

‘Hitting bottom sometimes serves as the biggest opportunity in life’

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<http://literarilyspeaking.net/2010/07/20/interview-with-sam-hilliard-hitting-bottom-sometimes-serves-as-the-biggest-opportunity-in-life/>

Thank you for this interview, Sam. I was reading an interview the other day and you mentioned you always liked to write, but it just took a real low to get you to do it. What did you mean by that? Can you tell us about the “real low” that got you writing again?

Sam: First, thanks very much for having me here, and also for asking that question. Hitting bottom sometimes serves as the biggest opportunity in life, rather than the terrible tragedy that some people perceive.

Sometime during school, I found writing was something I enjoyed. To this day, in one of my desk drawers, two unfinished novels from that period still beg for completion. But after graduation from college, finding time for writing got a lot harder, partly because I did not allow myself many opportunities to do so, and partly because I failed to appreciate how important writing really was to my sense of well-being. Note: Both these obstructions were self-imposed.

Years without writing passed. I became increasingly miserable without quite realizing why and that lack of self-awareness about that fact tainted everything I touched—from my relationship, to my career. By the time I got laid off (or was fired, depending on who you ask) three days after my honeymoon, it was pretty clear that I had lost the ability to pretend I could be happy without writing.

And that was what I meant by a real low.

Pretty quickly after the dust settled, my now ex-wife suggested that maybe I should try writing for a little while, in between freelance assignments and looking for another job, just to see if it helped. Fortunately it did.

Tell us how you got the idea to write your latest book, *The Last Track*. You were sitting in the woods and...

Sam: Many years ago, I was walking through the deep woods and suddenly became very aware of how it easy it would be to completely disappear into that landscape. I interrupted my hiking buddy and said something like: “I’m going to write books about a guy who finds missing people in the woods.”

And then I filed that moment away for several years. When I had time to write, a character—Mike Brody—who did just that surfaced.

Do you see a little of yourself in your main character, Mike Brody?

Sam: Mike has traits that I certainly try to emulate. He is a compelling character for several reasons. First, he can think and adapt in extremely chaotic situations—consistent with his military training and personal background. Second, while I do not know how the series will eventually conclude, I am certain Mike will never quit what he is doing, no matter what the personal cost. Last, he’s done some exceptional things with his life in an attempt to heal some childhood wounds. Maybe not the best things from a physical or an emotional standpoint, but he tries the best he can with what he has.

In some areas, there's overlap. I see Mike as roughly the same age as me, and we share a birthday. My knees were in bad shape long before I injured them skydiving. A basic failure to resolve some personal issues directly contributed to my divorce. And lastly, for some reason, I continually find myself in do-or-die situations with strong women.

What was the hardest part about writing *The Last Track*?

Sam: I really enjoyed writing it, even during the dark periods when it seemed like the book would never get past my computer screen, but there was one particular thorny sticking point. I spent a few years on the book, and then realized the entire middle section wasn't working at all. Oddly, fixing those problems proved far easier than actually admitting they existed in the first place.

You have an interesting job at an all-girls boarding school I understand. Do they know they have an author on staff? If so, what has been their reaction?

Sam: I am the Director of Technology at an all-girls boarding school, and witness world class drama first hand. Thanks to a co-worker who sent a staff-wide email about it a few months ago, my secret life as a writer has been exposed.

The reaction varies, depending on how an individual knows me. To the students, I'm the ghost in the machine who keeps them from getting to Facebook during class. Regardless of how far I go with my writing, I doubt it will impress the students very much. That's an appropriate reaction and one that keeps me grounded.

The response from co-workers has been good. Many bought copies—I only know because they asked me to sign them—including my boss. Also the Head of School sent a nice note on my birthday wishing me good luck with the book. That's a pretty supportive attitude towards an outside creative endeavor.

Before you wrote *The Last Track*, did you feel you had a book in you but were not sure what you wanted to write about? Can you tell us what other things you have written?

Sam: I definitely was begging for an excuse to find out whether there was a book in me or not. In terms of subject matter, I was willing to be pretty flexible about what I wrote.

Right now, I'm working on two manuscripts. One is another Mike Brody adventure slated for Fall/Winter 2011, and the other is a project with no fixed deadline.

Finally, I like to ask authors this question...what is your passion? What is it that you're more passionate about than anything else?

Sam: I think at the end of the day, being in a situation where I have the time and energy to write matters most. The problem is if I don't write, my life becomes completely unmanageable, and I transform into the type of person no one wants to be around. Yet when I do commit to a big writing project, happily entrenched in the pages, I tend to neglect everything except the absolute necessities; it's really no problem for me to stay in the house for ten days in a row on a writing tear. Fortunately working at a school affords a pretty generous vacation allowance for such indulgences during the summer.

So the real trick is finding a balance between doing what's necessary to write, while remembering there are actually other people I care about—besides the characters.

Thank you for this interview, Sam. I wish you much success with your new book!

Sam: Thanks very much! I wish you the best of luck as well.

You can visit Sam's website at SamHilliard.com.