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Interview with Sam Hilliard - Author of The Last Track

<http://thewriterslife.blogspot.com/2010/06/interview-with-sam-hilliard-author-of.html>



*Born in Kansas City, MO, near the center of the United States, Sam Hilliard arrived during a very scary period of the 1970s. Since then he has lived on both coasts and quite a few places in between. Currently, Sam resides outside New York City with his girlfriend, and an army of four cats—one feline under the legal limit. His first book, *The Last Track: A Mike Brody Novel*, a mystery/thriller, released this Spring. When Sam's not writing, he's the Director of IT at an all-girl boarding school where he observes world-class drama firsthand. It's also the reason he studies Krav Maga and Tai Chi.*

Website: <http://www.samhilliard.com/wordpress>

Twitter: <http://twitter.com/samhilliard>

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/thelasttrack>

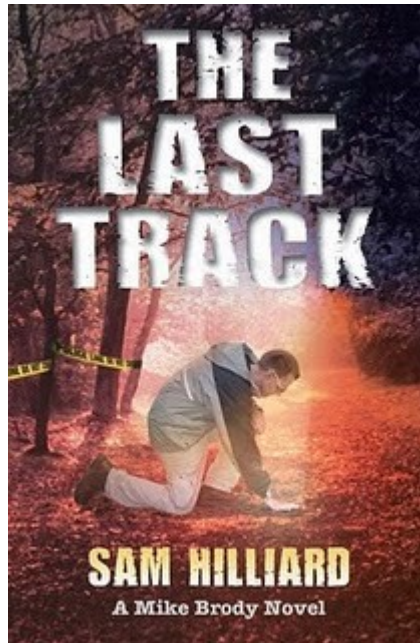
Trailer: <http://www.youtube.com/user/buddhapussinkllc>

Publisher's site: <http://www.buddhapussink.com>

Welcome to The Writer's Life, Sam. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and how long you've been writing?

A: Thanks very much for having me on your site! When I'm not writing, I enjoy reading, watching movies, studying martial arts, playing bass and complaining about the government. Before the age of thirteen I had lived on both coasts, and in the Midwest and Utah. Such frequent moves led me to suspect my parents were in the witness protection program. In fact, I probably just blew their cover. While I've been writing off and on for years, I did not pursue it seriously until 6 years ago.

Can you please tell us about your book and why you wrote it?



A: *The Last Track* is the story of Mike Brody, a tracker who can tap into the memory and emotional state of those he pursues. More than just a master tracker, Mike is a former Special Forces operative, smoke jumper, and now extreme adventure tour guide. He is recruited to find a missing, asthmatic boy (and unwitting murder witness) in the rugged terrain surrounding a dude ranch in Montana where Mike and his family are vacationing. Fearful of capture, the boy has burrowed deep into the woods. As Mike tracks the boy, the killer pursues them both. Meanwhile, Mike's ex-wife—a well-connected journalist—uses her contacts to unravel the killer's identity. Her discoveries ensnare them all in a treacherous conspiracy.

Three days after my honeymoon, I was fired. This life-changing event happened during the second dot-com crash and before the present when-is-the-bad-news-going-to-end recession. Apparently the universe wanted to teach me the true meaning of that “for richer or poorer” vow right away. Suddenly, I had some free time on my hands. That's when I began to write and how Mike Brody found his way onto the page.

I wrote *The Last Track* because I love the concept of someone who gets results when no else can; the person who sees what others overlook and never stops searching, no matter how long the odds.

What kind of research was involved in writing *The Last Track*?

A: Although the storyline and characters are the products of imagination, I did do a fair amount of research into police procedure and developed a healthy collaboration with an ever expanding network of experts. At present I have access to law enforcement personnel working at various levels inside the US and the Middle East, plus a Senior Officer in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, loosely the Canadian equivalent of the FBI. In addition, I recently picked up a source at NASA who will figure in a future book.

And the process continues. I'm always open to learning from people who are willing to share what they are allowed to about a given subject. They allow me to give the reader a glimpse of what it's like on the inside.

At a certain point, though, the writer has to trust the imagination and let the story happen. Technical details can be sorted out later. So that's why I lean on the experts for the gut checks. They can guffaw in private at my flubs and then let me know what needs fixing.

There are times however, when I will deliberately alter a detail to either suit the story or ease my

conscience—regardless of what I really know about procedure. I am trying to tell the best story I can by leveraging access to privileged information in a way that makes the story more credible and engaging. I'm not writing a primer on how to frustrate police investigations.

Has it been a bumpy ride to becoming a published author or has it been pretty well smooth sailing?

A: If by smooth sailing, you mean did I spend two weeks writing a book that netted a half million dollar advance? Well, then no. By the way, that did happen for someone I once knew. All things are possible in the universe.

My story was a bit bumpier. Basically I invested a few years in writing the book, bouncing it off test readers and building up my sources and revising. I started shopping it only after I felt it was my best effort.

After nearly getting to the altar with an agent (figuratively, of course, I was still married at the time) I continued pitching the book for another year.

I'm a big believer in Randy Pausch and *The Last Lecture*, especially his point about obstacles that keep everyone else out but give you a chance to prove exactly how bad you want something. Well after 122 agents, I was staring at that wall. It was time to get creative and prove how bad I wanted it.

At the time, book trailers were drawing the buzz that author blogs and podcasts had before them. My idea was try to translate part of *The Last Track* into a [live action trailer](#), burn it on a DVD and send it out with a writing sample and query letter. The other wrinkle? This time I went directly to publishers.

That did the trick.

For this particular book, how long did it take from the time you signed the contract to its release?

A: Buddhapuss Ink (my publisher) runs a lean ship, so the turn-around was well under seven months.

Do you have an agent and, if so, would you mind sharing who he/is is? If not, have you ever had an agent or do you even feel it's necessary to have one?

A: I think agents in the right circumstances serve an invaluable purpose; however, at this time I do not have one. I spent roughly three years contacting agents to no avail and got my book in print anyway.

I would welcome a film rights agent who could negotiate a movie deal on my behalf. They tend to move very quickly, have a great list of contacts and access to people who can write big checks. These are all beautiful things. In terms of brokering movie rights, film rights agents are worth every cent.

With literary agents I have a few basic concerns. First is their rate schedule which depends on a very old world assumption that authors can't be trusted to read a contract, push back in a negotiation, and do the math. Agents net a percentage of the books earnings in perpetuity, which could be a considerable sum. Second, the way almost every literary agency contract works, the agent gets money directly from the publisher and then pays the author the remainder of the what was always the author's money, after siphoning off fees and expenses.

This automatically places the author in a subservient relationship to their own agent. Look, I have an accountant. I really depend on him to do my taxes. This fact is undeniable. Every year he saves me time, money and aggravation. But he sends me an invoice right after he completes the work, and then I pay it. He doesn't get all my earnings for a quarter, deduct his fee and then send me a check.

James Patterson terminated his relationship with his literary agent a few years ago. He's got twelve titles

that hit number one on the New York Times Bestseller List. I believe he knows what he's doing, and if he does it without an agent, do authors really need them?

In the end, authors are answerable to their readers; they're the customers; they pay the bills. Why add another layer between you and the client, especially one that charges you forever for the privilege?

Do you plan subsequent books?

A: Absolutely. I plan on writing a lot more books. One is in the works now, the next chapter in the Mike Brody series and should be out in time for the Holiday season 2011, if I make my deadline that is.

Can you describe your most favorite place to write?

A: I will only write in one place, that's at a desk deep enough to support my forearms from wrist to elbow, keeping them parallel to each other. Carpal tunnel syndrome has plagued far better writers than me, so I never cut this corner. Where that desk is actually located is less important, although I wouldn't say no to a farmhouse in Maine.

If money was no object, what would be the first thing you would invest in to promote your book?

A: I would do exactly what I'm doing now. Money doesn't make sales, marketing does, and it costs as much as you want to spend.

How important do you think self-promotion is and in what ways have you been promoting your book offline and online?

A: The greatest idea in the world is only worth something when people know about it. Self-promotion never ends. One of the reasons I like my publisher is they spend the lion share of their efforts on promotion versus infrastructure. By running a modest-sized organization, they have more resources for marketing and are willing to spend when it makes sense to do so.

Online, I make the usual pit stops, Goodreads, Facebook and Twitter, plus my own site. Offline, I've been asked to present at some writing workshops. I don't expect to sell too many books at these events, but it does get my name and face out there. I'll also be at some book fairs this summer and fall, signing books in the Buddhapuss Ink booth (my publisher), as well as doing some store and library appearances. I'm also available to meet/speak with book groups, locally in person, or long-distance by speaker phone or Skype.

What's the most common reason you believe new writers give up their dream of becoming published and did you almost give up?

A: Writing means walking a path with no clearly marked sign posts. People are obsessed with looking for some proof that what they are doing is the right course of action. The problem with waiting for these indicators is they never appear when you want them to. Validation and reinforcement only come when you stop looking for them.

This is a very scary concept and one I fought for a long time. There were plenty of moments I thought about giving up. At one point, I spent several months modifying *The Last Track* based on feedback from an agent who liked it but felt the manuscript needed a little more work. They actually sent me a multi-page letter explaining what needed to be fixed. But after I made the changes and sent the manuscript back, they passed on the project anyway.

The thing is, almost all of those revisions are in the finished book. The suggestions truly did improve the story. So even if they didn't give me what I wanted in that given situation, I still got closer to where I wanted to be.

Any final words of wisdom for those of us who would like to be published?

A: Ask yourself if the manuscript is your best effort. If you truly believe it is, do whatever it takes to get the project out there. And keep trying. Get creative if necessary. The distance between where you are and where you want to be is measured by your willingness to prove you want it.

Thank you for your interview, Sam. I wish you much success!

A: Thank you very much! I wish you the same.