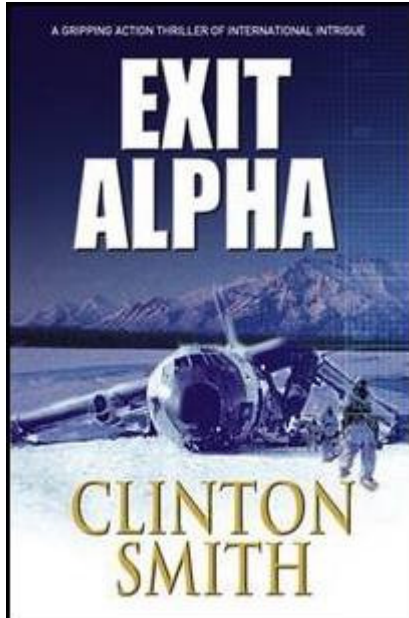


SPEECH GIVEN TO LIBRARY AUDIENCES ABOUT THE WRITING OF EXIT ALPHA



Fiction is a curious invention. It's sometimes more effective at changing the world than fact.

Have you noticed how factual books are now becoming partly fiction. A recent biography of Ronald Reagan interposed a purely fictional narrator. And quite often now fiction is 'faction' - poses as fact. Truman Capote's book *In Cold Blood* was a famous early example.

Fiction can also pack a satirical punch strong enough to destabilise governments. For instance - *The Good Soldier Schweick*.

Even a thriller can be more than entertainment. It can highlight facts the mainstream media soft-pedals. Some facts are too dangerous to tackle directly and fiction - being at one remove - can lift these into awareness.

It can also be ahead of the headlines. Because good thrillers are often based on research into new trends and coming events. When all that's collected, the writer usually has to do a lot of hard predictive thinking - because he's writing a 'what-if' story. This is one reason why thrillers and science fiction have often predicted the future with a better strike-rate than most economists, futurists and historians.

So predictive fiction *can* help us look ahead.

There are brilliant examples through the years. (Remember Verne, Wells, Huxley, Orwell?) For instance *1984* is with us. The only mistake Orwell made was imagining it would be overt rather than covert.

To demonstrate this futurist cast to the thriller - my next, now with the publisher, is an examination of the future of warfare based on the latest military projections. The one after that, which I'm writing now, is based on the conclusions of multiple think tanks and political and scientific forecasts.

Of course, thrillers are mass-market entertainment and have a duty to be fun.

That means an adroit blend of action, suspense, military hardware, eroticism and intrigue.

Generally there should be a beautiful male person and a beautiful female person who, after enormous complications end up together in some hopeful or horizontal way. And there should be enigmatic baddies who almost triumph - only to die horribly.

Well, in a Smith thriller, you'll find variations on all these conventions.

The beautiful female person could be bent, or someone the hero never beds. The beautiful male person might not only become a cripple but also have brain surgery. The villain may be pitiful and might even die heroically.

I'm fond of bizarre characters. Brilliant fourteen stone lesbians who run the world. Billionaire arms dealers who are trying to save the Amazon. Teenage nymphets afflicted with poltergeists. Heroines with double mastectomies. Nothing's predictable or formula. At least I hope it's not. It's a trip. Designed to surprise, interest, provoke. To be intelligent entertainment - fun.

And twisting the formula is fun.

I'm really not interested in writing the formula product at all. I'm trying to write intelligent escapism for big boys with brains. So EXIT ALPHA, though a rather gritty thriller, has considerable depth and subtext.

On the surface, it's the usual world-spanning international story in which two world leaders - Pope John Paul the First and President Zia of Pakistan - are resurrected by the plot to live beyond their apparent deaths.

The hero, Ray Cain, is an agent of EXIT - a covert organisation that attempts to guide world events more rationally by either killing dangerous political figures or replacing them with manageable look-alikes. Cain has completed his mission, to replace Zia, and faces retirement.

But his extreme specialisation makes him useless for any other task. So, triumphant, rich, middle aged, he is obliged to live the rest of his life in exile from the organisation that is all he has ever known.

Then he is recalled for a last trifling assignment. But the project expands into a quest across the most inhospitable continent on earth - Antarctica - and involves him in an interior journey more demanding still.

Despite these arabesques, it surprises me how the books I write seem to plug into contemporary events, even though they're written years before they happen.

Zia echoes the recent events around Saddam Hussein who, as you know had at least three body doubles.

You may have heard the joke: Saddam's chief of staff assembles the doubles after the war and says: I have good news and bad news. The good news. Saddam's alive. The bad news - he's lost an arm.

Have you ever wondered how many world leaders are actually there? What if people like Pope John Paul the first and even Princes Di are still alive? What if they've been kidnapped and replaced by the bodies of doubles?

John Paul the First is a major character in the book. In real life, he was pope for one month. He was also sympathetic to birth control and some say he was killed because of it. In ALPHA, that death was faked and he's still alive but imprisoned by the brilliant woman who runs the world's most covert intelligence agency.

And I have to say it was wonderful to be able to extend his life. He turned out to be a very special person that it became a privilege to know. Strange how characters can do that to you - turn into people you would never have expected.

So does all of this sound simple?

It's not.

You can write a thriller, if you're a commercial machine, in a year, and have one out each Christmas. At that pace, the best you can do is sketch in the muscle and action and jam it with cardboard characters and stock responses.

Or you could try and do it very well indeed. That's what interests Smith. He spends at least three years on each book, does enormous research, endless revisions. The plot alone takes him three months to concoct. And the characterisation and motivations are very carefully engineered. Endless revisions and reworkings, endless condensation and word balancing. Enormous industry, energy and care goes into each of these books. And each word has to work.

ALPHA is a page-turner because I find most thrillers dreary and slow. But it's also an attempt at a three dimensional world. I'm writing about unusual characters with human depth. And it's hard call to do that in a thriller. Because you have to do so much else.

So how to invest it with enough depth to be intelligent and subtle as well as escapist? That's what I'm trying for here - a kind of cross between Tom Clancy and Le Carre. Le Carre is very fine but his characters take a page to answer the telephone. Which is acceptable if it's a character you already know and love. But if you don't have that advantage, it's a long and difficult job to get the balance right.

As for the theme of the book - yes, even a thriller is allowed to have a theme - instead of the usual bastardry, in EXIT ALPHA it's the effect of love - from human to divine.

In other words, I'm attempting the impossible. So why put all that effort into a mass-market book?

Fortunately I'm self-funded, technically retired, and can take the time to do it as well as I can. After all, I've waited a lifetime to do this. And so, while watching myself decay, I may as well do as I wish.

So we have this Hercules military transport that crashes in the middle of Antarctica. And the survivors include the kidnapped pope, the Middle East dictator, a cult leader, several assassins and sundry others - including a nymphet afflicted with a poltergeist.

They can't be rescued because for good reasons, no country will go near them.

So how do they survive?

According to the Sunday Telegraph, that entire sequence is "enthralling". But easy reading's hard writing. And the research for this one was enormous. In fact ALPHA's so extensively researched they made me add a glossary - and half the people in the acknowledgments are scientists in Antarctica or professional warriors serving in defence forces around the world. Without that kind of expert input I'd be dead. But I think I got it right because the Australian Defence Forces Bulletin commended the book's authenticity and called it 'a pure adrenaline rush.'

But to write something this ambitious, you have to know everything about everything. Neuro-surgery, weapons systems, Gilbert & Sullivan, Catholic dogma, Vatican and Pakistan politics, systems and survival in Antarctica. Wound ballistics. Aircraft carriers. Airships. Special forces techniques. And more.

Then there are the locations. This one includes, Venice, Chartres in France, Lahore in Pakistan, the Vatican, the Persian Gulf, Sydney, Tasmania's southwest, New Zealand's Fiordland and Punta Arenas in Chile.

As for the military research - to give you some idea of the complexity – check the pilot's description of a C2-A Hawkeye early warning AWAC landing on an aircraft carrier on page 24.

Can you imagine how much research an ex-ad man living in Chatswood would have to do to get that kind of detail? That page probably took me two weeks. And that's just one small section of the book.

Military authenticity? Okay. That's expected in a thriller. But does one really need to have a subtle exposition of esoteric thought from Buddha to Gurdjieff? Does one really need to know precisely how to start a Haggglunds tracked vehicle when the engine is frozen solid? Or how to fly and maintain an airship? If you're serious about authenticity - about creating an alternative reality - you do.

And the joy is right there.

The chance to construct alternative world.

I've spent most of my life writing advertising. Spent years working on the studio floor in TV stations, more years sitting in the darkness of editing suites. I've directed quite a few lower budget commercials and numerous documentaries as well as produced hundreds of radio spots. So I know my way around broadcast media and film.

And what you have in those disciplines is a meeting of minds, if it goes well. The thing is never just in one head. Even with something as linear as a radio commercial, the sound engineer has his say. The actors have their input. There are decisions about effects levels, music and so on. Several minds working together.

But, with a book, you're it!

You're your own location manager, grip, gaffer, director, writer, make-up artist, props man, wardrobe lady... the whole production company.

You're never weathered - have precisely the climate you need. You never have to wait for that plane to go over before you roll sound. There's never a hair in the gate or a bad focus pull. Every shot is picture perfect. And you can change the set-up as many times as you like. Not only that - you have an unlimited budget. There's nothing you can't do. The hottest Hollywood directors don't have anything near that scope.

You can create your own amazing world.

You - are GOD.

But shouldn't God show restraint? For instance, do the action scenes really have to be that graphic?

Well consider the evening news, which the networks have reduced to the level of distraction, entertainment. You'll see more brutal sights there than in this book - from collapsing world trade centres to hip replacements. Even the Sunday press will tell you about infants harvested for their corneas. Life is often brutal. Should we ignore that?

It's interesting how they've tried to attribute Titus Andronicus to everyone but Shakespeare but there's good evidence he wrote it and academics are stuck with that.

So if I bring a blush to your maidenly cheek, then can only offer a suggestion much favoured by one of my daughters: "Get a life."

Although writing a novel makes you a one-man-band, the process still requires orchestration. And the elements of that counterpoint are pace, sex, action, intrigue, characterisation, atmosphere and factual authentication. These have to be combined. It's also good to be ferociously topical. For instance, my second book, *THE GODGAME*, was reality TV years before that was even heard of.

You also need a clear mind. Patricia Highsmith said that a book is a process that should be interrupted only by sleep.

It's true. But how do you organise your life for such minimum distraction? It's almost impossible in your go-getting forties. Getting and spending lays waste your powers. But as the years fly, things drop away.

If you're a loner with wife divorced, children flown, friends gone, pets dead - you have freedom.

In fact, I'm now so free that the most dramatic event of my week happens every Wednesday. When I put the garbage out.

You need this kind of space because writing is rewriting and, if you're serious, you'll endlessly rework.

Then, for narrative fiction, you should SHOW the story, not tell it. So it also helps to spend a lifetime writing advertising of every kind. Why? It conditions you to visualise. And to examine precisely the effect of every word you write.

I won't go into advertising theory, which is more recondite than most people imagine. But one useful rule of thumb is 'think it out square and say it with flair.'

Although writing is one of the hardest games going - everyone is sure they can do it. It took me over ten years to understand the inner principles of writing effective advertising and forty to get a book published. When I finally did that, it was a fluke.

I put three book-length MSS in the garbage one day. One of them I should never have thrown out. I told you that putting out the garbage is exciting.

But does one need that kind of opposition? Isn't life tough enough? My standard advice to people who want to write is - don't.

Years ago I saw that it was impossible to try and write while working at a job and caring for a family. So I decided to spend most of my working life bankrolling myself in the hope of having time to scribble in my declining years.

I spent most of my life with an upset stomach and a buzzing head, writing every kind of advertising on a vast range of products.

It's a job where you spend 40% of your effort working and 60% taking the knives out of your back. I got through all that with my health intact, hung up my stopwatch and here we are.

Why flog on? Because there's no choice.

Writing is a character flaw.

Perhaps every attempt at self-expression is.

The ancient Greeks compared life to a gymnasium. It's a fine, strong analogy.

And life is obviously a challenge. You could say a field of endeavour. But the arena for self-expression is a far smaller field. A painter's field is a blank canvas. An athlete's field might be a long-jump pit or a diving tower or a velodrome.

The scribbler has an even smaller field - the screen of a computer. There he contends year after year - adjusting funny symbols called words for the sheer intellectual joy of it.

Now, if a friend or even a publisher happens to like the way you arrange those symbols,

that's a bonus. If the book actually makes money, that is presumably a double bonus. But it almost never gets that far and neither should you expect it to.

Why complain? You are endlessly entitled to that first supreme joy of arranging symbols on a page and it's a pleasure no one can take away from you. But if you waste your life and distort your psychology trying to exceed that first pure simple pleasure, you're daft.

That first joy of creation should suffice - whether your means of expression is pottery, painting, landscape gardening, skeet shooting or cooking. You may be a fantastic cook with a flair and dash that amazes your guests. But it's unlikely you'll end up running the Opera House Restaurant. So what? You've still fulfilled yourself. So be delighted. And content.

Hence an important edict: success is failure. And also consider the remarkable comment by artist, Marcel Du Champ: 'There is no solution - because there is no problem.'

Perhaps at some level, there *IS* no problem. Chung Tzu made the assertion that life is a dream. And certainly fiction is a dream.

A dream within a dream. And, like a double negative, it might bring us closer to waking than we think.

So enough philosophising from a teller of tall tales. Now it's time to hear from you.