

A Conversation with Bryan Christy about *IN THE COMPANY OF KILLERS*

You had what many would consider the coolest job in the world. You were head of Special Investigations for National Geographic with a virtually unlimited budget to travel anywhere on the planet and investigate criminals. Why would you leave all that to write fiction?

It was absolutely amazing, and my team and I did some good. Through our investigations we helped influence China to close its ivory market, saving tens of thousands of elephants. We got Vatican City ivory dealers raided and a pedophile monsignor defrocked. We exposed corruption in South Africa. Prosecutors and legislators around the world cited our work in improving laws and sending some major traffickers to prison. All good.

But there are limits on what truths can be told in journalism. As a criminal investigator I began to see relationships among powerful actors that could not fit into a single magazine article or documentary film. Mark Twain famously said, "Truth is stranger than fiction." But fiction, when it's good, can be more illuminating than truth. It's why Twain wrote fiction himself.

What inspired you to write *IN THE COMPANY OF KILLERS*? Where did the title come from?

I wanted to write the kind of book I like to read—a good adventure story involving real world forces and full characters that makes me feel a little smarter for having spent the time. I've crossed paths over the years with private military contractors and long wanted to write a story about that world. I'd recently done a project in South Africa where I met some criminals who were both ruthless and charming, and then just when I needed extra inspiration in the villain category, Rupert Murdoch bought National Geographic placing the world's flagship magazine and television assets in the hands of its most powerful and destructive media mogul. Imagination took over from there.

The title comes from a pivotal moment in the latter half of the book when Tom Klay realizes he's been naive to the evil that surrounds him. Klay is a very good investigative journalist who tracks down criminal kingpins, but not all that is wrong with the world can be put on a Wanted poster. Injustice thrives when its perpetrators are perceived to be too big to tackle or too many to confront. If you look around, we are all in the company of killers; the powerful who game or break the system to achieve their goals and the good people who allow bad things to happen by staying in their own professional and personal lanes. The Trump presidency, for example, greenlit some of the darkest angels we've seen in this country in a long time—in politics, media, finance, defense, and technology. As we witnessed at the Capitol on January 6, people died as a result. Klay decides to take on what he considers "an unwinnable case," and stand up to these dark forces. It is his only hope to reclaim himself.

You were initially a CPA and then a successful lawyer, specializing in international law. What led you to become a writer?

Every male Christy since 1898 had been a mortician until I came along. I've always wanted to be a writer, but if I was going to break family tradition, I felt I had to be responsible about it. I did what writers do when they can't bear to disappoint their parents. I went to law school. I was working at a firm in Washington, DC when I got word my father had only a few days to live. Before he died, I decided I had to tell him why I'd become a lawyer. We were in the hospital. I was moistening his lips with ice chips. He looked at the bowl I was holding and said he would give everything he owned for a whole ice cube. He told me never to forget that in the end nothing material mattered; I shouldn't worry about success as others defined it. He loved to fish, he said. If he had it to do over he would have spent more time in his boat out on the lake, fishing.

I enjoyed law but it wasn't my boat out on a lake. My boat was writing. I went back to my law firm and quit. Six years later I had my first draft novel, a thriller. I drove to New York City to meet my new agent for the first time.

Unfortunately, our meeting was set for the afternoon of 9/11. I saw the planes go into the towers on television. Nobody on the street that day thought they would fall. I spent the day as a volunteer, bringing water to first responders. When I later met my agent he told me the thriller was dead, pick a new genre. I reached out to the CIA and to contacts in the magazine world. I decided whichever path opened first I would follow it.

How did you become a special investigator for *National Geographic*?

I met an editor at *National Geographic* who asked me how I would approach a story assignment from them. They didn't do crime, he added. I looked back at Nat Geo's work on animals and realized they were often telling crime stories, they just didn't know it. Their stories had all the elements, but the balance was off. Readers often felt sad or powerless after reading them. I proposed modifying their story-telling approach to move from victim-based stories focused on endangered species to villain-based stories that exposed kingpins and corrupt government officials.

My first assignment was to go after a reptile trafficker operating in Malaysia named Anson Wong, the so-called Pablo Escobar of Wildlife Trafficking. I set up a two-year investigation to expose him and the government officials who enabled him. As a result of my investigation, police raided his farm, seized his animals, and took away his license. When he was caught moving more animals, he was arrested and hit with the longest prison sentence for wildlife trafficking in Malaysian history. Meanwhile an anti-corruption squad raided the Wildlife Department. The story made international news and members of Malaysia's parliament used my work to pass new wildlife protection legislation.

How much of your protagonist, Tom Klay, is based off yourself and your experience?

That's the beauty of fiction. What surfaces from your subconscious as you write—is it your invention, or is it you? Tom Klay is a fictional character. The story is made up. I drew on my experience as an investigative journalist to give him authenticity but Klay's a different guy. He's darker, more cynical. He's had some terrible experiences I haven't had. That said we do have certain things in common. We both grew up in a funeral home, we both worked as criminal investigators for a famous international magazine. Klay employs investigative techniques I've used in the field. However, Klay accepts the CIA's offer, which is something I would never have done as a journalist.

What were some of your most memorable moments as an investigator? What were some of your most surprising?

Oh, I loved all of it. Truly. The first time seeing an elephant in the wild. Or a giraffe running free. Getting arrested in Tanzania, of course. We were moving fake elephant tusks with GPS transmitters hidden inside through the airport in Dar es Salaam for a story on ivory trafficking. It was a long night but I made friends among those who arrested me. The challenge is to communicate your humanity and to listen for theirs. And keep your sense of humor. In my fiction I want to continue that.

The book is filled with intimate detail about a host of things – hunting, Africa, international geopolitics, weapons systems, computer security, and a good deal more. What additional research did the book require and how did you go about researching it? What was the most interesting or surprising thing you learned?

I approached the novel the way I would a criminal investigation. I got out a whiteboard and drew a tree of my main issues and characters and set about learning everything I could about them. More than once I imagined the most outrageous criminal operation I could, only to see it happen in real life shortly after I'd sweated a chapter. In most cases I scrapped those scenes. A few times I made them bigger.

I was surprised to learn the CIA actually maintains a venture capital firm. It's called In-Q-Tel, the Q purportedly coming from James Bond's fictional inventor, and is used to seed high tech startups. The mixing of fact and fantasy by real world spies engaged in complex Wall Street investing struck me as too good to pass up as a novelist.

I was also surprised to discover National Geographic's early history with the CIA, including one disastrous effort to plant a listening device on the Chinese border, resulting in plutonium rolling down a Himalayan mountain into the Ganges. The

father of the CIA, Wild Bill Donovan, was a regular at Nat Geo headquarters back in the day. Many people know that famous spy novelist Charles McCarry was CIA, but few people know he was also a *National Geographic* editor-at-large.

Your first book, *The Lizard King*, was nonfiction. How was the transition into writing fiction?

Non-fiction has handrails. Chronological sequence is there to assist you. So are facts. You have them or you don't. You hit limits on what you can accurately say about a character's internal life. There is a joy to research that is usually rewarded.

Fiction has no limits. Genre helps. A crime helps. But you have many, many more choices to make, and discarded ideas don't always stay dead. In fiction you can kid yourself that excess research is a form of writing when it's not. Imagination is your job. A geopolitical thriller should feel real, the danger impending. One of the main reasons I left National Geographic was to explore topics that are too large or untidy to fit into reported stories. *In the Company of Killers* is fiction, but that doesn't mean it's not true. And, if I'm right about what's coming, readers should definitely be concerned.

What were the influences, literary and otherwise, that shaped you, both in writing this novel, and earlier?

My mother brought books into our home. The Flannery side of the family talked books, checked on what you were reading, celebrated a good author discovered, and cursed one who'd let them down. My grandfather was a one-man fireplace we gathered around for stories well told. The Christys, by contrast, were not avid readers, but oral stories play a vital role in a funeral home. Before they're called eulogies, they're what we tell each other to give others meaning and to take form ourselves. I grew up surrounded by stories.

For love of literature, writing, and animals my mom gets all the credit. My father taught me empathy for strangers. My uncle the FBI undercover agent taught me how to investigate. I spent a number of years with a Philadelphia underworld fence who taught me that the "good" aren't always right, nor the bad wrong. I had the great fortune to spend a summer with James Alan McPherson at the Iowa Writers Workshop who opened my eyes to the importance of writers as a kind of surgeon laying open the world for others to work on. That's carried me.

What do you feel is the most relevant theme set forth in your novel?

This is the story of one man's awakening to his moral obligation to act in the face of largescale injustice. Tom Klay is a loner. He changes story assignments. He changes identities. He doesn't have to stand up or stand still for very long. He skates above the world he wanders. He does not get involved.

Greed is everywhere in the book and takes many forms. Klay's greed is to keep his life rolling steadily along with himself in control. But Klay is also a witness. He has traveled the world and has seen the effects of unchecked power and greed. Terry Krieger's greed is more conventional. He's handsome, brilliant, extraordinarily wealthy, diplomatically savvy. A war veteran. He's got it all. And yet, more is what he wants.

I wanted to pit two American ideals against each another: the uber capitalist versus the lone individual. The idea is a story that reflects in some way the United States today. "American Exceptionalism," the notion that the United States is a city upon a hill, beacon for the world, included the idea that ours was a nation worth emulating, that Americans stand up to injustice and support democracy and basic human rights. Even Milton Friedman's "Greed is Good" philosophy that fueled the 1980s recognized the need to produce a good output. But that moral imperative has been stripped from our national identity. It's not just support for democratic institutions and a free press that is eroding; fundamental stories we tell ourselves as Americans are dissolving, too, so that lately words like liberty and freedom are confused with selfishness and ignorance.

In 2017 you testified before Congress on the importance of law enforcement in remote parts of Africa and the risk of spillover from wildlife-based disease. Do any notes of the argument you made then pertain to what has happening with the COVID-19 pandemic?

I testified on the costs of failing to protect the natural world, including failing to support rangers and others on the front lines in Africa. The risks, I said, were increased terrorism, political instability, and emergent disease. Spillover diseases like Covid—I cited Ebola—are a direct result of failing to adequately conserve and protect wildlife and natural habitats. Even though I knew the risks to be real, and had seen the bushmeat and other wild trade firsthand, I felt like an academic warning those politicians of a possible future disaster. Two years later the bomb went off.

Experts tell us COVID19 is not the last pandemic we will see. We should be listening carefully to those scientists who study the relationship between ecosystems and the chain of events that lead to the outbreak of zoonotic disease. We are focused on politics and, appropriately, on vaccines. The more difficult task is to understand and modify the human behavior that is a leading cause of this type of pandemic. Unfortunately, there is no vaccine for the supply end of disease. Like Tom Klay, we've ignored our call to action with disastrous results. The question is, having seen death, will we act now?

What's next for you and Tom Klay?

By the end of *In the Company of Killers* Tom Klay has finally found peace. It turns out that doesn't last.