Rishi Masand

Ms. DaSilva-Caton

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The Father of the American Thriller: Tom Clancy

Insurance broker. Military machinery enthusiast. Best-selling novelist. Tom Clancy transformed the conception of the American thriller by channeling his intense passion for wartime technology. Clancy did not obtain his best-selling status overnight. In fact, earlier in his life, his career path showed no signs of veering toward writing.

Tom Clancy was born Thomas Leo Clancy Jr. in Baltimore Maryland on April 12, 1947. Clancy’s father was a postman, and his mother a worker in a local store (*Bio.com*). At an early age, Clancy began to develop a liking for reading and military history. Later in his life, Clancy attempted to serve in the military, a desire resulting from his childhood interest. He successfully joined the Army ROTC, or the Army Reserve of Officers Training Corps, but was unsuccessful in actually serving in the military. Clancy was not able to meet his goal due to his nearsightedness.

In the near future, Clancy shifted gears and attended Loyola College in Baltimore to study Literature. This is where Clancy met his future wife, Wanda Thomas King, who was a nursing student at the university. After college, Clancy found a comfortable career as an insurance broker for an insurance firm in Hartford, Connecticut. An important part of Clancy’s life began here. Besides writing his first best-selling novel while in Hartford, Clancy also obtained unique exposure to American lifestyle by living in Connecticut for a few years.

Previously, while growing up in 1950s Baltimore, Clancy witnessed the happenings of a large, hustling and bustling city. A city whose economy was primarily run by blue collar workers in the shipping, manufacturing, and steel industries. Baltimore in the 1950s possessed a diverse population, and was the site of early civil rights movements. When Clancy lived in Baltimore, it was a declining city, and people began migrating to the suburbs (Moore). By living in Hartford later in his lifetime, Clancy was given a one of a kind view of two extremely differing ways of life in the United States. Hartford was wealthy. In fact, Connecticut was the nation’s wealthiest state at the time, and when Clancy lived there, it experienced a decline in manufacturing, and a rise in white collar occupations, including retail, finance, insurance, and real estate (Advameg).

Effectively, this firsthand experience of different ways in which the American lived his/her life allowed Clancy to recreate ultra-realistic characters in his novels. Clancy’s novels strive for realism not only in warfare, as he is famous for, or just in the highly accurate descriptions of weaponry, or the fundamentals of tactical assault, but also in the lives of soldiers, when at war, and when at home. Clancy exploited the knowledge he obtained from the places he lived to provide arguably the greatest sense of character realism found in the thriller genre.

While Clancy’s literary career seemingly begins with his writing of *The Hunt for Red October*, while working as an insurance broker, his true literary journey was in the making since he was a child. As mentioned earlier, Clancy had a great interest for reading and military history in his childhood, a duo he would combine as an author to generate some of the best war novels ever introduced to the literary stage. Following his childhood interests was his attendance at the Loyola College in Baltimore. He studied literature as a student there, and obtained knowledge he would obviously carry over into his writing. While at first, with his career choice of being an insurance agent, and before that, attempting to be a soldier, showed no signs of Clancy becoming the best-selling author he did become, looking back on his life, each step he took actually played a crucial role in his achievements as an author. Starting with his childhood interests, all the way to the courses he took in college, it seems as if he was subconsciously molding himself into being a military novelist all along.

After Clancy began working at the insurance firm, he soon began writing on the side. After two years of part time writing, he completed his first novel, *The Hunt for Red October* in 1984. He had it published through a publishing company known as the Naval Institute Press. After it started attracting thousands of readers, Clancy decided to begin writing full time. However, it was not just the early success of a few book purchases. A friend of Ronald Reagan gave a copy of Clancy’s first novel to Reagan who found the novel to be a masterpiece, and recommended it to others ("Tom Clancy and Ronald Reagan"). This gave Clancy’s book and his name widespread recognition and would serve as a huge boost to his literary career.

As popularity of Clancy’s work increased, he was able to gain special access to military technology, something he focused on depicting accurately in his novels. He developed connections with admirals and generals that allowed him to take a closer look at the machinery and weaponry being used by the American military (*Bio.com*). At this time, it seemed as if Clancy had achieved his goal. His descriptive representations of warfare and his literary finesse in developing characters caused him to become a best-selling author, receive Presidential acclaim, and obtain access to military grade technology. But what exactly did Clancy strive to achieve from his writing?

Clancy’s influences can be traced back to his high school English teacher, whose class likely led him to major in literature in college. By reading copiously, and developing a favoritism for a certain style of literature, Clancy found his calling. The novel *The Day of the Jackal* by Freddy Forsyth was the greatest literary influence on Clancy. He found that the book was a great thriller, and that he too wanted to create captivating thriller novels. Thus, his goal became to become the first great American author to write a good thriller, as Forsyth was British. Though Clancy mastered the art of writing an excellent thriller, he had his own personal touch of precise realism, something he drew directly from the work of Alfred Hitchcock (“Verbosity Chats”). Clancy’s literary contributions clearly encompass his fulfillment of the goals he set for himself.

Clancy wrote a total of 20 novels. Most of his works dealt specifically with hypothetical warfare and terrorism, stemming from political instability between nations. His novels are technically accurate military thrillers, many of which harnessed true events and created fictional characters to live through those events. Clancy’s novels had the components of a thriller novel: action and suspense. They also displayed soldier’s strategic and brave actions which led to the toppling of terrorist organizations or the saving of millions of lives. Of course, Clancy always included vivid descriptions of military weaponry and vehicular technology and their use. In fact, Clancy is the author who created the technothriller genre and brought it to the forefront of literature (Feller). He strived for realism in each of his works and would give the characters, though clearly heroic, very human qualities. For example, the main character might reminisce about life back home while he is on duty. He not only captures the soldiers’ actions, but their feelings as well to give the reader a clear understanding of the life of a soldier.

Clancy’s accolades and achievements pay a significant tribute to his work. Over 100 million of his novels were sold. 17 of Clancy’s 20 novels became #1 *New York Times* Best-Sellers. But the achievements are not limited to literature. 5 of his novels were adapted into major motion pictures. These movies generated over $750 million in total box office gross. As if this was not sufficient, his literature also played a huge role in the video game industry. Clancy founded Red Storm Entertainment in 1996 to develop video games developed based on his novels. An entire franchise of war games was built around the Tom Clancy name, and many of the games used characters directly from his books. About 76 million video games were sold in his name (*Los Angeles Times*).

All in all, Clancy’s life was a success. He began writing as an insurance broker just for fun, and did not realize the amount of recognition he would receive in the years to come. Clancy used his liking for the military and his literary talent to his advantage. One of Clancy’s greatest qualities is often overshadowed by his outstanding literary success. When Clancy joined the Army Reserves Officers Training Corps, he was not allowed to serve in the military, something he badly wanted to do, as was nearsighted. However, his determination and unwillingness to give up allowed him to persist at getting close to the military in a different sense. With his novels, he was able to create realistic stories about how the military actually operates, and had the creative freedom to add his own flavor to it. Clancy’s persistence not only allowed him to write about the military, become a best-seller, and make millions, but also gave him a unique exposure to the military, something he could not achieve earlier in his life. Through his writing, he was able to come in contact with military technology. He achieved his goal in a different way.

Clancy is not only a successful author, but a determined individual. He is a man who puts his talents and exposure to good use. He is a man who knows how to achieve his goals. He did not let a brick wall stand in his way, but instead, found his way around it. Tom Clancy died at age 66 on October 1, 2013 in Baltimore, Maryland, the city of his birth, with a net worth of $300 million (*Bio.com*). Clancy will forever be remembered as the first American to write a great thriller. He will be regarded as an excellent military author for years to come. His accolades will speak for his literary successes. But there is more to Tom Clancy’s story than *New York Times* Best-Sellers. Clancy was a man who did not allow life to hold him back. In the end, his determination led not only to his achievement of his personal goals, but to a reshaping of the thriller genre.

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