
Tom Franklin

Hell at the Breech
ISBN13: 9780060566760

The book strongly evokes a feeling of the South at a certain time in American history. How did you go about creating this atmosphere?

The hardest part about writing this novel was getting the day-to-day details right. I didn't know anything about the 1890s. I mean, I knew who was governor of Alabama, and I knew the larger sociological, financial, racial and political aspects of the times — in other words, I knew all the things that history's spotlight shows us — because I'd read a lot of books about such things. But the truth is, those things don't really mean squat when you're writing about a man riding a horse through the hills of Mitcham Beat.

I didn't know, for example, if people had zippers on their pants at that time, or if they had buttons. And I found such things paralyzing as I tried to write. What makes fiction believable and solid is attention to detail. When you read something — about a firefighter, say — and you learn new details about how fires are fought, or how the firefighter wears his or her boots — the writer earns your credibility. You believe the fiction. The fiction becomes as real as real life. That's the magic. A lot of people have said to me, "It's so long ago. Why not just make it up? Who cares if they had zippers or not?" Fact is, a lot of people know those things, and if I get something wrong, even a relatively tiny thing like a zipper, then the book's a little tainted for that person. So I became obsessed with getting it right.

Of course, I still got a lot wrong. But it wasn't for lack of trying.

What's also crazy is how different things were just over 100 years ago. Things I totally took for granted, like animals, were things that ultimately tripped me up. I had a scene where Ardy Grant kills an armadillo, my least favorite animal. I killed one in my previous book, *Poachers*, and I'd decided I'd kill one in every book I wrote. But someone read an early draft of *Hell at the Breech* and told me there weren't armadillos in Alabama in the 1890s. They came from Texas and couldn't get across the Mississippi until bridges allowed them to. So I had to lose my armadillo scene. Ditto with coyotes. And egrets — cowbirds. I had strung cowbirds all over the backs of my cows and had to remove them. Crazy.

Even — get this — the landscape was different. Mitcham's Beat is now almost totally wooded. I imagined that it would've been even more wooded back then. But it wasn't. Mostly, in those days, cotton fields were everywhere. Imagine writing when you don't know the landscape, the animal life, what people wore, etc. Paralyzing. But then I just did it. And when I learned that I'd gotten something wrong, I'd redo it.

So one way I hope I've evoked the time is by getting all the details right.

Does all your writing feature the South in some way, i.e., do you consider yourself a "Southern" writer?

Yes, I do. Because it's the landscape I know and have come to love. I think the South is more interesting because it's more complicated. The Civil War gave us our giant guilty complex — or gave us anger, or regret, or resentment, or some stew of all of the above. The most interesting people, I believe, are those who're the most conflicted — who have dark histories. So as a people we're lugging a lot of baggage around, and whether we're proud, ashamed or whatever, it's back there. I'll always write about "losers" for this reason.

And it's a beautiful landscape. A great example — metaphor, whatever — of the South's aesthetic (for lack of a better word, though I'm sure there's the perfect one out there) is kudzu, that amazing weed that we planted all over ourself to curb erosion in the early part of the last century. Little did we know that it would take over everything, that it would cover fences and trees and houses and car carcasses and even whole fields, that it grows at a rate of something like a foot a day, that it slowly strangles the life from whatever it mummifies. But it's beautiful. That's the South to me. A thing slowly dying. A way of life gone. And of course it's a good thing that those old dark ways are gone, but for a writer it's a gold mine of material.

Was it difficult to write about such cold-blooded killers and gruesome murders?

Sure, but the fact is, most of those murders occurred. Tooch Bedsole was indeed shot so many times he had holes in the bottoms of his feet. They had to drag him off on a tarp. He had six holes in a plug of tobacco in his shirt pocket. So while it wasn't fun, per se, to illustrate that, I felt it would've been wrong to ignore it. When such acts of atrocity are committed, it's a writer's responsibility to explore it from as many angles as he or she can. I don't mean glorify it, but really examine it. In a way, writing this historical novel was like performing an autopsy. Getting in there and finding out the sizes of people's hearts. Where the bullets went in, where they came out.

What was it like to think from the perspective of Ardy Grant?

Ardy's my favorite character in the book. He's the one who's totally made up, too. There was a guy he's very, very loosely based on, but he's pure fabrication. I love him. Every time he came on the page, the writing was a breeze. Everything he did surprised me. Even his death scene surprised me. A friend said of that scene that it's a kind of redemption, that I let Ardy off the hook. If I did, maybe it's because a writer likes his or her bad people the best.

Mack?

Mack's the person in the book who's most like me. Conflicted about everything. And guilty, good lord. He was second easiest to write. In real life, Archie "Rafe" Bedsole died of an alleged poisoning. This was less dramatic, I thought, and I wanted to raise the stakes for Mack

as high as I could get them. So I had him shoot Arch.

What was particularly compelling about the real-life event this book is based upon compelling enough to want to write an entire novel about it?

I just loved the vivid fragments that survive. There are a lot of mysteries about who did what, and why they did it. But there are the known facts, too. Stories like Lev James being ambushed and, after he exhausts his ammunition firing back at his assailants, picking up rocks and twigs and throwing them at the bushwhackers shooting at him. What a man! That says more about his character than anything you can imagine. In the end, I made up much more than what is factually based, but I strung my fictions around those amazing true stories, and the characters in *Hell at the Breech* were born of such stories.

How did you get over the initial difficulties in conflicting stories surrounding this event?

I had, ultimately, to choose to believe one story or another. A perfect example is Tooch Bedsole. Many people today still believe that he was innocent. And maybe he was. But having him guilty made him much more interesting to me. It made him darker, more worthy of exploration. I'd much rather read about a criminal than a saint. And then, with that decided, I had to work to find the good in such a person. To try and explain his life, how he got where he was. If a writer can make a villain human (and vice versa, of course), then he or she's done the job.