

Going the GREAT DISTANCES

WITH HIS NEWEST NOVEL *THE DEVIL'S WATERS*, SUSPENSE WRITER

By Julie Krug

THE WRITER

An adaptation of David L. Robbins' *Scorched Earth* premiered at Virginia Repertory Theatre in 2012.



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avid L. Robbins is one of the most positive and vibrant people you'll ever meet. He's successfully written 10 novels, two screenplays and adapted *Scorched Earth*, his third novel, for the stage.

As the son of two World War II veterans (his parents met at Pearl Harbor) and the product of a blue-collar upbringing in Sandston, Va., Robbins has a strong work ethic and optimistic

outlook. Even when challenged with a major publishing transition for his newest book, *The Devil's Waters*, he exuded a kind of primal confidence: no problems. Only curious impasses and opportunities to find creative bridges to the other side.

DAVID L. ROBBINS JUMPS PUBLISHING SHIPS, STRAIGHT ONTO AMAZON.

Robbins now lives in Richmond and teaches creative writing at Virginia Commonwealth College. To a classroom of new students, the six-foot-six writer is both blunt and effervescent. "Do you want to write?" he asks. "Or do you want to be a writer?" Because they're not the same, he says. Robbins encourages trust in the writing process and in oneself.

As a child, Robbins was drawn to storytelling through his mother. "She was a beautiful liar and taught me about imagination," he says. But his parents did not see writing as a viable profession. And so after earning a bachelor's degree, Robbins stayed on at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg to enter what he called the great catch-basin of unfocused overachievers: law school. After completing his juris doctorate in 1980, he worked for an environmental law firm for one year to fulfill a promise to his father.

When his year was up, he promptly left law, began freelance writing and never looked back. "I wrote everything," says Robbins: TV, radio and billboard ads, and newspaper and magazine articles. In 1999, he wrote *War of the Rats* – his second book and a powerful story about the Battle of Stalingrad. Robbins wrote four more books in the same genre, and *Kirkus Reviews* called him "the Homer of WWII novels."

Robbins's books have drawn readers and praise from a large artistic circle. *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* author Tom

Robbins (no relation) told *Richmond Magazine*, "As a longtime pacifist and advocate of nonviolence, you would not think that I would ever read a book that primarily concerned the various aspects of warfare ... but I'm a language lover ... and in David's war novels ... there are so many beautifully written passages that even if I wasn't sucked in by the story, I would just read it for his use of words."

New York playwright and screenwriter Doug Wright won the Pulitzer Prize for his play *I am My Own Wife* and wrote the stage and screenplay *Quills*, about the Marquis de Sade. Wright adapted Robbins's third novel, *Scorched Earth*, a tale about racial tensions in the contemporary South, for Warner Brothers. "I eagerly campaigned for the job, because I simply adored the book," says Wright. "In *Scorched Earth*, David pulled off a very rare feat: He managed to write a book that was a heart-pounding thriller with all the attributes of the genre – a taut narrative, unexpected twists of fate and a host of suspicious characters – with genuine literary heft. Often his

prose is as striking and original as any of our great Southern writers from Faulkner to O'Connor. He's the rarest kind of author; he effortlessly combines commercial viability with high art."

In addition to being a writer and teacher, Robbins is an avid seaman. He spent three summers sailing off the coast of Spain in his youth. "I learned to love the great distances of the sea, the moon and the stars, and the vagaries of wind and weather," says Robbins. "No consecutive days on the water are the same." Sailing informs writing, he says, "because both involve staring into a lot of blankness."

For *The Devil's Waters*, he's back to his military roots and to the sea. In one of his most violent stories, an elite U.S. Air

Force unit is stationed in Djibouti and tasked with taking down a hijacked freighter off the coast in the Gulf of Aden on the Horn of Africa. The Air Force unit of pararescue jumpers – PJs – has just four hours to recapture the ship. The cargo is so sensitive that the U.S. government would rather sink the ship than let Somali pirates hold it for ransom. For research, Robbins rode a freighter for two weeks through these waters and spent another week in Djibouti with the Air Force.

The Devil's Waters has brought unexpected changes. Robbins has

"A good writer has big antennae to catch hold of stories from any source."

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left the safe harbor of New York's traditional publishing houses and entered the lesser-known waters of Amazon. But Robbins has jumped aboard Amazon's mystery and thriller imprint Thomas & Mercer with the same verve that's led him to nine other successful novels, and he's excited about the change. "Amazon's new publishing wing is based on a revolutionary idea that the writer is the founder of the feast," he says. Modern publishing, with all its sacrifices and casualties, is enough to make any writer nervous. But Robbins, a soldier of the printed word, smiles from his chair, takes a drag on his cigar and says three words: "Vive la révolution."

How do your stories come to you?

They don't. I come to them, or rather, I gravitate toward stories and settings than can act as crucibles. That can distill out of a character what I'm looking for, the human themes I'm exploring. In *War of the Rats*, a man and woman fall in love at the horrific Battle of Stalingrad. They go out every day to kill people and survive those trying to kill them, then at night try to find some tenderness left in their souls for each other. In my *The Devil's Waters*, I became fascinated with the pararescue jumpers of the U.S. Air Force, the most highly trained soldiers in the U.S. military. Their mission is to go into battle in any kind of terrain and rescue the endangered, the isolated, the dying. Their motto is "That Others May Live." What a romantic notion, to go into deadly combat not to kill, but to be ready and trained to die to save another. Look at the opposites of that, the built-in tension. *That's* what I'm looking for, the contrasts of setting and plot that can enable my characters to reveal that surprise, that deep human failing or saving grace.

If stories don't come to you, what aids in your search?

A good writer has big antennae to catch hold of stories from any source. I've written books that were spurred by a variety of sources: a TV news story about former comfort women protesting in Seoul, a newspaper article about a church burning over an exhumed mixed-race child, even a dream about a man who falls in love with the spirit that is possessing his wife. My newest book was inspired by an Air Force ad on TV about pararescue jumpers.

When you hit a wall in your novel writing, how do you get unstuck?

When you feel like you've hit a wall, it's like finding that a bridge is out. You're standing on one side of the story, staring across a crevasse to the other side where your story needs to continue. You need the link, but it's eluding you and so it feels



David L. Robbins



like a blockage. Faced with this, too many writers cheat. They'll create a fire or a flood to remove an obstacle, a suicide to remove a character. I've even seen a time machine used so the characters could go back and change things. There are a million ways to bridge the gap.

I look forward to those moments when I've written myself into a dead end. I flip through possibilities as fast as I can, as long as I have to, to find that one narrow tunnel the story can pass through. Remember, when you hit that dead end, the reader hits it with you. The reader also wonders: How the hell is he going to get out of this? What a wonderful thing, to bring a story to a seeming dead end, with no way out. Isn't this something you're *trying* to do? You must reward the reader with the best resolution you can come up with. Be faithful, patient and diligent, and when you finally figure it out, your reader will have the pleasure of your best efforts, instead of some deus ex time machina.

What about writer's block at the beginning? You know you want to write, but you've got nothing. Writer's block is another way of saying "daunted." There are

two tricks to get past this. First, climb the mountain by staring at your feet. Don't make your goal reaching the end, finishing a novel. It helps to proceed a day and a page at a time until you become stronger. Simply target a good page or two. Then do that 100 times. Soon enough, you'll have a critical mass of pages and the journey begins to ease up.

Next, become a good juggler. A good writer develops the ability to leave several items in the air, somehow in rhythm and under his control, although he's laying hands only on a few items. Work to gain control over the whole, no matter what portion you have in front of you. Then, finally, you must become Atlas. Be able to put the entire unwritten novel on your shoul-

"Be as engaged in publishing as you were in writing."

ders, be powerful and confident enough to turn it and examine it, to let it course and develop on its own without losing its boundaries. All this while you are in direct contact with just the smallest part of the story at a time, the created now.

How do you keep your butt in the chair?

I set writing hours, just like office hours. I don't answer the phone during this time and my friends have, over the years, gotten used to this. And I work from a manageable anger, my own inner critic. I subject myself to lectures of disappointment and personal finger wagging if I'm slacking or behind schedule. I try to be a good boss to myself, praising effort and focus, rewarding myself with a day off once in a while. I'm understanding of illness and the occasional need to be elsewhere than The Chair, but never distractions or laziness.

You do extensive research for your novels. Do you write and research at the same time?

No. I get all my research in hand before I start out on a novel. My characters and stories arise a great deal out of what I read, what I experience on my travels and what my expert advisers tell me. The story's not done until I can sit still. Even then it's not done, because I have to react to what the characters bring to it. I work between two desks and there's a chaos of open books and notes on four sides of me. It feels like a cockpit.

With *The Devil's Waters* you made the leap from a traditional publishing house to Amazon's Thomas & Mercer. What have you learned about the new publishing model?

I recently had a one-hour conversation with Thomas &

THE DAVID ROBBINS FILE

- ▶ Robbins, 58, graduated from the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Va., with a bachelor's degree in theater and speech. He went on to complete his law degree in 1980, but a year later abandoned his legal career and became a writer.
- ▶ *War of the Rats* and *The End of War*, his second and third novels, placed Robbins on the *New York Times* bestseller's list.
- ▶ In 2002, Robbins co-founded the James River Writers, a nonprofit organization with an annual writer's conference.
- ▶ He is the chairman and co-founder of the Podium Foundation. Podium provides platforms of creative expression for Richmond public school students and support and training for teachers of writing and the arts. Podium publishes a yearly literary journal.
- ▶ Robbins adapted his novel *Scorched Earth*, a story about contemporary racism set in the American South, for the stage. It premiered at Richmond's Virginia Repertory Theatre in 2012.
- ▶ He plays blues and classical guitar. He's also an accomplished seaman. He's been sailing his own 35-foot boat on the Chesapeake Bay for 11 years. In his youth, he spent three consecutive summers in Spain and sailed the entire length of the Mediterranean.
- ▶ When he's not writing, playing guitar or sailing, Robbins loves a good cigar and checking on his fantasy baseball team.



Robbins' *Scorched Earth*

Mercer, where I was addressed by a full team, a collection of professionals divided into specialties, each one vital to the successful publication of a book. In the old method, what are now being called legacy publishers, your editor was the center of your world in that publishing house. He was your partner for editing the manuscript, your contact point for all questions regarding marketing, payment and production and your advocate inside the house to push the book into prominence with the sales staff and PR folks. What I learned about T&M's original approach to this thrilled me.

How is the editorial process different?

My T&M editor is not, for starters, my manuscript editor. He uses an outside expert for shaping up the pages. And my editor is not my locus for questions. T&M actually has an office called Author Relations. I have my own dedicated point person for queries, suggestions, concerns – someone actually assigned to respond to me. I think this is revolutionary and long overdue.

The production head, the marketing chief, they're all focused on their own jobs. Publishing is like clockwork. There's just no cog that can go wrong and allow the whole to function properly. In the traditional publishing houses, the editors wear many hats. Too many, in my opinion. At T&M, the team divides to conquer. My lead editor is the maestro on the bandstand, the major cheerleader for my book. He can therefore dedicate his efforts to watching the big picture and not get bogged down with deadlines, line edits and the minutiae of getting the book out on time with notice and pre-publicity.

What have you lost in making the switch?

Let me start with a quick primer. Barnes & Noble, an integral player in the traditional paradigm, announced it will not carry any books published by an imprint of Amazon West Coast. Ditto for all independent bookstores. On the surface, that seems devastating. But the truth lies under that surface. For my nine previously published books, here's what happened: My publisher paid B&N for a spot on the store's front table for four to six weeks. Indy bookstores put me in windows or not, as they saw fit, and only if a publisher's rep had stopped by to

pre-sell my work. As soon as the first bloom was off the rose or the contract and co-op money ran out, my book was placed spine-out on a shelf in alphabetical order in the massive fiction section, where only a handful of my backlist was available. Once the initial complement of books sold out, rarely did a bookseller reorder in significant display numbers, so demand would wither. So, if that proscription holds, that's what I give up by going with Amazon. A few weeks of front table attention, and perhaps some reviews by those few loyal newspapers that still have books sections.

What have you gained with Amazon's imprint?

A global electronic footprint with one of the two best e-marketers on earth, along with Apple. I get a better percentage of each sale, especially on e-books, and I'll be in several languages. I have a dedicated team of eager and positive-thinking professionals working for a savvy and gargantuan international company that does something better than anyone in, well, ever. And that's *sell*.

What does this model say about the future of publishing?

I think this is round one of the publishing industry reinventing itself. Amazon has brought lots of new and good ideas to the table in a short time span, and that's been jarring for the business overall. But the big publishing houses and booksellers have existed a long time, and they've done so by being clever and creative in their own right. It'll be exciting to see what changes all these titans will wreak while they figure out their co-existence. My confidence stems from the belief that no matter where they take publishing, the author's role is ascending.

Do we still need traditional publishers?

Absolutely. And I don't even think it's accurate to think of e-publishers or Amazon as anything non-traditional. They have the same ideals as every publisher, to bring to the public good books for sale. But there can never be too many avenues for writers, so of course we need traditional publishers, just

like we need new ones. Amazon is just one answer to the question: How can a writer get his or her work read and get paid in return? The delivery methods for these books, in all their formats, are evolving. And the pricing is still being hashed out. The web has ignited a revolution in publishing, and no one yet has figured out the way to maximize it. I think Amazon may be ahead in that race, and that's why my agent and I signed on. I'm optimistic that Amazon will be an agent of positive change in the models of publishing. The good news is that more and more people are reading, more books are being sold in every format, and more money is finding its way to writers. I expect publishing to be a hotbed of activity over the next decade as the opportunities of electronic publishing and the role of paper books continues to evolve.

“Be aware of your own voice, your personal statement in the language you use and the stories you select.”

What writers have inspired you?

As a kid, I steeped myself in superheroes. The whole notion of plot as crucible comes, for me, out of those early influences. Since then, I've loved Steinbeck, Clavell (*Shogun* was the first great epic I read, and that made me want to write them), Tom Robbins (you want to see what language can do?), Tolstoy (no one has matched his scope) and several science fiction masters, like Bradbury and Asimov (unmatched for imagination).

For inspiration, that thing that keeps me writing even at its

toughest, I get that from writers' conferences where I see hundreds wanting it and learning it, and from my writer friends who are such wise and striving folks. And from my mother, a storyteller and benign liar of the first degree. I think half of what she told me in life was untrue, but she stretched my thinking beyond what I could see and touch. From her, I learned that a good tale in any form was a special thing, a transforming and transporting thing.

What advice do you have for beginning writers

I want my students to learn that in fiction and non-fiction alike, in any story, everything happens to a character. By that I mean, don't just write action or sex for the sake of themselves; don't set a scene in a barbershop simply because you worked as a barber once. Everything in a story must reflect something about a character. Integrate place, dialogue, action, all of it not to the story but to a character in the story. Never jeopardize or complicate the life of a character until the reader loves or hates him, or else there's no attachment, no impact. And I hope my students leave with a self-conscious style. I want them to make decisions about their prose and stories, down to the level of each word. Be aware of your own voice, your personal statement in the language you use and the stories you select. Be able to pick your own writing out of a crowd.

With all you've learned from your publishing experiences, what would you tell a writer venturing into the world of publishing for the first time?

Advocate for yourself. Do not wait on agents to tell you what they think, editors to decide, publishers to market your work. Gone is the day when a writer could only write. Be as engaged in publishing as you were in writing. Keep your work lean, kinetic, gutsy. Lastly, and most importantly, be bold, in all aspects of writing. Your reader wants the four Es: to be elevated, educated, entertained and to escape. **W**

Julie Krug writes articles and interviews for a variety of publications and is a regular contributor to the *Spokesman Review* in Washington.