

A CONVERSATION WITH CHARLES TODD

Author of

A PALE HORSE

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Q: Each book in the Rutledge series takes place in a different town, why did you choose to set up the series this way?

A: This offers us--and Rutledge--the opportunity to explore more of England than a base in London or Kent or Leicestershire would have done. It gives the story line a chance to develop out of a vast reservoir of interesting places, backgrounds, and people, and we find this creatively exciting. People are the same everywhere, of course, but where you live can shape who you are, what your greatest fears are, and why you turn to murder when you are driven to a final solution. A great setting offers more room for Rutledge to work in and gives terrific color to a novel.

Q: A PALE HORSE is set in Uffington, the site of a literal "pale horse." Can you describe what this pale horse is and why you decided to set your book around this historical figure?

A: The White Horse of Uffington is one of the best of the figures cut into the white chalk of England. Take away the grass covering of a hillside, and the chalk beneath makes a figure stand out for miles--which is probably the whole point. Not all of the figures are old, but some, like this one, are said to go back to the time of Alfred the Great. No one knows quite what this horse was intended to be--a god, a tribal totem, or a monument to a great man or a great victory. They are all in fairly isolated places where they have sort of an eerie feel to them, especially by moonlight. In A PALE HORSE, one man uses the figure as a scourge, to remind him of what he's done, and at what cost. He's desperate to forget, but his conscience won't let him. And this will decide his fate.



The White Horse of Uffington, with its elegant lines of white chalk bedrock, is thought to be the oldest hill figure in Britain. The image is a stylized representation of a horse that is about 374 feet in length, and is thought to date back as far as 1000 BC.

Q: You have an uncanny ability to get deep into the mind set of a soldier that is trying to acclimate himself back to normal day life after experiencing the horrors of war. Where do you draw your insight from?

A: We've pored over innumerable first hand accounts of trench warfare and have listened to veterans from every war. It's amazing how similar, yet very different, their experiences are; how strongly the killing affects men who were taught from childhood not to kill, and how fierce a bond exists between buddies. When these men come home to peace and safety, then have to learn to shut down one of the major traumas of their lives—it's an enormous undertaking. Listen to their families and you know how helpless they feel when they can't take away the horror.

Q: Do you think Rutledge will ever find peace?

A: Many of the men who came home from France shell shocked walked out into their back garden one day and shot themselves, to find that peace in death. They had survived the war, but as so many soldiers have discovered even in Iraq, the war dead stay with you, and you sometimes feel closer to them than to living you've fought so hard to come home to. Psychologists tell us that the men who learn to live with their torment have a better chance of survival. That's what Rutledge is trying to do. The question is, who has the stronger will, Ian or Hamish? Who will ultimately win the battle? Whether Rutledge goes out into the garden with his revolver will depend on what his future still holds. and if he finds something--or someone--to anchor him in the present. The jury is still out.

Q: How do you approach the writing process?

A: It's that first written expression of what's to come that seems to fire the imagination and give the story and each character reality in our minds. We never outline, because the story tells itself, the characters take the stage and lead us to the end. We're as much in the dark as the protagonist, exploring the crime and the suspects and the clues as we follow him.

A PALE HORSE

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