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A Couple Of Killer Novels From Blake Crouch

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Features

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At 26, with two spooky, visceral, genre-shattering thrillers to his credit, writer Blake Crouch has just begun a metaphorical climb to what will assuredly be one of the glorious peaks of popular fiction.

On a more literal level, Crouch climbs mountains all the time. In addition to kicking a hole in the staid wall of the publishing industry at a tender age, he also had the good sense, when he and Rebecca, his then-fiancé/now wife, graduated college in their native North Carolina, to pack up a vehicle and, sight-unseen, relocate to Durango, Colorado. Mountains galore.

Both Blakes were fans of the Blue Ridge range in N.C., and the idea of getting out of the south and experiencing a new area – one rife with outdoor possibilities – was irresistible.

"Picking a town off a map, that happens to be 2,000 miles across the country, isn't the most logical way to find a home," Crouch said in a recent e-mail interview, "and I guess it could have really turned out badly if Durango wasn't such a beautiful place. I think we may be here for the long haul."

Odd, isn't it, how such lovely and pastoral environments can feed The Muse: in Crouch's two novels, "Desert Places" and the brand-new "Locked Doors" (both from St. Martin's/Thomas Dunne Books) the novelist tells the increasingly creepy saga of Andrew Thomas, a successful thriller writer who, hopefully, bears zero resemblance to his creator.

It's not that Thomas isn't a good guy. He is — insofar as most of us are decent sorts who have no concept of what we might be capable of if placed in extreme conditions of duress. At the dawn of the first novel, Thomas is coasting through a life when a strange letter



Blake Crouch, author of "Desert Places" and "Locked Doors."

alerts him to the fact that there is a murder victim buried on his property — and unless he performs as per impending instructions, authorities will be alerted to the corpse's presence. Oh, and by the way, the killer has orchestrated details so that Thomas is genetically linked to the killing.

We're off. Thomas must perform increasingly dangerous and implicating tasks if he's to have any hope of finding out who's behind the growing chain of homicides — and why the maniac has targeted Thomas for this bizarre game.

Harlan Coban is a master of the Everyman Tossed Like A Salad Into Desperate Circumstances motif, but Crouch has absolutely no inhibitions about raising the torque level on the concept.

Indeed, while there is no supernatural activity in either "Desert Places" or "Locked Doors," it can safely be said that Crouch's plots and characterizations gleefully hopscotch from traditional thriller territory into the horror genre. It wasn't necessarily planned.

"I just went where the story took me," Crouch said, "and it certainly went down a brutal path that occasionally veers into horror. It doesn't bother me that my work straddles the line between thriller and horror. Hopefully, it will bring in readers from both sides."

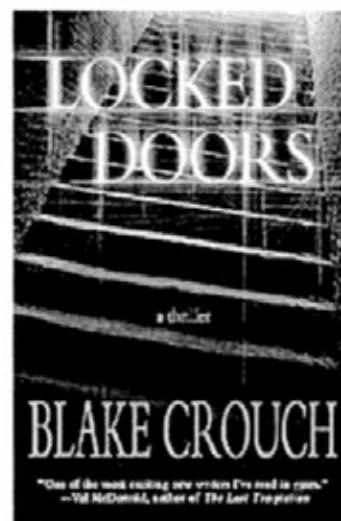
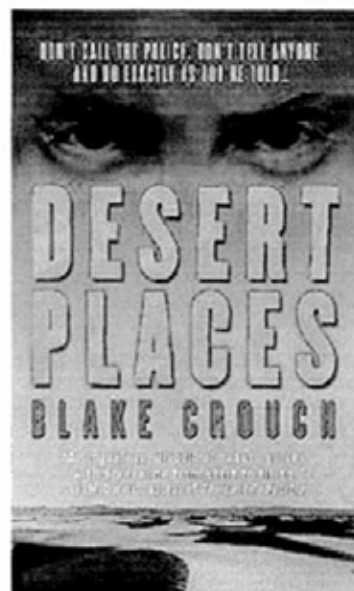
That possibility probably wasn't hurt any when Crouch's literary hero and fellow North Carolinian, Pat Conroy, e-mailed the younger writer an unsolicited blurb invoking true master of the forms after reading "Desert Places."

"... A whacked out combination of Stephen King and Cormac McCarthy," Conroy gushed.

While Conroy was right — it is a terrific and brutal novel — it was also meant to be a stand-alone. But Crouch's editor wanted to see where life took Thomas after the horrific machinations of the first book. Crouch's concern was, while his protagonist had been expertly coerced into doing some bad things, readers might understand but still be turned off.

"Plenty of readers have told me they loved ('Desert Places') but hated my characters," Crouch said. "But to some degree, I think they need to hate Andy in the first one, because if they sympathize, are they saying they would make the same choices he made?"

"Locked Doors," then, is on a big level a novel of redemption. Without divulging too much data



from either book, suffice it to say that Thomas has to survive not only the traumas of his own choices and the litany of victims, but also the loss of his identity and career — and the excruciating weight of the killer's identity.

In "Locked Doors," Thomas has the choice of maintaining a fragile and anonymous existence in the wilderness — or returning home to save friends and family from a tangentially connected lunatic. Not for the faint of heart — but great stuff and wonderfully written. ■

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