



from left to right--Tom Straw and Bill Bryan  
photo by David Hartwell

## WHEN TV STILL MATTERED

**Two of the creative forces behind *Night Court* discuss the old days and new projects.**

Long ago, in a galaxy far, far away - unless you happen to live in Burbank - Tom Straw and Bill Bryan began their careers as TV writers. Early on, they each wrote many episodes of *Night Court*, the classic sitcom that ran on NBC from 1984 to 1992 (and happily ever after in reruns.) Between them, Bryan and Straw went on to work as writer/producers on more than twenty network series. But all along, each harbored a secret fantasy. Several, actually. But the only one that's appropriate to mention here is that they both wanted to write crime novels. And eventually, they did.

Tom Straw's riveting debut, *The Trigger Episode*, was released by Carroll & Graf in March 2007. Bill Bryan's hilarious first novel, *Keep It Real*, will be published in May 2007 by Bleak House Books. The two friends and former colleagues had fallen out of touch (though they claim not to remember why), and neither knew that the other had a book coming out until *Crimespree* asked them to interview each other. They had their reunion at Junior's Deli in Westwood, which seemed like the best venue to accommodate seating for all their fans, their entourage, and personal security detail. OK, they were pretty much ignored.

**TOM STRAW:** So we're supposed to talk about our road from Hollywood to writing mystery novels. Is that the assignment?

**BILL BRYAN:** I thought we were supposed to talk about how great my book is.

**TS:** I only wish I'd read it. That would make it easier to talk about.

**BB:** Not necessarily. But suit yourself.

**TS:** Starting off with *Night Court*, we were never there together. We're sort of like Clark Kent and Superman that way. On the same show but never seen in the same room at the same time.

**BB:** True. Although immediately thereafter, we collaborated on *Good & Evil*.

[Ed. note: *Good & Evil* was a half-hour comedy that aired on ABC in 1991. Despite a large and talented cast that included Teri Garr, Marian Seldes, and Seth Green, plus the writing talents of Bill Bryan, Tom Straw, and Susan Harris - the creator of *Soap* and *The Golden Girls* - the show came and went quickly.]

**BB:** I've worked on ten or eleven network series, and whenever anybody asks me which one was my favorite, I always say *Good & Evil*, both because it's true, and because I like baffling people by carrying on about a show they've never heard of. But that was such a great experience, both creatively and personally. Although I haven't seen one of those episodes in fifteen years, so for all I know they really suck.

TS: I haven't seen it, either. If they're showing them somewhere, I want the money.

BB: Yeah. But if we're getting stiffed, at least our ex-wives are too.

TS: When *Crimespree* put us together for this, I got this big rush thinking back on the times we had on *Good & Evil*. Whereas most TV shows have eight to a dozen writers, there were only four of us on that show. What a great tennis game you and I had across that table...not to at all diminish the efforts of the others-

BB: No, of course not. [prolonged, semi-guilty laughter]

TS: That was really one of the closest experiences to authorship I ever felt on a show because television is so highly collaborative - and working in a very small room gave us a chance to be a little closer to what we might have experienced in the book writing.

BB: I also really liked the complicated stories we were able to tell. My appetite for plot was something I'd had to curb in other shows and pilots I'd done - the sitcom form generally doesn't allow it. And I have to think it's no accident that two guys who really thrived on one show that did use a lot of story wound up years later writing densely plotted novels.

TS: Yeah, the skill set that we brought to *Good & Evil* is the same set you need to plot out a novel, particularly a mystery, where you want to have everything be cause and effect. You just do it by yourself with a book.

BB: How do you like that process? Do you miss having the feedback when you're trying to work out a story?

TS: Only occasionally. If it were a pure choice, boy, that idea of sitting alone every day in the room and facing the page, and just finding your way through those woods... I like it. I mean, I really do. How about you, did you like the quietness of it when you wrote *Keep It Real*?

BB: Yeah. But until fairly recently, I had too much fear of failure to be effective without other people pulling me along. I was in the movie business first, and the worst thing in the world for me was a screenplay assignment with no fixed deadline. I'd sit there in solitary confinement and rewrite the first ten pages about a billion times, until the words completely lost their meaning and the studio and the credit card companies would start making threatening noises. Then I'd fly off to some remote location with a stack of blank legal pads and come back ten days later with a finished script, which may or may not have had anything to do what I'd sold them eight months earlier. So TV was a great relief, because I was able to do most of my work out loud, in a room with other funny people. And when I walked out the door every night, I got to punch out until the next day.

TS: That's why so many people in television and movies write with partners. When they're not together they can punch out.

BB: The way I finally managed to overcome writer's block - and a big reason why I'd prefer only to write books from now on - is by using word count. I stay locked in my office every day until Microsoft Word tells me I've come up with 1500 fresh ones. Or at least I used to, back when I was still writing. Now all I do is talk on the phone with my agent and publisher about desperate self-promotion schemes. Anyway, I find that the prose form lends itself much more readily to using daily word quotas than do screenplays or teleplays. With the book, I would be perfectly happy to stop in the middle of the sentence.

TS: That was the Hemingway thing. He would end his writing in the middle of a sentence because he knew what the rest of the sentence would be when he sat down the next day.

BB: Yeah, and then of course one time he inadvertently put a period at the end of the day's work, and we all know how tragically that turned out.

TS: Let's talk about the process of getting from being in TV to doing our books.

BB: For me, it's just something I'd thought about for a long time, and finally did. I had a fairly serious medical scare a few years ago, and while I was recovering I took a look at my resume. The last thing on it was a sitcom called *Meeego*, with Bronson Pinchot playing a nanny from outer space. I didn't really dig that as a lead for my obit, so I sat down and started writing a book. Three and a half months later, I was done.

TS: Three and a half months?! You dog! Que macho hombre!

BB: I worked seven days a week, and never missed my word quota except for a few days when we went on vacation. And even then I tried to make the time productive, by starting a couple of nasty fights with my wife about how I should be back home working. What was your writing process like?

TS: The Hollywood thing is always, 'But I really want to direct.' and for me, it was always, 'But I really want to write a book.' As much as I love television, it's always felt like a constraining form to me. I wanted to be on a wider pasture. Even though I was known for sitcom, I wanted to stretch into the genre I loved as a reader. I'm a big le Carre fan, very big fan of the Spenser books, the Dave Robicheaux books by James Lee Burke...

BB: Those dudes are all writers?

TS: Truly.

BB: I had no idea there were so many.

TS: Yeah. And they have stores where they sell their books. When I finished as exec producer of *Cosby*, and I'd been a good saver, I grabbed the opportunity people dream of in their lives, which was to employ myself to take every day and write this book. I knew I wanted to do it about this paparazzo character I'd been mulling, and once I figured out what his story was, it was open road. Well, sort of. I thought I could get by with a little less plotting, a little less outlining. Then there was another TV series that took me out of my daily writing. Whereas you wrote yours in 3 ½ months, it took me three years to write the first fifty pages (the fifty I kept, anyway). Once I got serious with my outline, it took me five months to write the next 300.

BB: Wow. Your book better be a lot better than mine.

TS: Well, the first fifty pages will be at a high gloss, I assure you.

BB: Is *The Trigger Episode* primarily a comedy?

TS: No, it's not. At least not intentionally.

BB: Well that's interesting, because you're an extremely funny guy.

TS: As are you, sir.

BB: The thing that really keeps me going is the hope of laughter. In *Keep It Real*, I tried hard to make a believable and exciting story, with compelling characters and all that other crap, but if it wasn't for the fact there's always a joke sitting out there, I'd probably quit writing altogether and just move my afternoon nap up to the morning.

TS: That's not to say there's no humor in mine. I think it's certainly hovering in my man Hardwick's attitude and POV... he's got a lot of attitude and it's sardonic. He's got a lot to say as an aside to the reader. I wrote mine in the first person.

BB: Me too.

TS: How come?

BB: Because I found it a lot easier to be funny that way. I look at *Keep It Real* as kind of an extended standup act, with occasional flying lead. Why did you pick first person?

TS: I did a lot of soul searching before I chose the first person. I'm basically talking about a lunch one day...

BB: Turns out your soul isn't that big, huh?

TS: I chose first person because I have a main character who is a paparazzo. That's a very loaded job in terms of perception by a lot of people. I thought if I could put the reader

of the head and soul of this guy I might have a chance for him or her to identify with Hardwick and get with him in a way they wouldn't if he was talked about. Turns out it made a wonderful opportunity for this guy to take the reader on a ride-along through the underbelly of Hollywood TV production and the celebrity culture we live in. But I think I needed that layer of hearing his inner voice to make him accessible because of the baggage that comes with the word paparazzo.

BB: I think I got - and needed - the benefit of that effect as well. My narrator, Ted Collins, is a guy with some serious anger management issues. At the beginning of *Keep It Real*, he's in a grim situation, only able to see his daughter under supervised visitation at his ex-wife's house, and working at a job he hates in reality TV. (Any resemblance to the show he works on and an actual program that is currently very popular is purely coincidental, according to my attorneys.) We gradually learn that before Ted quit drinking and doing drugs, he burned just about every personal and professional bridge he had. So getting inside Ted's skull definitely helped humanize him.

TS: I guess the obvious question people might ask is, if this becomes a movie would you write the screenplay? Or do you see this as a TV series?

BB: I'll give you two answers. On the one hand, I really think that books and other things made from them are completely separate, and if I were to follow my creative instincts, I'd just keep squeezing out my 1500 words a day and let someone else worry about adapting them. But on the other hand, I ain't letting that son of a bitch take my money. So yes, I'd write the screenplay. But I want it to be a book first and foremost.

TS: I agree with you on that. You may also feel that there also comes a point that you say, if I'm thinking of this as a movie, I'm not really serving the reader, in other words, I'm asking the reader to be the guinea pig or the loss leader.

BB: That's very astute of you, and honorable. We both know the realities of these two businesses. If our first novels are both runaway, wild successes, they'll be read by a tiny fraction of the audience for the most obscure, long-forgotten TV shows we ever did. And therefore the financial rewards can't compare. So it's very tempting to ask "Can I have my cake and eat it too?" by writing books that would easily translate to the screen.

TS: Just so it doesn't come back to bite me on the ass, that doesn't mean I wouldn't do the screenplay of my book now that it's done. But I'd tackle it as if someone else had written it. A movie or TV series has to be so much a different animal than a book.

BB: Because I enjoy the taste of my own ass, I'll go on to say that I don't think first-person novels tend to make very good movies. Now I just have to round up every copy of *Crimespree* in Southern California, at least until my agent sells

the rights.

TS: A logical question is, what ghosts or demons are being exorcised through our writing? Are we having our say in ways that we couldn't, or is this a sort of venting or exposing, or none of that?

BB: No doubt about it. Yes, there are some nice things that come out of collaboration, particularly when you work with people who are both talented and pleasant. And I had the great fortune to experience that quite a number of times in my career. That having been said, there's an awful lot about the business that's just nonsense. No one who wants to remain an optimist about human nature should see what happens to a struggling standup comic who overnight becomes a big TV star.

TS: I have no idea what you're talking about.

BB: Man, you must have had a really bad divorce lawyer.

TS: Okay, I cede your point. There are a few people I wouldn't rush to work with again.

BB: I guess you can call it exorcising demons, or you can just say we're finally taking advantage of having some "Fuck-you money," and writing what we really want to write.

TS: My Fuck-you money needs Viagra now.

BB: So do you settle any old scores in your book?

TS: Not really. As much as some of the pro and con experiences I've had in the business informed what I did in *The Trigger Episode*, for me it was more about, 'Can I get it right?' When I was a disc jockey in my prior life it would kill me to go to a movie or read something and see how DJs were portrayed, and I would say, that would never happen. So I was concerned about not being one of those people who would write a book that smacked of skimming instead of the reality of what could happen. There may some people who look at my book and say, aha, I know who he's writing about there because he had this or that experience on that show with that person. But I can honestly say I'm not grinding any axes. I just wanted to say, 'OK, dramatically, what can I draw as the best story and can I make it real?'

BB: I can't wait to read *The Trigger Episode*, Tom.

TS: And I can't wait to read *Keep It Real*, Bill.

BB: Well go ahead, then. I'll watch.

THE TRIGGER EPISODE by Tom Straw  
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[www.tomstraw.com](http://www.tomstraw.com)

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