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Andrew Vachss



A Conversation with Andrew Vachss

Interview by [Rob W. Hart](#)

Andrew Vachss is not a writer in the traditional sense.

He doesn't do it to win awards, even though he's gotten plenty. He doesn't do it for the thrill of seeing his name in print, even though you could fill a whole bookshelf with his work. He's not plumbing the depths of his soul to wrestle with personal demons.

The demons he's wrestling with are very real.

Vachss (pronounced like *fax*) is an attorney in private practice, exclusively representing children and youths. Before that, he was a federal investigator in sexually transmitted diseases, a social-service caseworker, a prison director and a labor organizer. In Biafra, he worked to find a land route to bring donated food and medical supplies across the border. He helped to establish a national organization that lobbies on behalf of children, and is a leading expert on child protection and sex crimes.

From that diverse career he's mined the material for 23 novels - 18 of which feature Burke, an abuse victim turned mercenary - as well as short stories, graphic novels and essays. They all further his cause of exposing real-life monsters and the society in which they breed.

It's impossible to summarize the depth of his work while still giving it the proper due, but you can find out more about him on his official Web site, [The Zero](#), an exhaustive catalogue of his career.

He currently has two new books out. The first is *The Weight*, a noir romance about a professional thief who takes the rap on a rape he didn't commit. The second is *Heart Transplant*, a stunningly beautiful "graphic novel" about bullying that he developed with artist Frank Caruso.

Vachss was very generous with his time when we spoke. I had initially crossed my fingers for 20 minutes. We spoke for more than an hour, touching on his writing, his career, the blues, the changing face of New York and his law work. It's a long interview (and there's a few spoilers for some of his books), but it's worth sticking through to the end - especially to see him set me straight.

The night before the interview, news had broken of *The Pedophile's Guide to Love and Pleasure*, a self-published e-book on Amazon that was sending the blogosphere into a frenzy. That's where we started.

Rob W. Hart: You may have heard about this, but there was this big controversy where Amazon has been selling a guide for pedophiles. It's a self-published book, and they removed it last night, but before they did they defended it by saying that they don't want to infringe on someone's First Amendment rights, and if you don't like it, don't buy it. What do you make of that argument?

Andrew Vachss: It's word on paper, right? It's kind of a scam for people to talk about censorship. Because censorship is when the government doesn't allow you to do something, when something's illegal, something is prohibited, when something's banned. If nobody buys the book, what difference does it make?

The second thing is, all these people getting all worked up and all excited about this, do they know anything at all about what they're talking about? Because it doesn't sound like they do.

RH: In what regard?

AV: You know what I do for a living?

RH: Child protection.

AV: Do you know why I do it?

RH: From your past interviews it's based on a lot of the work you did in your past. You were inspired to do it by some of the previous cases you were disturbed by.

AV: I've been doing it a long time, and let's just leave it there. When I began writing I had the devil's own time dealing with reviewers who said what I was writing about was a product of my sick imagination. So I was grateful when - what you call pedophiles, I don't - but what you call pedophiles, went way above ground and started giving news conferences and publishing books and all of this stuff. All of a sudden I could drop that burden. I didn't have to convince people that these humans exist. If I'm going hunting, what do I want to hunt? Deer wearing camouflage? Aren't they giving some self-righteous nonsense about this? Do they think this book is going to convert anybody?

RH: I don't think people really think this will change anyone's mind, I think it's one of those First Amendment rights arguments, on how far you should be able to take it, because there's two sides. There are people who say you should be able to say whatever you want whenever you want, and there's people who say this is going too far.

AV: Again, these are people - I'm not trying to be insulting, I don't know you at all - but there's too many writers writing about things they've never experienced, so is a ransom note a First Amendment issue? You see what I'm saying? I'm writing words on paper saying if you ever want to see your kid again alive, is that protected speech?

This wave of self-righteous indignation, how many people in that wave are actually doing anything about this issue other than forwarding an e-mail? To me it never was a First Amendment issue. I'm happy when these freaks say, 'This is what we like to do and this is why we should be allowed to do it and blah blah blah blah blah.' It's not going to change anyone's mind but it's going to make my job a whole lot easier.

As far as Amazon's concerned, c'mon, anyone can self-publish a book. It doesn't mean that Amazon has to sell it, but are they going to appoint a board and review every self published book?

RH: OK. I wanted to also talk a little about *Heart Transplant*. Considering bullying is currently in the national spotlight, how has the reaction been so far to the book?

AV: I don't think I've ever seen a book with better reviews, better reactions, better endorsements from every source you can imagine, and correspondingly worse sales. It's kind of funny to talk to me about censorship. As far as I know Barnes & Noble won't carry this book.

RH: Really?

AV: Really! Feel free to call Dark Horse and ask 'em.

RH: I don't see anything objectionable or inappropriate in the book.

AV: Of course there isn't.

RH: The thing that impressed me the most [with *Heart Transplant*], is that, in a lot of work like that, it seems the author is talking down to the reader, which is something you didn't do. You spoke to the reader like they understood what you have to say.

AV: I hope so, because that's the way I talk, period. This isn't supposed to be a thesis on bullying or a lecture or an admonishment. It's supposed to be a dissection. Frank [Caruso] and I put in a lot of work on it.

RH: Why do you think the story needed to be told like that, with a mixture of art and prose?

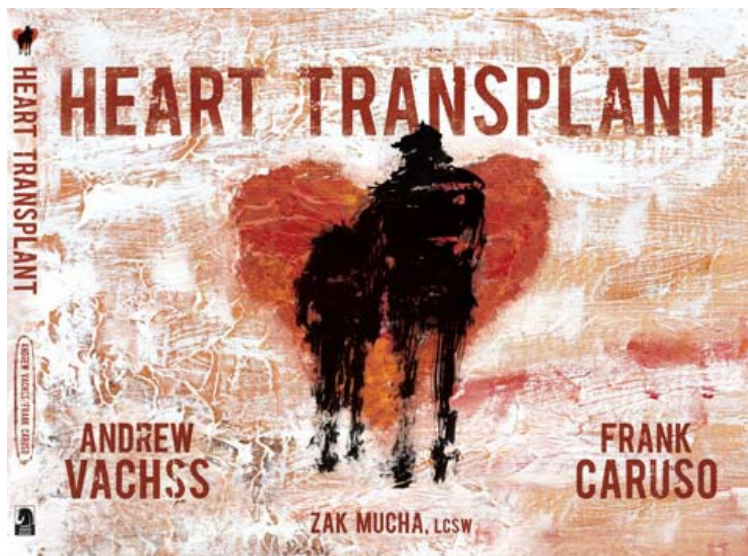
AV: I can't say it needed to be told like that. It's a new genre that Frank and I have been experimenting with before, with these triptych haikus, and they really worked, insanely well. I didn't want to write a comic book. I didn't want word balloons in the book. I didn't even want the same font used throughout, in regards to who was speaking. The best word is, I wanted to have the person who has this book experience the book, not read it. And it's an experimental form, and we understand that, and we understand that when you experiment, you take risks. But not for nothing, I don't know what Lou [the intermediary who set up the interview] has sent you, but *Publisher's Weekly* did a long thing on this, *USA Today* did a long thing on us, it's in *King Features Syndicate*, it's recommended by all these people. I'm really shocked that nobody can find anything bad to say about the book. Quite the contrary.

RH: The reaction I've read about it so far has been fantastic.

AV: Yea, that's the reaction, but it's not just Barnes & Noble that won't carry this book. The New York Public Library, the Los Angeles Public Library, the Chicago Public Library, you name it, they don't have it.

Now there's two ways to look at this, and I don't know how much of a journalist you feel like being, but the two ways are, all these people, Barnes & Noble and all these public libraries, were solicited and passed, or they weren't solicited. I don't know because I'm not in the position to ask them. But certainly, if you call Dark Horse, and I think the guy's name is [redacted], he's their book expert, he's the one who passed the news that everyone passed on the book.

But you're talking libraries that have every other thing I've ever written.



[Dark Horse confirmed difficulty in placing the book, but noted that they're buoyed by positive reviews and making headway with Barnes & Noble. While the book doesn't appear to be available in their stores yet, it is available on their Web site.]

RH: That's strange because a lot of the other works you've written are a little more risqué for most audiences.

AV: Yea, you think? On top of that, part of the deal was this book sell for what other books sell for. So it's not a damn art book, although it looks like one. I'm not selling it for \$125. It's absolutely accessible from our end going out, but what I'm told is, it's been passed on by this whole pantheon, you know, chain stores and human beings.

RH: I just finished reading *The Weight*, which I thought was fantastic. What was the inspiration for that story?

AV: It was a true story I didn't think I could tell, except in that form. There's a lot of layers to the book and I do understand that some people will never get all of them and I can still live with that, but there has to be, at least in my mind, a way of showing people how things actually work, and people they may not understand still have a code that they live by. And how debts have to be paid.

RH: One of the more interesting things that jumped out at me from the book, and it's a smaller detail on the whole scale of the story, but how with the sex offender registry, the flaw there is that if someone doesn't appear on registry, it's like a seal of approval. *[Clarification: People can and do slip through the cracks]*

AV: Too bad Meagan's Law torts haven't said that. And that's exactly what I mean. You just perfectly highlighted that this book of fiction gives me a way, because if it does nothing more for you than to make you inquire, like, 'Is this guy nuts?', well, then you find out.

RH: I wanted to talk a little bit about Burke. It seems like in a lot of past interviews, people ask you how much of you is in Burke, which is usually after you say that Burke is a pretty bad guy. So do you think people come into interviews or situations with you with inaccurate assumptions, or that they're judging you over the work?

AV: That's a really good question. I don't know. I don't know. I don't meet a whole lot of objective people. I don't meet a whole lot of people without an agenda, so I don't know what's really in their mind. All I can do is be consistent and truthful. Am I shocked that the NAMBLA bulletin called me a fascist? No. But do I think they're objective reviewers? Of course not. Any more than I think most book reviewers could be objective, I don't know how they could be. The whole concept of book reviewing is, 'You people are a bunch of sheep and I know what's best and I'll point you in that direction.' What are the qualifications for being a book reviewer?

RH: I don't think there are any.

AV: Of course there aren't! So why should people pay any attention to it? The reason is nobody can read 15,000 books a damn month. So they have to find some way to sort through it. But I've seen human beings walk into a store and say, 'Where's the best seller section?' They're hardly giving - look, I don't think it's a fair fight, bottom line. I don't think it's a fair fight.

There's better actors than you've ever seen on the screen who won't even get a screen test. There are better musicians than anybody else has heard, who aren't ever going to get a record. There are better writers who are never going to get published.

In my other work, you need absolutely cold objectivity. You're not supposed to be wrong. It's not about feeling, if you don't get it right, you can literally make a fatal mistake. But when it comes to books and you strip away the crap, all the book reviewer is saying is, 'I like this book or I don't like this book, and if a book hasn't been made into a movie the odds are the book's not that good,' which is kind of the typical mindset.

RH: Speaking of that, it seems like a lot of your work gets bought up by production companies but they don't go anywhere. Do you have any desire to see that, or are you afraid your message might be corrupted by the entertainment industry?

AV: Look, for several years, I just said no to anybody who asked, but then a young guy, a smart guy from one of these studios said, 'Look, you're all about message, that's why you write these books. Well, let's say we make a movie and the movie sucks, and 10 percent of your message gets through, one percent of your message gets through. More people will see a gigantic flop of a movie than will ever read a book.' So that kind of makes sense to me. The other thing is, I know how to read a contract, so I can't guarantee a good movie, I don't even know what a good movie is, but I can absolutely guarantee some certain things that can't be done in the movie. Indeed, certain people can't work on the movie. I've always done that.

RH: Because you have a rule that if someone's been convicted or involved in a sex crime then they can't be involved, right?

AV: Right, and I also have specific names of people. Look, I don't expect them to screen some third hand grip on the Australian set, obviously I'm talking about the principals, but I don't want anything - I have a right - anything directed by Roman Polanski or Victor Salva. There's the mockery, if I was learning toward that.

But in a way there's nothing artistic about the fact that everything gets optioned and nothing gets made. There's a lot financial about it. I can't claim to be aggrieved when I can sell the same property over and over again.

RH: I mentioned unfair assumptions before, and I think I made one when I was reading Another Life, because you've said Burke is a bad guy and I understand why you used him as a guide, but I thought he might have to die to pay the price for the life he lead. Instead I found that the ending was very hopeful.

AV: I never said he was a bad guy. I said he's not a white knight, and there's a big difference. This is a family, whether it fits some Christian tradition or some Islamic tradition, but it's a family. A family's job is not just to protect its young, but to give

them the kind of guidance that will enable them to exceed those giving the advice. You think this family wants its children to follow in their footsteps?

RH: Probably not.

AV: Probably? They're thieves. That's what they do. They're lifestyle criminals, they don't do anything legitimate, except as a front. No. They have one kid well along in college, one kid just beginning, the youngest of their actual crew, who wasn't one of the originals, getting married. They know that all these people have to move off in a different direction. The job is done. The arc is complete. They weren't trying to raise the next wave of avengers. The kids, who are grown now, don't feel that burning hatred that Burke does. Why would they? No one's done these things to them.

RH: You've also made the argument that you don't see yourself so much as writer, as you do a soldier fighting a war, and that fiction is your weapon. What caused that initial spark? Were there writers using fiction for social change who inspired you?

AV: Writers have used fiction to inspire social change at least since Dickens. But no, I don't think I could write *The Grapes of Wrath* or anything like that. But what I do know is that, my first book, it was a textbook, it wasn't a novel. And I do know that a zillion times more people will read a novel, and I know that if I can bring sufficient narrative force to the table then people will read it. Now, if I slip in enough truth, it's like eating a piece of really good steak. There's fat marbled in it, but you don't want the fat removed, you want the total taste. So, if I can get you to swallow the steak, some of what I'm trying to tell you will stick with you, and of course people will recognize themselves as the ears of proof.

RH: I know you've said you write your books in your head and when you find the time they just sort of come out, but if I can ask, what's your editing process like?

AV: [Laughs]

RH: I mean, do you find it pretty close to the finished product, after the first pass?

AV: I'll go over and, I try to use a scalpel on my books. I really don't want to waste words, and I'll do that, but the beginning, middle and end are what I intended, and I'd say it's pretty damn close. Editing a book is not something I would spend a lot of time doing on any book or any short story or anything else. I either - I don't know how to explain it - have you ever done any fighting?

RH: Not professionally or controlled.

AV: Obviously, I didn't expect that, but box any amateurs or fight in a dojo, anything like that?

RH: I've been in a couple of scraps.

AV: All right, fair enough. When you hit somebody, at that moment you know it was effective enough, right?

RH: Yea, you know whether or not you've connected.

AV: Well, that's the whole thing with me. I know what I want to hit, if I see it reflected in the words I wrote, all right, I'm done. I've tried over the years to learn to hit harder and throw shorter punches. I know how to fight, so if I bring those same skills to the books, I'm better advantaged, and I've always tried to do that.

RH: It's really amazing to me that you have such a deep library and such an involved career, I mean, do you ever actually find any time to sleep?

AV: Well, not as much as I'm told I should, but also remember when one flows into another, it's a whole lot easier. If you're a journalist and you want to write a book about being a journalist, it'll be a hell of a lot easier than someone who said, 'Oh, I think I'll use a journalist as a protagonist.' I'm writing about what I know and that makes it so much easier. I think if you gave me an assignment to write something, I'd probably fall on my face, if it's outside my comfort zone. And my comfort zone is what I know to be true, I don't think I would do real well [outside it].

RH: And you've said you write because these are things that you're angry about and that you're passionate about, but do you find any catharsis in the process?

AV: Nope. None whatsoever.

RH: Really?

AV: Yes. And all this bullshit, about, the protagonist Burke does to certain human beings what Vachss would like to do and can't, that's what it is, it's all bullshit.

The catharsis was, during one of these chats that publishers used to force you to do, somebody said - unlike, by the way, the way started this conversation, screaming and yelling about Amazon - he said, 'Listen, I've been reading your books since the first one and I really want to do something, what can I do?' And my answer was, 'I don't

know, what can you do? It depends on your skills, on your commitment, on the time you have to devote to it, etc. But if you're serious, call me at my office'. Well, the guy called me at my office, what he does is he's a political operative, he runs campaigns. It was his idea to start a lobby, not a charity, a lobby, modeled on what I've always been saying about the NRA [that they're an effective lobbying group], and that became the organization known as PROTECT, and that organization has quite literally changed laws. And those laws had operated to virtually enslave children and treat them as property. Now those laws don't exist anymore.

Do you want an example?

RH: Absolutely.

AV: I don't know how much you know, that's why I don't want to bore you.

RH: Believe me, this is not boring in the slightest.

AV: OK. New York's law used to be as follows: If a human being goes next door and sexually assaults a ten year old, that's a B felony, and you're looking at up to 25 years, OK? However, if he does the same acts on the same day to a child of exactly the same age, only it's his child? Even if the criminal law does get involved, because most of the time they don't, but even if they did, the prosecutor, in his or her sole discretion, could charge the person with incest. Now, what's the difference? If you get convicted of incest, the maximum is four years and change, and you are, right upon conviction, eligible for probation. Now, you don't have to be a legal analyst to understand that this means: Grow your own victims.

That law's gone. It took a lot of lobbying and all the things lobbying entails. It was almost impossible to get this thing out of committee, but once it got out of committee, shockingly it passed unanimously. Because nobody is going to stand up in public, no politician, and advocate for the rights of parents to sexually abuse their own children.

So that law's gone. Without PROTECT it would still be in place, and this is a law that's caused me to head-butt the wall dozens of times in my career. I've not only had Miranda-ized confessions, but I've got 12 and 13 year old girls giving birth to their father's kid, when I can obviously prove who the father was. And they're all pleading guilty to incest and getting probation. That's one example.

RH: That's unbelievable.

AV: The thing is, that example stays in place forever. Can you see a politician saying, 'Can we go back to the way we did things, when incest offenders got special treatment?'

RH: Is this reflected in a lot of other states too, or is thing something unique to New York?

AV: Different states have differently oppressive laws, as does the federal government. And PROTECT is a lobby, it's not a not-for-profit, you don't get a tax deduction, so it relies completely on grassroots membership, which costs a whole \$35 bucks. That's the money it runs on. And it's always taking on one of these causes at any given time, sometimes two or three or too many, frankly, but it's never going to go out of business, sadly.

I'm going to give you another example. In Florida, if you're 13 years old and you shoot somebody in the head, you will get a lawyer to defend you, an actual lawyer, but if you're 13 years old and your father's been raping you or your mother's been pimping you out, and you end up in Family Court, you won't get a lawyer. You'll get a warm, caring volunteer, you know, like a counselor or something like that. That's ridiculous, it's throwing a guppy into a shark tank. So that law has to go to. Because where do you think you get the monsters that actually terrify people with their very existence? You think it's bad genetics? We make our own monsters. We build our own beasts. And the greatest weapon we have against that is to interfere in the production lines. The earlier and more correct the intervention, the better the end result.

And how do you do that if the kid doesn't even have a lawyer, see? Because, look, everybody overdramatizes crap, let's see you overdramatize this one: In my cases, I go to court, it's the only part of the American criminal justice system where if I lose, the perpetrator takes the victim home.

So don't even bore me about your silly death penalty cases. This is a million times worse. There's no project to help these kids. There's no possibility of doing something, because the perpetrator has told this kid, all the kids life, 'I decide everything, you're my property, whatever I want to do, I can do, nobody can stop me.' Now, you're in court, right? And the judge says 'not guilty,' you think this kid will ever, ever report that he's being abused again?

RH: I would imagine no.

AV: Of course not, what's the point? So the stakes are enormous, and if every time you change a law to level that playing field, you save a gazillion kids, because it's a

law that stays on the books. Nobody will go back and change it to the way it used to be.

Well, if it wasn't for the books, none of this happens. So on that basis, of course, they've been a wonderful means of getting to where I think we need to go, but I don't think it's because anybody read the book, any book, and said they'll devote their life to doing this.

RH: You've talked about how you get a lot of threats, how you take special security measures for you and your family. What is it that sets people off? Are abusers that self-righteous?

AV: No, no, no. They don't tell me. They're not writing learned essays, they're sending me funeral cards expressing sympathy for the death of my family, or sending pictures of me with crosshairs drawn over my face. When they do identify themselves - you know, I've had letters from the Hillside Strangler, the one's that still alive, Bianchi - all outrages at the way I unfairly portrayed him. People like that, it's pretty common because they have an insanely narcissistic sense of their own rights. Most of the time they're your garden-variety threat. Sometimes someone's stupid enough to call in a threat, worse yet mention a specific case, that's very easy to deal with that. You're largely dealing with anonymity. One thing I have learned, though, if you go around playing Mister Macho, 'No one's really going to take a shot at me, no one's really going to do this,' that'll be your epitaph.

RH: On the other hand, do you see evidence of people reading your work and experiencing positive changes?

AV: They sure express it, but I'm not in their lives, that's really the problem with this. If I believed that I changed as many people's lives as I have actual written letters attesting to, I'd have an ego too big for this office. I think a lot of people give me way too much credit.

You know, when Bill Clinton's book came out, he had to take a paragraph and say the most important piece of legislation was the one that I wrote, and blah blah blah blah. I couldn't have gotten that bill anywhere near his eyes if certain rich and famous people, who can do a lot of things I can't, hadn't, shall is say, called this to his attention.

So to give me credit for that is wrong. To give me credit - people think PROTECT is my agency. No, it's not. It has an executive director. I haven't even been to the new headquarters in Knoxville. But I don't ever go in the other direction and say I'm a

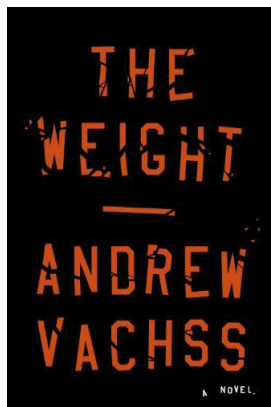
writer and that's it. If you want to judge me, judge me by my conduct, don't judge me by what you read. Behavior is the only truth.

RH: I gotcha. Now, in your books there's a lot of unifying themes, and one of those is blues music. What is it about the blues that speaks to you so much?

AV: Well, you know the saying, that blues is the truth? Well, that's it. I didn't really hear the blues until the first time I went to Chicago, and I was a kid, a teenager, but growing up I didn't hear blues music. At least not music I recognized as blues music, because doo-wop is just another form of blues, you see? But when I got to Chicago and I heard some of this, it just blew me away, because of the environment. I've never attended a stadium concert or anything like that, but you go into a bar or a juke joint, people up on that stand, they're playing for their lives. I don't mean that the audience will assault them, I mean that they either bring it or they don't, and that means it has to be hard and insistent so that people - I've been in places where people literally stopped reaching for weapons because something caught them from the stage.

RH: Wow.

AV: Yea, its effect is stunning. It's not dance music, so, yea, if you buy my argument that doo-wop is just the Brooklyn blues, then that's the only music I've ever really been interested in because it's the only thing that speaks to me.



RH: So the character in *The Weight* named Robert Johnson was named after the blues singer Robert Johnson?

AV: You're a smart guy, yea. And they met at the Crossroads Diner. I didn't name it, but that is in fact the biggest diner in Queens.

RH: I'm a big fan in Robert Johnson, so I thought it was a great reference.

AV: But the whole point is, because you know you got it, right? If you didn't know that it would just pass you by. It's a generic name.

RH: It is. And especially, and I think he's pretty obscure singer. He's become more about his legend than his actual life.

AV: Oh, absolutely, but the concept of making a deal at the crossroads didn't start with him.

RH: That goes a long way back in mythology.

AV: You can read book from the 1800s talking about selling your soul to the devil in exchange for something.

But yea, that was a touch, and the touch you won't get, because of your age, I think is, do you know the significance of the numerals and 'goliath' written under the bloody thumbprint?

RH: No, I don't.

AV: First of all, they're written European style, so instead of month-day-year, it's day-month-year. The second thing is, what are Solly and Albie, back in the 80s, what enterprise could they have been in for so many years? Have you ever heard of the Irgun?

RH: No.

AV: Irgun. They were either freedom fighters, if you were an Israeli, or terrorists if you were a Brit. This is after World War II when they all got dumped in, what is still being called Palestine, and homeland by one group and Israel by another. But the Brits were going to follow their standard model of hanging around, and the Irgun was lead by some pretty vicious guys, like Menachem Begin, and on that date, they blew up the King David Hotel, and that was it for the Brits in Palestine. They left.

So I understand, 99 percent of people won't get this, but if you think about this, why would these guys be together? They're obviously very different people. And what is Solly a traitor to? No one said he was a rat and he informed on the gang, it's obvious that the people visiting Albie at night, who just show up, are hard guys, but they're not crime guys. This is Mossad, and these are very serious people, so what happened was, Albie figured out, if you read the book you see how, that Solly had to be the traitor, and he left the message in the only way he could hope it would work. Solly's a bad guy, it's not about money, what could he possibly need more money for? He's actually gone over to the other side, and they've been together since they were in the Jewish underground, before Israel was established as a state. And that's why this is so critically, desperately important.

You don't need to know that to get the book, you don't need to know that to understand that whatever Solly was traitorous about is something pretty damn important. And you also now get an explanation of why is Albie, who looks, on the surface, like a pretty good guy, why is he always sending up jobs and heists? Because he needs money. Well what does he need money for? There's still an underground, the

same way any Irishman would know there's still an IRA. People who started running guns in the late 40s all over the place haven't necessarily stopped.

RH: Well, one of the other things that stuck out for me with *The Weight* is that, I'm a native New Yorker. I've lived here my whole life, and I'm only 27 so my history doesn't go back that far, but I remember things weren't great in the late 80s and early 90s, and we've seen a lot of changes in the city since then. The crime rate has dropped, the murder rate has dropped, and it was interesting to see a writer refer to how things used to be compared to how they are now. But also the argument that you're making, that a lot of these things, the bad stuff is still around, even though you don't necessarily see it.

AV: Absolutely right. It's a different way of doing the same business. Anyone who thinks that there's no prostitution in New York, no dope trade in New York, c'mon. You'd have to be really lame to do that. I'm a born and raised New Yorker, it's my native home. The place where we lived at one time is now Soho [laughs]. Trust me, it wasn't Soho when we lived there.

Born and raised in Hell's Kitchen, where do you think the Westies came from? Not from Clinton. And there's a double joke inside that, because Dannemora, the Siberian prison, has been renamed. It's now called Clinton. [*Dannemora is a prison facility in upstate New York's Clinton County, nicknamed New York's Siberia*]

RH: Really.

AV: Yea, check it for yourself. Dannemora is now Clinton Correctional Facility. They couldn't stop with renaming every two square blocks in New York, they have to start renaming prisons? Riker's Island is going to be Riker's Isle? This sort of euphemism that they sell the public, that's a city that's rotting from the inside.

Before you're 40, all the people, the service personnel, that Manhattan needs, are going to be living on what used to be Welfare Island [nickname for Roosevelt Island] and they'll be ferried over once a day, because no working person in the world can afford to live in Manhattan.

RH: No, absolutely not. I live on Staten Island because that's where I can afford to live.

AV: Sure, sure. That's what so ironic, it's amazing the way it is, there's places in Staten Island, there's places in Queens, that are incredible bargains. But they're not Manhattan, so PPHT, you know? You'd have to be nuts, you have to share your apartment with nine people and live in a crawlspace.

RH: It's amazing how you can give so much to the city and grow up there and then feel like you're persona non grata when you can't afford anything.

AV: Absolutely. You're in Staten Island, so you know what people in Staten Island call Manhattan. They call it The City. Well, it's supposed to be a city of five boroughs.

RH: Which most people tend to forget.

AV: And as far as the murder rate going down, all this crap like that, the whole Giuliani initiative, that's about a certain number of square blocks in Midtown, heading up Central Park West and Fifth Avenue to X number of blocks, then they're done. Then they don't care.

RH: They care much more about the crime rate in Times Square than they do in Bushwick or East New York.

AV: Of course. East New York, when I was growing up, anybody who went in there unarmed was an idiot. You'd have to be crazy. I remember, probably going on 20 years now, I took a journalist from another country who said, 'I want to see the real New York.' All right, fine. I took him to Hunts Point [in the Bronx]. And he visibly, within a few minutes, 'We gotta get out of here.'

There's dead dogs lying in the gutter and seagulls ripping them apart, there's whores working under clear plastic raincoats servicing the truckers, there's guys test firing weapons at the cars. [laughs] And it was a little much. And now they're probably building co-ops out there, right?

The New York rule is that every square inch of land is eventually going to be worth something, but it really hasn't worked out that way, and a lot of people haven't grasped the idea that elevators have a top floor. So they're paying stupid money for apartments. Now co-ops? And they just bought themselves hell, they're paying twice what the last guy paid so their assumption is they're going to sell for twice what they paid, and it doesn't work like that.

RH: It amazes me to see the kind of apartments people will live in just to say they live in the city. These little tiny boxes with no room to move around.

AV: When I was your age, before I went overseas, I lived on what we called the Lower East Side, now it's Loisaida or Alphabet City, but you could get a two bedroom apartment for \$65, and because of the wage scale then, we'd still have four, five guys living there. But that multiplication table stops once you get past what the working person can reasonably be expected to earn.

And hell, if you make \$40,000 a year, in some part of the country you're doing great. In New York, you better not smoke, because there's your salary. Obviously, that's the thing about, going back to your original point, you boycott something, you call attention to it. Why would you do that? So the clowns who think if nobody smokes the world will be sweet and green, now it's \$12.75 for a pack of cigarettes. You honestly think people aren't driving semis full of cigarettes from North Carolina without tax stamps?

RH: I'm sure you're aware, there's the Indian reservations [in New York] that the state is trying to collect taxes from.

AV: The Indian reservations are about as hypocritical as anything I've ever heard of. We attempted genocide against you guys, it didn't work, a few of you lived, we're going to make it up to you by letting half a dozen people get rich and have this lovely casino and we'll take our piece, and meanwhile the people on the [reservation] aren't going to do a god damn thing. I have a friend who's a Chickasaw, and he literally calls them Casino Indians, because the whole trick is to prove you have enough blood in you so you're entitled to your benefits

[My phone drops the call. Thanks, AT&T! I call back.]

AV: I don't know what happened with that.

RH: It was my fault, I apologize.

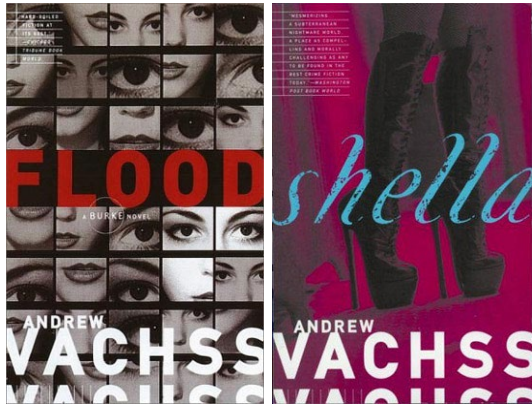
AV: It's not going to be the worst thing that happens to me today. [Laughs]

RH: Actually, I'm doing pretty good. I covered most of the stuff I wanted to talk about. Do you have anything that you're working on, books or projects you can talk about?

AV: The answer to both questions would be 'yes' and 'always.' I've never stopped working on the same project my whole life, and I don't intend to. Books are a weapon in what I believe is the only holy war actually worthy of that name. It's like asking me, 'Do I have any cases this year?' Yea, sure, of course, all the time, always. Because one flows into the other flows into the other. When I first tried this I would have to be a real demented person or somebody with an insane ego to believe I'd still be doing this a quarter century later.

I understand that bookselling is a business, so bottom line, if you want to know if the writer is successful, see if the same publisher goes back to them. That's the only measure I can think of. And I've been with the same guys since I got away from the

first. I've been with the same guys for all that time. They can call me up and say, 'Listen, *The Weight* turned out to be an anvil dropped in the ocean and it sank like a stone, it didn't sell any copies, it's been nice.' That can happen at any time. I don't take advances. I don't sign contracts to write books. I write a book, when I'm done I show it to them and I ask them if they want it. I don't have an agent. Admittedly it's not the standard way to do that, but I'm really too busy with other things to bother with the sort of party part of writing.



RH: Well, I want to thank you for taking the time to speak to me, and on a personal level, I'm a huge fan and you've been a big inspiration for me as a writer.

AV: Oh, I didn't know that you were a writer.

RH: I'm trying.

AV: Listen to what you just said. Damn. I hate that. You think you're a writer if you're published and if not, you're not a writer?

RH: No, I don't necessarily feel that way, it's just something - I'm still a long way from where I want to be.

AV: Good, but don't let anybody - I remember, I was once at one of these stupid-ass, I don't even know what it was, a literary celebration or something. And this kid who had just written a book was standing next to me talking to me, and some nasty bitch - and by the way, for me that's a gender neutral term - came up and recognized me and turned to the kid and said, 'What are you doing,' and he said, 'Well, I'm a writer', and she said, 'Well, would you have written anything I've read?'

And the kid was just, you know, melting, and I turned to the human and said, 'Name ten books you have read.' 'Uh, bluh bluh bluh bluh.' Who are you, telling someone

they're only a writer if you've read their damn book? It's like what I said, a person's not an actor if they don't get cast in a movie? Not a singer if they don't get recorded? Not a painter unless he has an exhibition?

RH: Fair enough.

AV: No, don't back off that. Don't let people ever tell you - I hate that, I truly hate that. It's wrong. It's just wrong. If you're a writer, that's what you are. And if the borderline is, are you published, that's why vanity press has succeeded all these years, because people fell into that trap. Being a writer doesn't mean you're published, it doesn't mean you're any good at it. You certainly know of unmitigated slop that sells year after year, right?

What I'm saying is, it's not a fight, with two guys going inside some ropes and one guy gets his hand raised at the end, it's not that. You never get to meet the enemy. People have gotten published because they're sleeping with this person, or they know this person or their cousin knows this person, and blah blah blah blah blah. I wrote my first book at least a dozen years before I got published.

No one has the right to define what you do except you.

RH: Thank you for saying that.

AV: I would be a hypocrite if I didn't say it.

RH: And thank you again for being so generous with your time today. I thought I would be lucky to get 20 minutes to talk to you.

AV: You would have gotten eight minutes or four minutes if you sounded like someone I didn't want to talk to.

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***Rob W. Hart** is a writer and aspiring novelist. This is his seventh interview for The Cult. You can find him on Twitter and Facebook.*