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The First Organization for Professional Thriller Writers

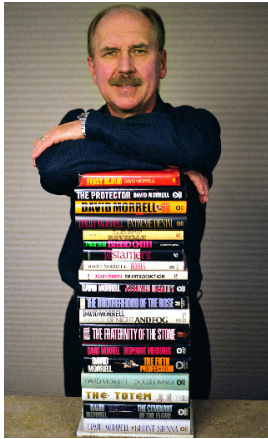
David Morrell: Literary High-Flier

BY K.J. HOWE



"Nobody is born a warrior,
in exactly the same way that
nobody is born an average
man. We make ourselves
into one or the other."

—Carlos Castaneda



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If there is one author who has transformed himself into a literary warrior, it's David Morrell. David published *First Blood* in 1972, and he has now written over 30 books. With 18 million copies in print, this ITW Thriller Master has been translated into 26 languages.

Perhaps the best word to describe David is untiring. Relentless in his pursuit of excellence, he has been a high-flier in the publishing world for four decades. As Jon Land (*Strong Justice*) says, "David is a true warrior who sets trends rather than follows them. He doesn't please anyone other than himself. He creates standards and then exceeds them." One only has to look at the variety and volume of David's books to see that he has always been ahead of the curve.

David's novels are timeless—you can pick up any of his books and be guaranteed a great read, regardless of when the novel was written. Jon explains that "David's books don't limit themselves to a specific time and culture. He keeps reinventing himself. First, he created the high-action thriller, then he wrote classic espionage novels, and then he combined the horror and thriller genres with *Creepers*. Like a true warrior, he refused to be 'typified' as a certain kind of writer. There are few thriller writers who become great novelists, and David is one of

them. He is a pioneer who made the thriller acceptable at a higher level."

The Master Craftsman

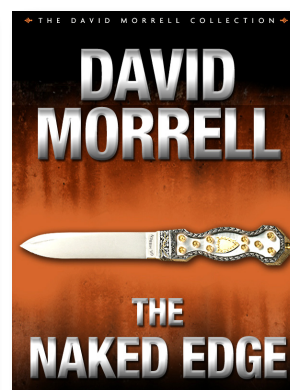
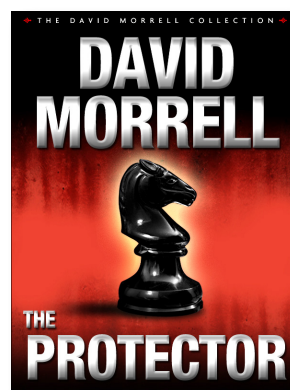
"The more you sweat in training, the less you will bleed in battle." Navy SEALs Motto

I've had the pleasure of hearing David, a former literature professor, speak numerous times, and one of the many gems he shared was his strategic approach to writing novels. When he invests a year of his life in a book, he wants to learn and grow as a result. Perhaps this is why David has straddled genres and has written mostly stand-alone novels in a time when publishing encourages authors to create a series character. David gives innovation new meaning, always striving for something that has never been done before.

When I asked David about his tendency to write mostly stand-alone novels, he explained that "I repeated a few characters: Saul and Drew in *The Brotherhood of the Rose* spy trilogy, Balenger and

Amanda in *Creepers* and *Scavenger*, and Cavanaugh and Jamie in *The Protector* and *The Naked Edge*. I even wrote two novelizations for the second and third Rambo films, which is weird because Rambo died at the end of my novel, *First Blood*. But my more than 30 books have usually been stand-alones. It wasn't a deliberate choice. My most enjoyable summer of reading involved all of John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee series. I think I could have had fun writing a series. But new possibilities kept occurring to me, and I couldn't resist going in new directions. I suspect that's why I'm still being published after almost four decades. With a series, there's a risk that a writer might run out of variations and lose interest at the same time that readers get the idea and go elsewhere."

Well, I don't see readers losing interest in David's gripping novels anytime soon. Every detail of every book is meticulously crafted, from the well-constructed plots to the deeper messages subtly layered within the pages. But what exactly is it about David's writing that makes him a Thriller Master?

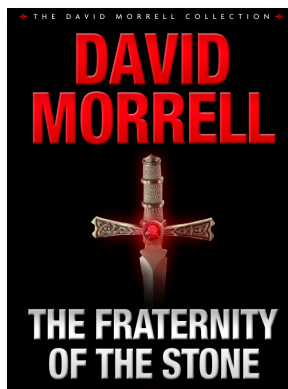
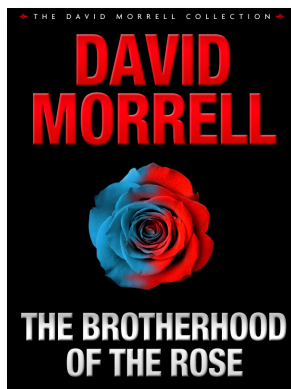


C.J. Lyons (*Urgent Care*) feels that it is his ability to establish an emotional connection with readers. "He knows what his readers want and need in a story, and he delivers every time. David has mastered the art of storytelling and has the artistic sensibilities of a great wordsmith—and that's an unbeatable combination."

Perhaps another reason David's novels are such a satisfying read is that they offer brilliant insights into the human psyche. Douglas Preston (*Fever Dream* with Lincoln Child) feels that David "invented the contemporary high-action thriller in *First Blood*. The novel is non-stop action, but not mindless action because the arc of the plot is so amazingly constructed that it demands action. At its time, this was

something very new. And the narrative is very deep with psychological motivations and the commentary on how people are damaged by war. David explores deeper realities in the character of Rambo."

Anyone who studies David's work will uncover certain themes—the search for



father figures and the unveiling of murky pasts, perhaps as a fictionalized way of searching for the truth in David's own past. When I asked why David wrote the short story, "My Name Is Legion," about the French Foreign Legion, he explained, "One of my persistent themes involves how people who consider themselves to be serious and solid can relentlessly follow their principles until they can no longer tell right from wrong. That was the point of my first novel, *First Blood*, and it continues to fascinate me almost 40 years later. 'My Name Is Legion' (in *Warriors*, ed. by George R. R. Martin and Gardner Dozois) dramatizes a battle in WWII during which two elements of the French Foreign Legion, one working for the Germans, the other for the Allies, fought each other to the death, even though they had trained together, bunked together, and eaten together for many years. They knew that the situation was insane, and yet they were committed to the Foreign Legion's code to fight for whoever paid them. The principle of loyalty to an employer outweighed common sense and loyalty to one's comrades."

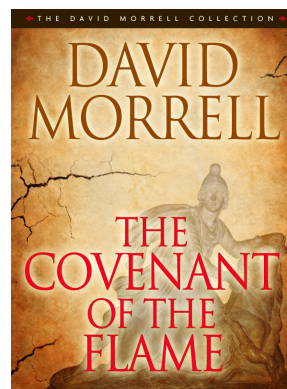
Longevity

The path of the warrior is lifelong, and mastery is often simply staying on the path. Richard Strozzi Heckler

In an industry that changes daily, it's a challenge to remain in the spotlight. Few authors have matched David in longevity. Asked about the evolution of the thriller genre in the last forty years and his role in it, he explained that the changes have been huge.

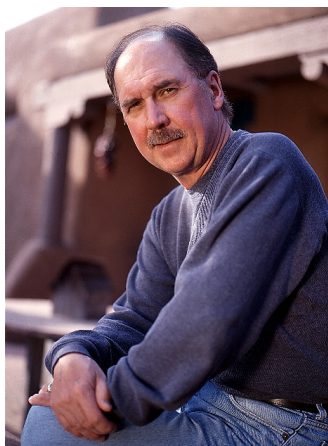
"At the time of *First Blood*'s publication in 1972, there were few subgenres among thrillers, and thrillers didn't routinely appear on bestseller lists. The spy thriller existed in strength with authors like John le Carré and Ian Fleming, but the legal thriller, the medical thriller, the high-tech thriller, the religious thriller, the corporate thriller, the anti-terrorist thriller and so on were yet to be developed. *Thrillers: 100 Must Reads*, which I co-edited with Hank Wagner, shows how this happened. As for my own role in these changes, *First Blood* has been called 'the father of the modern action novel' because prior to that time few books had that amount of action and pace, especially in a non-genre context. *The Brotherhood of the Rose* made

a difference, I think, because it combined John le Carré's authentic espionage approach with the action approach of Robert Ludlum. *The Fraternity of the Stone* was perhaps the first religious



thriller, just as *The Covenant of the Flame* was probably the first environmental thriller.”

David had a massive impact on the genre—and he continues to inspire many novelists, both new and experienced, through his innovative and meaningful stories.



The Man Behind the Author

A warrior must only take care that his spirit is never broken. Shissai

Behind every great warrior's exterior lie tales of hardship

and loss. In David's case, he had many personal challenges to overcome. His fighter pilot father died in World War II, and his mother put him in an orphanage when he was three years old. When his mother remarried and reclaimed him, the arguments between her and David's stepfather left the boy so fearful that he slept under his bed. Perhaps these early trials gave him the strength and skills to become a great warrior. One of Douglas Preston's mentors shared that, in his opinion, the most successful writers have suffered childhood trauma. If this is truly the case, David's childhood prepared him exceedingly well.

Later in life, David also battled personal tragedy with the loss of his son and his granddaughter. “While I have been fortunate in my career, I can't say the

same for my private life. The death of my 15-year-old son, Matthew, in 1987 took me down for three years. I wrote about it in *Fireflies*. When I regrouped, everything was difficult, merely getting up in the

morning, let alone writing. Matt died from a rare bone cancer, Ewing's sarcoma, that afflicts only 200 people in the United States each year. In 2009, my 14-year-old granddaughter, Natalie, died from the same disease. She was in the hospital for 250 days. The disease is not supposed to be inherited. What terrible odds. I sometimes make a dark joke that the only reason I keep going is that I've had practice dealing with horror.”

Gayle Lynds (*The Book of Spies*) concludes that “David waged war against despair and finally returned with a greater depth of understanding of life that deepened his writing, turning personal tragedy into something that is universal.”

During a keynote speech at a writers' conference, David explained that everyone has a dominant emotion and that his emotion is fear, but C.J. Lyons believes that the emotion is actually hope. “He turns personal tragedy into something that is inspiring and empowering and offers hope—hope that the world can be transformed through acts of bravery and sacrifice and courage. Hope that good will triumph and justice will prevail.”



When I asked David if he found writing fiction cathartic, he answered, “John Barth once said that reality is an interesting place to visit but you wouldn’t want to live there very long. Escaping into the daydream of fiction and the magic of words is a wonderful alternative to what can be a hostile neighborhood.” Knowing the personal losses David has suffered, I find it comforting to know that fiction allows him a porthole into another reality, a place where he can leave his worries behind.

Gayle Lynds adds that, “David has limitless curiosity, and he likes to try new things. In addition to having an incredible intellect and being a fine writer, he is a first-rate human being.”

Asked to reveal something surprising to his fans, David comments, “The creator of Rambo, who once broke his collarbone in a knife-fighting course, loves to grow vegetables and dig in the garden.” Rumors also suggest that he sports a wicked forehand in tennis and that he is an avid fan of Dr. Oz. If there is one thing I’m sure of, it’s that there are many surprises left to be discovered about David.

Preparation is Key

The focused mind can pierce through stone.
Hagakure

An intelligent and successful warrior never goes into battle unprepared—and David is no stranger to in-depth research. In fact, as you read above, he has broken a bone or two during hand-to-hand combat sessions. Now that’s sacrificing for the art!

He doesn’t just investigate his characters’ profes-

sions; he becomes them. For example, to prepare for *Double Image*, David lived the life of a photographer. He is also a graduate of the National Outdoor Leadership School for wilderness survival as well as the G. Gordon Liddy Academy of Corporate Security. In addition, he is an honorary lifetime member of the Special Operations Association and the Association of Intelligence Officers. David has been trained in firearms, hostage negotiation, assuming

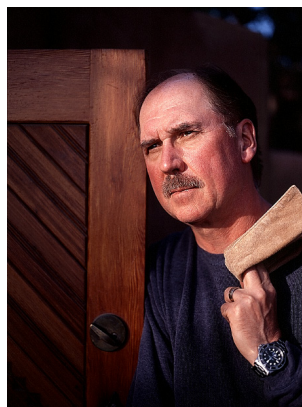
identities, executive protection, and car fighting, among other action skills that he describes in his novels.



“Learning about photography for *Double Image* profoundly changed the way I see things around me,” David explains. “Learning how to fly a plane for *The Shimmer* was profound as well because I am now able to move in three dimensions. As for the week I spent researching *The Protector* at the Bill Scott Raceway in West Virginia, learning how to drive cars the way stunt people do in the movies, that was the finest amusement park I ever went to. I laughed constantly for the entire week as I spun cars at high speeds and rammed barricades. Living above timberline for 30 days in Wyoming’s Wind River Mountains also stands out—because of the resilience it taught me.”

Douglas Preston echoes David’s commitment to research. “He is a warrior in the real world, battling reality to gain the information he needs to write his

book.” David’s action scenes mirror his in-depth research. An excellent example is the fight scene in complete darkness in *The Fraternity of the Stone*, the mood palpably breathtaking and sentient, the details precise and vivid.



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Future Warriors

The two most powerful warriors are patience and time. Leo Tolstoy

If you are an aspiring author, be sure to read *The Successful Novelist: A Lifetime of*

Lessons about Writing and Publishing. Not only will you be privileged to view a snapshot into David’s life, but you will also learn a great deal about the craft of writing and the art of storytelling. “I have several mantras that I teach my writing students. ‘Be a first-rate version of yourself rather than a second-rate version of another writer.’ ‘Write the book that you were meant to write, not the book that you think will satisfy the current, soon-to-change market.’ ‘Approach your work with a sense of devotion, adventure, and discovery.’”

Douglas Preston was once a recipient of David’s kindness. Over 15 years ago, he asked David for a cover quote for his first novel *Jennie*. David graciously agreed and a wonderful friendship bloomed. Today, Doug is a fiery proponent of ITW’s mission to help his fellow authors because of the support

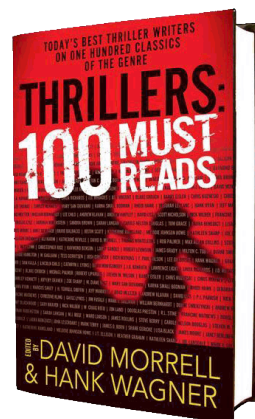
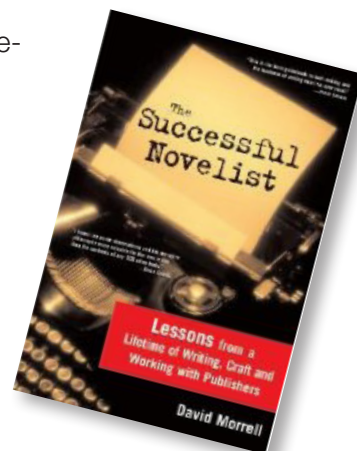
and encouragement he received from David.

Gayle Lynds appreciated David’s incredible devotion as her partner in starting ITW.

“With David, it is all about community and collegiality and giving authors opportunities they might otherwise never have. David always looks for talent in aspiring writers, that little extra that includes an eye for a story and an ear for words and the personal vigor that will keep a person at their computer long enough so he/she can be very good.”

The caring attitude that Gayle and David exhibit is exactly why International Thriller Writers has grown to be such an influential and positive organization. When asked about his vision for ITW in the next five to ten years, David answers, “ITW’s mandate is to help thriller writers become better at their craft and to educate readers about the enormous possibilities of thrillers. Our Debut Authors program and our CraftFest/AgentFest sessions go a long way toward the first goal, and books like *Thrillers: 100 Must Reads* help with the second goal.”

David is a steadfast warrior, a mind warrior, an intrepid warrior, a loyal warrior, but



most of all a literary warrior—and we are grateful for his legacy of books. He has had a fascinating career, never compromising his integrity or inner voice by writing to market rather than writing for himself. Instead, he keeps flying to new heights, and I can't wait to see what he does next. No matter which direction he turns, I'm sure we'll all learn from David's exploration.

If you ever have the opportunity to hear David speak, by all means do so. He has the gift of making you feel like you're the only person in the room—he gives sage advice, his intelligent eyes full of kindness and warmth. The world would be a better place if we had a few more warriors like David. Visit his website www.davidmorrell.net and his Facebook page to which he contributes daily.

This essay originally appeared on the International Thriller Writers website, www.thrillerwriters.org

DAVID MORRELL FICTION

First Blood (1972)
Testament (1975)
Last Reveille (1977)
The Totem (1979)
Blood Oath (1982)
The Hundred-Year Christmas (1983)
The Brotherhood of the Rose (1984)
The Fraternity of the Stone (1985)
Rambo (First Blood Part II) (1985)
The League of Night and Fog (1987)
Rambo III (1988)
The Fifth Profession (1990)
The Covenant of the Flame (1991)
Assumed Identity (1993)
Desperate Measures (1994)
The Totem (Complete and Unaltered) (1994)
Extreme Denial (1996)
Double Image (1998)
Black Evening (1999)
Burnt Sienna (2000)
Long Lost (2002)
The Protector (2003)
Nightscape (2004)
Creepers (2005)
Scavenger (2007)
Captain America: The Chosen (artwork by Mitch Breitweiser) (2007)
The Spy Who Came for Christmas (2008)
The Shimmer (2009)
The Naked Edge (2010)

DAVID MORRELL NONFICTION

John Barth: An Introduction (1976)
Fireflies: A Father's Tale of Love and Loss (1988)
American Fiction, American Myth: Essays by Philip Young (Co-edited with Sandra Spanier) (2000)
The Successful Novelist: A Lifetime of Lessons about Writing and Publishing (2008)
Thrillers: 100 Must Reads (Co-edited with Hank Wagner) (2010)



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K.J. Howe is a medical, health, and fitness writer whose passion is international thrillers. She has a Master's in Writing Popular Fiction from Seton Hill University in Pennsylvania and has the honor of winning three Daphne du Maurier awards for Excellence in Mystery and Suspense. Travel and adventure fuel her imagination. She has raced camels in Jordan, learned how to surf in Hawaii, zip-lined in the Costa Rican jungle, dove with Great White Sharks in South Africa, and co-mingled with elephants in Botswana. Home is in Toronto, Canada, but she is often missing in action. www.kjhowe.com

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