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“A BETTER PLACE”

LEE CHILD



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REACHER

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Quote on pg. 4 from “Born Under a Bad Sign” by Albert King (lyrics by William Bell).

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INTRODUCTION

was first published in 1997, nearly thirty years ago as of this writing, in an era that now feels as remote as the Jurassic in the book business. The world was still almost entirely pre-internet. I had heard of email, vaguely, but I didn't have it. Nor did anyone else I knew. My first editor's **I** comments arrived by fax, to an obliging local store, because I didn't have a fax machine either. I communicated with my agent by letter or landline telephone. I delivered my manuscripts as bulky packages in the mail.

The upside of that era was that brick-and-mortar bookstores had not yet been laid to waste. In fact they were thriving. New York had four excellent crime-fiction stores, and most cities had at least one or two. Their proprietors loved the genre and knew it intimately. They would call each other or get together at genre conventions to talk about hot new books and authors.

That's how I got my start. Those so-called "big mouths" talked up *Killing Floor* and turned it into a major release within the genre. It became a cult hit within the community. It won several Best First Novel prizes. I had arrived at the starting line.

Naturally (and of course quite rightly) by the time my second book came out, those folks had moved on to even-newer books and writers. All except one. The only "big mouth" who talked up *Die Trying* was a guy named Otto Penzler. He owned The Mysterious Bookshop in Midtown Manhattan, and was a voice worth having on your side. He was a world-renowned collector

and a world-renowned Sherlock Holmes expert. He pushed *Die Trying* just as hard as anyone had pushed *Killing Floor*. I was grateful for that.

Otto also ran his own indie publishing company, The Mysterious Press, and was the editor of countless short-story anthologies and other ventures. He had more pies than fingers. He was always doing something, including beautifully bound special editions of titles likely to appeal to his customer base. Slowly, over the years, we became good friends, despite his irascible nature and appalling politics. On the plus side, he was a Yankees fan who had seen Mickey Mantle in his prime, he often had appealing wives or girlfriends, he had immaculate taste in food and champagne, he was funny in the kind of sardonic way that appealed to the Brit in me, and he was a gentleman. We got along very well.

Eventually he asked if he could do specially bound editions of the Reacher series. I had been asked once or twice before by other people, and I had always resisted the notion. Many of my readers were so into Reacher they felt they had to have every edition of everything. I didn't want them to feel obliged to shell out maybe a hundred bucks for a reprint of something they already had, but in a fancier jacket. So I had said no to such requests.

But Otto's special editions were also *limited* editions, only a hundred or so copies per title. His customer base was so big—and so rich—he could easily find a hundred people who really wanted the product and wouldn't even notice the price. So I felt there was no real risk of exploitation of the regular consumer. So I said yes.

Then he asked if I would write a foreword for each title, to add value and make each edition even more special. I wasn't sure how to respond. Certainly I was flattered that anyone would want to make or buy such handsome editions of my work, but felt quite unequal to providing literary insight into it, beyond what could be gleaned from, you know, actually reading it. I work with no plan, no theory, no structured approach, and no overarching intentions. I supposed I could pretend I had those things, and by using a little reverse engineering I could have come up with plausible explanations for why the books turned out the way they did. But the truth is I was always

just hoping for the best, trusting my instincts, and flying by the seat of my pants.

So, self-indulgently, I decided to use the opportunity to do what I wish more authors would do: to set down a plain and quotidian record of the who, why, what, where, and when, like a career diary. I am not vain enough to think it important, or even very interesting; but—as a reader, pedant, and geek—I would like to know this kind of stuff about other authors’ work, and therefore, humans being not so very different from one another, I assumed some readers, at least, might like to know this kind of stuff about mine. At worst, far in the future, if my daughter ever wanted to know where her dad was, and when, and what he was doing, and what he was thinking, she would have a shelf of handsome volumes to tell her exactly that.

—Lee Child
Cumbria, 2025

KILLING FLOOR

On Thursday, August 18th, 1994, in Manchester, England, I was told by senior management at Granada Television that my studio director's job was scheduled for elimination in an ongoing restructuring initiative and that, after a little more than seventeen years' service, I would be unemployed by Christmas. I didn't believe them. Given their competence level, I guessed early summer 1995 was a more likely exit date. (And I was proved right. I was eventually let go on June 21, 1995.)

I felt that British TV was in a death spiral—partly because people like them were in charge—and in any case employment elsewhere in the industry was unlikely. But I wanted to stay broadly in the world of entertainment, so I decided to act on a contingency plan I had thought of some years previously: I would write a novel.

So, to preempt the coming crisis, on Friday, September 2nd, 1994, I went to a stationery chain in the Arndale Centre, Manchester, and bought three pads of paper, a pencil, a pencil sharpener, and an eraser. I took them home, which was then in Kirkby Lonsdale, Cumbria, England, more than seventy miles away.

On Monday, September 5th, 1994, at home, at the dining room table, I sat down to write. An hour later, I gave the first chapter to my wife. I asked, "Should I continue?"

"Yes," she said. "I like it."

So I wrote through the rest of the fall and winter, at home and at work, and by March 1995 I had finished the book. But it wasn't this book. Not

exactly. The working title was *Bad Luck and Trouble* (a title I re-used much later in the series) and the story was about drug money. A year or so earlier I had bought a book about money laundering—purely for its cover: it had a real dollar bill laminated into it. It said the illegal narcotics trade in the US was all cash (obviously), and in a dry, statistical way said its annual value was twice the amount of all the cash in circulation within the fifty states. Which, I saw, meant the cartels had a serious, industrial problem. I worked out that four thousand tons of paper money had to be transported to the Caribbean banks—twice a year.

The original manuscript was based around that theme.

I typed it up on my daughter's new laptop, and printed it out on her slow inkjet printer, and bought a copy of *The Writer's Handbook*, which lists agents, and I sent a query letter and the first three chapters to Darley Anderson, in London, England. He replied immediately, by letter (this was 1995, remember), and offered representation—and eventually, after seeing the whole draft, some editorial suggestions.

The suggestions were mostly to do with the story, but one was to change the title. Darley felt that the two negative words “Bad” and “Trouble” would trap readers' perceptions in the narrow niche of noir, which wouldn't help when seeking a wider, more generalist audience. So I came up with “Killing Floor” as an alternative, and it stuck. (The image of a meatpacking plant's killing floor was present in the text, and so were lines from the song “Born Under a Bad Sign”—including the line “Bad luck and trouble's been my only friend,” which are still there, of course, as trace evidence of the working title.)

I worked on the suggestions and had the second draft completed by May 1995. Darley and I went through it again, and perfected a third draft by July. Nothing much happens in the world of publishing in August, so it was September 1995 before the book went out on submission. By that point I had been out of work for more than two months, and my savings were dwindling.

It was a targeted submission. Darley's movie co-agent knew an editor at Putnam in New York who was looking for that kind of thing: David Highfill.

David liked the book and wanted to buy it.

But: he wanted me to change the story. He felt that drug gangs and drug money were overdone and overfamiliar. He wanted a major launch and major attention and felt that any element of same-old-same-old would blunt the impact.

I wanted—needed, I felt—to preserve the “river of money” theme. And I got lucky, because out in the real world, 1995 was the year the US had its first change in printed money for many decades. The \$100 bill had been redesigned, and the new bill was being fed into circulation. There was tremendous journalistic coverage of the change, which was a move in the battle against counterfeiting. Some coverage was superficial, and some was very comprehensive. By reading it all, I saw how I could preserve the skeleton of the book by changing the flesh from narcotics proceeds to raw material for a counterfeiting operation.

I rewrote the book through the fall—over a year after starting it—and David liked what he saw, and on Thursday, December 7th, 1995, he made a formal two-book offer. At that point I was seven weeks away from going broke. I had enough in the bank for one more mortgage payment, but not two.

Putnam saw it as an early spring book—March, ideally—but March 1996 was too soon for them. Line editing, copy editing, jacket design, and preliminary marketing plans had to be done. So the book was scheduled for March 1997.

And eventually it was published in that month, on Tuesday, March 17th, Saint Patrick’s Day. It had a truly great jacket image by Thomas Tafuri, a bloody handprint on a white background, and an author photograph taken by my then-sixteen-year-old daughter, of me sitting at the same table at which I had written the first pencil draft.

The book became an absolute exemplar of how things used to work: the specialist mystery bookstores and the crime fiction community adopted it as a favorite; it won every genre award it was eligible for; and without selling more than a respectable number it gave me a very solid start. Since then it

has sold untold millions in, as of this writing, fifty languages and ninety-six countries.

I sold the dining table when we sold the house before our move to the States, but I still have the pencil. It sits on two pegs on a bulletin board in my office, and it reminds me every day of how this whole thing started.

DIE TRYING

y first book, *Killing Floor*, was substantially put to bed by the middle of March 1996, and slated for a publication date a year later. I realized—obviously—that if I wanted to publish a book a year, then I would have to write a book a year, which meant I should spend that pre-publication year writing the second book. Accordingly I started thinking about what became *Die Trying* at the beginning of April 1996.

At the time I was very interested in the separatist and militia movements in America, of which many still existed then, particularly in the Northwest. I saw them as fitting very clearly into the paranoid tradition of American politics, as ably described by Richard Hofstadter. In particular I was fascinated by their self-serving mental gymnastics: total absence of evidence for wild fantasies was claimed to be definitive proof of their existence because only perfect government conspiracies could produce perfect cover-ups. I read extensively into the subject, and then did something I have never done since—I decided to make a research trip.

I was still living in the UK then, so I flew to Chicago and fitted in a short visit with my sister-in-law. I had been to Chicago several times before but for some reason on that occasion I noticed the huge number of dry cleaners in the area. *Chicagoans are very meticulous*, I thought, and later a dry cleaner showed up in the opening of the book.

Then I flew onward to Seattle and rented a car (a gray Ford Explorer, if you care) and drove back east, through the Washington State badlands,

across the Idaho panhandle, and into Montana, as far as Kalispell and Whitefish. I had been paid for *Killing Floor* but was still some way from repairing my unemployed-broke-guy financial profile, and I had no credit cards, so it was cash all the way, including the planes and the car rental. (That was still possible—even somewhat normal—in 1996.) I stayed in twenty-dollar motels and ate cheap. I used truck stops and played pool in bars. I talked to all kinds of people—truckers, strippers, cops, farmers, FBI agents—and found my way into two separate militia encampments. I saw bears and coyotes and two-mile-long freight trains, and never quite got used to the vast emptiness, which at times was scary. At one point I drove four hours without seeing another vehicle.

But in the end it turned out to be more of a vacation than a research trip. I didn't really learn anything. The reality turned out to be more or less exactly what I had imagined. So I hustled back to Sea-Tac and flew home and started writing. I made rapid progress. I was full of energy and ideas.

The book's working title was *They the People*, to reflect the separatist angle. I started out with pencil and paper (as I had written all of *Killing Floor*) even though by then I had bought a basic Compaq laptop (in New York, with cash). I was worried that typing directly into the word processor (Windows Write, the 3.1 freebie, an excellent program for a novelist, I still think) would change the voice. But I tried it, and it didn't, so I carried on straight into the computer, which saved a lot of final-draft time.

The book's overall shape and approach were based on an instinctive decision to make it as fundamentally different as possible from *Killing Floor* while at the same time keeping it clearly part of a coherent series. I felt that authors could become as stereotyped as actors, and that if I did two similar books in a row I might get locked into a narrower channel than I wanted. I felt that if I used *Killing Floor* as a kind of "left field," and the new work as a kind of "right field," then I would be staking out a wide territory in between, in which I could roam free forever.

Accordingly, where *Killing Floor* was a one-track first-person narrative set in a small no-account rural town, I decided the new book should be a

third-person, multiple-POV story involving glossy elements like the White House and the Hoover Building and the unlimited power of the state—which in particular seemed like an apt counterpoint to the bad guys’ perspective. With that plan in mind, I maintained good progress—not least because a pre-published author has absolutely nothing else to do but write.

Only two things intervened, one ongoing, and one short and sharp. The short and sharp was a meeting with the UK publisher Transworld, on May 22nd, 1996 (my father’s 72nd birthday, which is why I remember the date). I dropped in for a visit on the drive back from London. Transworld made a two-book offer a week later—May 29th, 1996—for *Killing Floor* and the work in progress, and has been my UK publisher ever since. After that—but not requiring involvement from me—my agent’s foreign rights department quickly rolled up Holland, Germany, and Japan, in the first of what, as of this writing, totals ninety-seven territories worldwide.

The ongoing interruption was endless discussion with Putnam in the US about the title *Killing Floor*. There was concern (shared to some degree by Transworld) that a book with “killing” in the title wouldn’t appeal to women readers, who might otherwise be interested in Jack Reacher. (Interestingly, that concern was recently echoed by my movie people, who love the first book but who, they say, *absolutely could not* title a movie *Killing Floor*. No, I don’t know why, either.)

Accordingly, a lot of fruitless time was spent searching for alternatives. I still have doodled lists somewhere with dozens of increasingly desperate suggestions. But—as you know—in the end we stuck with *Killing Floor*, to no obvious commercial detriment.

And then ... Putnam wasn’t crazy about *They the People*, either. Did I have an alternative? Purely as a joke about the recent painful process, I said *Die Trying* ... as in, we’ll find something better, or die trying. But, “Great title!” they said, and it stuck.

I finished the book in December 1996, and it was quickly approved and accepted—still three months ahead of the first book’s first publication. I remember feeling good about having the second book in the can so early,

while simultaneously feeling worried that I had two books completed before I had received the first iota of reader feedback. It felt like a real gamble—but what else could a poor boy do?

TRIPWIRE

n the fall of 1996, my first book, *Killing Floor*, was still six months from publication, and I had almost finished my second, *Die Trying*. The various signature and delivery payments from a growing number of contracts had started to repair my unemployed-broke-guy status—I had a furnished office by that point, and my daughter, then sixteen and a big movie fan, felt the time was right to suggest a vacation in Orlando, Florida, so she could visit the Universal Studios theme park. In time-honored parental fashion, we negotiated—we would all go to Universal first, and then Key West afterward. Which we did, late in October.

Then when I got back I finished *Die Trying* and sent it in—physically, by courier, in those days. (Which was a significant expense for a newbie author living in the UK with a publisher in New York but, happily, I found a way of getting my manuscripts there for free. At the time the British Post Office ran a guaranteed overnight service—to compete with FedEx and UPS, I suppose—but possibly because I didn’t live in a major city, or possibly because it was British, it never took less than two days to deliver a package, so it refunded my money every time, under its guarantee.)

I went on vacation again, in January 1997, to the Caribbean, and I remember getting a fax at the hotel from my editor at Putnam, formally accepting *Die Trying*. (I didn’t have email until over a year later. Not that I was ever an early adopter. I didn’t even have my own fax machine. All the edits for *Killing Floor* and *Die Trying* came via fax from New York to a bookstore near where I lived. Bruce, the owner, would call me and I would

drop in and pick up the latest. He also sold me a *Webster's Dictionary*, which I still use.)

After that second vacation I had about six weeks before the US launch of *Killing Floor* and I used them to start my third book, *Tripwire*, which at that point I was calling *The Hook*. Strictly speaking I was writing it on spec—I had no contract for anything beyond *Die Trying*. But whereas publishers are always gloomy (like farmers, no year is ever a good year, and next year will probably be worse), this was still early 1997 and the industry was nothing like it is now, so I saw no real reason to anticipate insecurity. I set to work with a will and had finished the first three chapters by early March.

The initial idea had come from things I had read about Vietnam MIAs, the careful exhumation of remains, and their transportation to the identification lab in Hawaii. The process was quite rightly respectful—almost reverential—but I felt it spoke to a kind of collective trauma. Sadly, twentieth-century wars produced countless MIAs—technically KIA/BNR, killed in action, body not recovered—but the two thousand or so from Vietnam loomed large, possibly because it was a war with a confusing genesis and an unsatisfactory outcome. (By contrast, World War One produced an average of two thousand KIA/BNR *every single day*. But we won.)

Added to which I was full of ideas for characters and sub-plots, and indeed I look back on this book as having been the easiest and most joyful of all to write. It almost wrote itself. (Thinking about the books for these essays makes me realize how full of energy and ideas I was back then. Not that the tank is empty now—but the pressure in the fuel line is lower than it was.)

I set Reacher's early scenes in Key West because I had enjoyed the place the fall before (and because doing so would make the vacation retrospectively tax deductible). I set the early New York City scenes inside the World Trade Center in lower Manhattan. I love New York City's epic buildings—and as a writer I was interested in what goes on inside them, which often isn't really epic at all. The Empire State Building, for instance, is a glamorous icon on the outside, but on the inside, on its business floors, it's