

THE DESERTER

NELSON DEMILLE & ALEX DEMILLE

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Dear Reader:

I haven't coauthored a novel since *Mayday*, written with my childhood friend Tom Block in 1979. *Mayday* was a commercial and critical success: it was made into a CBS TV movie starring Aidan Quinn and remains in print after forty years. But the collaborative experience was not smooth and I vowed never to cowrite any fiction again—except for my joint income tax return.

There is an inherent problem with collaborative fiction, and the problem has to do mostly with different writing styles and differing visions of the story. Also, of course, there is the problem of clashing egos and temperaments. Authors have chosen a solitary occupation and we're comfortable with working alone, so collaboration is not in most authors' vocabularies. Someone once said that two authors trying to write a book together was like two men trying to make a baby together.

Why, then, did I agree to coauthor a book for my publisher, Simon & Schuster? I have no answer for that, except maybe after forty years I'd remembered only the success of *Mayday* and not the difficult process that led to that success.

In any case, I'd signed the contract and I needed to find a coauthor for my idea, titled *The Deserter*. My editor, Marysue Rucci, and my literary agents, Jenn Joel and Sloan Harris of ICM, were very helpful in looking for a writer with whom I could work. We interviewed several authors, we read writing samples, and we considered other qualifications such as "works well with others."

Unfortunately, after a few false starts, it seemed as though I'd be writing *The Deserter* on my own. But then one night, a voice spoke to me (out of a glass of Scotch whisky) and the voice said, "Your son Alex is a screenwriter, dummy. He knows how to write, to structure a story, and to create characters on the page."

Bingo.

Also, I knew that Alex, as a screenwriter, would be more comfortable with collaboration than most novelists.

So I called Alex, and he took the call, which was a good start. I explained my predicament, and also explained how my predicament could be mutually beneficial to us.

Alex is passionate about film and movie-making, and he was reluctant to get into the publishing business, reminding me of a few unkind things that I'd expressed over the years about writing, agents, editors, book reviewers, readers, and...whatever. I assured him I'd come to a new understanding about being a novelist. It's actually lots of fun. Also, it pays the rent. Alex and his wife, Dagmar, a cinematographer, had a first baby on the way, and coauthoring a novel could be a good gig. So we decided to give it a try.

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I had my original outline for *The Deserter*—based very loosely on the Bowe Bergdahl desertion in Afghanistan and Bergdahl's capture and imprisonment by the Taliban—and I sent this to Alex along with my research notes.

The MO we came up with was that Alex would do all the necessary research and write the first draft. He would then email me a few chapters at a time and I would edit or rewrite as necessary, then email back to him for a final tweaking. Also, about twice a month we'd have a story conference on the phone or in person.

The process turned out to be smoother and easier than I'd expected, and I found that we were usually on the same page, both figuratively and literally.

Alex's strengths as a screenwriter—an economy of words, tight plotting, sound structure, and dialogue that advances the story and defines the characters—were transferrable to the novel (with a little help from the old man). And I learned a few tricks from the screenwriting trade.

The result of this sixteen-month collaboration, *The Deserter*, is a work that succeeds on many levels: a great balance of two writing styles and a happy fusion of two methods of storytelling.

Simon & Schuster was delighted with *The Deserter*, which introduces the new characters of Scott Brodie and Maggie Taylor, both of whom are army criminal investigators, and who we will see again in a new adventure coauthored by the same father/son team that gave you *The Deserter*.

Hope you enjoy it.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nelson". The script is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Nelson DeMille

