

Jack Ketchum's
OFF SEASON (1981)

Blake Crouch

Jack Ketchum, a pseudonym for Dallas Mayr (1946–), owns some of the blackest real estate in the world of thriller fiction. A former literary agent and actor, Ketchum published his first novel, *Off Season*, to the dismay of the mainstream literary establishment and the delight of what would grow into a cult following. Over the last quarter of a century, he has published numerous novels, novellas, and works of short fiction. However, only in the last five years has he gained notoriety, largely due to the praises of Stephen King. In 2003, while accepting the National Book Foundation's Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, King said, "There's another writer here tonight who writes under the name of Jack Ketchum and he has also written what may be the best book of his career, a long novella called *The Crossings*. Have you read it? Have any of the judges read it?" In his approach to thrillers, as typified by *The Lost*, *Red*, *She Wakes*, and *The Girl Next Door*, Ketchum defines fearless and unflinching.

Off Season isn't Jack Ketchum's best book or even his most disturbing. It is, however, his first and his most important, since it remapped the boundaries of where writers could go in the name of suspense.

But as often happens when something different arrives, the critics didn't understand. The *Village Voice* condemned *Off Season* as violent pornography, and even Ketchum's publisher and distributors were stricken with a late case of buyer's remorse, finally losing their nerve about giving the book the full marketing and publicity push they had originally intended. Then there were the edits Ketchum was strong-armed into making—the toning down of the most brutal scenes (no recipe for man-meat jerky or cock-stump spitting), and an absolute ultimatum from his publisher to let a character live whom he had every intention of killing—so that the 1981 publication, while still chock-full of groundbreaking un-

pleasantness, did not embody Ketchum's initial vision, which was to write, in his words, something with the "kind of teeth pretty much unseen before in mass-market fiction." Following its initial 1981 publication, the book promptly went out of print until Leisure Press finally released Ketchum's uncut, uncensored version of the novel a quarter of a century later in 2006.

Enviably accomplished for a debut novel, *Off Season* draws its inspiration from the legend of Sawney Bean, the Scottish leader of a fifteenth- or sixteenth-century clan that engaged in mass murder and cannibalism until their capture, torture, and execution. *Off Season's* narrative structure, while by no means revolutionary, is deceptively simple and ingenious. Six friends meet at a remote cabin in the Maine woods, not far from the coast—Nick, Marjie, Dan, Laura, Carla, and Jim. One of the most intelligent choices Ketchum makes is not to rush anything. The first 130 pages are essentially violence free and dedicated to the introduction of the six main characters, along with foreshadowing of the horrible events to come. The sense of increasing dread is palpable, and by the time the family of cannibals gets around to attacking the vacationers at the cabin, the suspense has been ratcheted to an unbearable degree.

If the first 130 pages are prelude, the last 140 are the roughest, nastiest, and most brutal you will ever read. "Unflinching" is thrown around liberally these days, to the point where the word has lost its impact. But Ketchum truly is unflinching in a way that few other writers have dared to be, and this is what sets him and his debut novel apart. The author's chief talent lies in creating scenes of overwhelming violence in such a lean, straightforward, and disinterested style, that it is simultaneously torture to read but impossible to look away.

Witness Ketchum's portrayal of the second character's death:

In a slow, deliberate motion he reached into the chest and touched the heart. It was still warm, still beating. He severed the veins and arteries with the knife and lifted the muscle into the light, and still it beat, steaming in the cool air. For the man this moment was the nexus of all mystery and wonder, the closest thing he knew to worship. He stared until finally the heart was still.

At the center of the carnage and mayhem stands the character of George Peters, the decent lawman, appalled and disgusted by what he sees,

an early incarnation of Sheriff Bell from Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*, and Police Chief Marge Gunderson of *Fargo* fame. Sheriff Peters is order, or the *attempt* to restore order in the face of pure depravity, and like the reader, if he escapes harm, it is only a physical escape. His and our psyches will never recover.

Though *Off Season* was published at a time when such independent slasher films as *Halloween* (1978) and *Friday the 13th* (1980) were challenging the shock value of *Psycho*, there is little to compare. Those films are comical, cheap, even childish in their treatment of violence, in a way that is completely diametric to the very adult study of violence that is the foundation of *Off Season*. If anything, the novel was a nod to *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), and a precursor to Bret Easton Ellis's controversial novel, *American Psycho* (1991), Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy* (2003), and the best work of Takashi Miike, the prolific Japanese director of such ultraviolent films as *Audition* (1999) and *Ichi the Killer* (2001).

What makes *Off Season* so effective and important is Ketchum's masterful manipulation of the reader. Just as in *Psycho*, *Off Season's* erstwhile hero, Carla, is killed first and most horribly. This is Ketchum grabbing the bullhorn and screaming at the reader: "No one is safe or off-limits in this book! Not even you!" And while *Off Season* muses on such "big ideas" as the rational vs. the natural, the family unit, and urban vs. rural, its most enduring message concerns the abrupt ugliness of human violence, and how people face such extreme situations and horrors that come out of nowhere. The violence that occurs in this book touches us so profoundly because it is perfectly reminiscent of the awful and sudden turns that life can take. It is ultimately the unpredictable, uncompromising way Ketchum rains his terrors down upon his characters and the reader that earns *Off Season* a place in the canon of classic thriller fiction.

Off Season may upset you. It may even make you sick. But it won't make you feel cheap. Whether you have the nerve to experience what Ketchum has to say about violence and the human condition is another matter. Just don't say I didn't warn you.

Blake Crouch was born near the Piedmont town of Statesville, North Carolina, in 1978. He attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and graduated in 2000 with degrees in English and creative writing. His first two novels, *Desert Places* and *Locked Doors*, were published in 2004 and 2005. Inspired by his

relocation to Durango, Colorado, he wrote *Abandon* (2009), a novel set in the past and present in a remote mining town high in the San Juan Mountains. His short stories have appeared in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, an anthology from Bleak House Books titled *Uncage Me*, and ITW's *Thriller 2* anthology. David Morrell called him, "One of the most exciting new thriller writers I've read in years."