

THE BESTSELLER

By Patrick Kendrick

Todd Taylor placed the headphones onto his ears – like the conductors on the Frankenstein creature’s electrodes – that would pound the heavy metal music into his brain and help him transform into the monster he would have to become.

Actually, he was nervous, fretting over that afternoon’s meeting (confrontation) with convicted serial killer, Frank Brockman. So, he ran to relax; his iPod blasting, ripping strains of Linkin Park into his head, his legs pumping in time with the music.

His senses were particularly acute that day. As he passed homes where occupants went about their daily routines, he could smell the sweet, hot scent of clothes dryers as they vented their fabric-softener scent into his path. He could almost taste the bacon frying in one house. A hundred yards away, he could discern the slight tea-stained crotch in a girl’s underpants as her mother hung the laundry out on the clothesline.

Moving through this neighborhood like a cheetah, going all out. It was fantastic to be free! Taylor tried to savor every last moment. After the afternoon’s activities, after killing Brockman, he would lose that freedom. For awhile at least.

It had been his agent’s idea from the beginning. Not killing Brockman, of course; that had only been hinted at lately, when Hirsh Volat could not find a publisher for the Brockman biography and then only in a joking manner. But, it was Volat who’d suggested to Todd Taylor that writing a “fact-based book” on Brockman could be their “ticket” to the big time in the first place.

“Dey’re makin’ dese movies o’da week, allo’time now,” Volat assured Taylor, in his thick Jersey accent. “Mini-series. Everything. And the books sell like hotcakes. I’ve sold three of ‘em dis year alone. For hacks, no less. Look, I know you got talent, you know you got talent, but da publishers don’t care diddly about talent. They want a hook. A grabber. And dese true-

moida stories are grabbers. People eat'em up! Write me one, an' I sell it for ya."

After twenty years, and failing to get even one of his six novels published, Taylor no longer thought of himself in the romantic context of struggling young writer. Middle-aged loser was more like it. Being, among other things over the years, a waiter (of course), an airport baggage handler, and the noblest of all, a projectionist at a twenty-four hour adult movie theater, did not boost Taylor's ego nor his image as a writer. Having an agent like Hirsh Volat spoon-feeding him tabloid headlines for book ideas didn't help either.

Still, the true-crime book idea caught on with him. There did seem to be an enormous, albeit abnormal, public interest in serial killers. Taylor knew, despite what people will admit, everyone really loves to read about the gore, and if they are sex-related and/or mutilation type murders, as was Brockman's, so much the better.

Initially, Taylor thought he'd throw together a non-fiction pulp crime book. Piece together the stories from various magazines and newspapers who followed the case, change the wording around a bit; two-hundred and fifty or so pages with a few grainy black and white pictures of the "grizzly" murder scenes, and bingo, you've got a marketable product. Put on a jacket design with an embossed cover, lots of red, or a menacing silver dagger, and a title with the word "Blood" in it somewhere and you might even have a bestseller. It's what Hirsh Volat wanted, what he could sell. He'd seen it done with Christopher Wilder, a killer from Florida, Ted Bundy, another killer from Florida, and Henry Lucas, still another killer who ended up in Florida. What was it with Florida anyway? Lo and behold, Brockman was from Florida too. In fact, several of the almost two dozen murders that had been attributed to Brockman were right in Taylor's home town, that being Boca Raton, a city made distinct by its unusual Spanish name, which meant "mouth of the rat," and the fact that it had more shopping malls per square mile

than any other city in the world.

But the pulp book idea, eventually, had not set well with Taylor. The three to four months he'd originally thought it would take to complete the entire manuscript had stretched into a year, then two. He'd become obsessed with the story, enough so that he'd ventured away from the newspaper clippings, many of which were from his own collection that he'd compiled years earlier while the murders were still current, before he'd known he'd one day write a book about the killer. These clippings were to be the bulk of the book but he'd actually put them away and delved into the exhaustive research it takes to do a credible job on such a subject. In a nutshell, and to his own surprise, he'd gotten serious about it.

Taylor had written letters to policemen who'd worked the Brockman case, to families of the victims and to judges, psychiatrists and just about anyone who'd had anything to do with Brockman. He'd arranged interviews, which he would tape and upon returning to his "study," a dimly lit corner in the living room of his one bedroom apartment, painstakingly transpose the audio tape to printed page.

The work was endless. Taylor's social life was non-existent. It had never been remarkable before and now it was disastrous. Women were initially turned on by the fact that Taylor was a writer. But after a few cocktails, the universal truth serum, the relationship would take a decidedly icy turn when the women found out Taylor never had a book published -- a few articles in a now defunct alternative newspaper impressed no one -- and now he was writing about those terrible murders that had taken place years ago. "What kind of man would be interested in that old, horrible story anyway?" their mascara-laden eyes would ask. Then, they'd find some reason to excuse themselves and Taylor would be left alone at the bar, their cigarettes still smoldering in the ashtray, as was the anger in Taylor's soul.

Bitches! Who needs them anyway? These were just the kind of women Brockman would've stalked as they approached their cars in the poorly-lit parking lots of shopping malls. Taylor could visualize the scene clearly. In fact, he'd become excited thinking about it, his breath almost panting, sweat forming on his brow as he pictured the killer grabbing his victim from behind and shoving her into the car. Once inside, he'd force them to drive to an isolated area, have his way with them, then bludgeon them to death with his beefy fists. After they were dead he'd dismember their bodies and scatter the parts in various drainage ditches throughout Palm Beach County, as well as the adjacent Broward, Dade and Martin Counties.

Taylor knew, too, that for each of the victims, the killer would keep a memento. An earring. A bracelet. A tooth. It was these keepsakes that had led to Brockman's conviction and that had led to his nickname, "The Packrat Killer." Among the damaging evidence that had been confiscated from Brockman's motor home were dozens of inexplicable items: jewelry, handcuffs, ropes, and other bondage-type devices, women's stockings and underwear, pornographic magazines that featured sado-masochistic scenes, a blood-smearred machete and several human teeth. Although the teeth and jewelry were never positively linked to any of the victims, Brockman was still found unanimously guilty by the all female jury. The evidence had all been circumstantial, that is, no one could place Brockman at any of the murder scenes. Not a fingerprint. ("He wore gloves!" the prosecutor exclaimed.) Not a single strand of Brockman's hair. ("Ski mask pulled over his head!") But one forensic dentist testified that some of the teeth in Brockman's possession may have matched those of Linda Farmer, one of the victims, and another forensic expert said the blood on the machete was definitely type "O" which could have corresponded with that of several of the victims.

The defense attorney had argued that Brockman admitted using the machete in a drunken

brawl with several migrant farm workers outside a convenience store in Okeechobee, an agricultural city in western Palm Beach County. Brockman testified he had “clipped a few of the wetback’s wings” but he had never “kilt” anyone.

The jury didn’t buy it. The migrant workers, if they’d existed at all, could not be found and all of Brockman’s alibis were consistently weak. The women’s articles, the jewelry and underwear and such, were his former wives’ Brockman testified. But all three of his former wives testified, none of them claimed ownership to any of the items, and all of them swore on the stand that he’d beat them, severely. He also tied and handcuffed them and held knives to their throats for some sort of demented personal gratification. They were lucky to have escaped with their lives. The jury sympathized with them.

The jury also sympathized with Jonathan Sears, the widower of Barbara Sears, victim Number 16, whose tearful testimony was one of the most damaging. The women of the jury all listened intently as this handsome, blue-eyed, blonde-haired, probably compassionate and most assuredly single, widower identified what he believed was the ring he’d given his wife for their first anniversary. The jury wept along with Mr. Sears as he held the ring in his clenched fist and weeping, cried out, “They never even found her teeth!”

The jury deliberated for an unheard of short time, seventy minutes, and Brockman received the death penalty.

So, Taylor had put his time in on the book. When finished, it was truly a decent piece of work. Todd Taylor signed his name with a proud flourish on the obligatory query letter that accompanied the completed manuscript which he sent to Hirsh Volat. Then, he waited. And waited. And . . . nothing.

Taylor called his elusive agent at least three times a week, consumed in a white-hot rage.

Why hadn't he sold it? Hirsh Volat, who'd never really liked the book, citing it was too "artsy-fartsy," and "ya ain't no Truman Capote, ya know," also told Taylor, "the market ain't right, right now." Taylor argued that he thought these books sold all the time. Christ! The grocery store bookshelves were straining under the weight of such books. And *Blood of The Rat* was a prime example of these types of stories.

Finally, after almost another year, Volat told Taylor the book had three problems. One: too much time had passed since the murders and there simply wasn't much interest in another serial murderer from Florida. The subject had been overdone. Two: after three rewrites, the book was still written in a style that was "too personal." "You can tell about da moidas, but you can't go off on a tangent about the color of the sunset on a certain day. Da story loses its credibility. It ain't like you were actually dere, ya know." Three: most importantly, Taylor never did a face to face interview with the killer. That was the biggest problem. Readers want to know that the writer not only had the tenacity to accurately report such an atrocity, but he also had to have the "*cahones*", as Volat would say," to converse with the bloodthirsty killer. Wrench the truth, the whole truth and nothing but, from the misbegotten creature.

It wasn't like Taylor hadn't tried. But it was not that easy. The Florida State Prison system had a rule that no book writers would be allowed to interview a convicted killer without first agreeing to sign over a significant percentage of the profits from the book to the surviving families of the victims. While Taylor had no problem with that, Hirsh Volat assured him he could never find a publisher willing to sign him with a chunk of the profits already contracted out to several dozen people.

There was a way around the problem though. If Taylor got into the prison as a writer doing a story for a newspaper, or magazine, then he wouldn't have to sign over anything. So,

Taylor got a local newspaper interested enough in a feature story for an ongoing series about local crime stories over the past decade. Brockman's story may not have had much national appeal but locally it was still, even years later, a hot subject for the media, as well as great barbershop gossip. The newspaper people, convinced by a peek at Taylor's research, gladly procured for him some press credentials that would enable him to enter Florida State Prison.

While Taylor waited for the final okay from prison officials, an idea, outrageous but so crystalline perfect, occurred to him: *What if he killed Brockman?*

Would not such a move guarantee media exposure? Would not such exposure guarantee him an audience for his book? Would not such an audience guarantee him a publishing contract? Yes. Yes. Yes!

The final chapter could then tell of Taylor's own life. How he struggled for years as a little known writer. How he became obsessed with Brockman's story. How he came to empathize with the families of the victims. How he grieved for them. How he was left with no choice but to avenge the deaths of the innocent women. How he was left with no choice but to end the life of this most heinous killer.

Book buyers the world over would go crazy for it! *Inside Edition* would want an interview. Hell, *60 Minutes* would want one! It was a guaranteed bestseller.

And what would happen to him for killing a convicted killer who was already on death row? Taylor believed very little. He would have a trial but what jury would convict him for saving the state the expense of feeding and sheltering Brockman another year, maybe two, or three, or more? He could get a psychiatrist, paid for by his elite defense attorney, paid for by his huge publishing house, to testify that Taylor was under extreme duress, emotionally traumatized by reliving Brockman's atrocities. Maybe he would get a year, or two, in a state mental hospital.

If so, Taylor could write about that in his follow up sequel to the bestseller.

It was the perfect plan!

Todd Taylor finished his run, showered, and put on a new suit he'd purchased for the occasion. He put a collapsible traveler's toothbrush and a small tube of toothpaste in his top pocket, his briefcase in his car and drove the six hours from Boca Raton to Starke, Florida.

The prison was a gloomy structure situated behind several rows of fences, about twenty feet high and crowned with severe-looking concertina wire. There were no screens on the windows and Taylor could just make out the faces of the prisoners, hundreds of them, peering through the bars, ghastly pale, like ghosts that needed a shave.

Inside, the walls were the mustard-brown color of soiled diapers. The smell was that of disinfectant. The sound made by the opening of each set of metal-barred doors was deafening. Taylor would lean close to each speaker outside each set of doors and announce who he was; a pause, then an electrifying buzz and the locking mechanisms would clang open. After six of these doors, Taylor began to feel a tinge of claustrophobia. He hoped he wouldn't have to stay in this facility when his deed was done.

An overweight guard stood at the final opening into the prison proper, his bulbous paunch threatening to pop the buttons off his gray polyester uniform shirt. He checked Taylor's identification; the press credentials seemed to impress him. He was sorry he had to give Taylor a light frisking and look inside the briefcase. Taylor was hesitant to open the case at first but realized there was nothing that could be construed as a weapon by anyone other than himself, so he popped it open with a smile. The briefcase held several yellow legal pads, a pack of cigarettes

with matches, a small tape recorder with extra cassettes, and several number two pencils, their lead tips sharpened to spear points. The guard pinned a pass to Taylor's suit coat and passed him onto another guard, this one with a bad complexion, who seemed to come out of nowhere. The acne-faced guard led him to a small, air-conditioned room with no windows, a table and two chairs and told him to wait there. Taylor placed his briefcase on the table and laid out the tape recorder, the legal pads, the cigarettes, and the sharpened pencils.

Taylor then tried to distract himself by reading the obscenities carved into the table with multi-colored ball point pens. He did not hear Brockman come into the room until he closed the door behind him.

"Mr. Taylor, I'm Frank Brockman," he said, and extended both hands as they were still shackled together, as were his ankles. Taylor shook his hands, noticing the acne-faced guard looking through the small window in the door. Taylor nodded to the guard signaling it would be okay to leave them alone and the acne face moved away from the window.

Taylor started to say, "Nice to meet you," but changed it to, "Thank you for your time today."

Brockman mumbled something about what else did he have to do. Both men sat down. Brockman asked for a cigarette, Taylor gave him one and lit it.

The prisoner was not as big as Taylor had imagined he would be, and so, not as ominous. His clothes were tattered, right down to his shoes, of which his big toes stuck out obscenely through holes worn in the canvas. Brockman noticed Taylor's scrutiny and apologized for his appearance. "They told me you were coming up," he said, "but they didn't say when." He flicked his cigarette ashes onto the floor.

Taylor explained he was doing a piece for the local paper down in Boca, a follow-up

story sort of, to see what prison was like, specifically what death row was like, etcetera. Brockman said he was familiar with the paper, they'd raked him over the coals during his trial but he wouldn't hold it against Taylor. Maybe some renewed interest in his case might help with an appeal. "So, go ahead and ask a question. Anything."

Taylor placed a cassette into the recorder and began walking around the room, tapping the binding of one of the legal pads, nervously, with the edge of a pencil. Brockman was a good conversationalist. One question would lead him into a lengthy dissertation that would easily invoke another question, then another. He liked to talk, probably didn't get much of a chance sitting on death row. His story hadn't changed much since it was front page news. Taylor, after spending two years delving into the case quickly grew weary of the conversation and was eager to get on with his true purpose for being there. In fact, the more Brockman talked, the more Taylor wanted to kill him.

Brockman still maintained he didn't know any of the women who were murdered. All of the items found in his trailer had been his wives', girlfriends', etcetera, etcetera. The teeth were his and his sister's from when they were children, saved for the tooth fairy that never did visit. His attorney abandoned him immediately after the trial. One attorney he hired botched his appeal. And so on. Taylor grew more irritated.

Brockman had grown comfortable with Taylor's company and was at ease as Taylor sat down on the edge of the table, right next to him and handed him another cigarette. The benevolent interviewer and the misunderstood prisoner.

"One last question, Mr. Brockman," said Taylor, carefully cupping the pencil's erasure end into the palm of his hand and aligning the length of the wood with his fingers. The lead point stuck out past his fingertips like the tip of a miniature but deadly missile.

“Did you kill those girls?”

Brockman stared ahead as Taylor lit his cigarette. “No sir, I did not. I’m an innocent man,” he said, lifting his chin and moving his face away from the interviewer so as not to blow the plume of smoke into Taylor’s face.

“Isn’t that what they all say?” said Taylor. Then he jammed the pencil into the side of Brockman’s head. Into the temporal region. Into his brain.

Brockman went rigid for an instant, then his head slumped forward, almost peacefully. A small trickle of blood escaped his left nostril. As his last breath left his body, he exhaled the remainder of the smoke from the cigarette Taylor had given him.

Todd Taylor went to the door and tapped on the window. “Guard,” he said. “Please open up. We’ve had some trouble in here.”

It was two months later and Taylor was not enjoying his stay in Chattahoochee, Florida, where he’d been placed in the State Mental Hospital pending a full psychiatric evaluation and a new investigation into the case. He would tolerate it though. Things had been going according to plan for the first few weeks. In a preconceived plan to act out his emotional distress, Taylor had not spoken a word. Already he’d heard hushed whispers of psychiatric diagnoses he’d never even heard of.

In addition to that success, he’d received an offer from some obscure, tiny publishing house. A pitiful offer of five thousand dollars, plus six percent of paperback sales. Nothing like the half-million bucks he’d envisioned on a hardback sale but it beat waiting tables or splicing broken fuck-films at the all night porno theater.

A huge publisher had contacted him to say they were interested in his story but he had not heard from them at all since that idiot, a goon by the name of Gerald Simon, walked into the Boca Raton Police Department and confessed to being the real killer. Said he planned to confess before Brockman was put in the chair but now that he was dead he just couldn't sleep until the truth was told. The papers were calling it the "Simon Says Case." For God's sake. It was enough to make Taylor nauseous.

The most remarkable thing was that the police believed him! Now, just about everyday that moronic State Attorney, David Blume, would come visit Todd Taylor and practically taunt him.

"Thought you could get away with premeditated murder, didn't you?" Blume would say. "Well, mister, that's what we have this system for. We try an alleged criminal. We sentence him if he is guilty. He might get the death penalty. But, we exhaust all possibilities, all appeals. That's why they sit on death row for so long. Just in case we made a mistake."

Taylor stared, unblinking, at Blume as he went on.

"But we didn't make the mistake this time, pal. You did. You killed an innocent man." He paused. "Still nothing to say, Taylor?"

"Just this," Taylor said, pronouncing every syllable, every letter, as clearly as possible. "And get it right the first time. Gerald Simon killed no one and I can prove it. In my apartment, in my desk, in the upper left hand drawer, you will find some items of interest. In particular, an emerald ring with the inscription, 'To B.S. from J.S., 1st Anniversary.' If anyone cares to check, you will find that Jonathan Sears is far-sighted and did not have his glasses on the day he identified his wife's ring in court."

He stopped for a moment to enjoy the stupefied look on Blume's face, then continued.

“You might also like the necklace. It’s made from Mrs. Sear’s teeth.”

Then, Todd Taylor turned around and began typing on an old typewriter the mental facility had provided for him.