

"Reavis Z. Wortham is the real thing: a literary voice that's gut-bucket Americana delivered with a warm and knowing Texas twang."

—C.J. BOX,

New York Times bestselling author

THE ROCK HOLE

FIRST IN SERIES
A TEXAS
RED RIVER
MYSTERY



REAVIS Z.
WORTHAM

SPUR AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. What is the significance of the “Rock Hole”?
2. Consider John Washington’s role in Chisum. What difficulties does he face as the first black deputy sheriff?
3. Compare two of the most powerful men in town, Sheriff Donald Griffin and Judge O.C. Rains. How are they different? Are they similar in any way?
4. Characterize the relationship between Pepper and Top. How do they get along with each other?
5. Half of the story is told from Top’s perspective. What is he like? How does his narrative voice differ from Ned’s?
6. Why does O.C. suspect Lightfoot is the killer?
7. Describe the relationship between races in Chisum in 1964. Is it an accepting place? Why or why not?

8. What is Mark's relationship to Ned's family? Describe his dynamic with Top, Pepper, Ned, and Miss Becky.
9. Describe the ways that The Skinner's presence affects everyday life for the people of Chisum. Do people behave differently?
10. Do you think it was right for Ned to kill Raymond Chase instead of taking him into custody? Is it ever morally acceptable to become judge, jury, and executioner?
11. There are some shocking racial slurs in *The Rock Hole*. Do you object to the author's use of the N-word in this novel? Why, or why not?
12. Some readers may be put off by uncomfortable scenes in *The Rock Hole*. Is it healthy to open dialogue on past and present racial issues?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

This is the first book in the series. What inspired you to create the Parker family?

I wanted to tell a good story and entertain folks, but there were other ideas in the back of my mind as well. I grew up spending much of my youth on my maternal grandparents' farm in rural Northeast Texas. That's where I found a love of storytelling by listening to the "old men" on the porch of the general store. They were probably younger back then than I am *now*, but they *seemed* old. They loafed there on cast-off chairs, benches, and porch rails, talking about the weather, politics, crop yields, telling of past hunts, and spinning stories from their younger days and what they then called, The War.

As kids who are to be seen and not heard, my cousins and I found an out-of-the-way spot within hearing distance, drinking RC Colas and listening. I heard exciting tales, funny stories, and sad laments that caused those men to grow silent for a few moments, shaking their heads at heartache, the loss of life, dogs, or in quiet reflection. I filed away every story, nuance, and comment for later.

The idea of *The Rock Hole* came as a warmup exercise before writing the next installment of my weekly syndicated newspaper column. It began with only a few words on the screen, “We’re from up on the river,” and from there the story unfolded at the same time the Parkers were born. I don’t outline or think about what’s going to happen next when I write my newspaper columns, magazine articles, or books. With my fingertips on the keyboard, I simply watch a story unfold. Young Top, Miss Becky, Grandpa Ned, and the others stepped on stage when they needed to arrive.

The story unfolded on its own, and I realized that I also wanted to preserve the way of life I grew up with, the language they used (we pronounced warsh for wash, winder for window, and piller for pillow), and the everyday life that’s quickly fading from memory. I use what I call Old Timey Words to bring that period of time to life, and to show how those folks survived the Great Depression and both World Wars and Korea while embracing family.

What does your writing process look like?

I write every day, but the process varies from day to day. I have the perfect office, with bookshelves reaching three feet short of sixteen-foot ceilings. There’s a library ladder on rails that allows me to reach the highest shelves. I sometimes write there at my desk, oftentimes staring out the glass doors leading to our wide front porch and the street beyond. Other times, I sit in my recliner and type on the laptop. Sometimes it’s in bed, like Mark Twain with his typewriter. On the road, I find corners to write in, sometimes at the end of a quiet bar, or maybe holed up in a hotel room. I once wrote the 14,000-word climax to *The Right Side of Wrong* on a rainy day while sitting in an RV. I don’t

require any one location or environment, other than the time to write.

With that, I begin by reading and editing what I wrote the day before. It's a perfect runway into the day's work, sort of priming the pump. Then I simply put my fingers on the keyboard and follow the story in progress. It's as if you, the Reader, is typing a story on your computer and it's coming up on my screen. Or maybe it's like watching a movie in my head, and putting down everything I see, hear, smell, and feel.

Each day's goal is 1,000 words per project. Sometimes I'm working on two or three manuscripts at the same time, so that means 3,000 words per day. But this isn't absolute. I said my goal is 1,000 words, but there are days 500 words is an accomplishment, while other times it's 1,500 to 2,000. At some point, a story is going to take hold of me, and it becomes my sole focus for weeks, or months, forcing the other projects into the background.

In addition, I've been writing my self-syndicated newspaper column for thirty-two years, so each Wednesday I spin a fun 900-word story about the outdoors, those aforementioned Old Timey Words, that way of life that is past, or honor and morality. I'm the Humor Editor for *Texas Fish and Game Magazine* and pen a bi-monthly column that averages about 1,000 words.

The more you write, the easier it is. You learn to avoid mistakes that beginners make, to streamline stories and to polish your writing voice so that folks recognize and want to read your work.

Were there any scenes that you found particularly difficult to write?

Not in *The Rock Hole*. That came later when I wrote the

sequel, the second book in the Red River series, *Burrows*. That storyline came from a recurring nightmare that haunted my sleep for decades, until my Bride suggested that I use it in the novel. Some of those situations Deputy Cody Parker and Deputy John Washington encountered in *Burrows* were tough, but cathartic. The hardest scene was deleted from the manuscript at the request of my editors, who felt the scene involving the deputies and a python was too much. Frankly, I wish we'd left it in. The funny thing is that since writing *Burrows*, I haven't had that nightmare for the past nine years.

With *The Rock Hole* the difficulty came from what *not* to include in the story. It's easy to get mired down in the details of a bygone way of life, so I had to edit a lot of that information out. In fact, the original manuscript was 140,000 words in length, because I didn't know what I was doing. To bring it down to an average novel's length, 90,000 words, I cut whole chapters, removed recollections that added spice and texture to the novel, but were absolutely unnecessary to the storyline. Beginning authors put way too much detail in their stories, so the difficulty for me was choosing what to delete. That's when I learned that a couple of well-constructed sentences can tell more than several paragraphs of minutia.

Can you talk a little bit about why you chose this era as the setting for *The Rock Hole*?

The novel is set in 1964, the year I turned ten years of age. It was a great time to be a kid. We roamed the countryside on our own, coming in only to eat dinner (and that's at noon), or for supper. In town, we prowled the streets until the streetlights came on, and never worried about getting in trouble, or being assaulted by some lunatic. The Beatles exploded onto the scene

at that time. In my mind, it was the end of the Age of Innocence and full of Life.

There were other reasons, also. As I said, I wanted to preserve a fading way of life, one that was based on generations of survival. We were still killing hogs each November, and the ladies canned seasonal food. Folks still said, “I reckon,” or “I’ll be dogged.” We said, “over yonder,” and “fixin’ to,” and “I’ll carry you up to the store.” We used language that has faded over the years and will likely disappear in the next couple of generations. That regional identity is what I wanted, and needed, to preserve. That carries through the entire series, giving it the flavor that readers love.

You paint a vivid picture of a small Texas town in the 1960s—did you have to do any research before starting this book?

Nope. I’ve done considerable research for some others, but that small community of Center Springs, loosely based on Chicota, Texas, is fixed in my mind. My fictional town of Chisum is structured around Paris, and both of them are as familiar as my own name.

Some of that charm still exists in small towns across Texas, but it’s fading as the old folks pass and “progress” takes hold. On occasion I have to look up such things as how push-button shifters work in sedans from that era, or technical details on police work in small towns back then.

Some things I swear I remember may not be true, so I have to do a little research to make sure those details are real, and sometimes I find my memory is faulty. One such detail is something my old aunts called a “toothbrush.” They were roots about five inches long, chewed into a brush on one end, and they used them to dip snuff from a Garrett Snuff jar. The problem is no

one is left to tell me what kind of root they were, though if I ever tasted one today, I could immediately tell you if it's the right one.

I often research certain details such as the spelling of items and brands from those days. I always thought it was Garrett's Snuff, but research proved me wrong. Questions sometimes arise such as the cost of gasoline or bread in 1964. Most people would write Dr. Pepper, but there's no period in the name, so it's Dr Pepper. Those are the kinds of detail that can make or break a manuscript.

This story delves into the very present racial tensions of the time. Can you talk about these elements in the book? Why did you find it important to explore these dynamics?

Back in 1964, there was a black deputy named Leroy Sears, who impressed this ten-year-old kid with his size and quiet disposition. He worked with my granddad, Joe Armstrong, who served as the local constable for decades in Lamar County. They often teamed up to bring in criminals, to work events, or to transport prisoners. Mr. Leroy's job was to deal with "his people," which is exactly how he put it to me when I asked, but he and Granddad handled all sort of calls together.

One of the scenes in *The Rock Hole* actually happened, when Granddad pulled over a car occupied by four black individuals who were ready to fight. They'd stolen something, but I can't remember what. Granddad told me it was one of the few times he had to pull his weapon, unlike my character Ned Parker, and he thought he would have to shoot. That's when Mr. Leroy showed up and put an end to the situation, by laying out one of the would-be assailants with a blackjack.

The 1960s were full of racial strife, but those two men had no issues with each other, proving that men of different skin colors

can be friends and work together. The riots in Watts, Detroit, and Newark were far away from our small Northeast Texas community, but the influence was there and on our TV every night. In *The Rock Hole*, I wanted readers to revisit that time to understand that no matter what's going on in the country, good people are doing good things and can work together.

If you could sit down for a conversation with any of the characters from this book, who would you choose and why?

I'd dearly love to talk with Top, who is loosely based on myself, and find out what he's thinking about at that time. We'd like to think we know all about the characters we create, but I think there's an entirely different level of character consciousness that most of us don't come close to tapping. I wonder, what was going through a ten-year-old's mind.

People don't often associate serial killers with a small-town, western setting. What inspired you to blend genres?

We don't often think of serial killers from before our time, but believe me, they were there, even in a "small-town, western setting." How about the Bloody Benders, a family living on the Kansas prairie from 1871 to 1873. It's believed they killed more than a dozen travelers for their money and belongings, burying the bodies under their house. Then there's Jesse Pomeroy, The Boy Torturer (1874), or the Servant Girl Annihilator (also known as the Austin Axe Murderer) in Austin back in 1884 when it was still a small town, and the Texarkana Phantom Killer who committed the Moonlight Murders between February 23 and May 4, 1946. There has always been evil in the world, both in cities and rural communities as far back as you'd care to look.

The idea for *The Rock Hole* came from dim memories of meanness back when I was a kid. As I said, my memory might be faulty, but I recall Granddad investigating a series of animal mutilations that he never solved. They began abruptly in the early 1960s, went on for a while, then stopped just as suddenly. There were also stories of murders, and I recall being with him one day when he got a call about one of those murders. I rode along with him and walked into a house and saw the walls and ceiling dripping blood. When he realized I'd followed him inside, he essentially knocked me back through the door and onto the porch, but I'd already seen enough.

He and I discussed them when I was grown, and when I pressed him for the details, he became terse. When I asked if he'd ever caught the individual, he gave me one chilling response. "Some folks just need killin'." With that in mind, the story of a small-town serial killer in rural Northeast Texas came to fruition.

I still wonder what happened with the investigation, and what prompted his cold response. Those old men back then were survivors of the Great Depression, veterans of two World Wars and Korea, and people who believed in absolute justice. Did someone take the law into their own hands? I still wonder.

Do you find that *The Rock Hole* tackles issues that people still grapple with today?

It sure does. There's still crime in small towns and cities. We still struggle with racism, dysfunctional families, and good people who simply want to raise their families and enjoy life. The days of the Spit and Whittle Club up at the general store are almost gone, to be replaced by social media discussion and all the faults contained within that world. The morning news reports are filled with crimes and while a significant amount are solved, criminals will always be with us. Serial killers still roam

our country, and I'm afraid there are more that are operating than have been caught. But families are still strong, and folks still stand up for what's right. That's what keeps our country strong. What do you hope readers will take away from this book?

The enjoyment of a good story, family values, a fading way of life, and the feeling that right will always prevail, even though the lines are sometimes gray. I hope readers enjoy the time period and the characters enough that they'll want to read the other books in this series, and my Sonny Hawke series with Kensington Publishing. All my novels are about family, right and wrong, and the hope that bad guys are always caught and punished.