do you like the Italian title and cover? (the UK cover, for me, is still the best

one). Did you control or supervise in any way the Italian translation?

I have to be very honest here and admit to knowing very little about the Italian market or its readers, other than I know you love crime thrillers! I'm also very lucky in that my agent, Luigi Bonomi, is Italian and lives there part of the year and he has assured me how well Hunter will be received by the Italian readership. I'm very excited to hear how people find L'Inseguitore. I like the new title (though I was literally translating it as The Pursuer or The Tracker), but would have loved "La Polvere dei morti" as it sounds so cool to me and was much deeper and pertinent to the story. I'm not complaining, though, I think that Longanesi have done a great job. I like the cover, and strangely enough it is very reminiscent of the Joe Hunter website graphics developed by my UK publisher. I didn't have much say in the translation, but I did meet the translator Stefano Moggi via facebook and we chatted and I cleared up a few questions for him via that forum. I trust that he has done a great job and hope the Italian readers love the book.

8) The first five Joe Hunter books are going to be released in six-monthly intervals in UK. Will be the same in the US? WHY this aggressive release strategy?

Yes, it was decided to publish the Hunter books every three months in the UK in order to build a readership very quickly and to establish Joe Hunter as a recognisable name in the thriller market. I think that other publishers will follow suit in the future. You sometimes see new authors appearing with a trilogy, and I think this is the same reason – to build momentum quickly. Book purchasers seem to gravitate to an author who has more than one book on the shelves as opposed to a one-off.

In the US the books are going to be published yearly, but I think this may change if the Hunter books do become a hit.

9) Where has book 1 been sold best, in UK or US?

As of this time the books are selling very well in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and elsewhere, but the momentum has been a little slower to get going in the US, though it's still selling well. The US economy is struggling as we all know and I'm not sure that people are buying as many books at present. I expect things to pick up in the US with the release of the paperback edition and the second book – Judgement and Wrath.

10) You're a master in martial arts. Do you still practise Jo Jitsu?

I've trained in Ju-Jitsu, Karate, Kempo, unarmed combat, self defence and boxing. At the present my training has taken a back seat while I'm so busy writing a book every six months. But I still try to keep active and still go to a class I started and train and coach students there periodically. Lately I moved into Mixed Martial Arts and train for the sport, although these days I have given up competing.

11) I read you're also a voracious reader. What do you read, Mr Hilton, and which are your fave action/crime thriller authors? When writing, can you read thrillers, or

you wisely change genre?

I do read a great deal, and usually in the action/crime thriller genres. I am a huge fan of John Connolly, and love his Charlie Parker books. I also love Robert Crais' Elvis Cole/Joe Pike books. Other authors I pick up all the time are Michael Marshall, Jack Kerley, Jeffrey Deaver, Dean Koontz, Jeff Abbott, Simon Kernick, John Connelly, Lee Child, and James Patterson. I've recently discovered Stephen Leather and Vince Flynn and will likely pick up their books too. Ken Bruen impresses me, as does RJ Ellory. There are so many great authors I have this horrible feeling I'm missing a few of my favourites. There are a couple English authors I tend to pick up too; Adrian Magson and Sheila Quigley are both great writers.

I also love horror stories, and have also read a lot of heroic fantasy and was influenced early in my career by HP Lovecraft, Robert E Howard and Edgar A Poe.

Also, and I don't want this to sound like I'm pushing my website, but I read a lot of great short fiction there written by some up and coming authors like Col Bury, Lee Hughes, Paul Brazill, Amit Dhand and others. There are so many writers submitting stories to webzines these days who deserve a broader platform.

Some people don't read in the same genre as they write, but I do. This helps me avoid pitfalls and I try to steer well clear of anything seen or read in a recent movie or book. For instance, I changed the ending to book 5 when I discovered a similar scene had just been written in another book.

12) There are people always looking for hidden meanings or messages, also in action thriller novels. Personally, I look only for good, very good entertainment. What's your opinion and what about your books? Are they sane and pure entertainment? Which word would you use to describe them ?

If I could use only one word I'd say 'escapism'. Like you I'm not looking for hidden meanings or anything profound, just a good kick-ass adventure. If I was looking for something nuanced I'd probably read 'literary' fiction, but I don't enjoy too much of it. A good strong and charismatic lead against a devilish villain wins out for me every time!

13) Book 2, Judgement and wrath (one title one can't easily forget, Mr Hilton!), will be released in the UK in October. Can you tell us something about it?

The title is taken from a grimoire of black magic. In this one Hunter is hired to snatch a girl from an alleged abusive relationship. However, Hunter isn't the only one with an eye on the girl or her bully boyfriend. A contract killer, who goes by the name of a fallen angel, Dantalion, is on a collision course that crosses paths with Hunter. Hunter then has to do everything in his power to save the girl and stop the assassin from seeing through his mission. I'd say it's even more action packed than Dead Men's Dust, if you can believe that?

14) All these tough guys, the ones I quoted at the beginning of this chat, have a strong romantic side. Their personal

life is a mess, but there's always a woman somewhere waiting for them (and it's never me, damn it!). Someone claims that the romantic side in action thrillers is made to fish female readers.

What's your opinion about it? After the wreck of his marriage, will Joe at last find love? Do you care for him as much as to give him a new woman in every novel to bed and to merciless dump, at the very end of the story?

I think there is some attempt at attracting female readers by including a romantic edge to action thrillers, but men also like it (not that most will admit to it!). I think female readers prefer to read about a strong, self-sufficient woman in a book than the kind of eye candy dropped in to some books for no other reason than for the hero to bed and then move on from. Once over, books treated women like that, but I've seen a change in the last decade and we now have some great female characters who are easily the equal of the males. Zoe Sharpe's Charlie Fox books immediately come to mind. I intend adding female characters to the Hunter books where I believe they will be interesting and important to the plot, not just for Hunter to jump into bed with.

Hunter is still in love with his ex-wife and is a little in the waste land when we meet him in *Dead Men's Dust*. But rest assured, by book three there is a love interest. I don't want to give the game away too soon, but let's just say that Hunter's life style can be a little dangerous for anyone who gets close to him.

15) What next, after the five Joe Hunters? More Joe or you will create a new serial character?

I would obviously love to secure another contract for more Joe Hunter books. I really love the character and have loads of ideas for him and his friends in the future. It would be a sad day if I ever had to say goodbye to him. However, I'd also like to do some stand alone thrillers, and would like to slot a few of these in along the way. I have another character that I've developed named Carter Bailey, who is the lead in a supernatural thriller I have written but is as yet unpublished. It's not an out and out supernatural story, more a thriller with a spooky undertone. Carter believes he carries the soul of his dead brother 'caged' within him, but you're left wondering if this is true or if he just imagines it. His brother Cash was a vicious serial killer, so having such an ally and enemy in Carter's head can throw up some interesting scenarios. I'd also like to write a few young adult horror/thriller books and have recently completed the first.

16) I read on your blog that in October you will be at Bouchercon - wow- like a guest author, I suppose. What do you expect of it? Whom, among your colleagues, would you be glad to meet and talk to?

I went to Bouchercon last year in Baltimore and met some of my literary heroes and also made some new friends. Everybody has been so incredibly supportive. I'm looking forward to going back again this year. It sounds like name dropping but I met Lee Child there last year and he was very nice and gracious and very supportive. I've also met some great people such as Andrew Grant, Simon Kernick, Peter James, Adrian Magson, Sean Black and a whole host of others I hope to catch up with there. I'm very lucky in that I'm appearing on a panel to talk about the reader's/author's fascination with

serial killers in fiction. I guess I'll have to get back into the head of Tubal Cain from L'Inseguitore for this. Bouchercon is huge, and it is the destination of many fans and I love meeting and speaking to them.

THE END

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<http://matthiltonbooks.blogspot.com>

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