

SHIMMER: ABOUT the BOOK

CEO Robbie Case is the corporate guru who, at age thirty-five, has transformed his company Core into an overnight twenty-billion dollar techno-miracle. Its stock keeps going up in value as its legend looms larger and larger throughout the global market. One reason may be that the firm is manned and womaned by some of the sharpest young business minds in the nation. Another may be that its chief product cannot be duplicated. But the real reason is that Robbie Case is a liar. His dream company is a nightmare about to be unsheathed, and his life is about to come crumbling down. That is, unless, he can hustle fast enough to turn a common Ponzi scheme into a legitimate business and his most ruthless competitor does not eat Core alive before Case can save it.

Though business journalist Eric Barnes began pounding out *Shimmer* years ago, its 2009 release grants it an urgent relevance. The tantalizing promise that the story keeps is to take us into the head, heart, and work life of a man running a multi-billion dollar con. Despite the sky falling in slowly at first, then in huge chunks, Case keeps meeting with his inner circle—smart, sleep-deprived people harboring complex relationships with him—as if nothing is wrong.

For Case's protégé Whitley, who is sacrificing her sleep and her marriage, it may be more for love than for money. Or is that in some way the motivation of all of the senior staff, who risk everything to try to win the game as if the game itself is all that matters?

Yet members of Case's team keep inadvertently getting closer to the truth. And daily the corporate landscape becomes more menacing.

Trevor, his head of sales is a cousin he grew up with, sadistic even as a child, wants more price-gouging, more firings, and more humiliation of the underlings. He is a man who thinks he has the world at his feet and so is free to stomp on it.

Regence, headed by the icy Chairman Tor, Core's diabolical corporate enemy, operates like the KGB and circles like a buzzard. It is determined to consume the vulnerable firm, whole or in bite-sized exploded pieces

Shimmer's suspense does not back down. Eric Barnes has created a timely corporate thriller that is as perilous and unpredictable as Wall Street itself.

SHIMMER: ABOUT the AUTHOR

When Calvin Coolidge said, “The business of America is business,” Eric Barnes likely was merely a twinkle in his great-grandfather’s eye. Yet it has become his destiny to witness evidence of that testimony as it is played out in millennial America, and to even write a novel about blinding, blistering corporate ambition.

Barnes received an MFA from the writing program at New York’s Columbia University in 1995. Yet he found himself on the entrepreneurial end of a series of publications and did everything from launching web sites to crafting sales presentations to pitching ideas to venture capitalists. And he now publishes *The Daily News* and *The Memphis Daily News* in Tennessee.

While his life has been buoyed by successes, it also has been tugged by the undertow of business failure, and one experience yielded the creative groundwork for his first novel. “When I was 35 years old, I found myself as Chief Operating Officer of a \$15 million publishing company,” Barnes recalls. “We employed 200 people, we published all over the country; we had plans to grow even bigger, faster.”

But the bubble burst and its flying fragments proved to be quite injurious. “We started cutbacks, layoffs, firings. It was awful. I stood in rooms of 20 people, all of them getting laid off. I met with a woman who’d just had a baby, laying her off as she cried into her hands. I laid one person off over the phone, calling her at home because she’d been sick, using a speakerphone to end it as she lay in bed in her trailer. She’d been with the company for 10 years. Those moments haunt me still.”

SHIMMER: AUTHOR INTERVIEW

You obviously know a lot about business and technology. How and where did you acquire your expertise?

After Columbia, I had to get a job to pay bills. I started at a business magazine, *Income Opportunities*, which had historically been a quite seedy, get-rich-quick-scheme publication. But they had a new publisher who wanted to turn it into a legitimate business publication. I ended up as managing editor, helping to dramatically upgrade the editorial content, converting the magazine from paste-up to desktop publishing (a sentence, let alone a memory, that makes me feel old, like grandpa remembering the days of gas lights), launching their first Web site, and writing and rewriting many, many articles.

The get-rich-quick schemes that had long been advertised in *Income Opportunities*—were definitely part of my starting to think about schemes, systems, vaguely convoluted plans to make money. The schemes all generally involved plans as simple – and elegant? – as sending your \$25 to the advertiser (who advertised a promise of making you rich) and who then in turn sent you a kit telling you to run an ad in a magazine telling people to send you \$25, in return for which you'd send them a kit telling *them* how to run an ad in a magazine.... Amazing. There were also advertisers for Multi-Level Marketers – Amway-type companies that were built on systems in which you sell your friends on selling their friends.

At Towery, when we got into financial trouble, one of the many problems was the failed implementation of a new accounting system. We really had no idea how much money was being spent or brought in. Amazing and sad. So the owner asked me if I could set up a set of financials separate from the accounting system, in Excel. I had someone give me a crash course in debits, credits, payables and receivables, then buried myself in my office for a month with nothing but coffee and Excel. I came out with a multi-hundred page spreadsheet that tracked every aspect of the company.

And so it grew from there.

What is a typical day like for you? Are you ordinarily out covering business news stories? Or do you confine yourself to the duties of a publisher?

I don't do any writing or reporting for the paper. I manage the business – editorial, design, production (we own our own press, which is pretty cool, being able to see the paper come off the press every night, the sense that the work you've done is complete, for better or for worse and you're already onto the next day's paper), IT, sales, marketing, admin, finance. There are 40 people in all those groups.

Sometimes I think about writing for the paper, but for the most part I'm comfortable with a division in my life: in my job, I manage; in my writing life, I write. But that could change. It's more a practical, time-driven decision than it is a philosophical one.

One of the best things about being publisher is that I go from debates with our third-generation Arkansas pressman about the most effective setup of our press, to conversations with the IT staff about changes in the architecture of our server room upstairs.

Did you use a real company upon which to model Core, or is it a composite of different corporations?

No, it is not really based on a real company. I actually wrote the first version of *Shimmer* before even Enron had blown up. I finished that first version in 1999. Before Enron, I thought I'd pushed too far, feared no one could believe that the scheme in *Shimmer* could possibly happen. After Enron went under, I worried I hadn't pushed enough.

For me, though, in the end, the book was more about the people: their pain, their hopes, their mistakes. That's not to say the scheme and the systems and the plans aren't interesting and important to me – they are and I liked writing about them immensely. (Earlier drafts included many, many more pages about the scheme and the inner details of the systems, both financial and technical.) But what was most interesting to me was to write about the people, Robbie especially but the co-worker friends as well, who are in the midst of the scheme, knowingly and unknowingly.

The house-of-cards situation that threatens the fictional corporation in your book seems to echo major elements in the current world financial crisis. When you wrote SHIMMER, were you anticipating a crash like the one Wall Street experienced last fall?

Definitely, which is why I'm a billionaire hedge fund trader by night.

Actually, no, I didn't foresee a crash. I will say, however, that the ballooning of the stock market back in the .com days did seem ridiculous.

And, in my job as publisher of *The Daily News*, I'm surprisingly in tune with the mortgage crisis – we cover real estate very closely and have tracked the minutiae of mortgage lending and foreclosures for many years. We did track sub-prime loans in Memphis being sold to foreign investors; tracked the rise in variable rate second mortgages; report on the default rate of FHA loans. All these things which we report on in great detail are the heart of the problem, nationwide, that fueled the ultimately artificial growth in the stock market.

And, again, all of it was a scheme. A Ponzi scheme. As long as loans were made – loans of any type to any type of borrower – then Wall Street could bundle the mortgages, sell them to investors, then turn around and pursue more loans. Local banks, national banks, foreign banks – all were in on the game and the game worked as long as no one ever took a moment to stop. The system worked as long as there were more borrowers at the bottom. But it was obvious to us in the reporting and research we did years ago that many of the borrowers had no business getting loans, no ability to pay their mortgage. It took awhile for that to show up on a large enough scale, however, a scale that would bring the stock market down as dramatically as it has fallen.

So, to some extent, I did think the stock market was artificially high based on the inflated real estate market. But I never thought it would crash so hard.

Your protagonist Robbie walks a tightrope of dishonesty. Do you think he has things in common with the real-life frauds in the financial world?

I would think so, yes. Without going too far with this, when I think of Robbie being symbolic of any real-life corruption he is, to me, actually three people—he's Perry, Robbie and Trevor all in one. They are three views of the executive in the midst of the fraud. Trevor is at one extreme—the person who knows the fraud and doesn't care. Perry is at the other extreme—in a kind of hopeful denial, wishing what he feels to be true isn't real, yet working quietly to make the fraud end. And then there's Robbie, in the middle, knowing what he is doing is wrong, struggling with the ethics and morality of it every day, wanting not to benefit from the fraud, but unable to confess to the fraud, to reject the fraud completely.

So how does that relate to real-life frauds? I think the truth is that real-life frauds are more varied in their motivations than we want to admit, more so, at least, than the press often shows. Some of these people are purely and consciously diabolical; these are the Trevors of the world. But some are clearly more conflicted, they are swept up in a corruption that, while it's of their own making, they want to undo it, like Robbie. And some are blind to the truth because they believe in what they're doing but are, eventually, too smart and too caring to deny the truth forever, like Perry.

Do you think there are philosophical and practical solutions to the ethical problems in various corporate bastions? If so, please elaborate.

Honesty. Independent oversight. Clearly, to me, there's been a total, massive failure of corporate oversight that has fed this current economic collapse. That oversight should have been done internally—companies should have serious, independent oversight in place via boards of directors, auditors, and ombudsman. This isn't just the right thing to do; it's the smart thing to do. Look at how much money these companies have lost, how much compensation has been cut, the jobs lost, the bonuses and dividends and options eliminated. That's just dumb. You're in business to make money for the long term.

Government failed as well. Government isn't a magical answer, but government is the only entity that has the weight and authority that can counterbalance the weight and authority of business. Legislatures, courts, the executive branch (be it federal, state or local) need to operate in a way that, yes, empowers capitalism but also helps to demand that capitalism acts ethically, morally, responsibly, for the good of the community (be it city, state or nation), not just for the good of the single owner or manager at the top of the company.

Where did you get the idea for the diabolical corporate nemesis Regence? Is there a real company like the evil Regence?

I'll admit that Microsoft was somewhere on my mind. Google also. But really Regence was inspired by any and all corporations that we, the people who buy their products, simply don't like – the phone company that charges you extra *not* to have your number in directory assistance, airlines that charges you extra if you miss your flight, car companies that sell you cars that don't work, technology companies that offer products they know have bugs. It's all so maddening.

What sort of literature do you most like and why?

I like the style of writing more than anything, more than plot or character. I can be completely confused by a book and still like it if the writing, the choice of words and the shape of sentences, interests me.

It's better, obviously, if I also understand a book and, better yet, if I can follow – or even enjoy – the plot and find something interest in the characters. But it's all about the writing style for me.

Who are your favorite authors and books?

So I like books like *Blood Meridian* and *The Road* (Cormac McCarthy), *Lolita* (Nabokov), *The Sun Also Rises* (Hemingway) *Ulysses* (Joyce), and especially *White Noise* (DeLillo).

It's a range of books, from very funny to horrifically dark, but I think the common element is that they are so well written. Interesting and compelling but first, for me, is the use of words, the choice of sentences, and the sounds of the paragraphs. I'll readily admit that the first time I read *White Noise* I was 60 pages in and was completely unclear what was happening. I had to start over. I didn't mind, because I was loving the book, but what I loved was the word by word choices he'd made, the sounds and shifts and stops and starts. I was so enjoying it that I'd lost track of who the characters were and what in the world they were doing. I read it every five years or so, and it is better every time, not just the writing but the story and the characters.

White Noise was a book that changed how I write. Some of the stories by Raymond Carver and Richard Ford were incredibly influential, because they wrote about the kinds of people I knew. The kinds of people I'd grown up with in Tacoma, a big blue collar city very removed from writing, the Web, jobs like publisher. Those Carver and Ford stories made it possible for me to believe that I could write about what I knew, too. *White Noise* changed my perspective, though, because – in addition to everything else I said – it was funny. An incredibly complicated, intelligent, interesting, thoughtful book could, also, be funny. That was a revelation to me. Until then, I'd thought the highest aspiration was to be as serious as Hemingway. Who I loved and who I used to sit up late at night in high school reading. But *White Noise* made me see how much more there was that I could possibly do with writing.

I left out *The Sound and The Fury* (Faulkner). I first read that in one day, when I was 18, lying on my back in a tent in Alaska. I was absolutely lost in the book. But it didn't matter because of the writing.

The violence of *Blood Meridian* was amazing – the idea of writing in such extremes. The starkness of *The Road* was the same. It reminds me of the range of what can be written.

One Hundred Years of Solitude (Marquez) was so funny and beautiful and the best translation I think I've ever read. None of those awkward formal English phrases that so often are included in translated books, the phrases that you know can't be right but because you don't speak the original language you can't challenge.

SHIMMER: QUESTIONS for DISCUSSION

1. Which are the best parts of this book? Why do those passages work so well?
2. Can you think of any other books that you have read that are at all similar to *Shimmer*? If so, which ones and why?
3. Did the book broaden your understanding of how a shaky, house-of-cards corporation might operate? What does *Shimmer* make you think of the world of business?
4. How is this book relevant to the recent world financial crisis?
5. What do you think of Robbie Case? Is he a good guy or a bad guy or a combination of both?
6. Why do you think he has a constant need for prostitutes?
7. What motivates the characters in this book to work so continually on so little sleep? Do you find their lives glamorous? Why or why not?
8. Do you feel there is an undercurrent of menace and violence in this story? If so, how does it manifest?
10. Do you think that pursuing corporate success is a game to the characters? Why or why not? Are there any symbols of game-playing in the book? If so, identify the symbols.

SHIMMER: RECOMMENDED BOOKS

The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald

Brightness Falls by Jay McInerney

The Smartest Guys in the Room: The Amazing Rise and Scandalous Fall of Enron by Bethany McLean and Peter Elkind

Microserfs by Douglas Coupland

Fountainhead by Ayn Rand

Den of Thieves by James B. Stewart

Bonfire of the Vanities by Tom Wolfe