

Q&A with author and attorney Robert Bailey

How did you come up with the story for “The Professor?”

The answer is twofold. First, I’ve always been interested in stories of legends, especially Alabama football legends. Second, when I was in law school, I always wondered what it would be like if a professor had to try a case. Could he or she do it? Would the classroom cross over to the courtroom? These questions piqued my interest, and Thomas Jackson McMurtrie was born.

What do you think readers will like about “The Professor?”

The answer, in my opinion, is the redemptive nature of the story. This is the story of a man in the twilight of his career that is done wrong, but he won’t quit. He comes back against all odds. A backstabbing former student. Cancer. Nothing can get Tom McMurtrie down. He embodies the principles of those men that played for Coach Bryant, some of whom stand with Tom in the courtroom in one of the climactic final scenes of the book.

What are the elements of a great legal thriller?

I’m not sure there is any recipe or formula. However, I think any story, whether thriller or not, has to have an emotional hook. Something that makes the reader climb on board for the journey. A lot of times that hook is identifying with a character and what he/she is going through or the situation he/she faces. I think this is particularly so in thrillers. Having a protagonist encounter a situation that stimulates the reader’s emotions and makes the reader want to follow the protagonist’s journey through it.

Have you ever considered a career in teaching law?

No, I never have. However, teachers have had a profound influence on me. I was blessed to have many wonderful teachers in elementary school, high school, college and law school. My mother and grandmother were also teachers, so I have a great regard for that profession.

How did growing up in the south influence your writing?

Obviously, you write what you know, and I have lived my entire life in the South. I have always been drawn to southern literature and stories with a southern flare to them.

You’re obviously a huge fan of the legendary Alabama football coach Paul “Bear” Bryant. What do you think made him such an iconic figure?

I think it starts with the winning. Coach Bryant was an incredibly successful football coach for over thirty years. There were many great college football coaches during his heyday in the 50’s, 60’s and 70’s, but Coach Bryant was undoubtedly the best and his record speaks for itself. 323 victories. Six national championships. But it’s more than just the winning. He was such a great character. He was tall and had that gravelly voice. He wore the Houndstooth hat and smoked Chesterfield cigarettes. He carried himself like an Old West gunslinger. In fact, there were many comparisons between Coach Bryant and John Wayne. There is also the regard that his former players show him. So many of them count Coach Bryant as their most significant influence in life. Finally, Coach Bryant’s story is so inspiring. Here was a man born of the most humble of beginnings, one of nine children to a poor family in Moro Bottom, Arkansas, who grew to be one of the most recognizable figures in sports history. A man who dined with Presidents and celebrities. Who, when he died, was given his own stamp. Coach Paul “Bear” Bryant personified the American dream.

How in the world did you find time to write a novel while working as a full-time attorney and caring for three young children?

Simple: I got up at 4:00 in the morning before work and before the kids were awake, and wrote for a couple of hours every morning. The pages eventually began to pile up.

“The Professor” is billed as “the first McMurtrie and Drake investigation.” So can we get any sneak peek into what’s next?

Book two, which is entitled “Between Black and White,” will take Tom and Rick to Pulaski, Tennessee, where they will defend an old friend on charges of capital murder.