

KELLY GRIFFITH

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## The Prisoner in His Palace A Conversation with Will Bardenwerper

“Is evil something you are? Or is it something you do?”

—Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho*

Sentiments towards the death of Saddam Hussein are generally one of victory, but for a select few their feelings are a bit elusive, like the fumes from Saddam’s Cohiba cigars. *The Prisoner in His Palace* pulls back the facade of a dictator to reveal a glimpse of a father, brother, and friend. In this narrative, Will Bardenwerper, a former infantry officer, strings together firsthand accounts that reconstruct the Saddam I thought I knew. I feel I was programmed to believe that Saddam was a tyrant, period; but, Bardenwerper reveals Saddam to be an intricate, narcissistic man who had the “uncanny ability to motivate people to please him.” The juxtaposition of being hospitable and hostile weaves throughout the book, demonstrating how Saddam’s admiration was the prize sought by all, but his disapproval was the unfortunate death of many. The very nature of his admiration and disapproval are almost mediievally feudal, where Saddam functioned at either extreme without a foreseeable in-between. Can a dictator be benevolent? Can a benevolent person be a warrior? Can a warrior befriend a prisoner? Does a prisoner belong in a palace? These are the questions I am grappling with, and maybe they’re what Saddam was questioning too. Of course none of us is one-dimensional. We all own regrets, aspirations, fears. We all work to navigate by a moral compass, but who’s to say her compass is more directionally sound. How can we deny Saddam’s crimes against humanity?—but do we lie to ourselves when we

consider our own small scale injustices? Despite any hope of acquittal, Saddam was sentenced to death by hanging on December 30, 2006.

I arrive early afternoon in downtown Denver to meet Will Bardenwerper for coffee at Pigtrain Coffee Company, located at the southeast corner of Union Station. With a cold brew and latte in hand, we choose to sit outside in the summer breeze. We settle into wrought iron patio chairs as nearby children zig-zag through dozens of pop-up fountains. With an impish smile, a young boy splashes through the water in his American flag swim trunks as we begin our conversation about Bardenwerper's retelling of Saddam Hussein and his American guards.

**Kelly Griffith: Throughout your book, the juxtaposition of prisoner and palace are apparent, and I realize just how fitting the title is to your story. Even though Saddam was labeled as a “prisoner,” it didn't take away from the stately way in which he carried himself. Were you the one who came up with the title, and has it had the effect you intended?**

Will Bardenwerper: That was my title—well, the primary part—“The Prisoner in His Palace.” The subtitle was more of a collaborative battle, as was the cover art. The initial cover art was a picture of the palace, but it was just too close-up. It wasn't even clear what it was, and people uniformly agreed that it wasn't going to be very effective. I like the title, the only issue is that I'm not sure I like having Saddam Hussein's name in it. It's unclear if this fact attracts more people or turns them off. Either they think they already know everything there is to know about Saddam, they just don't care, or there is a general fatigue over the Iraq war. You could make the argument that leaving it more ambiguous would lead people to pick it up, and then once they picked it up they would be hooked. I don't know if there is a right or wrong answer, but those are the kinds of things that editors and writers think about when they are trying to determine what to put in a title. Ultimately, I think the cover art and title work well together.

Saddam Hussein, His American Guards,  
and What History Leaves Unsaid

The  
**PRISONER**  
in His  
**PALACE**



**WILL BARDENWERPER**

"Takes us inside the final days of Saddam Hussein and the Americans who were his reluctant guards...a timeless story about duty, honor, cruelty, and most of all compassion."

—DAVID FINKEL, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Good Soldiers*

**KG:** Did any of the soldiers or anyone you talked to expand on the concept of Saddam being a prisoner in his own palace? Was it ironic for them to be stationed at his palace where he used to fish, but where they now waterskied?

**WB:** I thought it was pretty remarkable because it's almost something you could imagine in a Shakespearean play: the king being overthrown and being held captive in his palace. As far as I know, I couldn't think of any other historical examples quite like

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF THE HUMANITIES

this, where you have an overthrown leader held captive by his enemy in his own place. I thought all the way back to Napoleon, and I don't know if we have an account quite like this of a captured leader as seen through the eyes of the people who took over. I don't know if the soldiers saw it quite in poetic terms, but they certainly commented on how Saddam knew exactly where he was. We talked about how they would cover the Humvees with tarps so that he wouldn't know where he was, but he would see out occasionally, and he had helped design some of these palaces, so he knew. That's why, when Saddam would tell those stories about fishing, he would say we caught fish in *this* area and not *that* area. The guards recognized that Saddam knew where he was, but I doubt they were thinking about Shakespeare at the time.

**KG: I've encountered various reviews, and there is a clear mix of reactions about your book. Some are positive or intrigued, while others are surprisingly harsh towards the soldiers. What has your reaction been in regards to these different reviews?**

WB: I have mixed feelings on the value of reviews. Some reviews can provide valuable feedback. There are some observations which cause me to think: *You know what?—that's legitimate.* In some instances, I think I could have approached events differently and some cases I think not. But, at least I could emerge from those reviews with some feedback that may help me in the future. Other reviews are just out in left field, where you have to have thick skin. One person may argue that I'm a committed pro-war hawk, and someone else may argue that I'm a pacifist and don't know how the world works.

I remember one review that said: *I don't like the way Saddam comes across in this book.* I tried to call it like I saw it. I did the very best I could to describe the terrible things Saddam had done because I didn't want to either humanize the man to the point where readers overlook the terrible things, or focus so exclusively on the terrible things to where readers neglect the story of what really happened with these soldiers who were assigned to guard him. I tried to present the man as he came across to his guards, but also honestly describe who he was prior to his capture.

**KG: I think the juxtaposition you created is what's so important to your story. You're showing a side of Saddam that most people didn't want to admit existed because, if it did exist, then what would that mean about humanity? You walk a fine line in showing two ways in which to perceive Saddam. I'm sure that's why people are reacting with opposing extremes. Perhaps they don't want to accept either side or can't accept both people being in one person.**

WB: That is the fundamental paradox of the book: how did these two people coexist? I understand that for some people it may be a struggle to wrap their minds around the contradiction that *is* Saddam. I want to be careful about this analogy, but let's think about the fictional character Tony Soprano. Most Americans are probably more familiar with *The Sopranos* than with Middle-Eastern history. Soprano was a guy who was incredibly charming, who inspired loyalty amongst most of his subordinates, who possessed a great sense of humor, who was charismatic, but also who was capable of extreme violence without hesitation and without much guilt. That's an example of someone who isn't as easy to understand, but seems real. How can someone play with his kids by the pool in the afternoon and seem like a wonderful dad, but then eight hours later beat someone to death with his fists?

**KG: Throughout the book, the Super Twelve [the military guards] play a large role in offering different perspectives of Saddam. I know you respected their right to say “No” when asked to be interviewed, but how did this impact your story? Do you feel that you missed vital perspectives because you weren't able to incorporate all the soldiers' viewpoints?**

WB: I would have loved to talk to more people. I'm always of the opinion that the more interviews you can incorporate the better. I did have access to interviews from all of the soldiers that were done shortly after their deployment, and their reactions were generally consistent. Although, it was clear that the relationships Saddam created impacted some guards more than others—these events had impacted them all in some way—but that's just natural. If you have any twelve-people interacting with one person, there will probably be consistencies in those relationships, and some are likely to develop a stronger attachment than others. But, there were more consistencies than inconsistencies. All participants referenced Saddam's charm and charisma, and some took it a step further, such that some form of relationship had developed, making Saddam's ultimate execution much more difficult for them to experience. This fact led to a new question I had for them: if that's how they felt three to four months after, to what extent did they still feel that way? I could only talk to a handful of them to ask that question, but in every case, they reported feeling the same currently as they had at the time. This pattern validated the fact that the soldiers' experiences weren't just short-lived episodes, but an experience that has enduringly impacted their lives.

I think I can imagine their reactions because I was in Iraq at the same time ten years ago. I think back to all the work we did and all the people that were killed and

wounded trying to do the right thing. Then you see a country in the shape that it's in now and can't help but ask what was the effort for? Who did the war benefit? To some extent, I don't think that's totally dissimilar to what the soldiers were thinking. In their eyes, they performed their mission successfully and admirably, and within five minutes of Saddam's execution, it all kind of fell apart and the sectarian divisions were manifested in the sort of savage bloodlust that came forth. That fact made them step back and think to themselves why were they trying so hard to do this the right way when it all went up in smoke? You do something that you hope is going to be meaningful and make the world a better place, and for them that illusion was shattered quickly. These soldiers saw more immediately what I saw happen over years as I slowly saw Iraq deteriorate and ISIS eventually move in. I can definitely understand where the guards are coming from.

**KG: I agree, it was crazy how immediate the violent actions toward Saddam were after he was executed. The descriptions you give of an “audible crack echoing inside the execution room as his neck was broken,” and “spitting on and kicking his wrapped flesh,” made me feel bad for Saddam. I even willed myself to watch a clip of his execution, and my heart instantly felt heavy after seeing the floor drop out from under him.**

WB: I don't think any of Saddam's guards would argue that he didn't deserve to be executed. But, I don't think this notion made it any easier for them to play a role in the process. One soldier even said, *I thought that's what we were here to stop, was this kind of violence*. It's important to make it clear that none of these guys were arguing that Saddam was innocent or good, they just said: *Listen, we upheld the standards that we were expected to uphold and it was upsetting to see it fall apart so quickly*. I think I had a line in the book that said, *We were supposed to usher in a new era, and the new era didn't last five minutes. . . .*

**KG: It makes me wonder about the way in which they handled Saddam's death as compared to, say, Osama Bin Laden, whose death happened when I was a freshman at the Air Force Academy. I distinctly remember the evening we got news that our forces had gone in, killed him, and got out. There was a rush of cadets from the dorm rooms to the parade field in the center of the terrazzo. People were carrying American flags and “Party in the U.S.A.” was playing over the loud speakers. Even though we weren't a part of the Seal Team that killed**

**Bin Laden, we felt pride in that victory. That was so unlike what happened with Saddam because there wasn't this long, legal process to have him killed.**

WB: One of the principal themes of the book is to shed a light on how it is more challenging to play a role in someone's death with whom you've gotten to know rather than just shooting an anonymous target. I'm not suggesting that such killing is easy, it has its own consequences for a lot of soldiers, but I don't think anyone would argue that it's not more challenging to be involved when it's someone that you've spent twenty-four hours a day with, seven days a week, and that person's been good to you. If Saddam had been like one soldier imagined, this animal behind bars screaming *Death to America, I want to kill all of you*, that would be one thing, but this is a person who really showed his guards some form of kindness. Although they were aware of the terrible things Saddam had done, they didn't see that. They'd seen an older and vulnerable human.

**KG: Your book is enriched by all the interviews and historical data you interweave. Would you talk to the process you went through in deciding what information to keep and what to leave out in your book?**

WB: In the process of getting an agent and putting together a fifty to seventy-five-page proposal for a book, you're asked to provide an overview of what you want to write about, a Table of Contents, and a Sample Chapter, which is probably the most important part as it demonstrates your writing ability. Then, you also have to mention other comparable books and why yours is different from them, but may appeal to the same readers. It's a business plan. I proposed eight, thirty-page chapters and ended up producing forty-five page chapters. As far as what was included and what wasn't, there were certain elements of both the soldiers' and Saddam's backstory that I had to limit because my editor wanted to limit detours. You can't say here is Specialist Hutchison and really bring him to life and then wait sixty pages before bringing him back, otherwise people will forget about him. So, working through the chronology was difficult because I could never really step back or go somewhere else without risking the loss of momentum. There were also a few anecdotes about the soldiers that I thought were colorful and helped reveal their personalities, but there wasn't room for them. It was important, for momentum, to keep the chapters short and crisp.

**KG: The flashbacks and backstories you provide are extremely useful in framing all the individuals who interacted with Saddam. I especially found**

**the perspectives of the Jordanians and Iraqis very insightful. What was it like traveling overseas and talking to Saddam's affiliates?**

WB: In particular, with General Ra'ad al-Hamdani, Saddam's era was clearly a sensitive topic because his country is in complete disarray. He's lost many people in wars throughout his life, so it likely wasn't easy for him to talk about it. I tried to stay aware of these facts, because the General has had to live with war's consequences more closely than I. But, it was weird. I sat across from someone whose job was essentially to find ways to kill American soldiers, and my job was to find ways to kill him or his soldiers. When I was in Iraq, I would meet with people that I knew were tied to the insurgency and we would get along fine. We would have tea and joke. Then we would go back to our respective camps and work on ways to kill or capture each other. It's strange to figure out how, on an interpersonal level, you can seem to get along with someone, but then your missions are completely different.

From everything I could tell about this general, though, he was an honorable, military man. He was never complicit in crimes against humanity, but he was serving a very bad regime. Nevertheless, I got along well with General Ra'ad al-Hamdani. He was extremely helpful and had some fascinating firsthand accounts of serving under Saddam.

**KG: It seems that once enough time has passed, humans are able to digest books that look at criminals from a different perspective. How do you think your book speaks to this concept of giving criminals a second look?**

WB: On one hand, it foresees ways we could have dealt with Saddam differently. On the other hand, I did speak to a number of psychologists, and I read about how Saddam exhibited pathological-liar attributes. I think if you attribute everything to Saddam being a psychopath, you would overlook what makes human nature complicated. With that said, the fact that he exhibited certain tendencies means that we can't just say, *Oh, if we had only treated him differently, the results would have been so much better*, because it's impossible to know. There is also a risk when leaders think they have all the answers, or they absolutely understand the enemy, when maybe they don't. This book at least suggests that people should look a little more carefully at individuals, instead of reducing an adversary to a caricature, so that you may discover he isn't exactly who you think he is.



**KG: With that said, what is your take on some of the soldiers' boldness to state that they didn't think Saddam would kill them if he was given the chance? Personally, I was very surprised by and skeptical of such a powerful statement. I appreciated the counter you offer by presenting a contrary reality, such as Saddam killing his son-in-laws.**

WB: I don't think these guards were hoodwinked or so naïve that they were just taken with Saddam. I think they were very worldly. They had come from tough and violent backgrounds, and a number of them had been on dangerous deployments before. The fact is, we weren't there and they were. That was the soldiers' response, so who am I to judge? At the same time, objectively speaking, you do have to wonder.

**KG: I think you did a good job of allowing people to form their own opinions. You showed what people were saying and feeling, but paired the individual responses with historical reality. The end result is striking. Something else that stood out to me was your frequent reference to Saddam's Cohiba cigars. Did you ever try one in order to imagine being in the palace yourself?**

WB: Ah, no. I didn't actually smoke the Cohibas. I did try to imagine how it would have felt to sit outside on a warm night in little plastic chairs, just chatting. My editor always wanted me to appeal to the five senses. You really want the reader to feel it, smell it, see it, taste it, and hear it. The other task was to write cinematically, in such a way that a screen writer could film a scene knowing what it's like to be there. That brought up other complications because I wasn't there, and I was completely dependent upon those who were present. When I was interviewing people, not only would I ask about the substance of what was discussed, but I would ask: *What kind of chair were you sitting on, what was he wearing, was it hot, was it cold, how many lights were in the room, what color was the wall?*

**KG: I enjoyed your inclusion of Saddam's book, *Zabiba and the King*. Although maybe not the most reliable text for insight into Saddam's character, I think it still reveals a realistic sense of loneliness: "When the King remarks that he loves to 'have a good laugh with the common folk,' Zabiba responds by asking him why he stays 'locked up in the palace... sitting in house arrest even though nobody ordered you to do it.'" It seems as though Saddam was mentally imprisoned in his palace even before he was captured. What impressions did you have of Saddam's book?**

WB: I found Saddam's book fascinating because it reveals an element of his psychology. There are themes about the loneliness of being on top and yearning to connect with the common man, but being stuck behind the palace walls. Then again, you could make the argument that this was just another effort to manipulate the public and present himself as an "everyman." I'm inclined to think, though, that some of what he wrote is actually genuine because he really did seem to fancy himself as an artist. He was really proud of his work. As the years went on, some of his subordinates said that he was more detached from the day-to-day world because he was spending a lot of time writing. There might have been an international crisis, but it would take two days to track Saddam down because he would be holed up writing a novel.

**KG: This makes me think about your description of Saddam writing furiously, almost urgently, so that "the people... may know the facts as they are and not as those who want to counterfeit them." Did the U.S. get to keep those records, and did anyone read what Saddam wrote?**

WB: Well, it's frustrating. I've heard from multiple people who were involved that we had copies of what he was writing. It would have been foolish not to, but I don't think we publicized those efforts. I did put in for the Freedom of Information Act requests for this material with anyone I thought might have it, the CIA, FBI, DoD, on the grounds that this is historically valuable. At a minimum, we should go through his writing and redact anything that's sensitive or inflammatory, but reveal the rest. A poem that he wrote isn't going to lead to World War III, but it might lead to interesting insights about what he was thinking. But no, I got nothing. There is surely some fascinating stuff there, if someone can find it.

**KG: Well I hope it's released to the public one day. Looking back over your entire book, is there a specific section or passage that stands out to you?**

WB: I would say the very beginning. I worked especially hard on the introductory scene in the helicopter on the way to the execution. I wanted to subtly signify that some form of relationship had developed without explicitly spelling it out so that the reader's no longer curious. I wanted to signal certain things, but not go too far. Then, at the end, I liked bringing everyone up to speed with where these guys are today.

**KG: In your concluding section about Saddam Hussein, you detailed how his Albu Nasir tribesmen moved his gravesite, and rightfully so, given that the Shiite militiamen came in and destroyed his tomb not long afterwards. How did you decide to conclude the book with that information?**

WB: I alluded to his death in the Hemingway quote at the beginning of the chapter. I think both descriptions try to capture how Saddam, at one time, had all the power anyone could possibly have. The Hemingway quote captures this parallel with the fish that the old man tries to catch. At one point this fish was king of the sea, an incredibly powerful creature, but soon it's a collection of bones gone out to sea. In the same way, Saddam had all the power in the world, the power of life and death at his fingertips and every material possession he could ever want, but now he's just a rotting piece of meat. The images are meant to get at life and how transient it is, how people are on top one day and then food for worms the next. I also think the tomb being raided was important because it communicated the state of the country. We went there to install some degree of stability and make it a better place, but they're still fighting.

**KG: That connection also reminds me of Ozymandias. Saddam had his own statue erected while he was in power, but it was torn down once he was overthrown. After the video of Saddam terrorizing Iraqi citizens, I like your statement: "the tape played for one minute, but captured the essence of an era." It makes me wonder what my own life would look like if it was condensed down to five minutes. As a final thought, what advice would you give to our youngest generation of military leaders?**

WB: I would say that as an officer, across all branches of service, solicit input from everyone, even your subordinates. Try to learn from your subordinates as much as possible because oftentimes they've been doing the job longer than you have. So young officers have a lot to learn. But, once you've gathered all the information you need to make a decision, trust your instincts. That can be tough, especially when you're twenty-two and you've only been in the military for a year. Looking back, I think I did a good job regarding the decisions I made while I was in the military. There is still one instance that bothers me though. I had a particular NCO (Non-Commissioned Officer) who did not do a good job on numerous accounts. I initially was very candid on his evaluation form and communicated some of his shortcomings. Then, I had a more senior NCO approach me and say: *Sir, are you aware of the damages this is going to do to his career? He's such a good guy, do you have to be so harsh in your assessment of him?*

So, I edited it. I made his evaluation slightly more favorable than I think it deserved to be. Years went by, and that NCO helped lead young men into combat. I think everything went fine, and there were no unfortunate consequences; but, there could have been. However, had there been, and had I been able to provide feedback that would have prevented any consequences from happening, I would have felt terrible. It all comes back to the fact that I was young. I was probably not 100% confident in how things worked and instead deferred to someone who appeared to be more experienced; but, I had a gut instinct that it wasn't the right thing to do. It's hard. I remember when I took over my platoon; I was the only one who hadn't been into combat. There I was in charge of twenty-five guys who just got back from fifteen months in Iraq. That's a leadership challenge. I would tell young officers that there are a ton of things you should learn from your subordinates. You may be wrong a lot of the time, but if you solicit people's input, you think through a situation, and you still have a gut feeling that a certain action is the right thing to do based on you experience, go with it. That's what you're there to do. Be a leader.

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