

Matt Royal's No Longer a Mystery

An Interview with Author H. Terrell Griffin

H. Terrell "Terry" Griffin lives with his wife in Long Boat Key and Maitland, Florida. Terry earned degrees in history and law from Mercer University in Macon, Georgia. Upon graduating from law school he spent thirty-eight years as a civil trial attorney in Florida. His active trial practice made it difficult to find time to write, which is why Terry waited until his retirement to aggressively pursue a writing career.

Terry's first novel *Longboat Blues* (2005) and his second novel *Murder Key* (2006) were both regional bestsellers. The third book in his Matt Royal Mystery series, *Blood Island* (December 2008), was a finalist for the U.S.A. Book News National Best Book of 2008 in the Mystery/Suspense category. *Blood Island* also made the American Booksellers Association's (Booksense) national bestseller list for December 2008.

Like Terry, his protagonist Matt Royal lives on the coast of Florida. In each of the books in the Matt Royal Mystery series, Florida history and culture plays a central role. Terry sets all of books in Florida, not just because it's where he lives, but because Florida is home to some of the most outrageous people in the world, providing plenty of fodder for crime fiction. Good news for readers, that translates into unlimited mysteries for Matt Royal to solve.

In *Blood Island*, Matt Royal, lawyer turned laidback beach bum, is asked by his ex-wife to locate her stepdaughter who disappeared while vacationing in Florida. Last place Peggy was seen was Long Boat Key, Matt's hometown. Still in love with his ex, and still guilty that he let his law practice ruin what otherwise would've have been a perfect marriage, Matt doesn't hesitate to agree. What starts as a simple search for an errant college girl on a spring break bender turns into a dangerous exploration into the inner workings of a cult of religious zealots intent to spark a holy war on American soil. Enlisting the aid of his best buddies, Jock Algren and Logan Hamilton, Matt launches a search that leads from Longboat Key to Key West to a tropical island paradise called Blood Island, the cult's home base.

Blood Island is filled with non-stop action with twists and turns that make it difficult to discern the good guys from the bad guys. Terry's writing voice is unique with tight and punchy narrative and dialog--an entertaining combination. But, what really makes this book a fun read is the book's protagonist, Matt Royal. What's not to love about someone who would prefer to be a beach bum than be slave to a law practice, especially when he's willing to put his life on the line for the right cause. I'm looking forward to see what trouble Matt gets into next and how his beer-guzzling buddies help him wade his way out.

Q: You had a long productive career as a trial lawyer, so why have you decided to write now?

A: I always wanted to write, but never found the time. I was a very busy trial lawyer for 38 years, and when I decided to retire, I decided to try my hand at writing. I'm fulfilling a lifelong dream and having a ball.

Q: Why do you write mysteries?

A: I have always been a mystery fan, certainly since I read John D. MacDonald's first Travis Magee novel when I was in college. Since I love the genre, it seemed natural to attempt to write a mystery.

Q: When did you begin the process of writing your first book? How long did it take you? What did you find the most challenging?

A: I think in a real sense I started writing my first book when I was a teenager. I never was disciplined enough to finish it, and when I joined the Army right out of high school, I tried some more. I was seeing so much of a world that I scarcely knew existed and wanted to put it on paper. This was the beginning of my first novel *Longboat Blues*. It only took me another 40 or so years to begin in earnest. However, some of the scenes that are in the first book were ones that I actually wrote while in the Army. Once I really sat down to write, when I was nearing retirement from the law practice, it took me about six months to put the final product together. I think the plot was the most challenging in that I had to find a way to keep the tension building and allow the mystery to be solved by the protagonist as the story unfolded. I had to drop clues along the way. When the protagonist does solve the mystery, I want my reader to slap his or her head and wonder why they didn't figure that out from the clues they had read in the chapters leading up to the climax.

Q: What is your work schedule like? How has it changed since you published your first book?

A: I don't really have a schedule. I write when the muse calls. I only have to turn out one book a year, and I find that not to be an overwhelming obligation. Sometimes I'll write twenty pages at a sitting and get up the next morning and write another twenty. Sometimes, I'll write a couple of pages and not touch it for days after that. There are a lot of days when I don't write at all.

Q: There are a lot of legal thriller books on the market, but not with a beach bum attorney as the protagonist. What was the impetus for developing Matt Royal's character in this fashion?

A: I think for all those years I spent in a courtroom, my daydreams took me to the beach and to a life not unlike Matt's. I don't really see my books as legal thrillers, except for the first one, *Longboat Blues*. Matt is a lawyer, but he could be a plumber for all it matters in the other books.

Q: How many books do you plan for the Matt Royal series?

A: I don't really know. I like Matt Royal and his buddies. I like their lifestyle. I want to delve a little more into Matt's background to determine what makes him tick. I'll continue writing the series as long as I enjoy it and as long as the readers don't think I've gotten stale.

Q: Who are some of your favorite authors? Is there anyone in particular you draw inspiration from? If so, how has that influenced your writing?

A: John D. MacDonald is certainly one of my favorite authors and one from whom I've drawn a great deal of inspiration. I'd have to say that James Lee Burke falls into that category as well. Other writers that I enjoy immensely include Randy Wayne White, Daniel Silva, Vince Flynn, T. Jefferson Parker, Stephen Coonts and Michael Connelly.

Q: Do you know the ending to your book when you start writing? After it's in print, do you ever wish it had a different ending?

A: I never know where the book is going to take the characters or me. So far, I've never second guessed the endings of the books. They actually seemed to work pretty well.

Q: It is becoming more difficult to become published. Tell us about the process it took for you to get your first book on book store shelves.

A: It is tremendously hard to get published. I got so many rejections on my first book that I simply gave up and published it myself. Much to my surprise, it became a regional bestseller. I did the same with the second book, and then had the good fortune to give my third manuscript, the one that became *Blood Island*, to the owner of an independent book store in Sarasota, Florida. She and her partner had been great supporters of my first two books. She read the manuscript, liked it and sent it to Oceanview Publishing with her recommendation. Oceanview picked it up and published it, releasing it on December 1, 2008. Oceanview will also release my next book, *Wyatt's Revenge*, on December 1, 2009.

Q: While getting a book onto store shelves is a huge challenge, the work doesn't end there. How do you go about publicizing your work and developing a fan base?

A: I have the world's best publicist. That is, I believe, the most important part of marketing. I make myself available for interviews and book signings, book club meetings, conferences and the like. I try to go wherever I'm invited to talk about my book. So far it seems to be working and I'm having a ball doing it.

Q: Are you currently working on a new book? If so, can you talk about it a little?

A: I'm actually working on two books, one a Matt Royal story and the other a thriller that takes place in Europe with Jock Algren as the protagonist. Jock is a U.S. Government agent who finds himself involved with very bad people as he is trying to protect his nation. In the Matt Royal

book, Matt is dragged into a mystery that involves the Seminole Indians and some of their black relatives who live in the Bahamas.

Q: You have a new book coming out soon, what can you tell us about it?

A: *Wyatt's Revenge* is finished and will be released in December 2009. The title character, Laurence Wyatt, Matt Royal's very close friend, is murdered in the first sentence of the book. Matt and his buddies try to bring some sort of justice to the killers, legal if possible, and extra legal if necessary. The story takes the characters from Florida to Europe and back again. They fall into a nest of really bad people who are protecting decades old secrets and fortunes.

For more information about H. Terrell Griffin and his novels visit his website at www.hterrellgriffin.com.