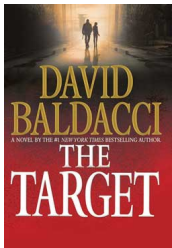


David Baldacci on Will Robie and Jessica Reel: 'I'm just getting started with this pair.'

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
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Against all odds and some formidable opponents, trained assassins Will Robie and Jessica Reel get the job done.

In their third adventure, “The Target,” they are tasked with taking out a “global menace, once and for all.” Their orders originate with the President, but if they fail, they're on their own.

When asked if there are actually people like Robie and Reel, their creator, author David Baldacci said, “Well, they're not going to give you a business card that says, 'I'm Joe Smith. I'm a government spy – here's my email address.’”

After writing 27 thrillers, Baldacci has become familiar with those who handle special operations.

“There are people with special skills,” he said during a phone interview from his offices in Virginia. “They are in the military. It's their job to go out on missions like this [in the book] – to go and take out a target.”

Baldacci said people like Robie and Reel are “trained in close quarter combat. They are superbly trained snipers. That's what they do. They are serving their country. They are following orders.”

But, the author says, “They have to have some emotional drain. It's not innately human to go out and kill people. [The job] has taken its toll on Robie and Reed. It has exacted its price.”

In the new book, Reed's past rears its ugly head and involves some pretty evil men, like dying prisoner Earl Fontaine.

“Even though he's bolted to a wall, old and dying, he can still be very dangerous,” Baldacci said.

When asked how he can write such evil, Baldacci – who is known for his easy manner and philanthropic work – laughs and says, “I just channel all the dark stuff.”

The plot involving Fontaine and Reed includes white supremacy.

“I grew up in the South in the 1960s,” the writer acknowledged. “I remember [separate] water fountains and bathrooms. I remember elementary schools in Virginia fighting to 'save our neighborhood schools,' even though Brown v. Board [of Education] came down in the 1950s. What they were saying was 'Don't integrate our schools.’”

Baldacci remembers seeing Klu Klux Klan people “marching down the street” and has seen “hate-filled treatment of African Americans.” He says the memories “never go away.”

When this particular showdown comes, it unfolds at a heart-stopping pace. Baldacci said he wrote the battle in one sitting because the adrenaline was going so fast he couldn't get up from his chair.

“Things like that are a lot of fun to write,” he said, lightening up. “Yeah, you go back and edit, but that first pounding is quite a thrill ride. I could feel every round fired. Everything was

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happening at once.”

He was happy with the way the action unfolded.

“You sit back and read it and think, ‘Damn. I really hit that one,’” he confessed with a chuckle.

Running on a parallel track with Robie and Reed is North Korean assassin Chung-Cha, who was raised in the bleakest conditions imaginable, escaping a penal labor colony only after committing unspeakable crimes.

“North Korea is such an outlier,” Baldacci said. “Its people are under the thumb of this long line of dictators from the same family. They are totally disconnected from the world. I wanted to have a character like Chung-Cha who had the worst possible upbringing.”

Baldacci said he read “probably five books written by people with similar experiences in labor camps. I have a couple of people, too, who have experience in that part of the world. I’m not writing a text book, but what I put in was a way to tell you this is how the culture is and this is how she would have grown up and these are the sacrifices she would have had to make on a daily basis.”

Then, he said, we could understand “why she does what she does. I had to set it up that way.”

Although Chung-Cha is a cold-blooded killer, Baldacci has a soft spot for her.

“You couldn’t blame her if she was cruel and evil and just this killing machine after the way she was raised,” he said. “My God. I wanted to see if I could make her somewhat sympathetic.”

Suffice it to say, Baldacci got his wish.

The last sentence of the book foreshadows Robie and Reed’s troubled future.

They turned and walked off together as the light gave way fully to the dark.

“You sure left the door wide open for another book,” I said.

With almost perfect comedic timing, he said, “Yes, I did,” and then let loose a hearty laugh.

“In the next book, I’m going to explore more of Jessica’s background,” he explained. “And, you’ll get a really good taste of Will Robie. Readers really want to know where he came from and why he is like he is.

“I’m just getting started with this pair,” he said, still chuckling. “They have a lot of room to run. They can’t be normal people. They can’t relate to normal things. They’ve got some challenging times ahead, these two.”



When asked how it feels to have sold more than 110 million books, he said, “It’s very humbling for a guy whose passion was to write a few short stories and sell copies here and there. It’s unbelievable to me.”

According to his website, “David is involved with several philanthropic organizations; his greatest efforts are dedicated to his family’s Wish You Well Foundation®. Established by David

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and his wife, Michelle, the Wish You Well Foundation supports family and adult literacy in the United States by fostering and promoting the development and expansion of literacy and educational programs. In 2008, the Foundation partnered with Feeding America to launch Feeding Body & Mind, a program to address the connection between literacy, poverty and hunger. Through Feeding Body & Mind, more than 1 million new and gently used books have been collected and distributed through food banks to families in need."

□ □ □ For more information, visit davidbaldacci.com or WishYouWellFoundation.org