Interview With Will Mackin, Author of Bring Out the Dog

Guest Interviewer Peter Molin of *Time Now* interviews U.S. Navy veteran Will Mackin. Mackin's work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *GQ*, *Tin House*, and *The New York Times Magazine.* His story "*Kattekoppen*" was selected by Jennifer Egan for inclusion in *The Best American Short Stories 2014,* and his essay about being an extra on Breaking Bad, published in *GQ*, was nominated for an American Society of Magazine Editors "Ellie" award. Mackin's debut collection of short stories, *Bring Out the Dog*, is on sale now.

Describe the path that led to you joining Naval Special Warfare? What were your thoughts and impressions of the SEALs when you first joined them? At what point did you feel you truly belonged?

MACKIN: I volunteered, interviewed, screened, then went through direct support selection, which is nowhere near as grueling as what the operators/SEALs go through. Most SEALs were personable one-on-one, but I found them to be very insular as a group. I never felt like I truly belonged.

From "Kattekoppen": "The variety of ideas among soldiers developed into a variety of ideas among units, which necessitated an operational priority scheme. As SEAL Team Six, we were at the top of that scheme. Our ideas about the war were the war." How are SEALs different from soldiers in line-units? What motivates them and what's important to them? What were you surprised to learn about the SEALs, as individuals and as a collective fighting force?

MACKIN: The main thing that differentiated our unit from "straightleg" units was our budget. We had a lot of money to throw around. There was also a genuine desire on the part of the operators to fight, kill, and vanquish, and absolutely zero tolerance for administrative bullshit. This would sometimes bite us in the ass because no one ever wanted to plan. What we lost in lack of planning, however, was often made up for in execution. As individuals I was surprised to find those who I wouldn't have expected to be SEALs. In other words, guys who didn't fit the mold of the tattooed, bearded, Harley-riding Alpha male. They were just normal dudes with this ridiculous and well-disguised drive.

In the Acknowledgements to Bring Out the Dog you write, "To rejects of all shapes and sizes," but also "And last but not least, a sacred debt to the men and women of Naval Special Warfare Development Group." What lies behind those two sentiments, which seem to express contrasts. What specifically do you owe DEVGRU?

MACKIN: I was assigned to Naval Special Warfare Development Group, or DEVGRU, from 2006-2011. Our mission was to research and develop tactics, techniques, and procedures for operators in the field. I'd deploy with those operators to test whatever gadgetry or tactics we'd come up with. Meanwhile I'd fill in on some operational requirement, like forward air control. I've always felt an affinity with the fuckups and rejects who populate the entire spectrum of military activity. Some just hide it better than others.

What are your thoughts about movies such as American Sniper, Lone Survivor, and 0-Dark-Thirty? How did you try to differentiate your take on the SEALs from other works that celebrate or castigate them, or treat them as heroes, barbarians, or traumatized victims?

MACKIN: I purposefully didn't watch any of those movies, nor read any of the books, because I didn't want to think my way around them. Character-wise, I tried to stick with the guys who surprised me by being SEALS, those who were able to sidestep the everyday macho nonsense without losing an ounce of respect.

Who and what were you reading before you joined the military? Were you writing? Did you publish or attempt to publish anything? Were you reading and writing while in the military?

MACKIN: The first book I loved was "The Outsiders" by SE Hinton, which I read in the sixth grade. As part of our lesson my English teacher brought in a boom box and had us listen to The Who's "Baba O'Riley" start to finish. She then related that song to the plight of the Greasers. I've been hooked on reading and writing ever since.

While in Navy I read mostly nonfiction and I wrote in my journal. I published columns for McSweeney's Internet Tendency and The Believer ("Dispatches from Iraq" and "Nutrition is a Force Multiplier", respectively) under the pseudonym Roland Thompson.

When, where, and why did you begin working on the stories in Bring Out the Dog? As you began to write, what attracted you to fiction, rather than memoir? Who or what helped most to develop you as a writer and reach your full potential? When did you realize the stories were getting good?

MACKIN: I started writing the book in 2011 after I transferred from DEVGRU to the Navy ROTC unit at the University of New Mexico. I gravitated toward fiction because it allowed me to

better explore the anxiety that I'd felt during certain real-life situations. Those who really helped me were George Saunders, my friend and mentor since we met at a writing retreat in 1998; my editor Andy Ward, who gave me enough rope to hang myself; and Deborah Treisman, fiction editor at the New Yorker, who never failed to set the bar really high. I knew when a story was getting good when I'd derive energy from it and not the other way around.

What was the kernel of the first story that made it into the final selection, both in terms of its relation to things that happened in real life and when you began to write about it? Which story in Bring Out the Dog was hardest to write and why?

MACKIN: We lost a dog on the first night of my second deployment to Afghanistan. The circumstances behind that loss and its fallout informed *Great Circle Route Westward Through Perpetual Night*. The cat-head shaped licorice and the seven-foot tall Dutchman, both featured in *Kattekoppen*, were real. I wrote *The Lost Troop* over a long weekend in April of 2017. Otherwise every story took forever to finish, with lots of iterations and getting stuck. The hardest story to write didn't make it into the book.

One of the recurring characters in your story is Hal, the SEAL team chief who expresses very strong ideas about tactical competence, unit discipline, and team-culture fit. What is complicated about Hal, what is simple, what is ambiguous, and what is problematic?

MACKIN: Hal is a combo of five or six real guys, named after the computer in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. What makes him complicated/ambiguous is his love for his men versus his love of the war. What makes him problematic is his ego. The only simple thing about Hal is his mullet.

Many Bring Out the Dog stories describe a new team member or

potential new member striving for membership and acceptance. What attracts you to this type of story?

MACKIN: It wasn't so much an attraction as a default. Aside from providing built-in conflict, that striver was me.

From "Great Circle Route Westward Through Perpetual Night":

> *"The stars were so bright we could have gone unaided. Still, night vision afforded certain advantages. I saw ice crystals trailing off the drone's wingtips, meteor shower in the ionosphere, plasma connecting unnamed constellations. Down in the valley I observed wind, not just playing on the corn, but the actual movement of air in evergreen loops. The sky was jade, the faraway mountains aluminum, the river like something you'd discover out the window of a time machine."*

What is the story of writing this paragraph (which I chose almost at random)? What's the real-life origin? What's the literary genesis?

MACKIN: The real-life origin was me stopping to look through my goggles while on patrol. The literary genesis, I'd say, occurred in the space between my eye and the night vision screen, or reality and its projected image, how those things were different but also the same.

What feedback about Bring Out the Doghave you received from members of the SEAL community? Are you worried that it might not be well received?

MACKIN: Most guys say they like it, but I think they're lying. I had to stop worrying about it or I would've gone insane.

Check out an excerpt from Mackin's Bring Out the Dog [Here](#) and Buy it [Here](#)