

Andrew Vachss's  
FLOOD (1985)

*Barry Eisler*

For over thirty years, Andrew Vachss (1942– ) has dedicated himself to the protection of children: as an attorney, a consultant, a prison supervisor, and, most prominently, as a novelist. His award-winning Burke novels (*Strega*), graphic novels (*Batman: The Ultimate Evil*), and stand-alones (*The Getaway Man*)—more than thirty—draw on his long and dark experience in battling child predators. They're not just gripping fiction; they're a call to arms to anyone who cares about protecting, and preventing evil from infecting, the most innocent among us.

The only thing fictional about Andrew Vachss's ultrahard-boiled novels is the dark, damaged characters populating them, and even these, it's clear, are based on people Vachss has known. But the settings—typically the rancid underbelly of New York City—and the plots—typically involving sociopaths who prey on children, and their familiars in the civilian world—are all from the hard path walked by Vachss himself, a former juvenile prison director and lawyer specializing in advocacy for, and protection of, abused children.

I first heard of Vachss in 1989, when, as a new covert recruit with the CIA, I was reading a lot about crime, violence, and the street. Vachss was mentioned in the bibliography of what remains one of the best self-defense books I've ever read, *Cheap Shots, Ambushes, and Other Lessons*, by Marc "Animal" MacYoung. MacYoung praised Vachss as one of the few novelists who really understood and was able to accurately portray the way the street works: the hits, the scams, the freaks, the whole ugly symbiosis between the criminal world and the civilian. Because MacYoung was clearly a man with his own intimate acquaintance with Vachss's world, I decided to give Vachss a try.

I found *Flood* at my local library and couldn't put it down. Vachss had created an unforgettable antihero—a man known only as Burke, a crimi-

nal living like a ghost in the underbelly of New York, preying on other criminals. Burke was a loner, but he wasn't alone: in place of the family he never had, there was his clan, a collection of people as damaged and dangerous as he, and together, probably the most lethal underground outfit in fiction. There was Max the Silent, a stone-reliable courier and expert karate-ka whose name was a reference more to his stealth than to his being a deaf/mute; the Prof, short for professor, or maybe prophet, an ex-con who knew every street move ever invented and communicated them in slang; the Mole, who ran his junkyard like an underground castle, his dog pack protecting it like a vicious, moving moat; and Mama, whose Chinese restaurant was a front for her own criminal enterprises and who served as Burke's cutout to the rest of the world. I'd never read anything like it and devoured the other then-available books in the Burke series—*Strega*, *Blue Belle*, and *Hard Candy*—in a matter of days.

What struck me most about the books was their unflinching realism. Reading Vachss, you didn't sense mere verisimilitude; you sensed reality. The places were real; the events were horrors you could read about in the headlines, if you could bear it; and the characters, hard as they were, were also all too human—men who'd learned from brutal experience to trust no one, and yet who found a way to trust each other. More than the gripping plots, more even than the razored-down prose, it was the *reality* of Burke's world that set the books apart and made them so affecting.

Today, when people ask me to name some of my literary influences, Vachss is always on the shortlist. He's the author who opened my eyes to the dramatic possibilities of dropping fictional characters into nonfictional settings and circumstances. He awakened a latent love of clipped dialogue and bleak prose. He implicitly instructed me on how to make the bad guy good: understand him profoundly, make sure that beneath his dark carapace lie certain core qualities the reader can respect and even admire, drop him into a world whose moral palette consists only of the bleakest shades of gray, and populate that world with people even worse than he.

You can't like thrillers and not love Vachss's books—not only the Burke books, but also the stand-alones and short story collections. It's an oeuvre without equal, adding depth and darkness to a genre I love and changing the trajectory of that genre in the process. And though there's much to be learned from them, these books weren't written to be studied. They were written to be read. Pick one up and you'll instantly understand why.

Barry Eisler spent three years in a covert position with the CIA's Directorate of Operations, then worked as a technology lawyer and start-up executive in Silicon Valley and Japan, earning his black belt at the Kodokan International Judo Center along the way. Eisler's best-selling thrillers have won the Barry Award and the Gumshoe Award for Best Thriller of the Year, have been included in numerous "Best Of" lists, and have been translated into nearly twenty languages. The first book in Eisler's assassin John Rain series, *Rain Fall*, was made into a movie starring Gary Oldman, released by Sony Pictures Japan in 2009. His other titles include *Killing Rain*, *Requiem for an Assassin*, and *Fault Line*. Eisler lives in the San Francisco Bay Area and Tokyo.