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Thrill 'Em All

A modern-day warrior offers 6 pieces of advice to help you build a plausible hero for your thriller novel.

BY KIMBERLEY HOWE

In thrillers, it's important to get all the technical details of guns, knives and other weapons correct, but how do you capture the essence of a modern-day warrior? Full immersion with one in the Phoenix desert.

Having worked in the global security field for years, Rigo Durazo (pictured) is the director of combative training for Craft International, specializing in executive protection and anti-kidnapping initiatives, and is in high demand as a trainer for the military and police. You only have to spend a short time with him to know that he's the real deal. He moves fast, with superhuman focus, grace and intention. He studies combat in many forms and hones approaches that are seamless in the field. No one offers comparable training.

Similar to a well-drawn character, Durazo backs up his physicality with intelligence, philosophy and forethought. He shared his insight on how to create a realistic protagonist, and his suggestions dispel some commonly held tropes in thriller heroes.



DON'T RELY ON REVENGE.

When you are creating a hero, motivation is key, as that burning goal needs to fuel your hero for the entire novel. Durazo stresses that it's not just tactical training or technology that will save your heroes—it's their combative mind-set. But he's no fan of vengeance stories, as the intense emotion and singularity of purpose blinds them vulnerable. Other motivations,

whether personal or global, work better. "Believable protagonists need to be selfless, focused on the common good, even if it comes at a personal cost," he says.

HARNESS YOUR FEAR.

There seems to be a myth in fiction that true heroes don't fear death. Wrong. It's what they do with that fear that makes them heroic. They recognize it, accept the physical

manifestations of it—shaking, hyperventilation, adrenaline surges—and are able to harness their conscious minds to fight effectively under immense pressure. Realistic heroes

crowd. You may want to reconsider this decision. When Durazo works in low-signature or undercover roles, he changes his looks and demeanor so he can fit into many surroundings.

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believe so deeply in what they are doing, whether it's guarding someone or fighting terrorists, that they can override their instinct for self-preservation. Still, Durazo says, the hero's actions must be calculated and strategic because "no one chooses to run into a bullet."

ADAPT AND SURVIVE.

Durazo embodies creativity. Although he is a guru in SEACA (South East Asia Combative Arts), a blend of the Kali and silat martial arts systems, he has also developed his own system that combines ancient techniques with modern weaponry. In practical terms, this means he can flow naturally from firearm to hand-to-hand combat and back to firearm or bladed weapon, a skill that allows him to use whatever tools are at hand to protect himself and others. Don't let your hero be one-dimensional, relying only on a Glock. Instead, unleash your creativity during your fight scenes, and let your hero use whatever weapons are readily available.

HIDE IN PLAIN SIGHT.

When you're creating your hero, it's tempting to give him a distinctive feature so he stands out from the

At 6 feet and 180 pounds, with dark hair and eyes, he disappears into any crowd. It would be difficult to pinpoint his nationality; he can travel everywhere from Latin America to the Middle East and successfully pose as a local. The transformation in his looks is remarkable—bearded and straggly or clean-shaven with short hair—and his chameleon-like ability allows him to gather information without being identified as an outsider.

USE YOUR BRAINS.

When a peaceful resolution to conflict isn't possible, many writers have their hero utilize "pain compliance" to erase the opponent's desire to continue the fight. Why not create a hero who can "erase intent" without getting in a brawl? Durazo explains that mental domination can be a very effective technique. Through acute sensitivity, a skilled combatant is able to sense his opponent's next move before he makes it. For example, if your hero predicts that the antagonist is going to pull out a knife and he's able to thwart the move before it can be executed, it can leave the antagonist feeling helpless and defeated. Using this technique, Durazo has had adversaries break

down and cry before he even inflicted any real physical harm. Essentially, your hero obliterates intent to force the bad guy way out of his comfort zone—and fast.

CONTROL THE CHAOS.

To create tension, writers often have their heroes internalize a deep-seated fear of being attacked from all sides, believing that increasing the number of assailants skyrockets the threat. Instead, why not create a hero who welcomes multiple attackers? Durazo explains, "People don't generally work well together. It actually becomes easier to interlock people and control two bodies. Humans have a pack mentality, and a savvy hero can disorganize it." However, there is one caveat: In the rare circumstance where opponents have trained extensively together, it can be very dangerous to have multiple attackers. Durazo's advice: If your hero is outnumbered, have him attack first and create disorganization.

Durazo has a personal mantra that resonates as a theme for thriller heroes: "Fight chaos in nature and restore balance in the world." To avoid clichés when designing a hero, you need to dig deep into the psyche and background of your character. Perhaps Durazo's insights from the field will assist you in that quest. Just don't name your protagonist Rigo Durazo, as he's one-of-a-kind and impossible to replicate—and your hero should be as well.

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