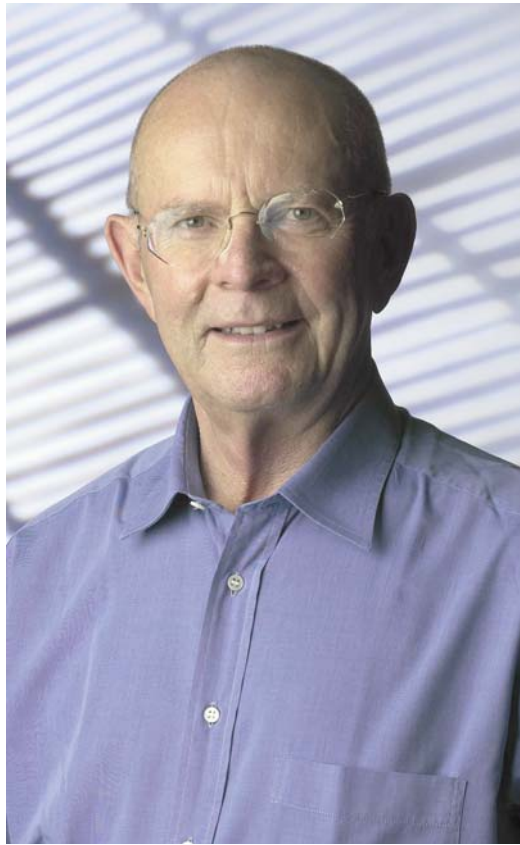


Wilbur Smith



B I O G R A P H Y
&
B I B L I O G R A P H Y

was born of British stock on January 9, 1933 in Northern Rhodesia, now Zambia, in Central Africa. As an infant of eighteen months I was struck down by cerebral malaria, delirious for ten days. The doctors told my parents that it was probably better if I died, because if I survived I would be brain-damaged. Despite the primitive medical facilities available in Africa in those days, their prognosis proved correct; I survived and am now only mildly crazy. Which is good because you have to be at least slightly crazy to write fiction for a living.

I spent the first years of my life on my father's ranch, so I had as my playground 12,000 hectares (or if you prefer 25,000 acres) of forest, hills and savannah. My companions were the sons of the ranch workers, small black boys with the same interests and preoccupations as myself. Chief amongst these was avoiding the discipline and unreasonable interference of our elders. Armed with our slingshots and accompanied by a pack of mongrels we ranged at large through the bush, hunting and trapping birds and small mammals. These we scorched over a cooking fire and devoured with immense gusto. I returned home as late in the evening as I dared with my bare legs scratched and bloody from the viciously hooked 'wait-a bit' thorns, smelling strongly of wood smoke and dried sweat, and infested with bush ticks.

I was occasionally allowed to ride on the back of my father's pickup truck while he went about the business of a cattleman. Later when he had trained me not to talk too much and not to be "a bloody nuisance", I was allowed to run with the herders and bring the cattle in for branding and dipping. As I made myself more useful I was gradually allowed to spend more time with him.

My old man was a Victorian father and ran a tight ship. He would not hesitate to pull his belt out of the loops of his trousers and give me taste of the buckle end. That was perfectly all right with me. I usually deserved it, and a few shots across my skinny little buttocks was small price to pay for being close to him. To me he was God on earth, and I worshipped him.

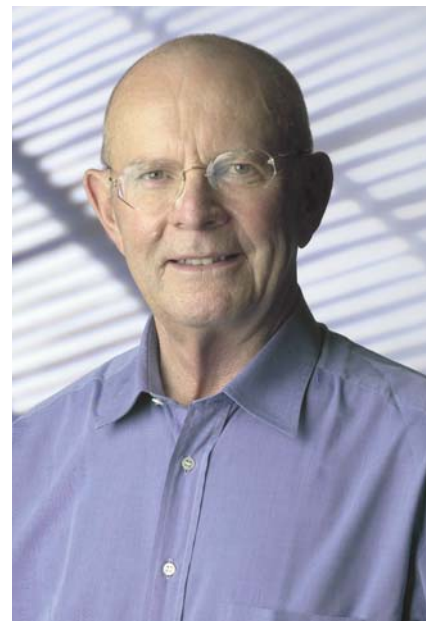
When I turned eight he gave me a .22 Remington repeater rifle. It had belonged to my grandfather before him, and it had 122 notches on its butt. He taught me to shoot it safely and to honour the sportsman's code. Soon there was no more space on the butt for my own notches. It was the start of my lifelong love affair with firearms.

The previous owner of my rifle, my grandfather, possessed a magnificent pair of moustaches only slightly stained with tobacco juice. He could hit his spittoon at five paces without spilling a drop. He could spin a tale to make the eyes of an eight-year-old boy start out of their sockets. In his youth he had been a mighty Nimrod and warrior. He had commanded a Maxim gun team during the Zulu Wars. His name was Courtney James Smith. Later I took his name Courtney for the hero of my first novel, "When the Lion Feeds."

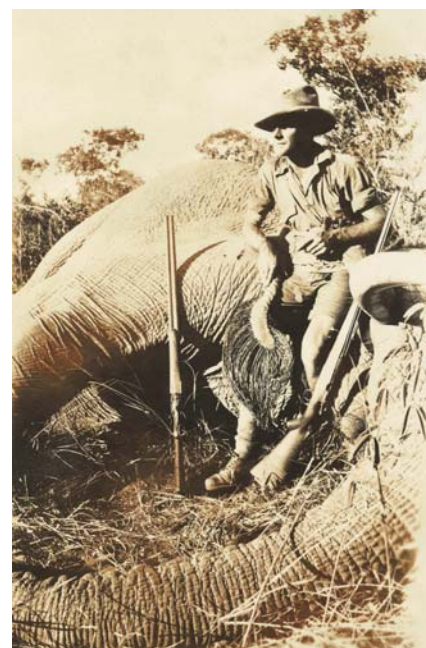
If my old man was God then my mother was an angel from heaven. She shielded me from my father's rage, until it had cooled. She taught me to love all of nature. She opened my eyes to the beauty of the wild world all around me. She was an artist, and to this day at the age of 93 she still paints beautiful watercolours of trees and animals.

Best of all she loved books. Before I could read myself she taught me to revere books and the written word. Every night she read bed-time stories to me, and these sessions became the highlights of my long exciting days on the ranch.

Through her influence I became a reader myself at a precociously young age. I



JOE PARTRIDGE.



My father elephant hunting in the 30s.



With my father, hunting lion. This was not sport – this pride had savaged the local's cattle.



Grandfather Courtney James Smith, seated behind the Maxim gun.

started with 'Biggles' and 'Just William'. Pretty soon I moved on to the novels of C.S. Forester, Ryder Haggard and John Buchan. From then onwards I always had a well-thumbed book in my pocket.

My father felt that my obsession with books was unnatural and unhealthy. I was forced to become a secret reader. I spent so much time in the outhouse long-drop latrine, where I kept a cache of my favourite books, that my father ordered my mother to administer regular and copious doses of castor oil.

School days

Then this idyllic existence came to an abrupt ending. One of my chums was sent to boarding school. I had only a hazy idea of what this involved. But it all sounded very exciting. I suggested to my parents that I should also go to boarding school. Mother burst into tears at the prospect of losing her baby. But my father decided it would make a man of me, so I was sent to Cordwalles boarding school in Natal, South Africa.

This involved a three-day train journey across most of Southern Africa. I quite enjoyed the novelty of the first week or so. Very soon the food and the cold showers and the discipline and the interminable church services began to pall. Then I received my first caning; three strokes across the backside with a light cane for the heinous crime of talking after 'lights out' in the dormitory. My father would never have been so unjust.

I asked to see the headmaster and I told him that if he didn't mind I thought it would be rather a good idea if I went home to the ranch. Apparently he did mind, and he didn't think it was a good idea at all. So I served out my full sentence, eight years of drudgery and misery. If you had no interest in hitting or kicking balls, and if you hated Latin and Mathematics you were considered a 'Slacker'. This was not a good thing to be. It turned you into a social pariah. But, the hell with them. I had my opiate. I had my books.

The school library had a special section in the upstairs gallery devoted to fiction. There were over a thousand titles. I started at one end and worked my way rapidly through them. My English master was a man called Mr Forbes, not his real name. Looking back I realize he was probably gay. He had a register in which we were



Northern Rhodesia (in red) became part of the Central African Federation with Nyasaland and Southern Rhodesia in 1953. In 1964 it gained independence as Zambia.



With my family in the-then Northern Rhodesia in the 50s.

required each week to list the books we had read. The average for our class was zero to one per head. In a good week I would notch up six or seven.

This taken together with the fact that I was a pretty child caught the attention of Mr Forbes. He made me his protegee, and would discuss the books I had read that week with me. He made it seem that being a bookworm was praiseworthy, rather than something to be deeply ashamed of. He told me that my essays showed great promise, and we discussed how to achieve dramatic effects, to develop characters and to keep a story moving forward. He pointed out authors who I would enjoy and books I should read. He even called me "Wilbur" rather than "Smith", as though I was actually a member of the human race.

At the end of the year he nominated me for the form prize for best English Essay. This was my first literary accolade. The book I received was chosen by Mr Forbes in person. I have it still; W. Somerset Maugham's 'Introduction to Modern English Literature'. This was the first time that it entered my head that one day I might join the pantheon of writers, and live on Olympus amongst them. Then at the beginning of one new term I was distraught to learn that Mr Forbes had left the school staff, hurriedly and unexpectedly. I never learned why, only now can I hazard a guess.

I moved on to senior school, Michaelhouse; AKA St Michael's academy for young gentlemen. This was a manifest misnomer as there was not a single gentleman amongst us. Here it was very much the same thing all over again, except much worse. The food was awful and the beatings heavier and more frequent. There was the same obsession with team sports and science subjects. Situated on the foothills of the Drakensberg mountains, the winters were arctic.

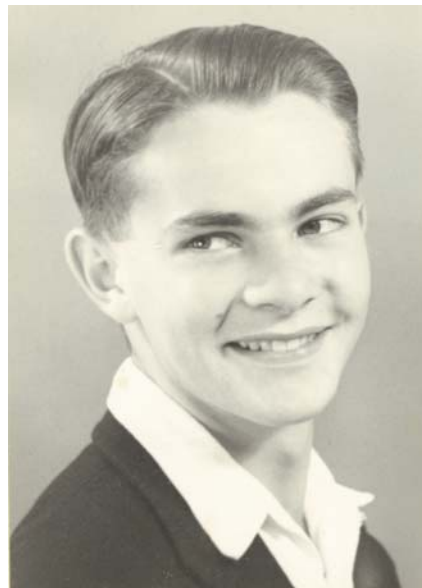
My English master was also my science master, and his heart was totally given over to the latter role. He did not have the wit to recognize literary genius when it was thrust under his nose. There were no more form prizes for me. My sole achievement of any note was to start a school newspaper for which I wrote the entire content, except for the sports pages. My weekly satirical column became mildly famous, and was circulated as far as afield as Wykham Collegiate and St Annes, the two girls schools famous for having the prettiest girls for a hundred miles around.

At the end of the year they awarded the prize for achievement to the kid that ran the Roneo machine to print the paper. The headmaster called me in and explained that they had chosen him as a symbolic gesture on behalf of all the newspaper staff, by which he meant me, besides which the laureate was captain of the Second Eleven.

University days, and hard days

After four years of durance and misery I moved on to Rhodes University, in Grahamstown, South Africa. Paradise opened before me, for here there were girls who did not wear gym slips and walk to church in crocodile formation. Up until that moment I had never dreamt of how soft and warm these gorgeous creatures were, or how sweet they smelled.

From then on I dreamed of very little else. Even books were forgotten in the feverish excitement of this new discovery. In the long varsity holidays I worked on the gold mines, trawler fleets and whalers. In this way I made enough money to buy a Model T Ford and finance my amorous experimentations. Taking into account all this extra curricula activity, it still astounds me that I ever received a bachelor's degree



School days in South Africa

Equipped thus I was turned out from my ivory tower into the real world, where I found that I could not sponge on my father indefinitely, and I was expected to find some form of employment. I decided that it might be wise to do the only thing for which I had shown the least aptitude. So I went to my father and announced that I was going to become a journalist, or failing that a professional hunter. My father was utterly appalled,

"Don't be a bloody fool," he told me. "You'll starve to death. Go and find yourself a real job." I ended up as chartered accountant, and very shortly thereafter as a husband and father of two. I was twenty-four years of age when this ill-conceived marriage crashed in flames. The alimony and child support payments left me penniless. My job in the tax department was soul destroying, and the evenings were long and lonely. I turned once again to my first love ... fiction. But this time I determined to write it, rather than merely read it. I had a ready source of free writing paper at hand, headed 'Her Majesty's Inland Revenue Service'.

To my astonishment I very soon found somebody who would pay hard cash for my creative efforts. I sold my first story to 'Argosy' magazine for seventy pounds, which was twice my monthly salary. After a number of further acceptances, I was encouraged to take a dive off the high board. I wrote a novel called 'The Gods First Make Mad', an atrocious title for a worse book. With a pin I selected a firm of literary agents from the 'Writer's Yearbook'. I sent my masterpiece to them, and in due course they collected on my behalf an impressive array of rejection letters from leading publishers around the world. Like my marriage my career as a best-selling author crashed during take-off. I went back to sending out tax assessments. But soon the itch that can only be scratched with a pen attacked me again.

Good days

I wrote a story about a young man, Sean Courtney by name, growing up on an African cattle ranch. I wrote about my own father and my darling mother. I wove into the story chunks of early African history. I wrote about black people and white. I wrote about hunting and gold mining and carousing and women. I wrote about love and loving and hating. In short I wrote about all the things I knew well and loved better. I left out all the immature philosophies and radical politics and rebellious posturing that had been the backbone of the first novel. I even came up with a catching title, 'When the Lion Feeds'.

I sent the book off to my agent in London, Ursula Winant. Afterwards I heard that she phoned the Managing Director of the eminent publishing house, William Heinemann. His name was Charles Pick. She told him:

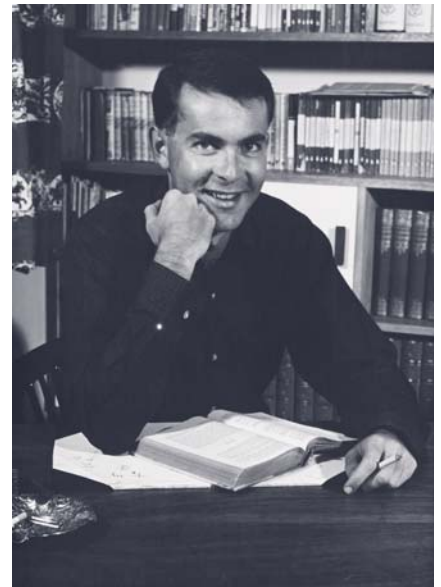
"Charles, I have a book which I will only let you read on three conditions. Firstly, you will give the writer an advance of a thousand pounds." At the time this was an unheard-of sum for a first novel.

"Secondly, you will run a first printing of four thousand copies." This was a respectable number for an established author.

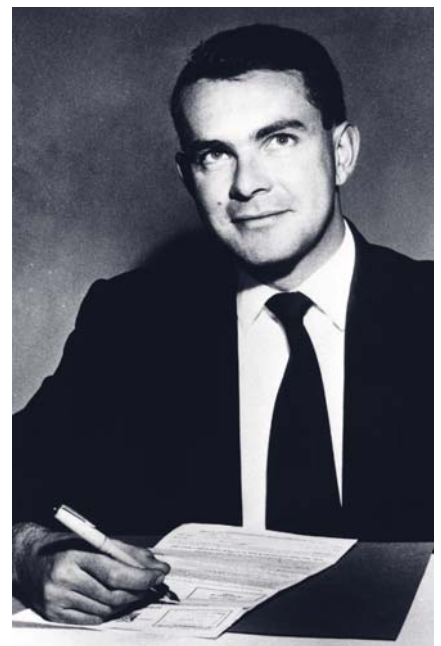
"Thirdly, you will give him a 7.5 % royalty on future sales."

Charles replied, "Send me the book, and we can talk about it later."

He read the book over the next weekend and phoned my agent at her home on Sunday evening. He told her:



This good cheer did not come with my first novel.



Success: signing a contract for 'When the Lion Feeds'

"Ursula, I cannot agree to a single one of your three conditions. Firstly, I am going to make the advance two thousand rather than one. Secondly I am going to order a first printing of ten thousand copies. Lastly I am going to pay him royalties of 10%."

Two days later the postman pedalled up the drive of the house which I shared in squalor with four other bachelors. I signed for the buff telegram form. I opened it, and my life changed forever.

A week later the postman pedalled up the drive with another telegram. Readers' Digest had taken my novel as one of their Condensed Books. I tipped the postman a pound.

In the following weeks the postman visited me regularly. He brought glad tidings of a sale of film rights in Hollywood, of a book society choice, of acceptance by Viking Press in New York for an eye-rolling sum of dollars, of new publishers in Germany and France, of a paperback sale to Pan Books in England. The postman and I became fast friends. He would holla outside my door, "Another one, Bwana!" When I opened the door he had his hand out for the tip.

I had not taken leave from the Tax Department for three years. I had never been able to afford the luxury of a holiday. I cashed in all that leave, and I had enough to live on for the next five years. I gave up the practice of accountancy for good and all time. I was so flush with cash and bonhomie that I made another effort at marriage, with the same result ... a baby followed shortly after by divorce.

Busy days

I flew to London to meet my publisher, Charles Pick. Charles invited me to spend the weekend at his home in Lindfield under the South Downs, near Brighton. We talked from breakfast to bedtime. He was the doyen of British publishers. Nobody living knew more about books and authors than he did. Unstintingly, he shared his knowledge and wisdom with me.

While we walked on the Downs he said, "You have written one book. A good first step on the ladder. You still have a long way to go. It takes ten years for an author to establish himself. We will review your progress each year." Five years and five books later at the same spot on the Downs he told me.

"It's five years earlier than I promised you, but you now have my permission to call yourself a writer."

He said, "Write only about those things you know well." Since then I have written only about Africa.

He said, "Do not write for your publishers or for your imagined readers. Write only for yourself." This was something that I had learned for myself. Charles merely confirmed it for me. Now, when I sit down to write the first page of a novel, I never give a thought to who will eventually read it.

He said, "Don't talk about your books with anybody, even me, until they are written." Until it is written a book is merely smoke on the wind. It can be blown away by a careless word. I write my books while other aspiring authors are talking theirs away.

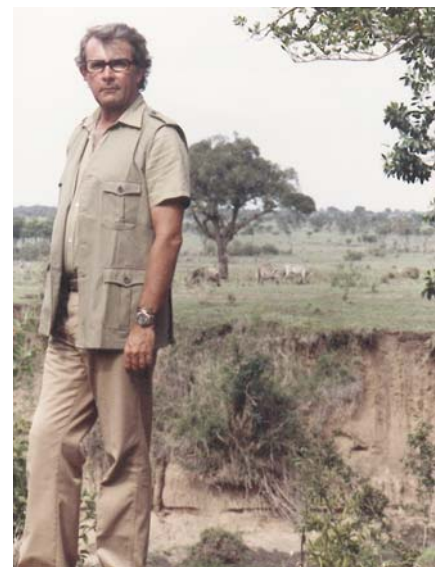
He said, "Dedicate yourself to your calling, but read widely and look at the world around you, travel and live your life to the full, so that you will always have something fresh to write about." It was advice I have taken very much to heart. I have made it



Friend and mentor Charles Pick



The launch of 'Rage'



The land I know and love

part of my personal philosophy. When it is time to play, I play very hard. I travel and hunt and scuba dive and climb mountains and try to follow the advice of Rudyard Kipling; "Fill the unforgiving minute with sixty seconds worth of distance run." When it is time to write, I write with all my heart and all my mind.

By the time Charles retired from William Heinemann, Ursula Winant had died. I persuaded him to take over the role of my literary agent. I do not believe that I could have made a better choice. The years brought us ever closer together. Our friendship is one of the great landmarks in my life. When he died in 1999 he left an enormous gap, which seemed impossible to fill. Once again 'Wilbur's Luck' held true, and Charles' son Martin Pick came forward to fill his father's place. My association with Charles Pick Consultancy Ltd. and the Pick family will run on to the end of days.

After my two previous matrimonial catastrophes I had vowed never to marry again. My father told me: "You should never buy a bean farm, if you can get beans free." I enjoyed plenty of free beans. In fact I got sick of the taste of free beans. I got bored of sleeping in different beds, and the prospect of waking up with a strange head on the pillow beside mine. I began to pine for a companion with whom I could share all my happiness and success. It was the only thing I needed to make it complete.

At this stage 'Wilbur's Luck' kicked in again. I met a young divorcee named Danielle Thomas. She had been born in my home town, and in the very same nursing home. She was beautiful and clever. She had read all my books, and thought that they were wonderful. Me being me, what happened next was inevitable. We were married in 1971, and stayed that way for 28 years. It was a good marriage. We made a fine team. 'Wilbur's Luck' never wavered. I wrote book after book and loved the entire process. Each book was more successful than the previous one.

Worst days

Then Satan sent in his bill, and it was a heavy one. He sent his Big Black Crab to collect. In 1993 Danielle suffered a grand mal seizure. We rushed her to hospital but the diagnosis was a malignant brain cancer, the Black Crab. It was a case of 'operate or die'.

"Who is best brain surgeon in the world?" I asked.

"Professor Mitch Berger, head of the neurosurgery unit of the University Hospital of Denver." They told me. I contacted Mitch. He was on the point of leaving for two weeks holiday. He cancelled the family holiday, packed a bag of his instruments, and boarded the next available aircraft from Denver, Colorado to Cape Town, South Africa.

He had Danielle on the operating table the day after he arrived. It took seven hours but he removed a tumour the size of a goose egg from the centre of her brain. He stayed two days to make sure she had recovered. Then I took him to the airport. On the way there I asked: "How much do I owe you, Mitch?"

He replied, "I am paid by Denver University Hospital. I did not come here for money. I came to try to save Danielle's life."

Later I was able to persuade that saintly man to bring his wife and two lovely children to Africa on safari, as my guest.

But despite Mitch's skill and dedication, the nightmare had begun. Danielle had gone under the knife as a robust, well-balanced, intelligent and loving woman. She came out of the operating theatre a frightened and confused child.



Playing hard, too

Mitch had been forced to leave a tiny piece of the tumour in place. Any attempt to remove it would have rendered Danielle blind and dumb. She had to undergo cobalt radiation. She lost all her hair.

To soothe the terrible injuries to her brain, and prevent the seizures which would surely have followed, she was placed on powerful medication. This was taken three times day. One of the side effects was massive weight gain. She became obese. I told her, "Now there is more of you for me to love."

Every three months her brain had to be scanned to detect any morbid changes. These scans became the focal point of our lives.

In the end the Big Black Crab always wins. The vestige of the tumour resuscitated itself. I flew with her to the United States. Mitch operated again, but this was the beginning of the end. Her condition began to deteriorate rapidly.

In early 1999 she sank into coma. When she died in December of that year I was sitting at her bedside and holding her hand. In death she looked like a sleeping child, utterly serene and peaceful. I had done all my mourning over the previous six years. I was left numb and empty.

Best days

Then 'Wilbur's Luck' returned in full force. Something happened to fill the emptiness and bring me back to life again. In a bookstore in London I met a beautiful Tadjik girl. Tajikistan, her homeland, is in Asia and borders on Afghanistan. Her name is Mokhiniso Rakhimova. She received her law degree from Moscow University. To me she is all good things; beautiful, clever, hard-working, loving and loyal. She is younger than me by 39 years. I married her in May 2000. She brought me back to life. She taught me to love again.

Now with Mokhiniso beside me I look forward eagerly to each day. She has banished loneliness. She is the perfect lover and companion. She has made me feel young and vital again. Since meeting her I have written five of my best novels. In my dedication of 'The Triumph of the Sun' I wrote:

"This book is for my helpmate, playmate, soulmate, wife and best friend, Mokhiniso Rakhimova Smith."

Which about says it all.

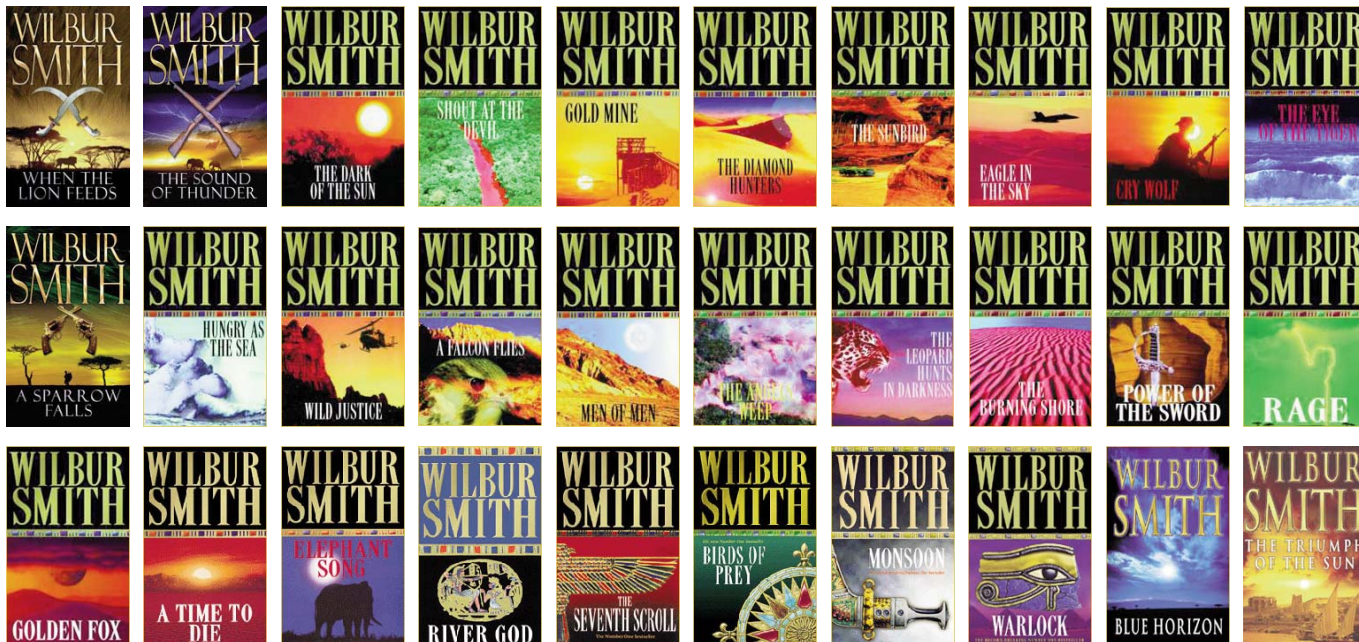
These days I watch my diet. I quit smoking forty-five years ago, and never even touch the dread weed. I exercise regularly, drink moderately, and undergo regular medical checks. So far all of these have come up clean. I am having too much fun to want to die any time soon. I feel fit, happy, optimistic and in love. I have plenty more books in my head, clamouring to be written.

The very best days are yet to come.



Helpmate, playmate, soulmate, wife and best friend, Mokhiniso

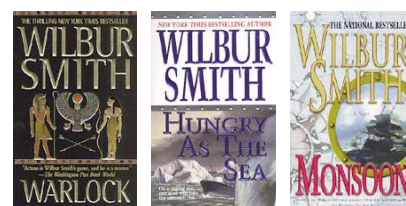
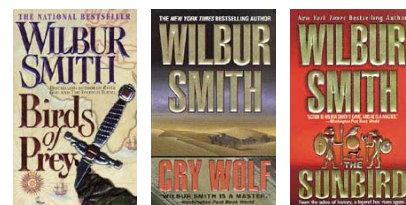




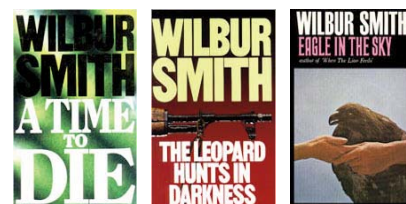
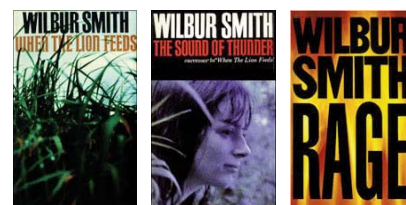
Cover art for the UK editions

Bibliography

Title	Year	Part of a series?
<i>When the Lion Feeds</i>	1964	A 'Courtney' novel
<i>The Dark of the Sun</i>	1965	No
<i>The Sound of Thunder</i>	1966	A 'Courtney' novel
<i>Shout at the Devil</i>	1968	No
<i>Gold Mine</i>	1970	No
<i>The Diamond Hunters</i>	1971	No
<i>The Sunbird</i>	1972	No
<i>Eagle in the Sky</i>	1974	No
<i>The Eye of the Tiger</i>	1975	No
<i>Cry Wolf</i>	1976	No
<i>A Sparrow Falls</i>	1977	A 'Courtney' novel
<i>Hungry as the Sea</i>	1978	No
<i>Wild Justice</i>	1979	No
<i>A Falcon Flies</i>	1980	A 'Ballantyne' novel
<i>Men of Men</i>	1981	A 'Ballantyne' novel
<i>The Angels Weep</i>	1982	A 'Ballantyne' novel
<i>The Leopard Hunts in Darkness</i>	1984	A 'Ballantyne' novel
<i>The Burning Shore</i>	1985	A 'Courtney' novel
<i>Power of the Sword</i>	1986	A 'Courtney' novel
<i>Rage</i>	1987	A 'Courtney' novel
<i>A Time to Die</i>	1989	A 'Courtney' novel
<i>Golden Fox</i>	1990	A 'Courtney' novel
<i>Elephant Song</i>	1991	No
<i>River God</i>	1993	An 'Egyptian' novel
<i>The Seventh Scroll</i>	1995	An 'Egyptian' novel
<i>Birds of Prey</i>	1997	A 'Courtney' novel
<i>Monsoon</i>	1999	A 'Courtney' novel
<i>Warlock</i>	2001	An 'Egyptian' novel
<i>Blue Horizon</i>	2003	A 'Courtney' novel
<i>The Triumph of the Sun</i>	2005	A 'Courtney' and 'Ballantyne' novel
<i>The Quest</i>	2007	An 'Egyptian' novel
<i>Assegai</i>	2009	A 'Courtney' novel



Cover art for selected US editions



Earlier cover art for selected UK editions