



PROFILE

Shooting for Thrills

THE EXPLOSIVE PAGE-TURNERS BY FAIRFAX'S JOHN GILSTRAP ARE ROOTED IN REALITY—HIS OWN.

BY BUZZ MCCLAIN • PHOTOGRAPHY BY AARON SPICER

TO MAKE IT CLEAR from the beginning, John Gilstrap is not the Special Forces war veteran-turned-hostage extraction specialist Jonathan Grave. “Oh God, no,” Gilstrap says when asked if he sees his fictional creation when he looks in the mirror. As it happens, Gilstrap—59, with graying hair and soft features—is the only person who knows what the hero of the soon-to-be 10 Jonathan Grave thrillers looks like: He has never

described him in detail, save for mentioning that Grave has blue eyes.

In fact, Gilstrap didn't realize he shared initials with Grave until four books in.

But what they do have in common is a fascination with explosives, an expertise with a variety of firearms and a longtime home in Northern Virginia. Grave lives in a marina town on the Potomac called Fisherman's Cove. Gilstrap and his wife, Joy, live in a gorgeously appointed, generously proportioned townhome in Fairfax and in Vienna

before that, which explains why Grave likes to have secret meetings with the director of the FBI in a certain hot dogs-and-beer mainstay called the Maple Inn (a hardly disguised Vienna Inn).

Grave, who runs a company called Security Solutions, employs a 6-foot-5, 250-pound fire-arms and piloting specialist named Boxers who doesn't care for people who call him Lurch, or people at all for that matter. He keeps to himself until compelled to interact with deadly force or to drive or fly something in a hurry, usually someone else's helicopter or executive jet. His other employee, Venice (and please, it's Ven-ee-chay), is beautiful, has an attitude of her own and can find or control just about anything with her laptop at headquarters.

Gilstrap's prose is the taut, fast-moving stuff of the best of action novels: unapologetically masculine, a bit profane (though reader feedback convinced him to stop using F-bombs), punctuated with the violent mayhem the plot promises and usually involving a nefarious high-ranking government official behind it all, which explains the shaded Washington landmarks on the covers.

"The violence has to have some kind of an impact. I hate cartoony violence," Gilstrap says. He describes Grave as "a predictable hero who stays in his own moral and ethical bounds." In other words, he really doesn't want to blow away those young adult kid-nappers in *No Mercy*, but they left him no choice. Not that he dwells on it for long; there's a hostage to extract and more plot to uncover.

The Grave books, the author says, "are about the other characters; I write him from inside him," and indeed the supporting cast members are carefully considered, fully described and given lives well before they encounter Grave, which heightens the inevitable tension. Between the action scenes are believable motives, thoughtful interior monologues and philosophical discourse that doesn't slow down the all-important momentum.

ALL OF IT ADDS up to the highest praise you can give a thriller: It's a real page-turner. And others in the business concur.

"More [so] than many, if not most, novelists, John is respected by not only fans but by publishers and fellow writers," says Jeffery Deaver, the award-winning, best-selling author of 35 novels, including *The Bone Collector* (Denzel Washington played his recurring hero, Lincoln Rhyme, in the movie).

"He's known as a craftsman, not a prima donna, of which there are more than a few in the business," he says. "He keeps his head down and produces a solid, fast-paced thriller seemingly effortlessly ... and when that's finished, he does it all over again."

As evidence, Gilstrap finds out this month if he's won the 2016 Thriller Award from the International Thriller Writers Association for last year's *Against All Enemies*. It's his third nomination by his peers.

Gilstrap's strong suit is his plotting; there are a lot of knots to untie by the end, and some of the rationale behind what's happened in the front of the book isn't revealed until the end. So it's astounding to hear Gilstrap does not work from outlines, notes or storyboards, just "waypoints to keep the story moving," he says. "I don't have muses or anything like that. My characters are union workers who sit and look at me until I tell them what to do."

Deliciously tangled plots? In *Nathan's Run*, his well-received 1996 debut (and not a Grave novel), a character utters a line that sums up nearly 400 pages of stomach-tightening suspense: "I've got a murderer being held hostage by a kidnapper impersonating a police officer! Where the hell are the good guys?"

"I think [Gilstrap's] greatest strength is the ability to blend breathtaking action with deep emotion regarding the characters," Deaver says. "All too often thriller writers are in love with plot but forget that the best twists and turns are useless without people we care about. John makes sure that we do care."

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“Car chases are only one way to get readers to turn pages; characters’ emotional conflict drives us forward as well, and nobody portrays that better than John.”



▲ His full-time day job was a safety engineer; his night-time job was a volunteer firefighter. But in his bit of spare time, John Gilstrap took pen to paper and is now a best-selling thriller author and screenwriter who calls Dino De Laurentiis (who died in 2010) and Thomas Harris friends.

12-year-old boy who has had his early adolescence stolen from him by two dead parents, a conniving uncle, a sadistic mobster, a drunken prison guard, a corrupt warden, a politically ambitious prosecutor and a vengeful sheriff. The “run” of the title is Nathan’s flight after escaping from jail, an ordeal as heartbreaking as it is gut-wrenching, and the world gets to watch it all on the nightly news.

Gilstrap’s stories often involve juveniles in peril. Teens and tweens are never safe in a Gilstrap saga as they could find themselves bound and gagged in basements, whisked away to South American drug factories, caught in the crossfire of brutal shootouts or locked in a cell with an armed assassin.

Gilstrap doesn’t apologize for endangering children. “Those are my comfortable shoes,” he says. “There’s something about the innocence denied. I write it well, and it’s my comfort zone.”

But how did such a treacherous place—in the father of a son, no less—come to be comfortable?

There may be a reason for this fascination with imperiling kids. And it happened when he was 21.

JOHN GILSTRAP MET Joy Blevins on a blind date in 1982; they married in Vienna in 1984. Their son, Chris, is 30 and lives not far from their home in Fairfax.

While he worked during the day as a safety engineer, Gilstrap worked nights as a volunteer fireman, first in Burke and later in Lake Ridge as a lieutenant. So yes, he was setting things on fire by day and putting out fires at night. It was terrific training for writing believable thrillers: “I saw two plane crashes, delivered two babies, saved a few lives, lost a few ...” he says, trailing off.

He eventually got tired of firefighting, he says, after falling through a floor at a burning daycare center.

In the early ’90s he opened his own business, Compliance Services Inc., which trained employees at body shops and the like how not to kill each other with flammable materials. He was also “running fire” at the station at night, and, without even Joy knowing, he was writing a book.

Nathan’s Run was rejected by 27 agents, a daunting number of “thanks, but no thanks” that arrived in many shapes and forms, the worst of

which was a rudely rubber-stamped “No.” Meanwhile, making ends meet for his young family was difficult, to the point of cancelling his *Washington Post* subscription to save a few dollars.

Finally, on Feb. 23, 1995, just after that subscription was cancelled, he got the phone call every beginning author dreams of, the one from the eager agent who says she wants to represent your book and, oh by the way, she also represents Frank McCourt, Jane Smiley, Sue Grafton and a stable full of other contemporary best-sellers.

About a week later the agent landed him an offer from the mighty Harper Collins publishing group, a six-figure deal that was about five figures higher than he was expecting. Six figures! For a debut novel!

The agent turned it down.

“I must have gasped because she laughed,” Gilstrap says. “What I didn’t know was she turned that one down because she had a bigger offer. The whole arc of horror-to-happiness probably didn’t last more than 30 seconds.” Talk about thrills!

Nathan’s Run was a hit that sold in 23 international editions and became a vaunted *Reader’s Digest* Condensed Books version (Gilstrap grew up reading those, and now he got to go to the New York authors’ party for them), and Gilstrap suddenly had an additional agent, one who represented his work to film studios, and this time the bidding among seven anxious studios was done on a midnight deadline that had Gilstrap staring at the phone for several hours.

Just before midnight a deal was struck: The book was successfully optioned, and a screenplay was created by a pair of writers who tried to make *Nathan’s Run* into something other than what it was. The check from the studio cleared, but it was obvious the movie was not going to be produced without a different screenplay. So Gilstrap, who had never written a screenplay, offered to take a crack. The agent said he had a week.

That rushed, first-time screenplay didn’t fly either (*Nathan’s Run* would still be a terrific

movie), but it gave Gilstrap a valid and valuable screenwriting sample that caught the eye of—you can’t make this up—Dino De Laurentiis. De Laurentiis is the Italian film producer of 172 movies, including *Dune*, *Army of Darkness* and *Blue Velvet*; he hired Gilstrap to write the screenplays for *Word of Honor* and—no, really?—*Red Dragon*, the first Hannibal Lecter book by Thomas Harris.

Due to Hollywood vagaries, his name is on neither, but his career was set. He became a full-time writer after selling the second book. That was in 1996.

Nowadays Gilstrap gets up at “the crack of 9” in the morning, he jokes, ambles to the Starbucks a few miles away, confers with the locals over coffee and ambles home. He’s at the upstairs study at his desk, overseen by an enlarged *Reader’s Digest* Condensed portrait of Nathan, doing email and the like and after lunch begins rewriting yesterday’s material and composing today’s new material from 1 or so until 4 or 4:30. “Then

I call it a day,” he says.

Meanwhile Joy is in her upstairs office managing her company, Personal Business Matters LLC, which helps seniors with their finances.

Joy admits her blue-collar background in the Rose Hill section of Alexandria is a far cry from where she is now and where she’s been with this accidental wordsmith. Having coffee with Thomas Harris (*Silence of the Lambs*) in Capri, helping De Laurentiis celebrate his 80th birthday and calling him by his first name—who could have imagined?

But as fate would have it, she met a guy on a blind date who would take her around the world for epic action and adventure.

Pretty cool stuff, and—wait, is that a gun?

“What I didn’t know was she turned that one down because she had a bigger offer. The whole arc of horror to happiness probably didn’t last more than 50 seconds.”

IT’S A FRIDAY AFTERNOON at 340 Defense, a shooting range and firearms training facility just over the Virginia line at Berryville, into West Virginia. It’s basically an ancient 100-acre farm turned into a private range. Gilstrap has been a member for eight years, and while others you know like to bowl or ballroom dance,

Gilstrap could, and does, stand for hours firing off rounds into paper targets with his small assortment of weapons.

Today it's the .40 caliber Glock 23, the .380 caliber Glock 42 and his new baby, his birthday present, a .223 caliber AR-15 Bushmaster carbine, the familiar weapon from movies and headlines; although it's an assault weapon, his is not fitted for continuous firing.

Gilstrap and the other shooters at the range this afternoon wear the mandatory ear and eye protection (if you don't know where to stand, it's very easy to get a casing ejected into your face) as they fire into targets on wooden stands about 30 feet away. A large mound of weedy dirt is the backstop, and that's all they need to while away the afternoon.

To the untrained observer, Gilstrap seems a competent enough shooter, taking out plenty of paper bull's-eyes over the course of two hours, but where he excels, as do the others at the range, is in safety measures and the lack of braggadocio. Bowlers show more emotion nailing spares. Shooting's just shooting, and he focuses on proper technique, takes careful aim and fires the weapons in an effort to be as precise as he is with his prose.

"I could do this all day," he says as he packs up. "This does for me what golf does for others

but without the frustration."

And once home, he spreads his Glocks on a pad on the deck table, breaks down the weapons and gives them a considered cleaning.

Gilstrap enjoys going to the big

gun shows, such as the one in Las Vegas where the manufacturers are showing off the newest things Grave needs in his arsenal. In the spring he went to what he called a "Jonathan Grave camp" in the Southwest to learn better how to handle and describe weapons.

He and Joy also attend industry events for the genre writers, such as Bouchercon: The World of

Mystery Convention and ThrillerFest, where he rubs elbow patches with the likes of other genre best-sellers Deaver, Harlan Coben, Lee Child and Nelson DeMille. "There are not a lot of jerks in the writing business," Gilstrap says. "It's a very, very giving group."

Gilstrap's next book is this summer's *Friendly Fire*, and in July there will be a launch party at the Vienna Inn of all places, followed by another at Middleburg Common Grounds, and that's it. He's loyal to both places, the way John Grisham is loyal to the first bookstores that carried his first novel.

Gilstrap doesn't do the big book tours he used to because he has found "word-of-mouth sells books." He tries his best to get the word into mouths, but "the only control I have over my career is to write my next book."

ON THE LAST DAY OF summer camp at Congressional School in Falls Church, a young boy runs into the street and is hit by a car. The first responder is a 21-year-old camp counselor who had been counting the long minutes until the end of the term. But there is a new urgency as he runs into the street to aid the accident victim.

"What I remember most vividly about the accident scene was the angle of the femur fracture, essentially a right angle from his body, and [the boy's] pallor and unresponsiveness," Gilstrap says. "My first thought was that he was dead, but then he moaned."

Gilstrap might have moaned too, out of sheer helplessness. "I was horrified," he says. He had no idea how to comfort the boy or how to keep him alive.

"I really didn't like that feeling," he says. To assure he would never be helpless in that situation again, Gilstrap enrolled the next month in an emergency medical technician course at Northern Virginia Community College. And that led to the careers as an EMT and later as a fireman.

The young boy was in peril but survived. Still, a childhood was brutally, ruthlessly interrupted before Gilstrap's eyes, but he was at a loss as to how to rescue him.

And that, as it happens, is exactly what Jonathan Grave does. 🐾

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