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P. J. VERNON

WE ARE ALL VILLAINS IN SOMEONE ELSE'S STORY

But someone else's story isn't our own

When it came to make-believe, this kid always played the villain. Vader over Skywalker. Ursula over the Little Mermaid. While friends fought tooth and nail for the coveted role of Whatever Color Power Ranger, wicked Rita Rapunzel was all mine. Why the hell would anyone want to be the hero? Heroes were boring. Banal. They were fighting for the status quo while villains challenged the system. Villains were magnetic. Villains had a five-year strategic plan.

Sure, behaving badly is fun; the pursuit of unfettered power or revenge or whatever is thrilling. But beyond swishy black capes and planet-shattering super lasers is something else, villains don't fit in. Their very survival is threatening. They're *Them* and everyone else is *Us*. As a queer kid white-knuckling his way through life in the Bible Belt, villains were, above all else, relatable. From the rigid pews of church and school, I was made to feel like one every day.

When you're bound for hell with the worst of them, is it unreasonable to question the moral authority fating you to burn alongside Caligula and Stalin for eternity? When survival is tethered to lies about who you are and who you love, is dishonesty really a vice? When your community holds no place for you, should its norms and mores go unchallenged?

Thrillers—or suspense or domestic noir, depending on who you ask and what day—are where moral compasses are stress-tested and the idea we've evolved beyond our more primordial urges, exposed as a

tissue-paper thin veneer. Thrillers probe where we're least comfortable (that's where the thrill comes from). Intrusive thoughts are ginned up by jealousy, hate or lust. The voyeurism we gleefully relish in—even if we won't admit it. We don't belong in the relationships and therapy sessions and bedrooms of strangers—but we'd have a hell of a time as a fly on the wall. As humans, we engage in both likable and unlikable behaviour, and thriller readers do not expect that thriller writers deliver sympathetic protagonists. All they ask of characters is that they are engaging and relatable. If any of us can't relate to notions of revenge and fear and regret, maybe we aren't honest with ourselves.

Of course, suspenseful tales excite us. They examine trust—in our loved ones, our communities, ourselves—and force the question, “Could this happen to me?” Likewise, when I started experimenting with the genre, my first instinct was to anchor narratives around queer protagonists—after all, it's what I know best. While I weighed writing characters like me into manuscripts I hoped to sell one day, is there a reason I'm not represented on the pages of all these thrilling breakout hits?

Whatever creative rocket fuel my lived experiences as a gay man would've given my plots was no match for one enormous fear: which large publisher with international distribution would ever buy a gay thriller? More important, what casual “mainstream” reader will pick up a book like this? Not a gay memoir in which

my wounds and traumas reopened, not a coming-out drama of literary fiction—tragic or comical or otherwise—but a good old-fashioned thriller brimming with gaslighting and murder and maybe a little toxic sex here and there (you know, a Gillian Flynn novel... just gay)?

I shared an identity with fictional characters in *Will & Grace*, not in crime fiction with huge press backing. These stories exist. We all stand on the shoulders of those who came first, and I've had the privilege of being swept away by tremendous, page-turning crime novels from folks like the award-winning Michael Nava (*Carved in Bone* is stunning). Growing up in rural South Carolina, where Walmart shelves were the only retail shelves, I often wonder what might've been different. What if I could travel back in time and leave one of Nava's novels somewhere for Teenage Me to discover? But I have no time machine, and the transformation of crime fiction that brought us queer novels like Kelly J. Ford's *Cottonmouths*, John Fram's *The Bright Lands*, and Micah Nemerever's *These Violent Delights* hadn't reached me as I began to write.

So, there I was, years later, querying literary agents with a not-gay-but-still-very-thrilling manuscript (ultimately published as my debut *When You Find Me*) when it happened. I was struck by a *f--k it!* moment spurred by the hundreds of rejections I'd collected and sustained through watching authors like Kellye Garrett, renowned for her multi-award-winning *The Detective*

Be fearless with your voice and your stories. Be stubborn. Yes, talent matters—but it’s entirely learnable through practicing our craft and giving our innate, unique voices room to run on the page. We will be rejected, but it only takes one yes. I opened over 200 nos. None of them mattered or impacted that single yes.

by Day series, fiercely advocate for representation of all voices in our genre. Fearless from having sold nothing at the time—and having nothing at stake—I feverishly drafted what would become *Bath Haus* over a summer. My only worry became telling the best story I could in the best possible way I could tell it, and I held nothing back. I began to write a very dark, very honest, and *very* gay thriller.

Two things were clear: First, characters from any marginalized community will navigate a crime novel differently. Interactions with police, the stakes, everything changes if *The Girl on the Train* is a Black woman, or if *Gone Girl*'s Amy becomes Nick's gay husband. Second, queer characters have a place in crime fiction far beyond their queerness. Our stories, with all their depth and richness, belong in thrillers. This narrative I'd started would be no coming-out story; instead, it would follow the same genre conventions its mainstream shelf-mates do. I opened the book somewhere provocative. The titular Haus, a gay bathhouse where anonymous sex is freely available at the expense of vulnerability. The sort of place you could be both almost-murdered and desperate to keep it secret. In villainous fashion, my main character Oliver Park is cheating on his husband from page one.

Liberated to draw on my identity for the sake of story, the book—as the cliché goes—wrote itself. I was free to play with ideas like the contrast between growing up gay in healthy, supportive environments vs. conservative communities, tropey plot

devices applied to fresh queer characters, and the hidden costs of progress. With all the rights that marriage affords (something this American author was only recently entitled to) come all the spousal expectations and centuries of patriarchal baggage.

See, as a kid, I dug villains because they felt like me. Outcast and misguided. Or more accurately, a villain only because someone else was telling their story. The book's journey mirrors its author's. The day I told my story was the day I stopped feeling like a villain. The day I decided to write *Bath Haus* was the day it stopped feeling unsellable.

And then I sold it. I sold my gay, unsellable thriller to the biggest publisher in the world in the biggest deal of my life. I share this because we cut our teeth on mistakes, and it turns out I'd been wrong. Wrong for thinking there wasn't space for me—for characters like me—on those rural Walmart bookshelves of my youth. Wrong for letting fear of what I don't know and can't control box in my creativity. And wonderfully wrong for worrying that those amazing, voracious, sophisticated folks we call thriller readers wouldn't dig a queer one. They dig good stories.

Be fearless with your voice and your stories. Be stubborn. Yes, talent matters—but it's entirely learnable through practicing our craft and giving our innate, unique voices room to run on the page. We will be rejected, but it only takes one yes. I opened over 200 nos. None of them mattered or impacted that single yes. Luck matters. Timing matters. But if inking a

book deal is our goal, we only fail if we quit. There is no such thing as “new” ideas in fiction, but that's the miraculous thing about our voices. They're exclusively ours. Until we tell them, the world has never read any stories in our voices. Write the one you want.

Experiment in genres and mediums and creative routines, but bring your vision and voice center stage and be confident that's where it belongs. Eye writing advice and commentary from authors like me with suspicion because you decide what pieces to keep or not. For example, I don't write every day. I applaud those who do, but that advice doesn't work for me. When I'm punishing myself because life is chaotic and I can't find time to fire up a word processor, my projects don't move forward. My vision and voice suffer, which is the metric against which I measure and weigh everything.

Of course, we all leave a bit of ourselves behind on the page, too. Though they're often (hopefully?) vastly different, we draw on lived experiences and pain and trauma when the stories we create demand it. It's an extractive process, and it undeniably takes from us. Sometimes it can feel like too much. When this happens, shut your laptop—or your notebook or whatever you use to get your words out—and do something you love. For me, nothing beats sunshine on the back of my neck in a leafy park.

But always go back. Don't stop. Keep going.

We are all villains in someone else's story, but someone else's story isn't our own. And if anyone ever suggests yours doesn't belong, they couldn't be more mistaken. Your story—no matter what it is—has never been told. Not in *your* voice. Not yet. ■

P.J. Vernon was born in South Carolina. A “rising star thriller writer” (Library Journal), Vernon's debut, When You Find Me, was both an Audible Plus #1 Listen and Top Ten U.S. Audiobook (Associated Press). His next novel, Bath Haus, pitched as “Gone Girl with gays and Grindr,” releases June 15, 2021 from Doubleday. The author lives in Calgary with his husband and two wily dogs. Contact pj@pjvernonbooks.com for more information.