



AUTHOR INTERVIEW

Victor Cass

1443 E. Washington Boulevard, #223 • Pasadena, CA 91104 • 626.375.5442 • Thelma T. Reyna, Chief Editor/Publisher

Victor Cass is the author of a new novel that is garnering attention because of its timeliness and relevance to our changing American military policies regarding the role of women in combat. It is the first war novel that details how women infantry develop from rookies to brave, skillful warriors in defense of democracy and our nation. And who are these heroes? The “Black Widows,” the world’s first all-female, full-combat U.S. soldiers to be sent into battle against tens of thousands of unified Jihadist terrorists, including ISIS and Boko Haram, in the not-too-distant World War III.



Author photo by Alejandra Ayala



Front cover: *Black Widow Bitches*

This is Victor’s fourth book and third novel, but this book has been in the making for almost 10 years, requiring 5 years of research—including extensive interviews with American veterans of various wars --to create a realistic, fictional world that, in hindsight, is amazingly prophetic. Victor has drawn upon his Master’s degree in Military History and over 30 years of pursuing military research on his own, as well as his extensive writing experience in various genres.

Q: What about your new novel might be considered prophetic?

A: Two aspects. First, our nation recently removed all the barriers to women in the U.S. military being in full combat. Our Secretary of Defense, Ashton Carter, announced this major change in December 2015. Before that, our previous Secretary of Defense, Leon Panetta, had declared that military positions were now more fully open to women. But more than four years ago, I was writing about this being a reality, showing what this looked like, with our American women being transformed from “green recruits” to full-blown warriors. Second, my novel depicts a world where

terrorist groups like ISIS and Boko Haram are able to take over large amounts of territory in regions of the world, like parts of Europe and Africa. When I began writing it, such terrorist groups weren't on the public radar as they are now.

Q: Will the readers of your novel be *convinced* that women can fight in battles, especially women in *all-female* combat units? Against men?

A: Yes. In the first part of the book, the reader is introduced to the women and follows them throughout their trials in basic and advanced training as well as their introduction to combat. People who read various drafts of my novel in the past two years--including military veterans, women, and anti-war advocates--have said the novel was very believable. You get to know these women well and witness their gradual transformation from naive "kids" to trained combat professionals. I conducted careful research to accurately depict the transformation that anyone in our military must undergo, men and women alike.

Q: Tell us about your book's heroes, these "Black Widows" who broke the proverbial "glass ceiling."

A: The feedback I get constantly from readers is how authentic, how believable, the characters are. The women are vastly diverse, representing every ethnic and socioeconomic group, every cultural group, in our society. The top "stars" of the book, for example are a Latina graduate of West Point, a lieutenant who hailed from the "barrio" and who had gang connections in East Los Angeles; a young Black woman who grew up rich and privileged in Chicago's Gold Coast; a virginal, mousy Midwestern, ultra-religious White girl; a dirt-poor, young White woman from Alabama who was domestically abused; an Iranian-American devout Muslim, who saved the lives of many of her comrades; a brave, beloved Asian officer, and so on. These women face discrimination from the military high command who are opposed to their presence, as well as challenges amongst themselves. For example, some LGBT soldiers are bullied by other women in their unit. Some face gang issues, race issues, and so on. I show these women warriors on and off the fields of battle, so you'll get to really know them. The focus of my novel is their huge transformation from fearful rookies to brave warriors. You'll be able to *believe* these Black Widows are genuine heroes.

Q: The book's main character is a Latino officer. Tell us more about him, since having such a hero in an American war novel is rare.

A: It is. To my understanding, there are very few American combat novels in our nation's history with a Latino protagonist. Elias Marin, my book's male hero, is symbolic of a leader who falls from grace due to his own failings, and who then has the choice to redeem himself or be undone by his own pride. At the beginning of my book, before the Black Widows unit is established, Elias makes a choice that ultimately costs many human lives. He sticks to facts that are actually on his side, but his pride gets the better of him. Disgraced, humiliated, his dreams destroyed, he is punished. But soon he is given a chance to step into an unknown and untested arena to train the new, all-female army division, a job no male soldier wants. Elias, as readers will see, is a complex character: incredibly strong, but we see him breaking down and weeping in several parts of the novel. He is cold yet sensitive, not the conventional hero, but more akin to what real heroes are probably like: good, conflicted, afraid, and strong. An authentic hero and role model.

Q: Why was it necessary to create all-female fighting units? Why not just integrate the women with their male comrades?

A: The answer, sadly, is based on reality, not fiction. Despite the fact that America's military has admitted women in certain areas for a number of years now, including military academies, physical

and sexual assaults on women are still a major concern. Women can't rise through the ranks as the men can, because of tremendous prejudice regarding their abilities. Women in the military academies are harassed, and rape is not uncommon. In my book, these facts are used by the male opponents of the Black Widows to prevent women getting into combat. But the proponents of creating the Black Widows point out that, with all-female units, these obstacles and abuses will not be an issue. Similar to research that shows how students in all-girl schools develop greater leadership abilities and achieve more highly than in heterogeneous schools, this all-female model seemed reasonable.

Q: So who are the Black Widows' leaders trying to get this historic division off the ground? Women?

A: Absolutely! Another top star in the book is its highest-ranking woman officer, General Jennifer Reed. She's a visionary but a tough realist as well. She fights hard to get the U.S. Congress to approve the Black Widows division, to approve having, for the first time in the history of the world, an all-female combat unit. Now, get this: *These Black Widows are an airborne division--paratroopers*. They must not only get trained in regular ground combat but as airborne troops as well. They will be warriors dropping from the sky! Luckily for them, Elias Marin is a war hero with airborne combat experience.

Q: Women advocates might argue that having a male leader as the main hero dilutes the "women's empowerment" that might otherwise distinguish your book. Are they right?

A: I've heard this expressed already. I can understand why women feel this way and I respect that perspective. But I was trying to reflect reality. When our military first integrated Black soldiers over 100 years ago, there were not enough Black officers to train new recruits, as was also the case in the Civil War with our Black soldiers. So, until there could be a critical mass of Black officers, White officers were used for training. In my novel, women volunteers sign up in droves for the Black Widows, defying expectations. Because of WWII's intensity, our military is being drained, so the U.S. needs all these recruits, but there simply aren't enough airborne-trained women soldiers, especially at the officer level, to train them. So male officers have to be practically bribed to take on this unconventional assignment.

Q: And do these women warriors turn into cold-hearted killers? How does their experience in war differ from men's experiences, if at all?

A: Great question. There are actually many scenes in my book where the Black Widows fight alongside men, as their battles cross paths, so it's easy to see similarities in their combat experiences. Yes, our Black Widows turn into killers, because their lives depend upon this. But war is the most horrifying event in civilization. No book, no movie, no real-life retellings of war can escape this. War is not glorious. It is sheer hell. Our Black Widows are courageous, tough, sacrificing themselves, as men do, to save their buddies' lives. Our Black Widows include bona fide war heroes, Medal of Honor winners, as you'll see. But no war novel can evade the fact that war is terrible, and our Black Widows are hardened, and many have to fight to hold onto their humanity, or whatever femininity they once had.

Q: Your depictions of death are gut-wrenchingly realistic, whether on a mass scale, or in describing the individual deaths of heroes or villains. Was it hard for you to create these?

A: Very important question, since war equals death. I have been an urban police officer in Southern California for almost 23 years. I recall how I felt as a rookie in a profession that involves guns, threats, all manner of violence, dangerous people, and death. Even now, with all my years in law

enforcement, witnessing death and its after-effects doesn't get any easier. There are physical, physiological aspects to it--which I capture as necessary in my book--as well as the heartbreaking sadness of it, which I also depict. My research in preparation for this book, as well as my interviews with war veterans in different combat jobs, also enlightened me regarding death.

Q: Have you received any blowback from the book's title, *Black Widow Bitches*? Last I looked, the "b-word" is still much reviled, especially by women.

A: Yes! Starting with my editor, and my family. My novel is a tribute to the strength and resilience of women from all walks of life. It celebrates how ordinary people, even downtrodden, disempowered women, can rise to great heroism, can do amazing things they never dreamed they were capable of. It celebrates how women can enter into a "man's world," a place they were excluded from and told they could never earn entrance into--and succeed! My Black Widows are models of inner strengths rising to the surface. I know that the title might appear to diminish that. But the title is meant to be ironic. The title comes from the snarling, hate-filled villains in the book, who battled the Black Widows and were battered by them. The terrorists in South Africa, in Greece and the Balkans, the terrorists in Europe who had never seen strong women take control, who hated the persistence and skills of the Black Widows. To them, through much of the book, these American women are "Black Widow Bitches"--a shallow, monotone, cliché depiction of women that reflects the denigration women have always experienced. Hearing themselves called this, my women soldiers are energized to crush the monsters these men are.

Victor Cass is the author of the novels *Love, Death, and Other War Stories* (2005) and *Telenovela* (2009), which was a "Top 10 Best Reviewed Books" on *Living La Vida Latina.com*. He is also the author of the nonfiction book, *Pasadena Police Department: A Photohistory, 1877-2000* (2001). His poetry has appeared in *Altadena Poetry Review: Anthology 2015* and *Spectrum 3 Anthology: Love Love Love*. His stories, essays, and other nonfiction have appeared in *Arroyo Monthly Magazine*, *Pasadena Weekly*, *Pasadena Star-News*, *If & When Literary Journal*, *Mexican War Journal*, and other publications. He lives in Pasadena, CA. Though Victor has never served in the military, he holds a Master of Arts degree in Military History, with a specialty in Land Warfare, from the American Military University in Manassas, VA. He has researched military history as an avocation for over 30 years. The book can be purchased through Vroman's Bookstore in downtown Pasadena; or through www.goldenfoothillspress.com and www.amazon.com.