

**BOOKS**

# A conversation with Cincinnati-native thriller author David Bell

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“I’m always surprised by things in the book,” said USA Today best-selling author David Bell (not the same David Bell who manages the Cincinnati Reds).

That’s true even in tightly plotted thrillers like “Kill All Your Darlings,” the latest novel from Westwood native Bell, which will be released Tuesday, July 6.

“Really the outline is a security blanket, it’s a thing that I can fall back on if I feel like I don’t know where the book is going to go,” Bell said.

And “kill all your darlings” is writing advice from William Faulkner, meaning you may need to edit out your favorite bits.

Those are the lessons Bell imparts to his students. When he’s not churning out novels, the St. Xavier graduate is an associate professor of English at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, where he directs the MFA program in creative writing. He received his Ph.D. in creative writing from the University of Cincinnati. All that time in academia may have been fodder for his latest book.

In the new book, Professor Connor Nye passes off a student’s manuscript as his own after she disappears. Then the student returns, threatening to expose him, while the police wonder why the details in the book are similar to an unsolved murder.

Here are some highlights from Bell’s recent chat with The Enquirer.

**Q: Is writing something you always wanted to do?**

**Bell:** “I didn’t get serious about it until I was in my 20s, but it was always in my head that that was something that I could do. ... Between my junior and senior year of college, I was back home in Cincinnati for the summer, I realized that I had to have a plan. So I started to really think, could writing be a profession? Not just something I was curious about, not just something that I did for fun. Could that actually be something that I did as a job as an actual adult?”

**Q: In “Kill All Your Darlings,” the book that Connor publishes is based on real people and events. Do you draw your stories from your experiences?**

**Bell:** “There is nothing in the book directly based on anything that’s ever happened to me or that I have observed, but I’ve seen a lot of different students cross my path, students who are very talented, students who write really interesting things. So the whole dynamic between Connor and his student, Madeline, a student who is more talented than him, and is more capable of writing the book than he is, that’s something that I think writing professors inevitably come across. ...

“The other part of the story is about the sexual harassment in academia. ... There’s a power imbalance between professors and students. Inevitably some people take advantage of that power imbalance and it’s horrible to students, harmful to the whole university community when that happens. In the wake of the #MeToo movement, we’ve made a lot of strides where we’re trying to be more informed and more aware of this. But obviously, it hasn’t gone away entirely. ... ‘Kill All Your Darlings’ is a book that does entertain – it’s a thriller, it’s meant to entertain, to have people turning the pages – but I think the book can also shine a light on this serious issue in academia.”

**Q: In the book, Connor gets some flak from his colleagues who congratulate him on his novel but also say they don’t read thrillers. What kind of response do you get from colleagues and students about your books?**

**Bell:** “I have certainly had colleagues of mine make snooty comments – ‘Oh, that’s just a mystery,’ ‘That’s a book you read at the beach. That doesn’t mean anything.’ I’ve had just

as many colleagues who are very supportive of my writing, who read the books and buy the books. So it's a mixed bag.

“I think it's unfortunate that it happens in academia ... that this weird dichotomy has developed where we act like there are these two giant categories. There are serious books that serious people read, and then there are fun, light books that you read at the beach ... and those categories don't overlap. But I certainly think it's possible that a book can be serious and entertaining at the same time.”

**Q: You have described your books as about an everyday person who gets thrust into an extreme circumstance. Is that where you start, with a scenario that puts someone into a wild situation?**

**Bell:** “Yeah, that's the way I think of my books. ... They're pretty regular people who have pretty regular, recognizable lives. And something strange, something difficult, something tragic happens to them. They are forced then to figure out how to navigate that. To me, that is something that allows readers to relate to the characters. ... They can look at these people who are pretty regular everyday people, who are thrown a giant curveball and have to figure out to sink or swim through these problems.”

**Q: Might you set a story in Cincinnati?**

**Bell:** “It's interesting that you ask that. So, I haven't lived in Cincinnati for 15 years now. ... We tend to think the place we grew up is not that interesting. It's easy to feel like this is the most middle-of-the-country, mundane place. The longer that I've been away from Cincinnati, the more clearly I can see what a unique place it is. Growing up in a neighborhood like Westwood, I can see what a really interesting place it was, what a unique culture, what unique architecture, the Catholic influence, the German influence. ... The more I think about it, I really ought to set a book in that kind of neighborhood someday. I don't have anything immediately in mind. But I think it's difficult to write about a place when you're there, especially when I grew up there and I was just swimming in that current for so many years. I never saw it quite as clearly or objectively as I do now that I'm older and I've been away for so long.”

## **If you go**

**What:** David Bell in conversation with Hank Phillippi Ryan.

**When:** Tuesday, July 6, 7 p.m.

**Where:** Virtual event; RSVP at [www.josephbeth.com](http://www.josephbeth.com) for Zoom link.