

The Blood of Paradise

Blood of Paradise's editor, Mark Tavani, interviews David

MT: At the beginning of *Blood of Paradise*, you include a quote by Peter Maass, who wrote in the *New York Times Magazine*, "The template for Iraq today is not Vietnam, with which it has often been compared, but El Salvador." Obviously, this quote connects the novel's setting and political milieu to the most intensely debated current American foreign policy initiative. But for you, which came first—the desire to say something, even if not direct, about America's engagement in Iraq, or the desire to set a story in El Salvador?

DC: I was drawn to El Salvador before I read the Maass story in the *New York Times Magazine*. But I became convinced that El Salvador had renewed relevance after reading that piece, and hearing various commentators, policymakers, and pundits opine that our "success" in El Salvador would provide a template for "victory" in Iraq. I felt compelled to set the record straight, by pointing out that our "success" in El Salvador was in fact a stalemate that morphed into a negotiated settlement, a result we could have had ten years earlier than we did, without the loss of thousands of additional lives and billions of dollars, if we'd not in fact been devoted to, yes, "victory." I also felt an obligation to show the current situation in El Salvador without ideological blinders. Pity the poor Iraqis if the best we can promise them is what ordinary Salvadorans have to deal with every day—the highest murder rate in the hemisphere, rampant corruption, a monstrous divide between rich and poor, and an exodus of an estimated 700 people per day who hope to find a better life elsewhere (principally the United States). That's the short list, by the way.

MT: Speaking of El Salvador, what was it that first interested you in the country? Have you traveled there? How else did you research it? Did any one specific element of the culture or geography inform your sense of the country more than others? During your travels and research, what one thing did you find most fascinating, memorable, or affecting?

DC: I first became interested in El Salvador when I met a woman whose father, an apostate colonel, was murdered there in 1980. She and I became good friends, and she invited me down to visit her friends and family.

Her mother had come from a prominent family—and within that class everybody knows everybody else in El Salvador—but her father had been born quite poor, thus the military had been the only real option for him to improve his social station, something that was true for a great many young men back at mid-century. He grew disgusted at the corruption he saw during the fabled Soccer War of 1969, and left the military, something one does not do easily there (or, as it turned out, with impunity). He entered business for himself and made a reasonable life for his family, but as the repression escalated, the lists of those to be eliminated began to include anyone who was suspected of even the merest opposition to the government or the military. This strategy went by two names. The first was "Drain the Sea," i.e., if you want to kill the fish, drain the sea. The thinking was that attacking the guerillas in the mountains was too problematic, better to wipe out their more readily accessible supporters: journalists, teachers, doctors, social workers, priests, catechists, nuns, etc. Eliminate this civilian support system, the insurgency would die (it didn't, despite the murder of nearly 40,000 civilians). The other term used to

describe this is "decapitation of the insurgency." The irony of such terminology is its source. "Drain the sea" comes from Mao Tse Tung, and "decapitation" was the term used by the Nazis for how they dealt with the Polish resistance. In the name of protecting democracy against totalitarian Communism we supported a regime that openly borrowed its methods from two of the most murderous totalitarian regimes in history, one of them Marxist.

As my friend introduced me around, I became aware of an almost poisonous animosity between the classes, even though people were universally kind, polite, helpful, and decent (at least to me). One really affecting moment, though, came one night near the end of my trip when one of my friend's wealthy companions, who'd been playing the generous tour guide for about a week, got drunk and dressed my friend down in front of me and her thirteen-year-old daughter, saying basically (I'm translating), "Don't forget that you're shit, and you'll always be shit."

I also saw that a lot of the infrastructure was falling apart, and there just didn't seem to be the money or the will to repair it. The landscape was devastated in places for the sake of plantations, and yet the beaches were largely unspoiled and spectacular, except where the hurricanes had laid waste. There seemed to be so much promise, and yet the weight of so much violent history, class conflict, mass poverty, indifference, and corruption felt oppressive at times. People of means often travel about and even dine with bodyguards, and wherever you go armed men stand guard, to the point I sometimes wondered if they weren't in fact protecting themselves from each other.

I also went down on my own a year or so later, to see more of the country, learn about its flora and fauna, its culture and institutions (and slang). One of the most intriguing people I met during that second visit was a former member of Mara Salvatrucha named Carlos Vasquez. He'd had a "crucible" experience in prison in the United States and had turned to Christ to escape the gang life. He was deported from the U.S. to El Salvador, even though he'd last seen the country when he was an infant. He had no illusions about gang life, and was in fact a big Bush supporter. But he also recognized the odd class consciousness down there (he noted that even recently promoted McDonalds managers begin to act like plantation overseers), and he commented that the overwhelming infusion of American culture had rendered the country a sad twin of Puerto Rico.

I also did a considerable amount of reading while writing the book, and a number of books were incredibly helpful. They're listed in the Acknowledgments of the book, and I won't go into them here, except to plus William LeoGrande's *In Our Own Back Yard*, the definitive history of America's involvement in El Salvador and Nicaragua from 1977 to 1992.

MT: With this novel, you have draped a gripping narrative over the skeleton of Sophocles' Philoctetes and you have set the resulting story largely in El Salvador. So how the heck did it also become a Chicago cop story?

DC: At the end of *Done for a Dime* (my second novel, the one preceding *Blood of Paradise*), "Richard Ferry" (the villain of that book) escapes to El Salvador, a country to which he fled for the first ten years earlier when he was indicted on corruption charges in Chicago. He helped train cops in El Salvador, and had a buddy in the Policia Nacional Civil who helped him disappear. Well, "Richard Ferry" was a pseudonym; his real name was Bill Malvasio, and he's one of the main characters in *Blood of Paradise*. In short, I chose Chicago because I already had in a

previous book, and Malvasio is a continuing character. Of course, that just begs the question of why I chose Chicago (and El Salvador) in the earlier book. Regarding the former, given what I know of street crime and the policing thereof in Chicago, it didn't seem too far a reach to imagine cops jacking drug dealers around the projects, which is what Malvasio and his buddies do. And I had him flee to El Salvador in *Done for a Dime* because I'd already been there and considered it a fascinating place to deposit a man on the run.

MT: Beyond that, how did it become a father/son story? In *Blood of Paradise*, you are definitely taking a hard look at how, as they say, the sins of the father are visited upon the son. Within the rest of this novel's context, how did that take shape?

DC: That's where Philoctetes comes in. In the original play, there are three characters: the corrupting elder, Odysseus; the noble young warrior, Neoptolemus, the son of the slain Achilles; and the warrior who was betrayed by his fellow Greeks ten years earlier, Philoctetes. I loved the moral symmetry at work in that arrangement. In brief, as the Greeks are traveling to Troy, they make camp on a desert island where Philoctetes is bitten by a venomous snake. The wound becomes infected, he spends the night howling with pain, the stench of the wound fouls the entire camp, to where the Greeks cannot make their offerings to the gods. Odysseus suggests they leave him behind, and the others agree—they slip off one morning while Philoctetes lies in pain-racked sleep. He has no companion but his weapon, the bow given to him by Herakles (a story in itself, which I'll skip). Ten years later, the siege of Troy is stalled (the original quagmire), Achilles is dead, and the Greeks address their soothsayers trying to figure out what to do. They're told they cannot prevail against Troy without the bow of Herakles. Odysseus must go back and reclaim a man who has had ten years to perfect his hatred. Odysseus decides to enlist the aid of his former rival's son, Neoptolemus, whom he tutors in the craft of deceit, since there is no way they can induce Philoctetes to rejoin the fray without lying to him. Although initially resistant, Neoptolemus ultimately warms to the scheme, with first brilliant but ultimately tragic results, and this was what I found intriguing. The reasons Neoptolemus decides to eschew his own values and embrace those of Odysseus isn't really explored in the original, and so I allowed myself to imagine what motivated the young man's desertion of heroic ideals for more "pragmatic" ones.

Jude, my protagonist (the son of a dead, corrupt Chicago cop), still has his father's ghost on his back as the story opens: He wants somehow to make up for his father's sins, while at the same time still hopes to live up to his father's example. I think a lot of young men are like that, especially ones who've lost their fathers (or been deserted by them). There's a desire to both honor and escape the father, which creates a moral ambiguity that makes the son prone to errors of judgment. This is Jude's situation, and he's beguiled by the opportunity to flirt with the same evil his father did, but show he has the character not to get dragged in. He can walk away, or so he thinks. But nothing is that simple, at least not in novels. Arithmetic, perhaps.

MT: Two of the things that distinguish this novel on the crime fiction shelf are its exquisite and powerful prose and its fearless examination of third-world politics. In approaching these elements, did you draw inspiration from any specific writers?

DC: Well, first of all, thank you. Every writer has a book or two (or several) that awakened in

him a mix of recognition, inspiration, and ambition. For me (and a lot of other writers I know) Robert Stone's *Dog Soldiers* was one of those books. Not surprisingly, *A Flag for Sunrise* was another. To have *Blood of Paradise* compared to Stone's work has been a very gratifying and humbling honor. And though *Blood of Paradise* has also been compared to the work of Graham Greene, I have to somewhat sheepishly admit that I've only read *The Power and the Glory*, though that's obviously relevant. I've also been inspired and influenced by Joseph Conrad, Martha Gelhorn, Pete Dexter, Alan Furst and Robert Wilson, all great stylists who capture place and time deftly, often brilliantly.

MT: In a number of different ways, and through a few different characters, in *Blood of Paradise* you seem to be exploring the idea that pure motivations inevitably fail or are fundamentally compromised. Jude, for example, acts on what he believes is solid reasoning only to find that he has landed himself in serious trouble by grossly misunderstanding his own motivations. Meanwhile, Axel proves himself to be driven by a deep and honest desire to do good, but his actions only complicate an already murky situation and deepen the peril faced by those around him. Would you say this assessment is accurate?

DC: In a word: yes.

In several more words: The problem with the human condition is we only pretend to know what lies in store for us. Prediction is purely argument by analogy, dependent on the hope that the future will conform to the past. And we have only two ways of understanding the past. The first is through memory, which is inherently flawed—recent research suggests that memory is in fact an odd mix of imagination and expectation, and recall is actually reconstruction heavily influenced by desires and biases and habits of mind rooted in the present. The other is history, which is, as they say, written by the victors (or by academics who believe they have found some novel thesis or insight or evidence worthy of a new analysis). So the one is undermined by desire or expectation or habit, the other by the need to bolster the accepted view or, contrarily, strive for novelty (and both of those are hindered by the inherently spotty historical record), and neither can claim to possess a link of necessity to the future. We're driving blind—or perhaps more accurately, driving while gazing dreamily in the rearview mirror.

Jude's problem is a little different. His lack of clarity involves the self, not the future, but the problems aren't unrelated. The self is heavily dependent on memory, that and the social and environmental associations we navigate every day and our various habits. That's why it can be broken down in isolation, or under extreme duress (such as torture—something Orwell addresses in 1984). Jude has suffered a shattering moment of betrayal, connected with the realization his father was not at all what he'd presented himself to be. I hinted above at how that creates ambiguity in Jude as to his own motives: He can't decide how to address the example of his father, whom he loved and respected not uncritically, but by whom he still felt terribly deceived. And because he has not yet settled on a clear idea of what his father's story means (and perhaps cannot do so given his father's untimely death—there will never be an eye-to-eye reckoning), he vacillates between two poles: His father really was the man Jude thought he was, albeit with a damning secret; or his father was really someone else entirely, someone who had everyone around him fooled.

I actually think this is how a lot of Americans feel about our country. Is America really the beacon of democracy, opportunity, and civic decency we grew up believing it to be, albeit with some stains on the linen? Or is it instead a mobster's paradise, beholden to wealth and privilege, where power decides all, ideals are propaganda for the gullible, and it's every man for himself? If you can't decide which it is—and where do you go to uncover the decisive, irrefutable evidence so you can choose reliably?—how do you identify yourself as an American? How do you act in accordance with "American values?" That ambiguity accounts for the contrast between the incredible acts of selflessness and courage we hear so much about from Iraq, as well as the disgusting images from Abu Ghraib.

As for Axel, his problem is more conventional. How does one do the right thing when the consequences of action are unforeseeable? Just because our actions align with our virtues doesn't mean everything will turn out dandy, far from it. Even if the Bush Administration had planned and executed the Iraq effort flawlessly, we still would be watching unspeakable atrocities and terrible events. (I can actually muster some compassion for the administration on this point, albeit not much.) Clausewitz called this "friction," the fact that once combat starts, so many contingencies come into play at once that it's impossible to predict with any certainty how the battle will play out. He also said that of all the errors to be made on a battlefield, those inspired by compassion are the worst—an insight long on soldierly sang froid, short on evidence. He provides none at any rate, not that I recall. Well, Axel could be cited as an example. He truly desires to redeem his life, which he fears has been wasted, by an act of selfless and courageous compassion. And it's noble. But he can't see all the angles. No one can.

And yet: given the blindness of reason, what else do we have but our virtues: courage, compassion, honesty (to the best of our abilities). These may not be able to "save" us, but they do define our humanity to the extent they shape the outline of our better angels, and in them I place my hope, something the very end of *Blood of Paradise* makes clear.