

**With Old Stories, New and Strong:
An Interview with Author James Bradley**

**Richard Salzberg
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By Richard Salzberg

*On Saturday, September 18, at 5 p.m. James Bradley will speak at Broad Street Books, at 359 Broad Street in Portsmouth as part of an eleven-city tour for the publication of the paperback edition of *Flyboys*. With that book on the New York Times bestseller list for twenty weeks, Mr. Bradley is also the author of *Flags of our Fathers*, a #1 bestseller in 2000; and movie rights for both books have been acquired by Steven Spielberg, Tom Hanks, and HBO.*

Raised in Wisconsin, Mr. Bradley studied at Notre Dame and Tokyo's Sophia University, graduating with a degree in East Asian History from the University of Wisconsin. President of the James Bradley Peace Foundation, which "fosters understanding between America and Asia," he is also a world-traveled motivational speaker, and his resume also includes work as a producer of corporate films.

*Mr. Bradley is currently at work on his third book, *The China Mirage*.*

Q: *Flags of our Fathers* began as a personal sort of odyssey, with your dad John Bradley having been one of the six flagraisers atop Mt. Suribachi on Iwo Jima in February of 1945, made legendary by AP photographer Joe Rosenthal. How did this story become a major book?

A: I didn't set out to write a book. I set out to find my father. It wasn't until after he died that we discovered he had been awarded the Navy Cross for heroism, which is like winning a Silver Medal in the Olympics and not telling anybody. I called vets who had served with him, and other vets and their families, which couldn't have been done when he was alive. I have the habit of keeping notes on conversations, and as I kept discovering more and more information, I shared it with my mother. It became clear that it was a powerful story worthy of a book, and I was the one who should do it.

Q: Of the six young men in the Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph, only three survived the war, and two had rather tragic post-war lives. Why was your father the exception?

A: First of all, he didn't get killed. Unlike the other two survivors, Ira Hayes and Rene Gagnon, he stayed away from "the flame of fame." He just didn't deal with the subject. He had certain phrases to deflect any discussion, like: "Yes, but that happened a long time ago."

Q: In 1998 you visited Iwo Jima with your mother and brothers. What was that like?

A: It was bizarre, emotional, touching, especially when confronted with the intimacy of the battleground, and its moon-like eeriness. A river of tears runs down Mt. Suribachi. It is no higher than the Washington Monument so, even to their insignias, individual Americans could be clearly seen by the Japanese. By comparison, the battles on the beaches of D-Day were over in 24 hours, while Americans were dying

in the sand at Iwo Jima for two weeks.

Q: The flagraising photograph has a unique place in history. After your own experience, what is your reaction to the image today?

A: I see what I wrote about. That is, six ordinary guys, six ordinary American boys who went out and did it. They are us.

Q: Did you ever meet Joe Rosenthal?

A: I've spoken to him a number of times, but I've never met him.

Q: How did the story of *Flyboys* evolve?

A: It was just another work day, and I got an e-mail saying there was a vet who had an interesting story. Well, a lot of vets have interesting stories, but that led to Bill Doran and his information, newly declassified, about the fates of eight airmen executed on Chichi Jima, the island next to Iwo Jima.

Q: As the only one of the nine fliers in *Flyboys* to survive, how did former president George H. W. Bush respond to the book?

A: It's very emotional for him. When he thinks about that time in the Pacific, he thinks about the boys who didn't come back. Two were killed in the plane crash he survived, and of his flier group of 14, only five returned home.

Q: There is a remarkable new afterward in the paperback edition of *Flyboys*.

A: Last April I was able to discover the identity of the "Unidentified Airman." And incredibly, in Colorado I found the 97 year-old mother of another flier. For the first time in 60 years she was able to know how her son had died.

Q: You ask the question: "How many other hidden stories from that terrible time are waiting to be told?"

A: World War II is the largest event in human history, a global war with 80 million casualties. I can only imagine there are other stories to be told.

Q: Much of your research is like that of a detective.

A: People say "research." There are just day by day questions to be answered.

Q: How do you determine the best story to pursue for an entire book?

A: In my case, the stories pursued me. First, I wanted to find out why my father had been so silent about Iwo Jima, and *Flyboys* was a 60 year-old mystery.

Q: How widely have your books been published?

A: In seven different languages, including Japanese and Chinese. Once you get Chinese and Spanish and English, you're covered.

Q: What did you read as a youngster?

A: I read Michener, and I listened to Harry Truman and read historical biographies.

Q: Do you have time to read today?

A: I read a tremendous amount, but it's all related to my research. Many dusty, arcane volumes. . .

Q: Have you encountered any of the lads of Bataan and Corregidor in your travels?

A: Oh, yeah, of course. You can't study the war in the Pacific without starting there.

Q: Tell us about your new book.

A: Like *Flyboys*, it casts a broader net. It's about the 150-year history between America and China, where two countries meet, fall in love, then fall out.

Q: What is the value of the study of History?

A: I'm just naturally interested in it. But if you know a little bit about history it gives a better understanding, a better perspective, of what's going on today.

Q: What do you think your dad would think of our soldiers and sailors serving today?

A: I think his heart would go out to all those serving under fire.

*For more information contact Broad Street Books at 397-8900, or visit
www.broadstreetbooks.com.*

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