

Eye Contact Over Truk

Author Q & A

Q. What was your inspiration for the story?

A. In 1996, I scuba dived on the sunken ships in Truk Lagoon—as it was most commonly called. However, in 1990, the islands took back their name: Chuuk, Micronesia. This is a group of islands that, in WWII, was a large and important Japanese navy base. Many refer to the two-day battle there as Japan's Pearl Harbor. At the time, I was completely naïve about the historical aspects of the wrecks. On my first dive, I swam through a torpedo hole into a cavernous space that had once been an engine room. The reality that I was experiencing a tomb immediately hit me. I stayed on a live-aboard dive ship with four Germans, three Japanese, three other American friends, and a few people from Europe. One evening, the captain of the ship played the original newsreel video of the raid, which had a chilling effect on all of us. Decades earlier, our countries were at war and now we were vacationing on the remains. It was completely surreal. Then I was told a tale about a retired pilot who, later in life, came back to Truk, dove on the ship he sank, and died during the dive. I tried to verify the truth to the tale, but wasn't able to do so. In the end, I wrote the story the way I wanted it to be.

Q. To what extent is your book realistic?

A. The historical aspects are completely accurate. That part is very important to me. I included a bibliography in the back for anyone who wanted more information. I took literary license with one event and I explained it in the Historical notes section. As I wrote my first draft in 2000, I found a WWII fighter pilot to interview. He wasn't in the battle at Truk, but still shared his story and helped me talk through my thoughts and goals for this book. Then, while I was researching WWII, I came across many events that I never knew about. I ultimately chose characters and settings that enabled me to blend them all into a cohesive story.

Q. As your book is historical fiction, are the characters based on real people?

A. There is only one character based on a real person, and that character is Sarah. She is based on me. For her, I wrote my questions, my confusion I experienced while I was there. A particular scene in the book, between the main character, Nick, and Sarah, is a recreation of a sunrise that I experienced with those thoughts. The other characters are fiction and include parts of different people that I knew.

Q. Do you develop your characters as you write, or did you already know them before you start?

A. They developed as I wrote. I found I was really enjoying the discovery. In many ways, the characters became friends I had to get to know through interacting with them. They revealed themselves to me as the story unfolded.

Q. During the writing, what did you find fascinating, exhaustive, and frustrating?

A. I was fascinated that as I wrote, I discovered ideas I'd never considered before. It was almost as if I wasn't the one writing.

The exhausting aspect was that much of this story was incredibly cathartic to me personally. I relived my parents' deathbeds, my own need to stop controlling my emotions, and to challenge several of my own perspectives. And, by writing the ending, I was finally able to resolve all those questions that had haunted me for so many years.

The frustrating part was learning to write words that described visceral emotions and background scenes. As a reader, I tend to skip over descriptive passages that are not integral to the forward movement of the story. This took a lot of work.

Q. What are you trying to achieve with your book?

A. The book evolved to be a story of perspectives. Not just that of one side versus the other, but also how perspectives change with more life experience. And the effects that can happen with a perspective that isn't challenged and allowed to fester, eating away at a soul. The internal change of a perspective can only occur with forgiveness of either yourself or of others. The story uses historical events to convey the idea, but it is universal to all our perspectives that we can cling to that bring us anger and pain.

Q. Why did you become a writer?

A. Writing found me. I wrote because this story haunted me for twenty-four years. But writing it, and learning how to write creatively, has opened up a new world for me. I think it is a world that I always wanted but never thought I could, so it stayed buried. Now I'm old enough to no longer give in to insecurities. Now I have things I want to say, history I want to highlight, especially in our current world of so much anger and polarization.

Q. What would you tell an author that wants to publish his first book?

A. See yourself as a writer, as an author. No one else will see you in that light unless you do first. Know that your work is not for everyone and don't associate with any vitriol. Also, know that publishing a book is either a hobby or a business, nothing in between. Choose which path your heart really wants. If it's a business, look at it as an adventure. See every new concept as just another: "I get to learn something new today."

Q. How do you define success as an author?

A. When my work touches another soul. When my words matter, in a positive way, to another person's life. There isn't anything real that can make me more successful than this.