



A conversation with Mark Harril Saunders

author of *Ministers of Fire*

What is the genesis of your book?

In the late 1970s, my father was the assistant secretary of state for the Near East and South Asia, including Afghanistan. Our ambassador was killed, and his widow became a good friend of our family. The opening scene of the book was inspired by that episode, my personal connection to it, but I altered it significantly to serve my fictional purpose.

Can you say more about your father's role in government?

Yes, he served in every administration from Eisenhower through Carter, ending up as the Assistant Secretary of State for Near East and South Asian Affairs. He was a principal drafter of the Camp David Accords, which was the closest we've come to Mideast Peace. And he worked very hard to get the American hostages out of Iran. In those 400 days we saw him more on "Nightline" than we did in person.

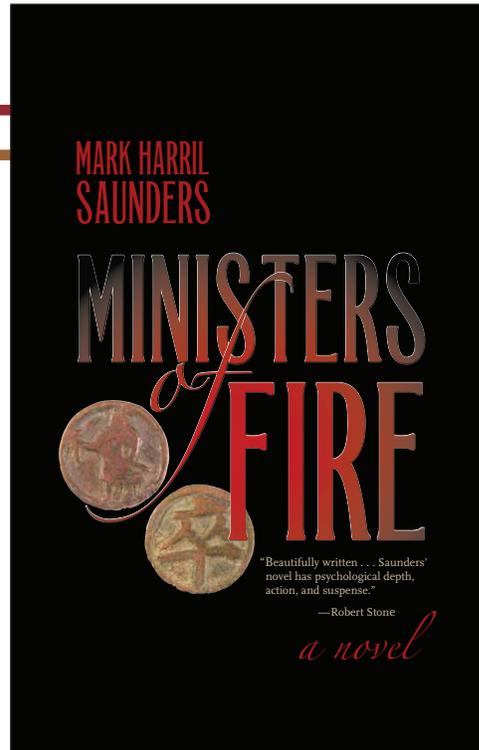
Was he in the CIA?

He did begin his career there, in the last year of his military service.

Did he leave the Agency?

I'll tell you what he said to my wife when she asked him that question when we were first dating. The answer is yes, but if it was no, I'd say yes, too.

Look, I don't want to be cagey about this, mostly out of respect for my father. For the past 30 years he's been well known as a peace negotiator and activist, not as a spook. The work he did on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was very important. If it had continued we might not have had 9/11 at all. In the book I write that in the last months of the 70s, the world we know was made, and he was very involved with the three most important pieces of that—Camp David, the hostage crisis, and the Russian invasion of Afghanistan. Having said all that, there's not a character in



the book that does anything that my father did, or who resembles him much.

Has he read it?

Yes, he read the manuscript. He liked it and said he had to rush through the last 60 pages to find out what happened, which made me feel good. There were things he saw in the story that I must have absorbed from him and forgotten, and I take that as a good sign.

How long did it take you to write *Ministers of Fire*?

I'm almost embarrassed to say. There are seeds of this novel that I wrote as long ago as 1993. Those early versions developed some of the characters, but the plot wasn't tight. A very wise and good writer finally told me, almost off-handedly, you've got two books here. I wasn't ready to listen and I put it away for a while, did other things.

What made you take it up again?

In some ways, it was 9/11.

So *Ministers of Fire* became a 9/11 novel?

Yes and no. This is going to sound presumptuous but the concept of the novel in some ways anticipated the attacks. I mean I was writing about Afghanistan in the early 90s when I was living in New York. My wife was working on Wall Street when Ramzi Yousef bombed the Trade Towers in '93. I even published a little kernel of this book back then in one of the first online magazines.

Why set the novel specifically in the spring of 2002?

It's a time that's hard to fix on now, but 9/11 was still fresh, and

we hadn't gone into Iraq yet, which muddled everything. It's a very clear window to try to bring back to life.

What about the Chinese government? How do you feel about what's happened there?

I first went to China a little over twenty years ago, right after Tiananmen Square, which had been a very traumatic event for me. To my mind, there is something terribly insidious about the blending of capitalism and communism that has been brought about by Deng's reforms. Essentially the Chinese government has tried to pay off its citizens for their lack of individual freedoms. As if, you can't think or say or Google what you want, but here, you can have a Buick. I'm not sure the Chinese people are going to put up with it for much longer, especially if the economy stops growing as fast.

Ministers of Fire does humanize several Chinese characters.

I hope so. It was the hardest thing to do, and yet at one point my editor told me that the Chinese characters were more rounded than the American ones. Often as a writer I find that the things you think you're worst at, end up being the best parts.

How did the book jump from Afghanistan to China? Is it really true that the Chinese and American intelligence services worked together to arm the mujahedin?

Yes, absolutely, but I don't think that many people are aware of it. In the 1970s the People's Republic and the U.S. had a common enemy, the Soviet Union. And of course Afghanistan is very close to Xinjiang, China's semi-autonomous Muslim region.

Was the invasion of Afghanistan the Soviet Union's Vietnam?

In some ways, yes. The war was unpopular at home, Soviet troops were fighting a determined guerilla enemy on its home turf, terrain for which their army wasn't really built. It was a helicopter war. Many of the Soviet soldiers, including a few I've met, were high all the time. Some people think it contributed to the fall of the USSR. Of course the Russians had been there before, fighting and scheming against the British in the nineteenth century.

Did that history draw you to this material as a novelist?

I love good narrative history, and some historical fiction. In the same way that J. G. Farrell wrote about 19th century Indian history in order to explain post-imperial Britain, I'm trying to figure out contemporary America, its place in the world, by starting with the blowback from the CIA arming the mujahedin, which was the last great proxy battle of the Cold War. Like a lot of people I'm drawn to spy stories, to Graham Greene and leCarré, but I find myself wanting to know more about the characters. It's my obsession as a novelist. There's a line in one of leCarré's books about his spymaster having a pretty wife and two kids that adore him, but you never get to see him at home. Growing up in Northern Virginia in the 70s, a lot of my friends had fathers who

did that kind of work, and none of us were all that well adjusted, if you know what I mean.

You've mentioned Farrell. Do you see other writers reflected in your work?

Writers I admire and ones I read a lot aren't necessarily reflected in the book, like John Banville or Roberto Bolano. I love Banville's sentences, which can be as good as anything in Nabokov, and Bolano's energy and belief in literature, which is like nothing else. Tolstoy and Philip Roth aren't necessarily stylists but they are very clear about how people are, which is something I'd like to do better. Certainly Robert Stone is a great influence. When I first read Denis Johnson's *Tree of Smoke*, I thought, holy shit, the great Vietnam novel shows up out of nowhere after all these years. I love how he keeps pulling the rug out from under reality in that book.

You have an MFA. Much has been written about the solipsistic fiction that comes out of MFA programs, the need to write big social novels instead, so-called "hysterical realism." Is your book a reaction to that charge?

Not really. You write what you have to write. Tom Wolfe (who was in graduate school with my father, but that's another story) was the first to argue that American writers should do novels like Zola or Dreiser, naturalism. More recently, Jonathan Franzen has taken up the call. The danger, in my view, is that the characters end up rather flat. I try to take on some big themes but I hope that the characters live, that they are sympathetic in the broadest sense of the word. If they frustrate you, then you know something something's working. No one would mistake my book for *Sister Carrie* or *Freedom*.

What about MFA programs?

I have an MFA from the University of Virginia, a fellowship that gave me two years to be a writer first and foremost, to not have to apologize for it or treat it like a hobby. It was a great luxury to take that time off from my publishing career and I remain grateful for it. My only issue with workshops is that it was very difficult to write a novel in that context.

What's next for you? Do you have another novel underway?

Two, actually. On the advice of my agent and my wife, I'm going to finish the shorter one first.

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