AN INTERVIEW WITH

H. Terrell Griffin, Author of *Blood Island*

Start to finish, how long did it take you to write *Blood Island?*

About three months

How did you get the idea?

Islamic terrorists have dominated the news for the past few years, and I've always thought that they're not much different than the Christians were in the Middle Ages and, more recently, during the Inquisitions of the 14th and 15th centuries. The damage that religious beliefs can do to society intrigues me. Look at the partition of India in 1949 and think about how many Hindus and Muslims were killed in religious strife, or for that matter, Northern Ireland in the recent past. Thinking about this gave me the germ of the idea that resulted in the cult on Blood Island.

Is Matt Royal autobiographical?

Not really, but I do draw on my own background as a trial lawyer of what I call the "old school"—one who puts ethics and principles and client representation above making money—to breathe a little disgust at the system into Matt.

How are you most similar to Matt? Least similar?

I have always tried to live my life in an honorable manner. Matt does that, too. I'm least similar in that the last fight I had was in the 8th grade.

What do you admire most about Matt? Least?

I admire his integrity, his wit, his loyalty to friends, and the fact that he's kind of a hunk. I'm not sure there's anything I don't like about Matt. The beauty of writing fiction is that you can fashion your hero in the image that you want, imbuing him with traits that you'd like to see in yourself. If Matt has weaknesses, they're the human frailties that infect us all, and he strives mightily to overcome those that possess him. He understands that his early life in the practice of law was, while financially successful, a shallow existence. He somehow lost himself during the years between his wartime experiences and his divorce. In losing Laura, he found himself.

Who is your favorite supporting character in the book, and why?

Logan Hamilton is my favorite. He's based loosely on one of my closest friends, Miles Leavitt of Longboat Key, who died last fall at age 61 from lung cancer. Logan wants to do right, and I think he's a guy who hasn't always lived up to the image he has of himself. But he strives mightily, and Matt is a bit of a role model for him. Logan never wants to let his buddy down.

Matt has a tight circle of friends—Jock Algren, Logan Hamilton—who seem ready to help him out no matter what. What do you think this says about him as a person/character?

Jock Algren is also based loosely on my best buddy since junior high school. We've remained close over all these years. I think Matt instills loyalty in his friends, but that is reciprocal. His friends know they can count on Matt, and Matt knows he can count on them. They're sort of a band of brothers who find support in each other; support that is emotional as well as actual.

What's the significance of Matt's unusual relationship with his ex-wife?

Matt believes that Laura was the best thing that ever happened to him, and he let her slip away because he was chasing his ego. He loves her still but understands why she left. He knows he can never have her back, but she is still his rock, his anchor to what life should be about. He hangs on to her memory like a drowning man clings to a life preserver. She is the manifestation of everything good in his life, and it is that thin reed that fashions his personality.

Is there really a Blood Island?

No, but the Mule Keys, where Blood Island is fictionally located, do exist. They're just a few miles west of Key West.

Where do you get the ideas for your characters?

With the exception of Jock and Logan, they're completely fictional, fashioned of whole cloth from my imagination. Jock is a much-overblown image of my friend John Allred (known as Jock to his high school buddies) who in reality was a top Exxon executive until his retirement. His personality in the book is pretty true, but I think his last fight was also in the 8th grade. We fought each other to a draw and became fast friends. The only time he's ever come close to killing anybody was with the occasional errant golf ball. Logan Hamilton is a pretty good portrayal of my friend Miles Leavitt who really was a helicopter pilot in Vietnam and was one of the gentlest people I ever knew. I've tried to imbue Logan with the wit and warmth that was Miles, and to provide Logan with the courage that I always suspected lay just beneath the surface of Miles Leavitt. I finished *Blood Island* before Miles was diagnosed with cancer, but during the eleven weeks that he lived post-diagnosis, I saw raw courage, laced with humor and good cheer and resignation at his fate. I hope I got all that into Logan's character.

Do you see your book as anti-religious?

I do not see the book as anti-religious, and I hope nobody else does. I tried to paint a picture of what happens when twisted people misinterpret religious teachings or use them for their own nefarious goals. I'm not a particularly religious man, but I greatly admire those who are, regardless of which faith they hold to be true.

Why base the story in Florida?

I have lived in Florida most of my life. I'm actually an eighth-generation Floridian, and would not want to live anywhere else. Florida is home to some of the most outrageous people in the world. The state seems to draw them. I think some of the best crime fiction writing today is being done by Florida writers who base their stories in the state. I love the history of the place and try to bring a little of that into my books. I know Florida and love it.

How long have you been writing?

Most of my life, but I never really tried to write a book until I neared retirement and slowed down my law practice. Over the years I wrote for my own enjoyment, but other than a number of opposite editorials for the *Orlando Sentinel*, I never attempted to publish anything. In fact, I'd never had a coherent story that I could submit to publication; just a lot of false book starts. When I started thinking that I needed to give writing a real shot or be forever regretful about it, I tried a couple of times to write the first book. I kept putting it down and coming back to it years later. When I finally sat down to write *Longboat Blues*, I finished the book in about six months during the winter and spring of 2006.

Have you always aspired to write a book?

Yes. I've been a big reader since I began to understand the written word. I've loved it so much that I thought I'd like to write. In 1971, after I'd been practicing law for about three years, I took a creative writing course at the University of Central Florida, thinking that I would write the great American novel. It didn't happen, but I became close friends with the professor, Wyatt Laurence Wyatt, who was a published novelist. He died a few years ago, but in my fourth book, *Wyatt's Revenge*, to be published in late 2009, I've brought him back to life, sort of.

Why did it take you so long to get around to writing?

I was a very serious trial lawyer for 38 years. The practice of law consumed me. I simply did not have the time or the energy to write. I've always been envious of Scott Turow who could practice law and at the same time write brilliant novels. For me, the law was my life, and, in order to have a little time for my wife and children, I simply couldn't find the time to concentrate on writing a book.

How does having worked as a trial lawyer impact your writing?

Trial lawyers are meticulous, over-prepared, and always nervous. We're probably a little neurotic and a lot obsessive-compulsive. Putting a story together is a lot like preparing a case for trial, except that in writing you get to make it up as you go along. The similarities lie in marshalling the facts and turning them into a story that a jury or a reader will identify with. Juries need to like your client, and readers must like your character. It is the job of the writer and the trial lawyer to make sure that happens. A writer needs to be obsessive about the details of his story, making sure that they hang together and present a cohesive tale for the reader. Trial lawyering is a good training ground for the aspiring writer.

What's next for Matt Royal?

I have finished another book entitled *Wyatt's Revenge,* in which Matt, Logan, and Jock, seeking revenge for the murder of a friend, travel to Europe and tangle with old Nazis and young Arab terrorists. A lot of the action takes place in Europe, but the story is centered on Longboat Key and environs.

What's next for you?

I'll keep writing until it's no longer fun. Matt is still evolving, and he needs my help. I loved the practice of law, but 38 years was enough. I won't go back to it. Like Matt, I intend to while away my time fishing and hanging out with friends on Longboat Key. I might even drink the occasional Miller Lite.