Delta Themes in the Legal Thriller Fiction of Arkansas Native Webb Hubbell: An Interview and Profile

by Maureen Richmond

To the ears of those who followed politics in the late 1990s, the name Webb Hubbell has a familiar ring. Many remember Hubbell as an associate of Bill and Hillary Clinton who forged a friendship with the Clintons in Little Rock when Bill Clinton was governor of Arkansas, and who later rose to the position of the Associate Attorney General of the United States under the Clinton presidential administration. Others may remember the name Webb Hubbell from the subsequent Whitewater Scandal, in which Hubbell was caught up, leading ultimately to his conviction and an eighteen-month incarceration at a federal prison in Maryland. Still others might recall Hubbell as the author of the autobiographical expose of the Clinton circle titled Friends in High Places *(1997), a conversational and controversial memoir of Hubbell's interaction with the Clintons from early days when all three were lawyers in Little Rock during the early '70s, to their roles in high political stakes while in Washington, DC, during the late '90s.*

Yet the Webb Hubbell of the 2000s is something quite other. Since 2014, Hubbell has emerged on the American literary landscape as an acclaimed novelist in the legal thriller genre. Hubbell is now the author of five bestsellers: When Men Betray *(2014),* Ginger Snaps *(2015),* A Game of Inches *(2016),* Eighteenth Green *(2018), and* East End *(2019), all published by New York City-based Beaufort Books, an independent publisher. Several of Hubbell's novels are set either wholly or partially in central Arkansas and the capital city of Little Rock, firmly rooting Hubbell's claim to literary fame in fiction of the Mississippi Delta. All five Hubbell novels have received high marks from celebrities, politicians, and writers, including former US president Bill Clinton, Harry Thomason of* Designing Women *and* Evening Shade *fame, writer and actor Peter Coyote, and DC lobbyist Jack Abramoff. More icing on the cake:* When Men Betray *was rated a finalist in the 2014* Forward Review *competition,* Ginger Snaps *captured the Gold Medal IPPY Award in 2016, and* Eighteenth Green *scored the same in the 2018 Forward Review Indies Book of the Year prize. The news has gotten around in Hubbell's hometown of Little Rock, where the Central Arkansas Library System stocks a substantial collection of Hubbell's fiction. His titles are always off the shelf and in the hands of readers. Hubbell, it might be said, appears to be on a bona fide literary roll.*

* * *

Born on January 18, 1948 in Little Rock, Arkansas, Hubbell is the real-deal Delta boy grown up. A few years after Hubbell was born, his engineer father found work in Memphis, an authentic Delta location if ever there was one. After a childhood in Memphis, Hubbell's teen years were spent with the family back in Little Rock, where Hubbell played football at Little Rock Hall High and made a name for himself as an offensive lineman. Hubbell then attended the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, ma-

joring in engineering and famously roughing up the gridiron there as well. Law school came next at the same campus, and then the passage of the bar and law practice in Little Rock. Along the way, Hubbell married the love of his life, Susanna Ward of Little Rock, tying the knot at historic Trinity Episcopal Church, a classic central Arkansas venue on the National Register of Historic Places. Soon, he was working as a trial attorney for the prestigious Rose Law Firm of Little Rock and serving as the mayor of the river city from 1979 to 1981. Around the same time, Hubbell contributed legal expertise and enthusiasm to the development of the riverfront area in downtown Little Rock, an area which has since become a major source of pride and revenue for the state's capitol city. He also did a brief stint as Chief Justice of the Arkansas Supreme Court. Then, Hubbell supported a successful bid for the American presidency by Bill Clinton, Hubbell's fellow native Arkansan.[1]

It's an impressive climb to notice, which winds its way through the Delta landscape and the classic white Delta worlds of family, sports, and privileged business connections. But from where, one might ask, did Webb Hubbell absorb the story-telling knack so essential to the successful novelist? In October and November 2019, I put that question and others to the author in two phone interviews I conducted with Hubbell, who now lives in Charlotte, North Carolina, where he enjoys the company of his wife, grown children, and many grandchildren.

* * *

Maureen Richmond: I wonder if you would like to comment on where you feel you got your story-telling ability.

Webb Hubbell: Well, first of all, I think the desire to tell a story is a southern thing. I grew up amongst southerners, who have a unique and innate ability to tell a story. I heard story-telling from my grandfathers, my grandmothers, uncles and aunts, and everyone else. It's just part of growing up in the south.

MR: Aha! Just an innate southern ability to tell stories. So your family was strong in that?

WH: Of course. I think every family in the south has this tradition, or something like it. On Sundays my family would go to my aunt's in Mississippi and have a meal that would last five hours where people were telling stories the whole time.

MR: When you were living in Memphis?

WH: Right. My grandmother's twin sister lived in Water Valley, Mississippi. About once a month we would all go from Memphis to Water Valley and there would be a ham and a turkey and a chicken and about twenty-seven vegetable dishes, six or seven pies and cakes, and you would sit on the front porch and tell stories.

MR: Well that explains it! I'm glad you told me that. I wondered. Football at Hall and UA Fayetteville, engineering degree, and law—where's the power of literary story-telling in all that?

WH: Right. The other part of it is that every lawyer is a story-teller. It's part of the profession. I was a trial lawyer and when talking to a jury, I would tell the story so that the jury would believe my client.

MR: The courtroom work of the lawyer, then, is very much the framing of the narrative?

WH: Yes, making it something the jury could understand. For example, if the trial had something to do with a bank, I would use the metaphor of a piggy bank, or a mason jar, to symbolize the way a bank works.

MR: So the origin of your storytelling ability goes back to two things—your childhood and your law experience.

WH: That's true. Engineers don't talk that much!

MR: So tell me again, is Water Valley in northern Mississippi?

WH: Yes, it's close to Oxford.

MR: Oh my goodness. Then you come by your story-telling ability very honestly don't you? You have childhood story-telling memories right out of William Faulkner land.

WH: Yes.

* * *

Indeed, the Water Valley of Webb Hubbell's childhood sits about twenty miles south-southwest of Oxford, Mississippi, made famous by the dean of southern literature, William Faulkner, who resided there for much of his life. For the southern story-telling tradition, this area in northern Mississippi is hallowed ground, downright mythical in its reputed near-magical power to stimulate literary incantation. Here is the fertile soil of angst and imagination which sprouted not only William Faulkner, but also famed southern short-story writer Eudora Welty and a host of other Delta fiction writers of note, including the prolific contemporary novelist John Grisham, twentieth-century writers Walker Percy, Richard Wright, Frances Gaither, Ellen Gilchrist, and Barry Hannah, and nineteenth century female novelist Sherwood Bonner. Given the power of story-telling rooted for Hubbell in this vaunted location, and his plots so frequently set in not far-distant Little Rock, the next question was obvious.

* * *

MR: Do you think of yourself as a regionalist fiction writer?

WH: Arkansas contains a wealth of stories that need to be told, so in that sense, yes.

Hubbell went on to explore his regionalist sentiment through the psychological make-up of his protagonist Jack Patterson, central figure and first-person narrator of all five novels. Patterson is, not unlike Hubbell, a former football player and tax lawyer turned criminal litigant who ends up in the nation's capital for a significant portion of his life, but who is seemingly helpless to resist the lure of Little Rock and periodic returns to his roots.

WH: Jack Patterson is the ultimate southern boy. He wants to go back home, but going back home is problematic for him, as we see in the plots of each book. It's through the lens of Jack's experience that I present the Delta, especially in his relationships with all the other characters who show up over the course of the now five novels. Jack is the voice of the novels, but the issues which he sees around him both live in the Delta and transcend the Delta. They're bigger than the Delta. They are more universal and found in lots of places—things like political corruption, abuses of the criminal justice system, racial inequality, suppression of innovative drug research by pharmaceutical companies, fantasy football and whether it will ruin the game, human trafficking, discrimination against the LGBQT community, gender issues, violence against women, problems in rural health care.

MR: How much does the sense of place, then, function as the mainspring of your creative inspiration?

WH: A great deal, because all my characters are rooted in place. They're embodiments of the values, characteristics, and themes of the south. My original idea was that I wanted to tell stories that have in the background the whole thing about growing up in the south. That experience shapes a person. Values like the importance of friendship, loyalty, working together, partying together, the fact you don't judge people on today's standards for what they did a long time ago, these are the aspects of the south I wanted to build into my characters. I'm basically telling the story of who I am and what I saw growing up in the south, in the Delta or nearby.

That qualified "yes" places Hubbell's evolving oeuvre somewhere in the vicinity of Delta regional literature. The themes he weaves into his novels bring the contemporary Delta to life, revealing both the shadows of the past and the tensions of the present. This is the stuff of contemporary Delta literature, according to Delta studies scholar Lisa Hinrichsen (2015), who writes,

> *while contemporary southern authors derive inspiration from traditional motifs of history, place, race, and community, they also place new emphasis on social class, sexuality, and gender, challenging conservative notions regarding the thematic range of southern literature. (278-279)*

It's true for Hubbell. Often set in the south and straightforwardly confronting the lingering legacies of enslavement, racial discrimination, and the struggle for civil rights, Hubbell's novels clearly reveal the imprint of history, place, race and community, while forging on to battle with class, gender, and a whole host of societal ills. I asked Hubbell how he approaches the infusion of today's emerging concerns as themes into his novels.

MR: So, do you start with a predicament?

WH: Yes. Well I usually try to have some theme, something I'm trying to tell, but then I try to create a predicament that will lead to not only telling that story but to entertaining the reader as well.

MR: You articulate a social problem and provide entertainment on the way. I notice these are the themes you've been covering: corruption in the justice system, corruption in the federal government, bi-raciality, gender issues, sex trafficking, predatory business practices of the pharmaceutical industry, discrimination against the LGBQT community.

WH: And American citizens funding terrorism, civil asset forfeiture, the need to legalize marijuana as a medical substance, fantasy football and whether it will destroy the legitimate sport, concussion injuries in football.

* * *

These are just some of the themes depicted in Hubbell's work. Hubbell himself is passionate about civil rights, and his novels reflect that fact. The star of Hubbell's novels is Jack Patterson, a white southern male living a privileged life as a well-paid DC tax attorney who private jets around the country in the service of his well-heeled clients. However, as the novel series opens, the reader learns that Jack has recently lost to cancer his dearly treasured wife Angie, a spirited and talented African American woman he met while in college at the fictional Stafford State University in Little Rock. From that marriage, character Jack has an adult bi-racial daughter named Beth, who is as on-point as her mother, a scientific researcher in the field of cancer cure before her demise. With this literary set-up for his novels, right off the scrimmage line Hubbell has charged straight into the face of the southern taboo against miscegenation, wrestled it kicking and screaming to the turf, and pinned it down securely with his foot on its throat. The reader is immediately given to understand that in the world of the Jack Patterson series, racial discrimination gets no quarter. This is a new south, a new world, a place where soul, mind, character, and demonstrated values matter most, skin pigmentation least.

But the south with all its problems stemming from a history of racial discrimination is still the confoundingly magnetic gris-gris rootball from which both Webb Hubbell and his character Jack Patterson have sprung. It works like a haunting siren-song on its children, calling them back to her secret springs of deep feeling whether they hie thither willingly or no. Hubbell builds this inexplicable call back to southern roots into his Jack Patterson story, doing so with twists and turns that sting like the proverbial cat-of-nine tails scourge. Jack loves his southern roots, but associated with its allure is a terrifying memory that appalls and repels him every time it appears. It revolves around Angie, his beloved marriage partner, the only girl with whom he'd ever seriously fallen in love.

Over the course of the novels, the reader discovers that in their college days, Jack had been a highly acclaimed football star and Angie a beloved member of his college social circle. A jealous and racist male rival plotted to get revenge on the successful and popular Patterson

through Angie. The rival arranged to have Angie kidnapped, tied to a bed in a Little Rock motel room, and gang-raped by white southern college boys. Jack was able to discover the plot just in time, bursting into the motel room as the action was in progress. Although Jack succeeded in freeing Angie from her tormentors safely, the scene of her rape is burned into his mind forever, the more intolerable because it would not have happened had it not been for him. Then, in the fifth and most recent novel, East End*, the jealous and racist rival returns decades later. Still trying to even the score with Patterson and punish him for crossing the race line, the rival has Jack kidnapped and strung up for lynching in the swampy Fouche Bottoms south of the Little Rock metropolitan area. Patterson is saved just in time by his body-guard and private investigator, Clovis Jones. Patterson lives to carry on, albeit with a harrowingly close and ironic brush with an agonizing form of death often inflicted on African Americans in the Jim Crow south. All the same, in Hubbell's Jack Patterson series, the protagonist finds himself frequently returning to Little Rock, set right in the midst of the lingering old south ways.*

WH: Jack keeps wondering why he keeps coming back. There's a real pull to his roots, but also a reluctance to return to them.

MR: Do you think that Jack Patterson stands for every person's relation to the past?

WH: It was Thomas Wolfe who said you can't really go back to the past, and Jack has a lot of that desire but inability in him.

MR: Do you think this internal tug-of-war about the return to one's roots is a uniquely Delta theme, or is it a universal theme?

WH: I don't know. I only know that it's pretty universal for people in the south, especially for things that happened when we were younger, but I haven't really talked with friends to see if they had the same pull.

MR: What about the situation of the white southerner in the 1950s? Does this play in?

WH: In the 1950s and '60s, there was a real desire to leave the south, but still that pull to come back.

MR: The conceit for the beginning of *Ginger Snaps* and *East End* is that Jack Patterson is going to come back to his roots in Little Rock for a short visit, just a couple of days, to see old friends and consult on their legal matters. And it's like that in the other novels not set in Little Rock. There's the expectation that Jack will spend just a little bit of time in Little Rock and then be on his way back to DC.

WH: Right. He's got in mind just going down to Little Rock, find out what happened, and then leave.

MR: Stick his little toe in, so to speak. But it doesn't turn out that way.

WH: No, he keeps getting drawn in, sucked in, like in quicksand.

MR: Does this pattern have a personal meaning for you?

WH: Sure, there's an autobiographical element in it. I didn't leave Little Rock and Arkansas for any reason other than the fact that the president (Bill Clinton) asked me to come to Washington, but then, all hell done broke loose, and people still ask me today why I don't go back to live in Little Rock. The answer is complicated.

MR: It is a complicated answer. The pull that characters either fictional or veridical experience to the past is complicated because there are memories that one doesn't want to face, while at the same time, there's a source of strength or familiarity that one wants to tap. Do you think Jack Patterson is in that situation?

WH: Yes. He's still very close to his old and new friends in Arkansas, and has wonderful memories, but at the same time there are things that give him a real reluctance to come back to Little Rock.

* * *

A preoccupation with memory, history, and the presence of the past is a key theme in Delta literature, according to Hinrichsen (2015, 274). This theme would be worked from every

angle by twentieth-century Delta novelist William Faulkner, who surrendered to his regional sense of shame and guilt around the issue of black slavery and created a literature which exposed the moral decay underlying the slavery-based plantation system defining the south up to and even beyond the Civil War (Hinrichsen, 275). Webb Hubbell is onto the same trail in his Jack Patterson series. Hubbell creates in his main character a man rooted in the old south but emblematic of a very new south not driven by prejudice against persons of color. Still, Patterson exists in the sticky web of stubborn racist beliefs, against which he struggles and sometimes wins. This, too, is typical of twenty-first century Delta literature, which still contends with the ways that past and present engage with each other in daily life (Hinrichsen, 279).

Hubbell springboards from his treatment of racial prejudice as a fundamental societal problem to encompass related issues, particularly prejudice and violence against women, a theme which comes to life through the experiences of his female character Mickie Lawrence, a sharp and confident Little Rock trial attorney who runs into both disdain and physical violence for her brave and principled stands. Hubbell's extension of his civil rights theme to women's concerns echoes the tenor of contemporary Delta fiction, which is known for its examination of race, gender, class, family, community, and even religion from the angle of changed perspectives and previously marginalized voices (Hinrichsen 2015, 280). Hubbell takes the big view, in fact, and incorporates into his characters and plots a consideration of multiple themes of human relationship, including friendship, loyalty and betrayal, forgiveness and redemption. To this end, his novels are filled with a large and socially diverse cast of characters, who move with Jack Patterson and support his unique brand of legal miracle-working from novel to novel.

* * *

MR: Another part of the world you create in Little Rock is a complex social grouping which supports Jack Patterson. Do you think that large group support is a feature of southernness?

WH: I think that southerners are attracted to the idea of making friends, and work-related friendships become social, usually in the context of meals. It's certainly been my experience that work friends become social friends, getting together for meals and holding conversations, things of that sort.

MR: And that's exactly what shows up in your novels. The support group of paralegals, investigators, body-guards, fellow lawyers, judges, and others in the Patterson series becomes a big family, often gathering for the most sumptuous and tantalizingly described meals rife with classic southern cooking. On the relational side, couples develop inside that group, which itself functions as a protective enclosure around Jack Patterson. So that southern world you're talking about reproduces itself right there in the fictional setting.

WH: It does.

MR: Is the big supportive family grouping around Jack a unique feature of your type of legal thriller?

WH: I think so. I spend a lot of time trying to explain those relationships. By contrast, a lot of legal thrillers emphasize only one character. I'm trying to include a bigger family.

MR: Your novels become a story of the whole group, including the subplots detailing the relationships between the characters supporting Jack. For example: Mickie and Jack briefly; then Mickie and wood sculptor Larry; Clovis and phenomenal IT guru Stella; Mickie's office manager Debbie and Jack's security officer Paul.

WH: Each book I try to grow the many characters, seeing them evolve and become more real with each novel.

MR: So many memorable characters—Jack's indispensable personal and research assistant Maggie and her husband, insurance

magnate Walter Matthews, Clovis the bodyguard, the brilliant gay military veteran Brian Hattoy . . . .

WH: One of my favorite characters is Brian Hattoy.

MR: Through Brian Hattoy, you bring to life the plight of gays serving honorably in the military and then expelled for no reason other than orientation. But Brian Hattoy wins our respect, a sharp member of Jack's legal research team who knows how to anticipate the opposition's next move and how to handle a weapon when that's necessary. He saves Jack's life at the conclusion of *East End*. I'm wondering if diversity might be thought of as the core theme in your Patterson series. The new diversity in the contemporary south?

WH: That's right. For example, the marriage of Jack and Angie couldn't have been tolerated in the old south.

MR: But there it is as a core plot element in your Jack Patterson novels.

* * *

Of course, diversity is nothing new to the Delta, an agriculturally and aesthetically rich area which has held appeal for a broad range of ethnicities since it was discovered by European explorers in the eighteenth century. Hinrichsen makes this plain when she writes,

> *Defined by both cultural vibrancy and debilitating poverty, and marked by a long and complex history of trade, migration, cultural exchange, and slavery, the literature of the Delta is born of the intricacies of a complex, polymorphous history and culture. The region is full of a cacophony of different stories that mirror this demographic diversity and historical complexity, from early foreign-language texts and the earliest stirrings of a proud regionalism trying to assert itself against northern literary dominance to contemporary self-reflexive historical novels and multicultural postmodern literary production. (271)*

Hubbell is right there. The world of his novels includes the multiplicity of viewpoints to which Hinrichsen refers. When he brings all that to Little Rock, he's reflecting what's been, all along, right in the Delta, though there's a difference between the urban and rural Deltas.

MR: How do you feel your novels reflect Delta life and experience?

WH: I think it's important to talk about the misery of living deep in the rural Delta and just how tough that place is. You drive through there even now out toward the Mississippi River and you see what it's like for people there, the people who work the fields, who move from field to field, and who you wonder how all this could still happen just like it was a century and more ago.

MR: That life is alluded to in *East End*.

WH: Yes, I touch on it in *East End*, but I haven't gotten near enough to it yet. The poverty and misery present in the Mississippi Delta are hard for me to write about, hard to describe.

MR: Has the Arkansas you know changed substantively in your lifetime?

WH: The real Arkansas has changed dramatically politically, yet I don't know that it has improved much in the area of racial inequality. Especially in the rural Delta and other places. It's changed in some ways, but not in others.

MR: A very large segment of the rural Arkansas population does not have sufficient economic opportunity or sufficient health care, and we see that depicted in your novels in several different ways, especially in *East End*.

WH: Yes, I would say that *East End* is my most direct discussion on Little Rock and Arkansas, for though the state has changed politically, the racial inequalities of the '50s and '60s are still there.

MR: The title *East End* refers to the east side of Little Rock, an historically African American neighborhood where poverty and absence of services and opportunity have been woefully endemic. A health clinic is set up on the east side of Little Rock by the character Dr.

Jana Hall, who has located her clinic there to be of service to the people there who need her. The plot in *East End* also includes matters transpiring at two of her rural clinics.

WH: Right. One in Mena in western Arkansas and the other one in the Delta, in the vicinity of Dewitt, Arkansas.

MR: And this rural Delta location is where Dr. Jana Hall discovers in her patient population an abnormally high concentration of toxic chemicals used in agriculture. So you're making a direct comment there on real situations in the world.

WH: Yes. I don't think much has changed there for the people in the rural Delta. People who live there might tell me I'm dead wrong, but I don't think so.

* * *

The predatory practices of agricultural chemical and pharmaceutical companies emerge as a central theme in both of Hubbell's novels set primarily in Little Rock. In Ginger Snaps*, Hubbell stages a conflict between major pharmaceutical powers and a brilliant chemist at the local university who has discovered how to remedy cancer with a hybridized version of cannabis sativa, or marijuana. The vicious intent of the pharmaceutical industry to suppress any and all activity which might cut into their profits drives the plot, with no means spared by the antagonists in their lust to destroy the chemist, terminally besmirch his reputation and thereby dismiss the import of his research, and devastate his wife financially. In* East End*, Hubbell takes on companies that foist cancer-causing chemicals on unsuspecting agricultural workers.*

MR: The power of the pharmaceutical and chemical companies in *Ginger Snaps* and *East End* figures prominently.

WH: Yes, the message I wanted to give in *Ginger Snaps* and partially in *East End* is the power of the pharmaceutical and chemical companies and in their use of regulatory control to keep certain products suppressed and not come up with solutions until they've exhausted the profits of their current drugs.

The result is the infliction of additional suffering on the uninformed and disempowered of both the rural and urban Delta, the patients who end up in legal trouble for using medical cannabis or who can't get it in the first place, and the workers who handle the toxic chemicals and thereby are at increased risk for life-threatening conditions. Hubbell plays these themes out slowly over the course of a novel, in each case letting the reader see first-hand through his adept creation of dramatic situations to what lengths vested interests are willing to go in their pursuit of profits over people. Everyday people at the mercy of corruption forms an even broader theme which Hubbell incorporates. The presence of international organized crime is one angle from which Hubbell approaches this issue.

MR: You treat the issue of human enslavement in another way also. You expose the issue of sex trafficking in *Ginger Snaps*, which is set in Little Rock.

WH: Sex trafficking is a whole issue of our generation in and of itself, which is at this time getting worse, not better.

MR: In *Ginger Snaps* the sex trafficking ring is run by international criminals in Little Rock. You're telling us through your novel that this is happening everywhere in the United States, not just in big cities.

WH: It's happening everywhere. All up and down the East Coast. Atlanta is probably one of the worst areas, where traffickers have easy access to vulnerable immigrants. People are being stolen, kids even, from malls. And I'm confident it's probably happening in Little Rock, although I don't know the specifics of crime in Little Rock like I used to.

MR: Two of your novels are set primarily and a third partially in Little Rock, a city of which you were once mayor. Do you feel there's

a certain atmosphere to Little Rock? Can you describe it?

WH: When I was a teen in Little Rock, it was a racially and economically divided city. I think that in recent years, this has improved tremendously, and I hope the former sense of divisiveness is gone. But for a long time, Little Rock to me connoted race and class division.

This once racially divided city to which Hubbell refers is present in his novels. In When Men Betray, *the brutal gang-rape of African American Angie by white college boys in a Little Rock motel is portrayed. In* East End, *the attempted lynching of Jack Patterson in a part of town not far from historically black neighborhoods in a white-on-white crime alludes to and resurrects the terror experienced by the African American community during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries at the hands of irate white property owners and others. These images of virulent race hatred haunt the pages of Hubbell's work, a testimony to the painful memory of days gone by and the disturbing attitudes still present in some cases. Hubbell shows through his dramatic presentation just what it's all about. This is particularly true in his lynching scene, which takes amongst the pylons and under the rushing traffic of Interstate 30 just south of downtown Little Rock.*

> *Patterson's white assailant speaks.*
>
> *For a good lynching, we raise you high enough so your big toe touches the ground if you stretch. For the first few hours you'll tiptoe and jump, trying to keep your feet grounded. Every time your ankle relaxes, the rope cuts into your neck, and you choke and gasp for air. After a while, your ankle cramps and your toe can't touch the ground, and you slowly choke to death. (2019, 9)*

Patterson's assailants think the scene devilishly amusing, a white man dying a black man's death for the crime of loving across race lines. This is the harsh racial division and brazen white supremacy that author Webb Hubbell remembers from his youth in Little Rock, the underbelly of his sense that Little Rock was once and still may be a city divided. "Lynching," Hubbell says, "is a crime of the south, a crime of the Delta." His portrayal of it numbs the soul, the setting amplifying the impact with its sense of helpless isolation not far from the ways of normal daily living. Little Rock is like that, Hubbell suggests. Right where it's least expected, the way of the old south rears its ugly head. Such an implication is hardly unthinkable for the city of Little Rock, the site of the 1957 Little Rock School Desegregation Crisis, known all over the world as a blight on civilized living. And yet, this is the city to which Hubbell's protagonist Jack Patterson feels an inexplicable attraction. It's a place in which many forms of power vie for control and influence over many kinds of people.

* * *

Nothing is simple in the intellectual design of Webb Hubbell's literary universe. Affable and homey in manner, Hubbell could easily fool a person about that. However, one read of his novels will forever convince the reader that Hubbell is a genius plot manipulator. His stories turn on complexities of legal strategies known only to the duly initiated, just as his plot devices thrive on the protagonist's dazzling capacity for anticipation of the opposition's legal moves, his penetrating analysis of motive, brazen grandstanding bravado, stunning intuition, inventive diversionary tactics, and sheer delight in white-knuckle tension.

MR: Your stories are very intricate, or perhaps I should say that your plots are very intricate. And yet I heard you say in one of your televised interviews that you don't pre-plan your plots. Is that true?

WH: That's true. I do exactly the opposite of what every author should do: write with an outline. Many authors say you must know how the story ends before you begin. But I usually dig my character into such a hole that I can hardly figure how to get him out. I don't have a

clue how I'm going to end it when I get started.

MR: So this is as much an adventure for you as it is on the reading end, isn't it?

WH: Yes, and I'm to some extent creating a mystery and then trying to solve it.

MR: What novelists have influenced you?

WH: Harper Lee and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Robert Penn Warren and *All the King's Men*. Canadian mystery writer Louise Penny. John Grisham. And Pat Conroy.

* * *

As Hubbell's responses indicate, when he's in creative mode, his writerly subconscious calls the shots. What a workshop of legal wizardry must populate his mental underworld, for out of it rises a potent army of images, characters, and plot devices which serve to deliver hard-hitting commentary on quite nearly the entire spectrum of American living in the twenty-first century, with reference to all that has gone before. He's inspired by Harper Lee's portrayal of the courageous, ethical lawyer in To Kill a Mockingbird, *by Robert Penn Warren's damning critique of cynicism and apathy in* All the King's Men, *by the filigreed plot construction of mystery writer Louise Penny, by the portrayals of power and intrigue in the Memphis Delta of John Grisham, and by Pat Conroy's searing re-evaluation of male roles. Driven by his penchant for civil rights, Hubbell as a writer has successfully employed his innate southern storytelling ability and knack for plot development as tools in his advocacy for the oppressed, the marginalized, and the unwary. Perhaps this is nowhere more evident than in Hubbell's treatment of the complex world in which attorneys just like him ply their trades—the American justice system itself.*

Americans like to dream that when faceless forces of corruption and coercion impinge upon the hapless individual, the United States courts system provides the venue in which the remedy of fairness and justice will be applied. Hubbell explodes that myth as every page turns. In all five novels published by Hubbell to date, abuse of power in the justice system forms an overwhelmingly central theme. Protagonist Jack Patterson encounters crooked judges on the take from both criminal and corporate sources, ambitious US attorneys who play fast and loose with the law as they seek to advance their own careers, federal law enforcement agencies that bulldoze over those they seek to prosecute, and local prosecutorial over-reach of monumental proportions. Few would know how to defend themselves in such a rapacious environment. Protagonist Jack Patterson unwittingly discovers he's able to do just that when he accepts a number of cases which fall not within his expertise of tax law, but within the much more contentious and dangerous territory of criminal law. How does Patterson do it? By dint of a blazingly clever mind, a near-unerring capacity for assessing the psychological dynamics of ego-inflated legal professionals, and a lack of fear for his own bodily safety that borders on the pathological. This is the dazzling white knight who goes up against the fortified castle of the rigged justice system in the Webb Hubbell novels. In every book, Patterson either outright wins the joust or negotiates a settlement that he and his clients can accept. On the way, he defrocks the justice system from the mantel of propriety it had hoped to wear with unruffled dignity. His tools are his southern story-telling capacity plus his experience as an attorney and official of the United States Department of Justice. Webb Hubbell's unplanned plot lines grow out of this rich soil, some it from the Delta, a mixture rich enough to work on its own while the author types.

Out of this authorial alembic has grown a literary environment which interrogates the legacy of racial division in the Delta, confronts the need to reckon with the past, advocates for the civil rights of African Americans, women, and others, engages with diversity, exposes the unethical practices of certain companies dealing in agricultural chemicals and pharmaceutical products, and throws a spotlight on sex-trafficking. All the while, the same literary

environment champions what Hubbell sees as the redeeming virtues of the south and its Delta culture as embodied in his regionally inspired characters, who represent the power of family and friends, friendship tried over time, and the loyalty which springs from trust earned. Some might say Hubbell learned everything he needed to know for a literary life when he was down on all fours at the scrimmage line, directly feeling the effects of teamwork and cooperation. It was either that or the twenty-seven vegetable dishes and six or seven pies at his great aunt's house which so richly fed him on the soul food of the ages in Faulknerian northern Mississippi, once upon a time. ▲▼▲

Notes

[1] For a short biographical account of Hubbell's life, see Ernest Dumas's *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture entry* (2018).

References

Dumas, Ernest. (2018) "Webster Lee Hubbell," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*. encyclopediaofarkansas.net, accessed 26 November 2019.

Hinrichsen, Lisa. (2015) "The Literature of the Delta." In *Defining the Delta: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on the Lower Mississippi River Delta*, edited by Janelle Collins, 271–282. Fayetteville: U of Arkansas P.

Hubbell, Webb. (1997) *Friends in High Places: Our Journey from Little Rock to Washington, D.C.* New York: William Morrow & Co..

_____. *When Men Betray*. (2014) New York: Beaufort Books.

_____. *Ginger Snaps*. (2015) New York: Beaufort Books.

_____. *A Game of Inches*. 2016. New York: Beaufort Books.

_____. *Eighteenth Green*. 2018. New York: Beaufort Books.

_____. *East End*. 2019. New York: Beaufort Books.