

· K N O P F Q & A ·

A conversation with

JAMES ELLROY

author of

BLOOD'S A ROVER

Q: It's been 8 years since *The Cold Six Thousand*. How excited are you that *Blood's A Rover* is finally being published?

A: Yes, it's been eight years since my novel, *The Cold Six Thousand*. I was that long between books for a variety of reasons, all of which are determining factors in the Beethovenian greatness of *Blood's A Rover*. One, my marriage had to go in the shitter—as I rigorously held on to the friendship of my beloved ex-wife and most astute critic, Helen Knode. Helen convinced me to write a more emotionally and stylistically accessible novel—one that plumbed the murky recesses of my tortured, tender and perverted heart!!! Two, I had to become deeply embroiled with the transcendent woman, Joan, who re-taught me American history from the ground up. Three, I made a conscious decision to write an entirely different kind of novel—one that explored spiritual and political conversion on an all-new level, while, of course, adhering to readily identifiable and identifiably groovy Ellroy shit!!! This IS my greatest novel—and I owe it all to Helen, the Red Goddess Joan, and a woman named Cathy, with a daughter named Theodora, who was the basis for Karen Sifakis and her daughter, Eleanora. Life is full of groovy, twisted, curveball shit, and *Blood's A Rover* explodes, both with autobiography and my knowledge of history, linked to a deep personal resolve.

Q: How does this book differ from the other two books in the Underworld U.S.A. Trilogy? The plot is quite complex, and there are tons of characters. How did you keep all the story lines straight?

A: Truth be told, it's markedly less complex than *The Cold Six Thousand* and slightly more complex than *American Tabloid*. The historical period—1968-1972—is less iconic than the periods covered in the first two books; thus, I had greater latitude to fictionalize. Again, this is a novel of outward revolution and revolution of the soul. There is greater dialectic in this novel than in my previous twelve novels combined. How did I keep the storyline straight? I wrote a 397-page outline, that laid out the action, down to the most minute detail.

Meticulousness, diligence, profoundly rigorous work habits all contributed to the greatness of this novel. During the odd moments that my super-human resolve faltered, I stared at the numerous portraits of Beethoven that adorn my pad and at the photo of Joan that I keep on my nightstand (the left side, of course).

Q: As in the first two books, readers will recognize a lot of the names in *Blood's A Rover*—Howard Hughes, J. Edgar Hoover, and Richard Nixon to name a few. So how much of the story is really true?

A: Yeah, Gay Edgar Hoover, Howard “Dracula” Hughes, and Tricky Dick Nixon appear again—but they are differentiated from my previous portrayals, as THEIR lives head for the shitter at a breakneck pace. As for what’s real and what’s not, let’s just say that gaps in actual recorded history have been kind to me, and, again, have allowed me latitude for creating fiction. My intent is to create a seamless fictional history; thus, questions like this one I tend to dodge and swerve around.

Q: There are three main characters in this book, Wayne Tedrow, Jr., Dwight Holly, and Donald Crutchfield, but Crutchfield is really the primary protagonist. You’ve said that in many ways he’s an odd hero. Why is that?

A: Aaaaahhhhh, my unholy troika—Don Crutchfield, Wayne Tedrow, Dwight Holly—all bad men in love with strong women!!!! They are all recognizably Ellrovia, but Crutch—at 23—is the youngest of my protagonists, ever—and is, like his creator was at that age—a perved-out, window-peeping dipshit. He is also a profound voice of the great American qualities of indefatigable will, ingenuity and pitbull-like persistence. He keeps getting his ass kicked, and he keeps coming back!!!! You gotta dig dat!!!! All drama is a man-meets-a-woman; he FOLLOWS a woman for six hundred pages, has a brief liaison with her, and in the epilogue follows her for the rest of his life. I revere him for that; it is something I would do myself.

Q: The other thing about Donald Crutchfield is that he’s actually a real person. How did you meet him?

A: I met Crutch in ‘99, dug his wheelman/P.I. spiel and impulsively co-opted him to the book. It was a smart, instinctive move on my part—because Crutch hipped me to a world I did not know existed, and his relative youth in 1968 played in perfectly to my dramatic design: DIPSHIT KID AS SECRET VOICE OF AMERICAN HISTORY!!!!!!!!!!

Q: You tackle some potent issues in this book involving race, crime, and social justice. How much did you intend the book to be a social commentary? Clearly a lot of these issues are still highly relevant today.

A: Yes, this book is highly topical, dialectical and full of exploitable contemporary reference, although I did not write it with those intentions in mind. Race, class, gender, sexual identity, seismic explosions within the body politic—call me prophetic, call me lucky, call me prescient. I am a student of history and an ignorer of contemporary culture, which allows me to live in the historical periods I write about with a fully-honed attention. There is a universal and timeless feel to *Blood's A Rover*, even though it is quite period-specific. It's the immersion process: I was THERE all the time I was writing the book.

Q: The hate and racism of the time period that you cover can be difficult to take at times. Did you find it hard to write?

A: It was EASY to write all the racial invective in this novel, because the story required it; because my bad white men come to renounce their racist beliefs; because racial humor is quite often hilarious and it is hypocritical to assert that it is not; because ugly language is a necessary corollary in a book entirely about the revolutionary tides of history. I feel no social obligation to mediate racial comments with apologies; I will read Black Panther/pimp schtick aloud, with broad racial inflections at my upcoming book gigs. Racism is a casual attribute of my characters, more than a defining characteristic, so PCers are confused—because guys they are supposed to get to dig are saying vile shit. I intend to grab the issue of race like a ravenous pitbull during my upcoming Knopf tour and milk it for all it's worth.

Q: *Blood's A Rover* has many varied settings including L.A., which clearly you know intimately, but also Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Have you spent much time in these countries?

A: Yeah, I know L.A. intimately—but no way was I going to shag my skinny white ass over to Haiti and the D.R. I sent a researcher—she had a blast—I read her notes, examined her slides and studied her maps. Fiction is verisimilitude—in the end, it all comes down to how well you can make this shit up!!!! HISTORY: what a blast to rewrite it to your own specifications.

Q: Over the years you've developed a very distinct writing style, but who were some of your early inspirations?

A: My style is deliberately provocative and outrageous: it is meant to be both challenging and wildly raw and entertaining. As a youngster, I loved the police novels of Joseph Wambaugh—but for years now, I haven't read fiction, I just lay around in the dark, brooding, listening to Beethoven and waiting for women to

call me on the phone. I'm a genius!!!! I'm sui generis!!!! I'd be insufferable if I wasn't such a sweet-natured and groovy guy.

Q: Over the last few months, *Playboy* has been serializing your next project *The Hilliker Curse: My Pursuit of Women*. Can you tell us a little bit about this new work?

A: Yeah, *The Hilliker Curse*, subtitled "My Pursuit of Women," a four-part serialization in *Playboy*, a Knopf book in a significantly enlarged form, most likely sometime next year. This memoir details my obsessive spiritual quest and dissects—with unprecedented rigor—the male romantic urge. The book is a companion to my 1996 memoir, *My Dark Places*, the story of my mother's 1958 murder. I conceived this book while writing *Blood's A Rover*, in a state of desperate mooning for Joan, while I tried to convince Cathy to divorce her husband and marry me, while my ex-wife Helen gave me nightly ass-kickings and urged me to cool my jets, and look to the deep psychic truth that informs my horny, aging burn-out on a mission of LOVE soul. You heard it first here: *Blood's A Rover* will be HUGE—but *The Hilliker Curse* will be a spiritual text for the ages!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Q: I have to ask, where did your nickname the Demon Dog of American Literature come from? Anything to do with Knopf's own canine logo the Borzoi?

A: I have never understood where I got the Demon Dog moniker. Maybe it's because I chase cats, wear designer flea collars, drink toilet water, bay at moons, and urinate to mark my turf. I DO identify with the Knopf Borzoi!!!! That dog is 94 years old and still going strong!!!! Let's get him a comb-out and a flea dip, so I can take him on the *Blood's A Rover* tour with me.