
BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

THE
500

A novel

by Matthew Quirk

Q&A WITH MATTHEW QUIRK

How much of Mike Ford's story is drawn from your own experiences?

It's the basics of my background going to work in Washington, dialed up to an extreme for the thriller. When I was finishing up college, I was a twenty-one-year-old history major with no obvious job prospects. I was working at *The Crimson*, my college's newspaper. And like Mike Ford in *The 500*, I found myself in front of a powerful man from Washington who had come to Harvard to recruit young people. I guess I said the right thing, because he gave me a job as a reporter for *The Atlantic* in DC.

The owner was nice enough to invite me and some other young hires to a dinner at his house—he lives in the former Cuban embassy, if I remember correctly. And I found myself in a Georgetown mansion with a former CIA director and a bunch of national correspondents who were discussing plans for the upcoming war with Iraq. It was unreal, way over my head. My whole experience coming to DC and getting thrown into politics was like that, a baptism by fire.

The story of growing up in a regular New Jersey suburb and end-

ing up in Washington isn't really all that thrilling, though, so I spent a lot of time thinking about how I could take that out-of-place feeling and steep learning curve, make it more dramatic, and craft an interesting story out of it.

So Mike Ford comes from a bunch of small-time criminals in Virginia and finds himself in genteel Washington politics. I had a lot of fun with the contrasts and themes. Mike soon learns that maybe there is a world of difference between a respectable life and an honest one.

The material on confidence games and breaking and entering comes from research, not any youthful criminal streak of mine. They were really fascinating subjects to delve into. I even learned how to pick locks.

How did your time as a reporter play into the book?

The Atlantic was a great break for me. It offered a chance to look behind the scenes of official Washington, to see how power really works. When you're young, reporting can get you access that it would take decades to earn as a political player. I reported about the worlds of private military contractors, opium smugglers, and international gangs. At the same time, I watched as friends went to work in the Green Zone, at the CIA, and on the E-Ring at the Pentagon. Hanging out with other reporters, I would pick up tons of great stories and anecdotes (I lifted a few for *The 500*). The cocktail parties, the intense dynamics of protégés and mentors, the elaborate games spies play to turn human assets: it's all material I came across living and working as a reporter. There was so much great local color firing my imagination that it overflowed the articles, so I started writing novels.

One fascinating aspect of DC that I tried to capture in the book

is that people work for these mythic institutions—the Pentagon, the CIA, the White House—which are exciting in so many ways, but also just regular jobs in so many ways. A friend would complain that his boss took his idea and passed it off as his own—pretty typical stuff. Then I remembered that his boss was the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and his idea had just become the law of the land.

What led you to make the jump from journalism to novel writing?

It's easier to jump when you get a little push. Print journalism has been having a really hard time, and when the economy collapsed in 2008, I was let go in a round of cuts at the magazine. It was awful, of course, but it turned out to be the best thing that could have happened to me.

At the time, I had a manuscript of an earlier novel halfway done. I had given it to a friend in New York months before who said she'd pass it around to some people in publishing. I just wanted some feedback to see if it was worth continuing. Then, three days after I got the news I'd lost my job, I received an email from some New York publishing people telling me the manuscript was great and I should keep going. I'm a pretty practical guy, and that gave me the encouragement I needed to try this full-time for a while. It ended up being two years. My then-fiancée, now-wife, Heather, was incredibly supportive the whole time. We were both working out of a tiny one-bedroom apartment in DC. I dedicated the book to her.

That first manuscript never did work out, but I was extremely lucky because as I sent it around looking for representation, I met the man who became my agent, Shawn Coyne. He took a chance on me and helped me develop the idea for *The 500*. He's an amazing guy, a former editor who really has a genius for plots and thrillers. The book came together very quickly, less than a year from idea to manuscript.

I kept my overhead low, living off of savings. We were about to get married, and I was running out of time on the whole writing experiment. My father-in-law was great about it, but after a glass of wine or two, he'd say, "Okay, Matt, what's plan B?" which was totally fair, and a question I'd constantly ask myself.

And then, a month or two before the wedding, Reagan Arthur picked up the book. Now I get to do what I love full-time. It's been an absolute dream, especially working with Reagan and everyone at Little, Brown. It was a crazy couple years, and everything worked out just in time. For me at least, the story of the book was more suspenseful than the book itself!

One of the main questions the book poses is whether everyone has a price. What drew you to that theme?

Influence and leverage are at the heart of Washington politics. It's all about understanding people and how to bring them around to your side. And those considerations are crucial to a good story, too. When you start out writing novels, you realize pretty quickly it's not about having the biggest explosion at the end, but taking a character and studying the choices he or she makes as you raise the stakes to the highest levels.

I started with the basic moral dilemma: How much will you give up in order to get what you want? At the beginning, Mike's motives are very relatable. He's sympathetic because all he wants is the decent life he never had. He wants what I want and probably all of my readers want. So we can all identify with his choices. Everyone makes compromises. That's part of coming of age professionally. But what happens when you raise the price he'll have to pay? When things go beyond the usual Washington hardball? Will he deal with the devil? It's a classic trope, back to Faust and the Bible.

One fun discovery I had while writing was how essential that sort of character work is, not only in fiction, but in espionage. One of Mike's bosses is a former CIA guy who now works in politics. Instead of turning Soviet agents, he's turning members of the 500. I was doing a lot of reading on intelligence, these great CIA manuals and old books on spycraft. I was fascinated by the similarities. When you're turning someone ("human asset recruitment," as it's called) you raise the stakes on your target slowly, making the choices harder and harder until they come around to your side. It was really fun to dovetail the work of politics and espionage and the rising tension that makes a good thriller.

*How closely do you think *The 500* reflects the way politics are played in Washington today?*

First, I should say that DC is full of people who work hard every day doing the often thankless, crucial job of public service. In *The 500*, I happen to focus on the other sort of Washingtonian.

That "underbelly of DC" material comes, unfortunately enough, from paying attention to the papers and staying on top of political scandals and dirty tricks (there are plenty of real-life stories from Washington that are just as outrageous as what happens in the book).

The first two-thirds of the book hews closely to real life, and even when I go beyond that, I tried to stay true to the everyday grit and personalities of contemporary DC.

It's a thriller, so things are a little sexed up, especially at the end. Murder isn't part of the domestic political playbook (though it does play a role in international intelligence). Campaigns do employ people called opposition researchers to dig up dirt on their opponents, and they can play pretty rough.

I would ask all my reporter and politics friends for real instances

of blackmail, and there weren't a lot of flagrant examples. That did turn up the anecdote, however, about a politician who was supposed to vet candidates for a very high-level government position. He ultimately recommended himself for the job, and got it, but not after he had done such a thorough vetting of all his rivals—far beyond the norm—that from then on they were afraid to cross him because of what he knew.

What's most surprising about politics is how much graft is perfectly legal. No one man has the sort of sway Henry Davies does, though there are individuals who, over decades, have deliberately plotted out and built movements, put like-minded people in key positions of power, and dramatically changed the shape of American democracy.

What's in store for Mike Ford in the future?

I'm deep into the sequel now. Mike's brother comes to town, and Mike has to venture into the criminal underground and face his past in order to save him. The conspiracy draws Mike into the world of finance and corporate intelligence. I'm having a blast with it, and I can't wait to get it out to readers.

MATTHEW QUIRK'S READING LIST

Here are some of my favorite political books and some other great reads and a film that inspired me while writing *The 500*.

Master of the Senate by Robert A. Caro

If you think Henry Davies is a cagey operator, just check out this bio of LBJ. While 1,200-plus pages may seem a bit much (and this is only the third of five volumes), Caro mines such unbelievable detail that reading it is like watching a great play.

Nixonland by Rick Perlstein

This history of the 1960s manages to shed new light on one of the most overanalyzed decades in politics and inspired some of Henry Davies's Nixon-era backstory.

Marathon Man by William Goldman

It's a classic of the genre and I love the narrator's voice. It goes to show that simply having people try to kill your hero for no reason can carry you a surprisingly long way in a thriller. Take care of any dental appointments before you read it.

This Boy's Life by Tobias Wolff and *The Duke of Deception* by Geoffrey Wolff

I am a huge fan of Tobias Wolff, whose father was something of a real-life con artist. His and his brother's excellent memoirs were very helpful as I thought about the character of Mike Ford's father.

Wall Street (film) by Oliver Stone and *The Firm* by John Grisham
You can't write a book about a yuppie-dream-turned-deal-with-the-devil without returning to these two.

Old Goriot by Honoré de Balzac

It seems like every French novel I read in college was about an ambitious young man in the nineteenth century going to the city to make it big and then discovering the dark side of success—very similar to the yuppie works above. I was trying to steal some of the mojo of *Old Goriot's* unforgettable last lines when I wrote the ending to *The 500*.

Scoop and *Put Out More Flags* by Evelyn Waugh

Waugh is one of my favorites, especially his political satires. I reread them often and am always in awe of how his books can be so hilarious and so beautifully styled.

Advise and Consent by Allen Drury

Published in 1959, this is the original DC blackmail thriller, written by a reporter and loaded with authentic detail and complicated, true-to-life characters.

See No Evil by Robert Baer

If you can't find an old spy who will sit down and rattle off swaggering opinions and over-the-top tales of tradecraft, this book is the next best thing. I picked it up for background on Marcus.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do the events in this book remind you of any recent political scandals? Any historical scandals?
2. When it comes to hardball tactics, how do you think real politicians compare with Henry Davies?
3. Do you believe Washington is more or less honest than it is portrayed in the book?
4. Do the things Mike Ford is willing to do to get ahead seem plausible to you? How far would most people go to get their dream job and dream life? How far do you think people should go?
5. What are some other famous deals made with the devil in literature, and how would you compare them with Mike's experience in *The 500*?
6. Do you think that Marcus is redeemable? Is he trapped by Henry or does he truly enjoy his work?

7. Why are confidence men, burglars, and outlaws such popular characters in books and movies?
8. Is Mike Ford trying to do the right thing or just protecting himself?
9. What is your favorite con man's or burglar's trick in *The 500*?
10. Has Mike resolved his criminal temptations by the end? Do you think they will get him into trouble again?