

A Book-Review Interview: David L. Robbins & Historical Fiction

By Bill Mesce Jr.

Book Review:

War of Rats, by David L. Robbins.
Bantam, 1999, and others.



Novels about World War II abound, from those with gritty realism (Harry Brown's *A Walk in the Sun*), literary grandeur (Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*), black comic absurdity (Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*) and surreal allegory (William Eastlake's *Castle Keep*). WWII lit seems a wide, deep canon in which the stories worth telling may already have been told and retold.

Yet the breadth of the greatest armed conflict in history remains under-appreciated, especially to a younger generation for whom WWII is as relevant as the War of 1812. The war touched, directly or indirectly, every continent. Somewhere between 50 to 60-million human beings were killed (the majority of them civilians) between the historical start of the war in September of 1939 and its climax in August 1945. The scope of the loss equals roughly every human being presently living in the American northeast—from Pennsylvania to the Atlantic, from New Jersey to the Canadian border.

Over 15-million men and women served in the American military, and several hundred thousand more in attached civilian organizations (such as the merchant marine). That means approximately one out of every nine Americans served during the war (contrast today, where the ratio is less than one in 100, including those serving in the National Guard and reserves).

In other words, the number of stories about the war is infinite, the only limitations being that of imagination, and, sadly, marketability.

Beginning in 1999 with *War of the Rats*, David L. Robbins has turned out 11 books including, five bestselling novels about WWII,

which focus on the overlooked, the undersung, and the plainly forgotten. Most of these novels, either in part or *en toto*, deal with the war in the east, where Germany and the Soviet Union were locked in a struggle of fantastic proportions. While we in the West think of the war in Europe through our own defining moments—D-Day, for example, or the Battle of the Bulge—even the largest of those engagements on the Western front were dwarfed by the apocalyptic fights in the East. The Battle of Kursk (the basis for Robbins' *Last Citadel*) stands as the largest tank battle in history, the armored duels of both Iraq wars paling in comparison. The fall of Berlin to the Russians, in 1945, comprises the final act of Robbins' *The End of War*.

War of the Rats is set against the Battle of Stalingrad (the title is a translation of *rattenkrieg*—the German soldiers' nickname for the fight): a six-month slugging match in 1942 that became a contest of wills between Hitler and Stalin (the city itself was of no great strategic value). Harkening back to the philosophy of journalist Ed Murrow—that one tells the big story by telling the little story—*Rats* focuses on a one-on-one duel between two ace snipers: Sergeant Vasily Zaitsev of the Soviet Army and Colonel Heinz Thorvald of the German SS.

The contrast between the two is the Battle of Stalingrad—in fact, the war in the east—writ in miniature. Zaitsev is peasant stock, taught to hunt by his grandfather not for sport but to put meat in the pot. Although his marksman's expertise has made him an unwilling pawn in the Soviet Army's socialism-salted propaganda, Zaitsev, the common man, fights because he has to: for his comrades, for survival, to repel the invader.

Thorvald, on the other hand, is an officer, aristocratic, arrogant, specifically assigned by the German high command to score their own propaganda victory by killing Zaitsev. Thorvald, master of Germany's sniper school, learned to hunt as a gentleman's sport, and he stalks Zaitsev in much the same frame of mind, devoid of either patriotic intent or loyalty to his brothers-in-arms, but simply to out-ace another ace.

Robbins' narrative is a dramatization of a true story. In that, Robbins had to deal with the questions faced by any author of historical

fiction: What are the boundaries? How far can history be stretched? When does dramatization compromise the integrity of the tale?

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BILL MESCE JR.: How much research did you have to do, and how obligated did you feel to get the history right?

DAVID L. ROBBINS: Historical fiction calls on all the writer's heart and mind, as required of any well-told story: love, hate, jealousy, fear, sorrow, the panoply of emotions and motivations that make up a human. That's a big enough challenge for any storyteller. For historical fiction, you also have to load up an intimate understanding of the context for the tale: the gone times, places, machinery, sentiments, culture, and, in my case, weaponry, the workings of two great militaries, the actual record of mass events (Stalingrad!). Then, just when you know everything you've set out to learn, after you have all your Gullivers staked to the beach, you must combine the two: the mercurial human and the immensity of history. Nothing short of this effort will make a compelling narrative out of the materials of the past.

As far as feeling obligated to getting the story right because it actually happened, I prefer to be guided by profound truths as well as real ones. This means I follow those events, actual or made-up, which best express the story I'm trying to tell. First priority is to mine the truth, to find those factual events and people I deem dramatic enough to be included. Once that's exhausted, I invent only those scenes and characters that can carry the banner of the tale authentically. Seamlessness is what I look for. A reader shouldn't be able to parse between the real and the pretended.

MESCE: You interviewed the real Vasily Zaitsev, as I recall. How much of a difference did it make to have spoken with one of the actual participants? Were you concerned that this asset might give the character in the novel a weight you might not be able to give Heinz Thorvald or the other characters?

ROBBINS: The real Zaitsev was very old and sick when we spoke, but willing to talk about his adventures in Stalingrad. It's always an irreplaceable gift to speak with an actual participant of the events in your book. The responsibility you mention of overweighting one character beyond another actually worked the other way: It pressed me to pay even more attention to the flesh and bones and makeup of the antagonist Thorvald, to make him a fully measured match for Zaitsev.

MESCE: While the novel is based on real events, and you are using real characters, this is still obviously a dramatization. To what extent did you feel obligated to remain within the facts of this duel? Did this feel like a constraint? Did you ever feel, "Who's going to know?" Did you, at any point in the book, "cheat" the history to take the story to a given place?

ROBBINS: I did, in fact, "cheat" the history. I gave in to my publisher's wish that there be an American character in the book, and so gave Tania Chernova, in real life a young woman from Minsk, the background of a woman caught in the German attack on the city while visiting relatives, who then becomes a feared sniper (and thus got back on track with her true arc). I will never, ever, do that again. The story didn't require it: The business did. They are not the same, and business shares few interests with writing.

Beyond that obvious act, I stayed true to the facts as the records and survivors, among them Vasha Zaitsev, himself, related them. I would have diverted, and without conscience, had the real events not been sufficiently driving. It turned out they were, and I had a real playground of history. The key, I believe, is to choose well; then, this issue of changing the story doesn't come up so much.

MESCE: You maintain, for much of the novel, parallel narratives. Was there any plan to that construction, or did it develop organically? Was balance a concern?

ROBBINS: The novel is a duel, and paralleling the points of view seemed a natural structure. It fit the back and forth of the drawn-

out confrontation, and, just as important, granted the reader access to facts that the other character in the duel lacked. This is the essence of tension, asymmetrical information.

MESCE: This is a fight during WWII on the eastern front about which I think most Americans know little. Was there a concern that readers might be so in the dark about the context of this fight that you'd lose them?

ROBBINS: I suppose there might have been, but as a young and avid writer, I didn't let myself think of anything but the story. I explored the human parts of it well, I think, the love between Tania and Vasha, the grudging respect between the antagonist snipers, the loyalty and fervor to both cause and country of the troops who made Stalingrad such a killing ground. The result of not thinking about the possibility of a confused or disengaged audience allowed me to focus on the universalities of the story, seeing my characters not as Russian or German but in wider, more recognizable human roles, just frightened, fearsome, lonely men and women. That, more than anything, made the book successful, I believe.

MESCE: Did you get a chance to walk the ground? Obviously, Stalingrad has long since been rebuilt, but did it make a difference to your writing?

ROBBINS: Absolutely. I have never depicted any major setting in any of my books that I have not personally visited. Stalingrad, Poland, the Russian steppe, the South African bush, the Saudi desert, Manila, Sydney, the list is growing as I will be heading for Vietnam this summer. You must go to your locations, for you will see that which you could never, truly never, have guessed. A gargantuan sunflower field outside Prokhorovka in Ukraine, the pillars of crashing water against the Malecon in Havana, the carcasses of rhinos butchered for their horns in the Kruger National Park, the savagery of Stalingrad preserved in several square blocks of the city left unrestored. Writers, go. Go.