

Example Interview with Roy Davis, Author of *STEAMed Off to China*

Q – Roy Davis, please give us a thumbnail description of your new book, *STEAMed Off to China*.

A – My book describes a rushed trip to Beijing, China by an engineering fixer to solve a technical problem while sorting a number of management, corruption, and in the end, a criminal case. A bit of a spoiler alert there. This fixer is a woman engineer with lots of experience working in Asia and even has a team of Chinese engineers she depends on. One problem turns into three, and all three must be solved to avoid a government shutdown of her company's biggest customer.

Q – Roy, your book has quite a few diagrams and maps, as well as photographs. The locations of the events you describe seem to be real, and the photos show real people engaged in the activities you write about. How much of the book is fiction and how much is real?

A – The short answer is that most of the events are real while most of the characters are fictional. That's not to say the characters are not based on real people, as they certainly are. I wanted to limit the number of characters so the readers could keep track of them. I combined multiple people into the fewer characters.

Q – You used a pen name of E. B. Davidson, which I'll ask about in a minute, but I notice you took credit in your own name for the photos. Since you took the photos, can I assume that this female fixer is really you?

A – So, you read the fine print! Yes, the events of the story are based on my own experience. I spent almost a year of my life in Asia working out dozens of technical mysteries, three of which are the basis of this book. Many of the problems were solved quickly, but these three had us all stumped, and the solutions took the multiple runs at them, just like I describe.

Q – But why did you cast the main character as a woman instead of relating the story in the first person?

A – I did not want to write a story that sounded like bragging. I did this and I did that. I wanted to distance myself from the main character. Most of the really smart Chinese engineers I worked with were women, so I shifted the roles around, so the lead American engineer is a woman and most of the Chinese team is male, with one exception. She

upstaged the men with her technical insight, even though she was the youngest member of the team.

The primary reason for me to write the book was to excite young people about a science or engineering career, and especially to encourage girls in this direction.

Q – What is the significance of the name of the main character, Eleanor Brown?

A – Eleanor, or Ellie, as everyone calls her, is my mother's name. She was a very smart lady who passed on her problem-solving abilities to me. She got them from her mother. Mom Mom's maiden name was Brown.

I felt almost like a mother figure to the team of Chinese engineers I worked with, teaching them how to solve problems for themselves, not just giving them the answer. Like the old saw of teaching a man to fish instead of handing him a meal.

Q – So, where is the pen name of E. B. Davidson come from?

A – Well, E. B. alludes to Eleanor Brown, as if she is telling her own story. Davidson could be she ended up marrying somebody named Davidson, but it's really just me inserting my last name into the mix.

Q – What books that you have read inspired your writing?

A – The *Tom Swift* series, both the original and the later *Tom Swift Jr.* were not only an inspiration for my writing, but also my whole career as an engineer. Tom invented things that were ahead of their time. I was the lead engineer of a team that put out a smart phone with touch screen handwriting recognition, third party apps and internet connectivity and sold by two major cellular carriers eight years before the iPhone hit the market. Sorry, I digress, but I had to slip in a brag.

Q – You can brag in a bit but first let's finish with the book. Where did the tough-as-nails, smart, but sometimes crude character of Ellie Brown come from?

A – On long trips my wife would read Stephanie Plum novels out loud to keep me awake while driving. Plum was a down on her luck woman who took up bounty hunting in Trenton, New Jersey. I grew up in the area and knew the streets described in the stories and enjoyed

the interruptions to the story line, like going for a bag of donuts. Food certainly gets in the act in my account. Stephanie's fighting challenges from every direction were a good fit for my storyline.

Q – You say most of the story is based on real events. The scene of the cellular base station with an armed guard on top of the top-secret Ministry of Information building seems pretty contrived.

A – They say truth is stranger than fiction. I did not make that one up! I was standing there on the roof with all this high-tech gear that was perfect for spying and a guard with a rifle staring at me. I thought of one of my fellow engineers who was thrown in jail in Russia for driving down the wrong street with a GPS receiver. The photo in that chapter I took from that roof of the most secure area in China. I'm surprised I still have the camera...and my head!

Q – OK, then tell me what part of the story was invented.

A – There were actually multiple bad guys causing the problems we were up against. I boiled all that down to just one and had him quickly dealt with by a court of law to bring the story to a close. In reality, the bad guys were taken care of by others after I went home.

Q – Back to photos, where did the selfie on the cover of your book come from since Ellie Brown is a fictional character?

A – I'll call that a composite image. I took the photo of the Pleasure Palaces in Xi'an and used it because it just screamed China. Since both Ellie Brown and E. B. Davidson are fictional, I had to resort to AI to create what I thought she would look like. There are no other AI or fakes in the book.

Q – You said you spent many months in China and had many other mysteries to deal with. Are there more Ellie Brown books coming?

A – Oh, yeah! Again, truth is stranger than fiction, and I've got a lot of tales to tell.

Q – Have you written any other books?

A - Not on purpose. I wrote the Digital Dave column in the weekly ComputerEdge Magazine for 25 years, computer advice for nerds. An anthology of columns was published as a book and translated into four languages. It was their bestseller.

Q – But *STEAMed Off to China* is your first novel?

A – Yes.

Q – Of course your primary career is Engineering. Did you spend all your time travelling around the world fixing things?

A – No, most of the time was heading teams of people designing things, such as cell phone chips, but that took some travel to Taiwan. Then I headed up 260 engineers designing the chip, plus the rest of the phone for Globalstar, an early satellite phone system that is still in use. The chip that we designed was used by companies in England and Italy, so I spent time in those two countries.

Q – What was the most surprising moment of your engineering career?

A – The very first project I worked on as an engineer was a radar system for the EF-111 aircraft. It is an electronics warfare plane with no weapons at all. The radar system allowed the plane to fly very low to the ground while simultaneously watching for attackers from the rear.

An Iraqi jet attacked an EF-111 from the back. The pilot of the EF-111 used the radar to avoid the missiles coming at him. He then flew toward a mountain using the radar to pull up at the last second, causing the Iraqi jet to crash. I've read that one of the scenes in the latest *Top Gun* movie was inspired by this event.