



DISPATCHES
FROM THE
The Fiction Of
Andrew Vachss
FRONT LINES:

WORDS BY ROSS THOMPSON

“Down here, we see it different. We don’t count on karma. But you can count on this: hurt one of us, we’re all coming for you.” So begins *Another Life*, the 18th and final novel to feature Burke, a menacing, street-smart career criminal, and his adopted family of misfits and fellow cons living off the radar. Propelled forward by a splintered past spent in and out of institutions and care homes, Burke is arguably the least likeable protagonist you will ever meet. And the least moral – according to his creator, Andrew Vachss, he has none. But the resultant fiction, which is written with honesty, truth and crosshair precision, is deeply compelling...

The first thing you notice is the voice. It’s warm and oak-smoked, brandy rich with a dash of gravel. It’s also, and this is in no way meant to sound corny or trite, a voice of experience. When Andrew Vachss speaks candidly about criminality in all its darkest shades, you can tell that he’s genuine. When you read any of his numerous novels, you can hear the rumbling underbelly of New York City: the death rattle of the subway, the trashcan rhythm of backstreets. It just feels real. At times frighteningly so.

You should know that Vachss has dedicated his life to twin careers: writing about crime and working extensively as a child protection lawyer. He has spent years on each, and made equal achievements in both fields. To deal with the writing first, Vachss himself would admit that he cannot be easily slotted into one particular literary pigeonhole.

“I’m at a loss to describe the style or the genre of noir fiction in an 18 syllable haiku, you know. I could tell you how they describe crime fiction, but what I do doesn’t fit there. If you want to go all literary on yourself, when I won the Grand Prix de Littérature in France, I was then informed that what I’m writing is literature engagée... I had no idea what they meant, so I subsequently found out. It’s at least a description I aspire to rather than something I claim.”

If somebody is going to speak to you in a foreign language, it’s always a relief to discover that it’s a compliment. Vachss has been bestowed with many such compliments during his lifetime – for his fiction and for his legal work. Some might observe a perplexing relationship between these seemingly polar disciplines, but for Vachss there is no such dichotomy. In fact, writing was a means to address the kind of issues he encountered in the courtroom.

“There’s such an overlap that there’s really no necessity for division. I consider the books to be an organic outgrowth of what I happen to endure. It’s not like I come home at night and write romance novels. I have information that absolutely needs to be shared, that books can further. The reality is without books the biggest audience I could get would maybe fill an auditorium or it would be a bunch of jurors in a box. The books enable me to address a humungously wider audience.”

Vachss once describe his writing as a “Trojan Horse”. Each book might at first seem like a fairly regular, albeit thrilling, slice of hardboiled noir, but the subject matter soon unfolds its cloak and reveals what’s underneath. Many of the stories focus on psychopaths and child predators.

“You can read one of my books and miss every point I’m making, but whether you acknowledge it or not, some of that information has been transmitted – even if it’s subliminal. I picked that form because it’s closest to the work I do. Crime is something that I know an awful lot about. I can write about it with an authenticity that I couldn’t on other subjects. I wasn’t looking to create literature; I was looking to send dispatches from the front lines.”

Unsurprisingly, Vachss’ novels have not been without their fair share of press attention. Where there are a dozen journalists praising his finely honed accuracy and courage, there are others who label it the product of a twisted imagination.

“If you think it’s difficult now, when my first book came out in 1985 the reaction was pretty much that I was having sick fantasies, that I was making stuff up... that it was science fiction. But remember that the people who are doing the considering are book reviewers, who are probably among the most cloistered human beings walking around. They don’t know anything about the actual subject matter; what they know about is writing.”

Again and again Vachss returns to storylines about innocents who have suffered at the hands of others. He coined the term “Children of the Secret” for those abuse victims who carry their “toxic childhood” forward into their adult lives. They keep the secret because they have nobody to share it with, nobody who will listen, so they wind up torturing themselves. Vachss describes it more succinctly:

“You know that silent whistle that only dogs can hear? Well, Children of the Secret have that too – they recognise each other right through walls.”

One of the ways in which Vachss balanced the cruel, desperate, clawing other side of America was by introducing Burke. A man with secrets of his own, he will take on any contract as long as he gets paid in full when it’s done. It’s Burke who narrates the novels – another voice which feels real, and frighteningly so. Unlike most central characters in the genre, Burke is not your usual hard on the surface but soft underneath, loveable ruffian.

“I certainly didn’t set out to create some Raymond Chandler type white knight. All this antihero nonsense gives me a headache... he’s a career criminal, he’s a mercenary, he’s an outlaw. He has no heroism in him at all. There’s not much he won’t do for money.”

True. Burke is not a people person. Burke lives in the shadows, hiding out in crawlspaces and underpasses, waiting patiently for his target. It’s an interesting choice of leading man, you might think, for a writer with a legal background.

“If you were a little blunter I’d perhaps understand you,” Vachss interjects. Not defensively, it should be said, but with humour. “Do you mean that I go round shooting people in the head? Burke is not me, nor is he a vigilante, nor is he in any way about social change. He is an outlaw and an urban survivalist. There’s no real connection. Burke exists to be your eyes and ears in a world which you may never have encountered or never even knew existed. If I’m going to show you what hell looks like, an angel isn’t an appropriate guide. Burke’s anger, his rage and his hatred are intended to be communicable to readers, but there’s no conflict between that and my legal practice where I’m actually trying to alter the system as opposed to dealing with its outcomes.”

What makes the novels so insistently enthralling is that no matter how many villains Burke punishes – and there are quite a few in an 18 novel run – no matter how many dirty tricks he pulls, you stick with him. You are frequently reminded of why you should dislike this man and resent everything for which he stands, but it’s difficult. Like Tony Soprano or Omar White or Vic Mackey, you don’t necessarily root for the guy who does these despicable things, nor do you want to follow him to the wrong side of the tracks, but neither do you wish him harm.

“Listen, Burke is not seeking therapy or catharsis. He has no morals as you would define them. He has a code, that anybody who wouldn’t step in front of a bullet for a brother or a sister isn’t worthy of being a brother or a sister, but that’s not morals – that’s a code of conduct. He has three motivations. One is to not go back to prison. Two is to protect his family of choice. Three is hate.”

The “family of choice” of which Vachss speaks is a motley crew of characters who share Burke’s distaste for a regular life: father figure the Prof, Max, the Mole, Terry, Michelle, and his beloved dog, Pansy.

“Burke’s looking for people who live outside the law as he does, and have a history similar to his. Those are the only people he can bond with. The only thing that Burke has, and without which he would be a full-blown sociopath, is that he has a very powerful sense of empathy. But it’s limited to his own family and his dog. Within that circle he’s a full human being, but outside it he’s a predator. He is beyond redemption if that means becoming a citizen. He’s not going to do that. But he certainly is capable of a full range of human emotion, and empathy and love for people like him.”

Our time with Vachss is almost up. Likewise, for Burke, time draws to a close. If you’ve been paying attention, you will know that *Another Life* is his last outing. In fiction, at least – he has plenty of real life counterparts running around. Not to give away the ending or anything, but Vachss has confirmed that there will be no more Burke novels after this one.

“I made a commitment when I started writing the series that it wasn’t going to be this stupid, plastic private eye crap where somebody stays 35 for 40 years. I was going to age the characters according to the times. Which means that they don’t all survive. This is a family of choice, which means that their highest commitment is to protect their children, and the only way to do that is to make their children go on to another life. They cannot bring those children into the family business. That’s where that decision has to be made and that’s where the series ends.”

It wasn’t, Vachss affirms, difficult to let Burke go.

“No. The job was done. It wasn’t difficult at all. I don’t consider the fact that each book has outlived the previous one to be a compulsion to keep writing the series. Actually, there has been a not inconsiderate number of fans who are angry about it, but that’s the way it is. I could have switched into fantasy land, or I could have played it straight. That’s what I did.”

It’s been over 20 years since the first Burke novel, *Flood*, was printed. During that time, society, both in Great Britain and the United States, has witnessed some of the most terrible atrocities and crimes committed against children – actually, scratch that, against other human beings in this world’s relatively short history. Life might have changed for Burke, but has anything changed in the other battlefield in which Vachss fights?

“There have been specific changes in the area that concerns me. There’s been more progress in the past 30 years than in the prior 300 years, but we’re nowhere near where we should be. One of the changes is that the media has acknowledged the existence of what it formally ignored. But has it shifted the culture in any massive way? Not yet. Children are to some extent considered more as people than they are as property, but these are incremental steps. This is no war that will be won in my lifetime, but it is a winnable war. When people make a connection that there is no biogenetic code for serial killer or arsonist, that we make our own monsters – when people actually get that, it will be obvious to them that early intervention, early protection will pay enormous dividends. The kids that we miss don’t disappear; they end up in our criminal justice system or our mental health system.”

ANOTHER LIFE BY ANDREW VACHSS IS AVAILABLE NOW (PANTHEON BOOKS)

WWW.VACHSS.COM