Lee Child lost his job, gained a bestselling series, and crafted a classic character so strong, he never gets old—even 17 books and one movie later.

BY ZACHARY PETIT
A man named Jim Grant had just been canned. The Coventry, U.K., native had been working at the once-revered Granada Television channel in England for close to 20 years. But in 1995, he was let go. He was 39. “Corporate restructuring.”

Fortunately, like a certain soon-to-debut protagonist, Jack Reacher, Grant is resourceful. Smart as hell. And he can roll with a punch.

He’d write a thriller.

“It was just a question of showbiz—entertainment was all I knew,” he says. “It seemed like writing this kind of book was the way to go.”

He gave it a shot.

And in the most unexpected ways, the foundation of his literary career began to take shape. At the supermarket, an old woman asked Grant to reach something on a high shelf for her. He obliged. His wife joked that if his novel-in-progress didn’t pan out, he could take up a career as a reacher.

Jack Reacher was born.

Later, Grant was on a train with a Texan who was chatting with him about his French Renault 5, branded in the U.S. as Le Car—which the man pronounced “Lee Car.”

Grant and his wife playfully began appending a “lee” to everything—including their new daughter: Lee Child.

A bestselling penname was born.

And it didn’t take long for Child’s leap of faith to pay off. He signed with the first agent he queried and the first publisher they pitched it to, and Killing Floor debuted in 1997.

The book introduced Child’s master creation—ex-military police major Jack Reacher, a nomadic vigilante who travels the country with little more than a toothbrush, encountering trouble and doing what’s right to squelch it (often with a headbutt). Killing Floor won a bevy of awards and launched a bestselling series that to date has sold some 60 million copies in 95 countries. The 17th installment, A Wanted Man, was released in September, and a Hollywood production titled Jack Reacher (based on the ninth novel in the series, One Shot) and starring Tom Cruise hits theaters in December (though many Child fans have been vocal about doubts that the short-statured star can fill the 6’5” Reacher’s shoes).

Child’s readers love him not only for his protagonist, but for his signature style, in which he utilizes simple, almost Hemingway-esque sentences and deft pacing to craft taut narratives. Fellow writers agree—in 2009, he was appointed president of the Mystery Writers of America.

These days, Child maintains homes in New York and France. In person, he exudes a quiet Zen. Despite residing partly in the U.S., he remains quintessentially British—funny, wise and dry, a slight smile often playing on his lips.

Here, he reveals why coming late to a writing career can be a great thing, why he’s sticking with Reacher for the long haul, what film adaptations can (and can’t) do, and much more.

You launched your fiction career after being fired from your longtime TV job. What do you think readers can learn from your story about the power of rebounding?

I think they can learn a lot. It’s a terrible feeling. We’re sort of trained or accustomed to thinking it’s a disaster—and it is, you know, it’s a major disruption. … You’ve got to look on the positive side. I was about to turn 40, and that’s halfway through your working life, basically: You’ve been to college, you’re going to work till you’re in your 60s, so you’re exactly halfway through. That’s not a bad time to start something else. It’s not too late. You’ve built up 20 years of work habits, skills, all that kind of thing. You’re not the jerk that you were when you were 22. It’s good in some ways, especially for writing. I honestly believe that writing is possibly the only thing that not only can you, but you should do it later. I think writing fiction especially is something that is unnatural when you’re young, because you haven’t absorbed enough, you haven’t seen enough, you haven’t developed your own mental space or your thoughts and all that kind of thing.

Where did Reacher come from, and how did he translate from your mind to the page?

I’d learned in television that there’s one intractable rule, really, which is that you cannot design a success. Success is always accidental, and the only way to really make a second-rate product is to sit down and think about what you’re going to do. You think, I’ve got to do this; you’ve got to do that; this is popular; that’s popular; women like this;
Lee Child

“Writing overall is in such a state of flux at the moment; [but] all that matters is coming up with a great original story.”

Do you ever foresee stepping outside of the Reacher universe?
I doubt it very much. You know, whereas, yes, absolutely this is a creative business, and the art and the craft and so on are absolutely paramount, it’s still a business. And you’ve got to be at least a little bit sane about your relationship with the marketplace. It’s evident that people like Lee Child the author and Jack Reacher the character. But I think it would be very misguided and arrogant to say, “People like Lee Child the writer, so they’ll like whatever I give them.” That’s an unproven assumption, and there’s no reason to believe that. What they want is Reacher.

It’s obvious that you still have a genuine interest in the character. The books don’t seem stale.
Yeah, because he’s a very timeless character, and he’s a very capacious character inasmuch as I leave him undescribed a lot of the time, I leave him unexplained, and so he can do pretty much what he wants. Also, [every book is set] in a different place. That was one strategic decision I took at the beginning, which was that it would not be employment-based, and it would not be location-based, because at the time everything else was. Everything. …

I’m about to start Book 18. Well, if he’d been a cop in New Orleans or something like that, I would just be groaning and dreading it. Where can you go with that 18 times? But with Reacher, the next story is going to be something absolutely different than I’ve ever done before.

Do you think that’s what makes him resonate so much?
Absolutely. There’s no question about that. Here’s the mysterious stranger, the knight errant, the noble loner, that has been invented or exploited or loved over and over and over again. I suppose if you really analyzed it academically, you’d probably figure [he pops up in] 50-year intervals, stretching back to Homer, probably, and the ancient Greeks. … So here’s something that’s being constantly desired by the audience.

Do you think that’s what makes him resonate so much?
We talk a lot about good writing advice. What’s the worst writing advice you commonly hear?
The worst is probably Write what you know. Especially in this market. In the thriller genre, for instance, nobody knows anything that’s worth putting in. There are three people in the world who have actually lived this stuff. And so it’s not about what you know. [Write] what you feel is really excellent advice. Because if you substitute Write what you feel, then you can expand that into—if you’re a parent, for instance, especially if you’re a mother, I bet you’ve had an episode where for five seconds you lost your kid at the mall. You turn around, your kid is suddenly not there, and for five seconds your heart is in your mouth and you turn the other way, and there he is. So you’ve gotta remember the feel of those five seconds—that utter panic and disorientation. And then you blow that up: It’s not five seconds, it’s five days—you kid has been kidnapped, your kid is being held by a monster. You use what you feel and expand it, right up as far as you can, and that way you get a sort of authenticity.

You’ve said that a book is like a snapshot of who the writer was when they wrote it. I love that.
I think it is. And now that I know the process better and I know people—you know, a lot of writers are now my friends—I read their books as partly to read a great new book, but it’s also kind of like getting a letter from a friend. This is basically telling you about what was on their mind last year, and you can really decode that. It’s good fun.

What vices do you need to write?
I think you’ve got to be very nosy. And that sort of gives you an excuse. I love eavesdropping, I love people-watching. It’s terrible—if someone invites you to their house, you say, “Excuse me, I’m just going to go to the bathroom,” but actually you’re not, you’re poking around in the mail on
the kitchen counter, you’re checking the computer. I think you’ve got to be intensely interested in people and things. Vices—I mean, writers are portrayed always as drunkards. I don’t drink at all, hardly at all. I’m not a teetotaler or anything but I’m not much more than a social drinker. I don’t think you necessarily need vices.

I have to ask the question I’m sure you’re sick of—the one about fans objecting to the casting of Tom Cruise as Reacher.

Point 1 is: I’m just unbelievably grateful that anybody has an opinion. If people are reacting one way or the other, I’m thrilled with it, because it means the thing has worked. The series is out there, and people own it, people love it, and they are sufficiently motivated one way or the other—in this case, mostly the other—to vocalize what they feel about it. And that’s a total thrill. If you say to any new writer, “Imagine 15 years from now there will be Facebook pages complaining about what somebody is doing to your character”—you know, God, yeah, you’d give your right arm for that. So I’m totally thrilled about that.

Then Point No. 2 would be, I am—I think all of us, always, we’re in a bubble here, the writer/reader bubble. It’s a very intense bubble. And one of the things I notice when I venture outside of it—suppose I’m on a plane somewhere and you’ve got a chatty person next to you. They say, “What do you do?” And you say, “I’m a writer.” Inevitably, without fail, if it’s a normal member of the public, the next question will be, “Oh, have any of your books been made into a movie?” … For them, a book is a weigh station to becoming a movie. And one about fans objecting to the casting of Tom Cruise as Reacher.

If it’s a normal member of the public, the next question will be, “Oh, have any of your books been made into a movie?” … For them, a book is a weigh station to becoming a movie. The book is a half-finished product, and the end-game is to have it made into a movie. That’s the public perception.

Therefore, Point 3: I’m kind of surprised at the book people. Here’s how I view it, as a metaphor: Here’s me the writer, here’s you the reader, and the book is the thing. The book is the entire subject for the conversation. I’m writing it, you’re reading it, we’re talking about the book. And then, as your career goes along, there begin to be sort of foothills, the valley gets filled up with other stuff, like fame and websites and this and that. I’ve met two babies who are called Jack Reacher. You know: first name Jack, middle name Reacher, surname. They come to signings—the father brings the birth certificate to prove it. So the book is still there, the absolute pinnacle, but the valleys are now getting filled up with these little bits of extraneous matter. And to me the movie is another of those extraneous things in the valley. I’m glad it’s happened, just like I’m glad people have named their kids Jack Reacher. But it’s not the book.