

A Written Interview with Hewitt Clarke (2002)

by Andy Collins (SHS)

Are any of your books, even though fiction, somehow based on your life or someone you know?

All my books are non fiction and based on real people involved in the story. I am in some of the books only as an observer, mostly in the Epilogues about how I obtained information.

Who is your favorite author?

*Hemingway. I have a grand daughter named Brett Ashley, a character from Hemingway's book *The Sun Also Rises*, a lot which take place in Pamplona, Spain during the bull running. I like his adventures and descriptions.*

What author do you think has influenced you the most?



Andy Collins (SHS)

Maybe Mitchner with his epic historical fiction stories; and I learned a lot from Ann Rule who writes non fiction true crime about how to quote dialogue at the right time from witnesses involved in the story; and the wit

and style of Joseph Wambaugh who writes cop books. Got a recent note from a reader who said the East End Tea Room compares to Wambaugh's The Onion Field, one of his nonfiction murder books. A real good compliment.

Why did you decide to write about Lt. Charles Read as the subject of your book *He Saw the Elephant*?

While researching the Civil War period for Thunder at Meridian, I came across Charles Read several times; then I learned he was buried in Meridian. That gave me an excuse to put him in the book. I think that Savvy Read was one of the most daring and competent naval officers in the history of naval warfare. His adventures are almost unbelievable. I felt he deserved a book if anybody in the Civil War did.

How long did it take you to write *He Saw the Elephant*?

It took two years of research and writing. By the way I think the term "I saw the Elephant" may have come from as far back as Hannibal when he crossed the Alps on elephants and the Romans told about it in Rome.

What kind of student were you in high school?

I was an average student, not studious, raced cars down the streets, etc., lucky to be alive, and I paid the price when I got to college because I had not learned the discipline of studying.

Have you received any awards?

No. Two of my books was nominated for non fiction Civil War book awards, but didn't make it.

Do you have any advice for future writers or for students today?

There are not many Faulkners or Hemingways around who can write brilliant fiction. I would say stick to nonfiction stories from your own area, especially at first. You will at least have local people interested in your stories. Find something dramatic like a murder or bank robbery and develop the story from newspapers, court records, police records and first hand interviews with people still living. Maybe Atoka's Choctaw trial in Columbus in the early 1800s. See Thunder at Meridian. Write and

rewrite. Stick with it as you learn to write. I write about history now, but never liked it in school. Thought it was too dry and remote.

How has Mississippi or living in Mississippi influenced your writing?

All four of my books are about Mississippi. The state is very interesting to me because the people and traditions haven't changed much over the years, and there is still a deep South country culture. My Yankee wife sometimes doesn't understand when I tell people that I'm a genuine Mississippi redneck. But I have recently been disturbed about a revision of history that claims the Civil War was over slavery and the attacks on the state flag. I've written a lot about this in my last two books.

When will your new book be published?

In two or three years.

What hobbies do you have besides your adventure every five years?

I've played tennis off and on. Like to camp and hike and go down rivers in canoes and rafts. I'm interested in astronomy and attend sky observation outings.

When did your interest in the Civil War begin?

My interest in the Civil War began at an early age, maybe 10th or 11th grade. I have always been a Southern patriot and have a photo of me with a Confederate flag on top of Mt. Whitney.

Have you ever had any major setbacks to your writing career?

Some books sell better than others and sometimes it's hard to figure. I've read that over half of the books published don't make a profit. I haven't had any real problems like somebody shooting at me so far, but have had several plenty mad at me. I've got my fingers crossed.

What do you like most about writing?

I like the creative part of it, and to be honest I like to see my name on a book in the store.

Why did you move to Texas?

I didn't like California at all and came to Texas for an insurance job.