

A conversation with the author:

Albert Ashforth



How and when did you start writing?

Although I always enjoyed reading, I went to a technical high school, where the emphasis was much more on science and math than it was on literature. We did a lot of drafting when I was in high school, and I became interested in illustration while I was in college. I did my first writing for newspapers.

How did you come to write a book?

I was interested in science and wrote a newspaper article about the English scientist Thomas Henry Huxley. The editor of a series of books asked me if I would care to write a book about Huxley, and naturally I said I would. That involved doing research at the Imperial College in London. In the Army I had been stationed overseas, so I was getting to know Europe fairly well.

What part of writing your book was the most challenging?

I find that some thrillers flag in the middle. I did my best to continue to present the hero with new challenges as the story unfolded.

How do you dial up the tension to keep readers on the edge of their chairs?

I try to keep the reader wondering – either about what will happen next or how the hero is going to accomplish what seems like an all but impossible task.

Which writers have inspired you?

Forgive me for saying this, but Homer and Shakespeare are high on the list. Both were thriller writers. The *Odyssey* is a great page-turner, and the suspense is at points nearly unbearable. *Hamlet* is a violent mystery story but without a last chapter to explain who the villains are and exactly what they did. Shakespeare thought he had provided his audience more than enough clues to figure things out. And both are great love stories. The interaction between guys and gals is the most thrilling element any story can have.

Odysseus and Hamlet are certainly fascinating characters.

Part of their interest lies in the fact that they are far from perfect. Both are self-indulgent. Odysseus is a lousy leader. None of his sailors make it back to Ithaca. Hamlet sacrifices his old friends, Rosenkranz

and Guildenstern, in order to keep his campaign of revenge in tact.

What is the writing process like for you?

As every writer will tell you, writing is hard work. But when you write something good, it's very satisfying.

What is the best piece of advice about writing you've ever received?

"Think about your topic before you sit down to write." This is valuable because our subconscious does more of the tough problem solving than our conscious mind does. Our conscious minds seem to present and define problems for us, but our subconscious minds then do the hard work.

How did you come to write a novel about Kosovo?

My work as a military contractor brought me all over the Balkans, and I did two tours in Kosovo. During my second tour there, in 2004, Kosovo's struggle for independence, which goes back many hundreds of years, was gaining traction. It became apparent to me that Kosovo would become independent of Serbia, and that independence would come sooner rather than later.

You say this struggle went back hundreds of years?

Back to the battle of Kosovo in 1389 between the Turks and the Serbs, which ultimately led to Kosovo becoming part of the Ottoman Empire. As that empire began to decline, Kosovo was taken over by Serbia, so the people of Kosovo have never known independence. I realized that I was witnessing first-hand a major historical event. Imagine being in New York or Boston in 1776, and you have an idea of how the citizens of Kosovo felt about what was happening in their homeland.

How could you know that their struggle would be successful?

One clear indication was that the United States had come to regard Serbia as an enemy, and the Kosovar leaders were opportunistically taking advantage of that political development. In 1999, President Clinton ordered a bombing strike on Belgrade which lasted 77 days.

Camp Bondsteel, which we began building around that time, is the largest military installation our government has established anywhere since the end of the Vietnamese War, so it was clear that the administration wanted us in Kosovo on a permanent basis. Another clear sign was the removal, in 2001, of Slobodan Milosevic, president of Serbia, from his Belgrade apartment to The Hague, where he was indicted by the War Crimes Tribunal.

In other words, the American government was quietly supporting Kosovo's movement toward independence from Serbia?

Yes, our support was tacit but not unqualified. Many high-ranking officials within the Bush administration were wary of giving whole-hearted support to Kosovo's independence movement. And interestingly, some completely opposed it.

Why?

Kosovo is a main pipeline for supplying drugs to Europe. As a result, many of the country's richest and most influential people are racketeers, so-called war lords or mafia chiefs. The second reason might have to do with the Kosovo Liberation Army.

Didn't the KLA spearhead Kosovo's struggle for independence?

Yes, but even people who supported Kosovo's independence had reservations about the KLA.

Why?

Because of the methods they often used to achieve their aims. On occasion, for example, they were not above assassinating political enemies. They were a criminal organization because they made most of their money smuggling drugs and trafficking women for prostitution.

A portion of *The Rendition* takes place in Germany, in Munich to be exact.

The KLA has operated drug and prostitution rings in a number of European countries, Germany included. The film "Taken" deals with that subject, but takes place in France. In *The Rendition*, the women Alex encounters in the brothel were trafficked there, either from Kosovo or other Eastern European nations. These kinds of

operations can only exist when a nation's government looks the other way, and that's also part of the story.

Why would they look the other way?

I'm not sure, but it may be because the European governments wanted to support America's Balkan policy. This is another aspect of Kosovo's independence struggle that makes things so interesting.

When did Kosovo finally achieve its independence?

The big day was February 17, 2008. At the time, I was in Khost in Afghanistan, another global hot spot. It did not surprise me to read about the big celebrations taking place in so many major European cities. People with red flags were dancing in the streets. In some places, the celebrations lasted for weeks. I was on hand for a major celebration in Munich's Marienplatz nearly two months later.

When did the United States recognize Kosovo as an independent country?

On February 18, one day after the independence declaration. Although many European countries followed our lead, Russia and China did not.

Why not?

With Kosovo having severed its ties with Serbia, it was now allied with Albania and the northern part of Macedonia. People in these areas are strongly united by a common history and culture and the Albanian language. In the Balkans they are now a significant rival to Serbia, which of course has strong ties to Russia. So with our military presence in Camp Bondsteel the United States may be able to exercise more influence in this part of the world – but only the future will tell. As we know, Balkan politics are unpredictable.

Precisely when does *The Rendition* begin?

It begins in March, 2007, and concludes in March, 2008, just weeks after Kosovo gained its independence. The novel's mystery element is only completely explained after we learn that Kosovo has become an independent nation.

In the novel, Alex learns a great deal about the kanun and the besa and meets quite a few people from the Balkans and from Europe.

I hope the novel not only takes readers behind the scenes – into a country that

is struggling to enter the 21st century and not finding it easy – but helps them to understand some of the confusing political events of the last few years. I also hope it helps people understand why we have come to depend so much on espionage and special operations as an element of foreign policy. Renditions, whether we like them or not, are becoming more significant politically. Many take place that are not written up in the newspapers. The most famous, of course, was the operation to take out Osama bin Laden. I don't think we have felt the last of the reverberations that will follow as a result of that rendition.