

Red Pencil

CINDY VALLAR analyzes the work behind polished final manuscripts. In this issue, she profiles John Shors' *Beside a Burning Sea*.

After Edward Chupack's *Silver* was published, he discovered that rather than hating his villainous protagonist, readers found him charismatic. "We admire villains . . . We are drawn to evil characters, real and fictional ones, because of a need that we have for them that is akin to love . . . I wanted to write about evil . . . but was also entrapped by my character and reveled in his maliciousness."¹ While Long John Silver is a villain and rarely sympathetic, there are times when goodness surfaces in him. It also helps that he is a familiar character, either because we read *Treasure Island* or saw a film based on the book.

Few villains elicit such reactions. They are despicable, sometimes evil incarnate, but without them, the most compelling stories would never be remembered. We often forget the heroes or heroines, but we rarely forget the villains. Such is the case in John Shors' latest novel. From my first encounter with Roger, I loathe him. Future meetings reveal kernels of this man's malice, and each time my aversion to him grows. And that's exactly what John wants the reader to feel.

Beside a Burning Sea is the story of Akira, a captured Japanese soldier, and Annie, the American nurse who tends his wounds aboard a US hospital ship. When a torpedo destroys the vessel, Akira, Annie, and several others – including her sister, another nurse, and her brother-in-law, the captain – survive and find themselves on an island in the Pacific. Also present is Roger, a sailor who informed the enemy about the arms hidden deep in the ship's hold. Akira and Annie fall in love, while Roger waits for the Japanese to arrive and plans how he will destroy the other survivors, particularly Akira and Annie.

Some readers might object to such a romance, finding it unbelievable, since many Americans lost their lives at Pearl Harbor and Australians, Chinese, and others living in the Pacific arena endured brutality and suffering, even death, at the hands of the Japanese. When I asked John about this, he replied, "Just because two countries are at war doesn't mean that two people have to be. Didn't Romeo and Juliet come from warring families? Obviously Japan did some atrocious things during World War II. But many of those things are spoken about at length in my novel. I talk about the rapes of Nanking, the Bataan Death March, and so forth. I don't think that I sugarcoat anything the Japanese did during the war. In my mind, there's no reason why a nurse couldn't fall for a wonderful man who just happened to be wearing the wrong-colored uniform. But that's just my opinion. Other people may obviously disagree."

Violence abounds in this story – through the characters' memories of past events and their daily life on the island. Akira, a former teacher and poet, is haunted by what he's done and witnessed as a soldier. In contrast, Roger's entire past has shaped who he is – a psychopath. "He can be illogical and crazed, but he also possesses intelligence and the ability to mastermind plans."

When authors write stories, they attempt to breathe life into each character. How and why that person acts and thinks as he/she does is part of what writers call backstory. It helps us to forge three-dimensional characters. Actors often say they prefer to play villains because they're more fun. John finds the same is true for a writer. "I like to create characters who, whether good or bad, are unusual. The average character is sometimes needed for a story, but to me, isn't much fun to create. I'd rather create an eccentric character, a villain, a funny child, etc. As a writer, these characters are more challenging, and more enjoyable to create." From its inception, he knew his story required a villain, which is how Roger came to be. As often happens in early drafts, the character fails to achieve that fully-formed status essential for the reader to believe the events that transpire.

Deep within the jungle, at the bottom of a gully that ran between two rises, Roger carefully pushed his shovel into the earth. The shovel was his creation. He'd used the machete to chop a large tree branch until it somewhat resembled a canoe paddle. He'd then hardened the blade with fire. Knowing that the captain wanted him outside of camp, Roger had told him that he'd seen a wild boar and that he wanted to fashion a trap to catch it. Predictably, the captain had been delighted to send him off into the jungle.

Roger had been digging for what he assumed to be several hours. The soil was quite soft, and if he worked with care he didn't think that he would break his shovel. The hole was already as deep as his chest and as long as his outstretched arms – much bigger than it needed to be to catch a wild boar. Working with endless determination, Roger continued to widen and deepen the pit.

This passage reveals what Roger does, but fails to reveal anything about the character. Nor does it show any foibles or flaws. A well-crafted villain must elicit sympathy, but not compassion in the reader. "The early versions . . . didn't have enough of a backstory . . . So, I added the material about the Depression and his parents. I just felt like the reader needed to better understand why he turned out so badly." Earlier the reader learns Roger once lived in Japan with his parents, who are missionaries. His childhood experiences there influence who he becomes. "Roger symbolizes what can happen to someone if that person is ridiculed at an early age, and if that person experiences discrimination. I think that most people could end up being bad, if raised under terrible circumstances." What happens to Roger during the Great Depression also leaves its mark on his psyche, and John uses this scene to reveal another episode in Roger's backstory.

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Roger had been digging for what he assumed to be several hours. His hands trembled as he dug, for he hadn't savored a cigarette in days, and his body was in turmoil. The headache that assailed him had been growing in intensity since not long after he'd set foot on the island. It radiated forward from the back of his skull, and his eyes felt as if they'd pop from his head. Moreover, his heart often raced and his feet tingled. His throat even ached.

These maddening symptoms reminded Roger of living alone in Philadelphia at the peak of the Great Depression. Like so many others, he'd been jobless. Unlike most others, he'd thought the soup lines beneath him, and stole what food he could. Still, very few coins had rubbed together in his pockets, and he'd no money to spend on luxuries. Limiting himself to one cigarette a day had led to his first experience with the headaches.

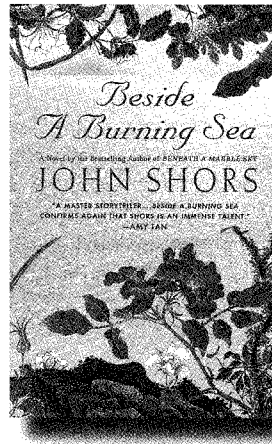
For many years, Roger had hated the Japanese. But it wasn't until returning to America and experiencing the Great Depression that his hate followed him across the ocean and spread like the plague within him. He quickly grew to detest America, to despise his country of birth for how it had failed him. He could still remember his father telling him and his mother that the banks had collapsed and what precious little money they'd saved was gone. His mother had wept quietly while his father shrugged and said that though the Devil was hard at work, God would see them through. Roger had thrown his father down at these words, sickened by his weakness and blind faith. He'd cursed the man and woman who'd brought him into the world. He'd screamed at them for all his pains and wants and memories. His spittle had struck his mother's face. His booted foot had caused his father to beg for mercy. And he'd seen neither parent since.

Now, as Roger dug deeper into the black soil, the temptation to climb the hill, uncover his box, and smoke cigarettes all afternoon was frighteningly powerful. He hadn't felt so vulnerable since those unbearable months in Philadelphia, and his feebleness enraged him. If only he were alone on the island, as he was meant to be. Then he'd have a cigarette between his lips right now, drawing sweet smoke into his lungs and watching it disperse into the day.

This glimpse into Roger's past allows the reader to see his arrogance, his warped perspective, his anger. While his brutality is evident, so are the elements that make him human. We might despise him for what he does to his parents, but we also empathize with him. Who hasn't had trouble finding a job? Who hasn't experienced a headache or craving so intense as to cripple? If all we read is this scene, would we loathe him? Probably not. As Orson Scott Card explains in *Characters and Viewpoint*, "To make us dislike somebody, simply show her deliberately causing someone else to suffer in body or mind. If she enjoys causing the pain, we'll hate her all the more."²² To achieve this John inserted another paragraph before returning to the last paragraph in the original scene.

Trying to ignore his cravings, Roger continued to work on his hole, pausing only to pull apart or smash insects that he uncovered. Such insects had tormented him during his stay on the island, and he found it gratifying to watch beetles try to walk with half their legs missing or centipedes writhe after he chopped them in two. These sights briefly obscured the ache behind his eyes, as they reminded him of how boys had struggled and squirmed after he'd hurt them.

After Roger finishes digging the hole, he fashions spikes out of saplings and plants them in the bottom of the trap. Then his thoughts unveil the pit's true purpose.



As Roger worked, he held a slender, cigarette-shaped stick between his teeth and imagined Akira and Joshua chasing him through the jungle. He saw himself lead them into the gully. He then jumped over the trap and, after rounding a nearby corner, grabbed a pair of spears. By the time he turned back to the trap, the Jap and the infuriating captain had already fallen into it. They were pierced in a dozen places and dying quickly. With no need to use his spears, he set them down, put his legs over the edge of the pit and listened to his enemies plead for mercy. He laughed, picked up several stones, and began to hurl the stones into their faces, killing them the same way criminals had been slain for thousands of years.

I asked John why he portrayed Roger with such menace.

"I could have lessened his brutality. I thought about that, in fact. But at the end of the day, I felt like *Beside a Burning Sea* needed such a villain. The book is set during the war, people are dying – having a villain who wasn't fairly psychopathic just didn't make sense to me." I wondered if John had based Roger on a real person. "I've certainly met a fair number of people who I didn't like. And though these people probably weren't as bad as Roger, they definitely gave me ideas for how certain people tend to think. I've always stood up to such people, and dealt with them, and I think that this interaction was helpful to me as I created Roger, because I understood how such people reacted in certain circumstances."

Matt Braun, who wrote *How to Write Western Novels*, says of the villain: "A well-drawn antagonist will be conniving and clever . . . While he knows right from wrong, his values are skewed, somehow at odds with conventional beliefs."²³ Roger certainly measures up to this description. To make certain the reader understands this, John drafted a paragraph that reveals Roger's intentions for the other survivors.

Thinking about the cave, and how Joshua believed it would protect them, Roger couldn't help but smile. That cave will be his tomb, he thought. He'll hide in it like a coward, hide there with that annoying, know-it-all wife of his. He'll think that he's safe but I'll lead a small army of Edo's hand-picked men straight to his door. I'll tell him that the women can go free and they'll come forward. Then we'll open fire on the men. They'll burn and scream within it and they'll never leave that worthless cave. And when they're dying, I'll be sure to let them know what will happen to the women.

This is the only place where you, the reader, will actually see this paragraph in this form. In the published version, John added the finishing touches to make Roger the epitome of evil. "In addition to being smart and diabolical, Roger is formidable physically. I think this adds to the danger of him, the potential of him, for doing harm." I think John succeeds in this endeavor, do you?

Thinking about the cave, and how the idiot captain was convinced that it would protect everyone, Roger smiled for the first time all day. That cave will be the fool's tomb, he thought excitedly. He'll hide in it like a coward, hide with that annoying, know-it-all bitch of his. He'll think he's safe, but I'll lead Edo's men straight to his door. I'll tell him that the women can go free, and when the skirts come out, we'll open fire on the men. They'll burn and scream and they'll never leave that worthless cave. And when those maggots are dying, I'll let them know what will happen to their whores.

Pleased with his trap and by thoughts of the future, Roger decided that he'd reward himself with a cigarette. As he had several days before, he'd climb to his secret stash, strip off his clothes to keep them free of smoke, enjoy several cigarettes, and later swim in the ocean and remove all scents but salt from him. If smoking presented a small risk, so be it. It was far better, he reasoned, to take a slight chance at discovery than to continue to suffer from an intolerable headache and to have the trembling hands of an old man.

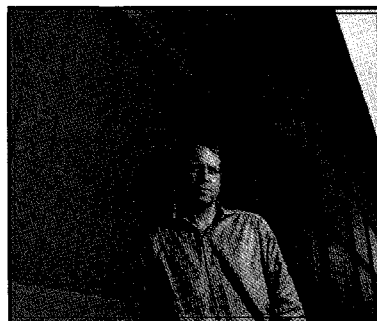
Making his way through the jungle, his mind euphoric over the prospect of his reward, Roger again thought about what the near future would bring. In less than a week, he said to himself, I'll have everything I want, everything I've worked for. I'll have it because I'm smarter and stronger than anyone else on the island. And though now they laugh at me and hate me and I can't do a goddamn thing about it, soon enough they'll know that I betrayed them, that I sold their souls, and they'll understand that I won. And when they look into my eyes before they die, when their pain's so great that they beg for an end, I'll drag them to the sea and let the waves wash them away.

Being a writer myself and having spent nine years working with students with severe emotional challenges, I often wonder why characters do what they do. Although Roger admits to vulnerability, he never takes responsibility for failure. He blames others instead. Since the reader only sees his parents through his eyes, why do they become his central focus for everything that's gone wrong in his life? "That's a tricky question. But I think that some people, when life takes them places they want to go, tend to blame one or two events instead of looking at the evolution of a series of smaller events. Roger is such a person. He blames his parents for everything that has gone wrong in his life. In his mind, his suffering is because of them. And there is some truth to this, as his painful childhood was a direct result of his parents' decisions."

Lest you think that evil consumes this story, I assure you it does not. Roger and his treachery play a key role in the story and its outcome, but he is not alone on the island. Just as his life experiences shape Roger, so does the past impact all the characters and the actions each one takes. Just as hatred and love coexist in the real world, so it does

in this fictional world. *Beside a Burning Sea* is set against the backdrop of the Solomon Islands. For a brief moment in a time when war savages countries and people, John Shors shows us that hope never dies as two enemies fall in love. Never once, though, does he let his characters or his readers forget the violence around them.

*The earth is burning,
Blackened by machines and men.
Raindrops are lost tears.⁴*



John taught English in Kyoto, Japan, for several years before trekking across Asia and climbing the Himalayas. Before achieving his dream to become a full-time novelist, he was a reporter in Iowa. Then he moved to Colorado and helped launch a public relations firm. When asked what he'd like to share with readers, he

wrote, "I appreciate everyone's support, for starters. My goal is to bring periods back to life in a vivid way. My next novel, while set in modern-day Saigon, deals with America's past in Vietnam.⁵ This has been an interesting novel to write, as it's set in modern-day times, but has historical overtones. History fascinates me."

Notes

1. Edward Chupack, "The Man in the Starched White Shirt," *Pirates and Privateers*, (5 September 2008), located at <http://www.cindyvallar.com/silver.html>.
2. Orson Scott Card, *Characters and Viewpoint* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 1988), p.86.
3. Matt Braun, *How to Write Western Novels* (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1988), p.39.
4. Akira uses haiku to teach Annie about himself and his culture. This is one of several haikus that John includes in the story.
5. New American Library is slated to release *In the Footsteps of Dragons* in September 2009.

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