

THE LIFE OF R

Thriller author Matthew Reilly is taking his movie ambitions into his own hands





REILLY

in his hands, writes Mark Whittaker.

Jackie Chan's people, they just kept asking for more. Australian author Matthew Reilly had written a script for a "two-hander" with a couple of 20-something good ol' boys from Montana as the heroes. But after the Hong Kong movie legend got involved, he had to rewrite it for a 50-year-old Chinese guy.

When Reilly was in Hong Kong, he teed up a meeting with the martial arts movie hero. (Curiously for the silver screen, the star was much taller and broader than Reilly imagined.) Things went well, but Chan's people kept asking Reilly to play down their boss's part and play up his buddy – a character Reilly had visualised as Jack Black, the slobbishly cool actor.

So Reilly went away and beefed up the sidekick and, at their request, he beefed up the sidekick some more, and it was like, "If I beef him up any more, then he becomes the lead."

But still they wanted more. Reilly knew Chan had not done well at the box office when it was him in a stand-out role. His biggest hits had been buddy flicks, but the writer got to the point where he wouldn't budge for Chan's people any more. "No, the script is good," Reilly told them. "I think you have to commit now." But they wouldn't.

"And so I walked away," says Reilly, sitting over a coffee in his cottage on Sydney's lower north shore. "I think that's the joy of my position with Hollywood; I have a base with books, and I do the scripts in between the books. A lot of screenwriters I meet over in Hollywood couldn't walk away. They'd keep doing it because it's Jackie Chan."

Reilly has come a long way. The last time I interviewed him, in 1998, he was a precocious 24-year-old trying to create the appearance he was the next big

thing in action-thriller books. On the cover of his self-published debut novel *Contest* he'd had the audacity to put his name in huge silver type, as if he was, well, a big name. He wrote in the blurb: "Crichton, Clancy, Ludlum – add another name to the list. Because action has a new name and it is Matthew Reilly." It sold 700 copies.

Seven years down the track, he gets invited to school speech nights to tell the story of his success. How, after having been rejected by every publisher in town, he self-published, convinced a city bookstore to put his book up the front of the shop with the blockbusters, and waited until a real publisher came looking for him. And with his millionth book sold in Australia last month and more than a million more sold internationally, the tale is somewhat inspirational.

Now they call him the king of the hyper-thriller. Sure, he gets a few bad reviews, but he has taken to reading them at writers' festivals as a gag. "It's like eating your enemy. You absorb them," he says. And the biggest laugh is with him. *BRW* had Reilly at 44th on its 2004 list of top earners in the Australian entertainment world with estimated earnings of \$1.5 million, the only writer ahead of him being the equally unclaimed Bryce Courtenay at 29th on \$3.5 million.

In Reilly's living room there are four piles of all the various editions in each of the 19 languages in which his seven books have been published. When I ask him to stack them on top of each other, they don't fit under the ceiling. With his seventh novel, *Seven Ancient Wonders*, published this month, and a DeLorean sports car – the same model that Michael J. Fox drove in *Back to the Future* – in the driveway, you could say he has succeeded in creating the appearance of stardom.

But there's something missing in Reilly's world. He has not tasted the thrill of watching people jump out of their cinema seats at some moment invented in his head – preferably directed by him as well. He wants to see action figures of his scar-faced hero Shane Schofield, video game spin-offs. He wants to spatter fake blood on a clean white wall.

So, as he did when he'd been turned down by the best publishing houses in the land, Matthew Reilly has taken matters into his own hands. And maybe this is the story they'll be asking for in speech nights of the future.

MOVIES HAVE INFORMED REILLY'S BOOKS. HE says that he writes for people who like Bruce

Willis. His first writing efforts were scripts. He had five in the drawer before he turned to novels when he realised the difficulty of getting films made. He decided to crack Hollywood by becoming a mega-selling airport novelist. He and his wife Natalie and some friends had mucked around and made some crummy little short films when they were at university, but Reilly's movie career got its first big break on the savannah of Botswana.

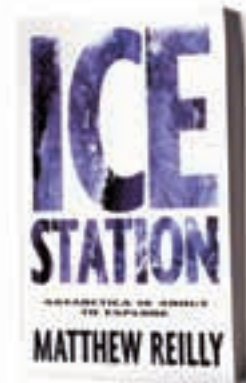
Hollywood producer Kevin Messick was hiding from the

Y2K bug there at the end of 1999 when one of the safari guides heard what he did for a quid. "I'm reading this great book that'd make a great movie," said the guide. "It's called *Ice Station*." The guide went on and on about it, but wouldn't give his copy to Messick. It was a Christmas present from his mum.

But he did let Messick take it back to his tent for a few hours. "I read a good chunk of it and thought this is really good," recalls Messick. "When I got back to the States, I thought for sure somebody would option the rights and I poked around and saw Matt had a website and I emailed him. He told me the rights were available and I told him I was really, really interested."

Messick sold the story to Paramount and got a scriptwriter, John Rogers, who had just got his big-budget movie *The Core* into production so he had a buzz around him. *Ice Station* was on the way.

Reilly played the game. He was wooed with seats at an LA Lakers game. Boy, did he love that. He sat in the Warner Bros commissary and discussed plot points with sharp guys in suits drinking skim decaf lattes. The scriptwriter turned Reilly's British bad guys into Russians, and he changed the object of their quest – a top secret aeroplane – into an alien spaceship, but



◁ Reilly did his best to work with them.

"I got sent every draft. They kept me in the loop because they knew I knew the story; that if you change this, it affects this, this, this and this. I said, 'Listen, if you make it a spaceship, there's all sorts of troubles at the end, because the hero jumps in the plane and flies it. If it's alien, you can't do that.' To watch the screenwriter twist himself into knots – nup, couldn't do it.

"The other thing that happened, the executive who got the book, Alex Young, left Paramount and went to Fox, where he made *X Men 2* and some other big action movies. Turned out he was the only person at Paramount who'd read my book. So suddenly it was the screenplay that had to fight the battles. And the new guy came in and, like a lion taking over the pride, he kills the cubs of the previous lion because if you make

hasn't been nearly fast enough, high enough or adrenalin-pumped enough.

REILLY'S DESK HAS TAKEN OVER his lounge room. Action figures crowd around the tiny laptop on which he writes. And now, muscling in on the clutter is an Apple desktop on steroids that he uses for film editing. "He outgrew his office," Natalie explains. "The toys just expanded."

"I don't buy that many toys now," he tells me, a tad defensively. "She's the one that buys the toys. This giant Han Solo is her doing – a seven-foot [2.1 metre] tall Harrison Ford in the living room. She got it on eBay. It came from Lebanon USA. One of 2500 made." He might not have bought it, but he certainly admires it.

Natalie has taken over his old office since the couple decided late last year

time and you never think anything's going to happen," says Hunter. "He was just the kid over the back fence. Then all of a sudden he tells me, 'Oh, mate, I want to do these aerials over the Olympic stadium in a helicopter. We want to shoot 35mm.' And I'm going, 'What?'"

They did the shoot, although nothing has come of the movie – yet – but then Reilly was back on the phone early this year saying he wanted to make the first 12 minutes of a script he had written of his first book, *Contest*. Hunter was happy to join in. But it helped that the kid from over the back was paying full commercial rates.

Reilly got his brother, Stephen, to research a monster. He found a company in Sydney, Image Creative Partnership, which did some of the characters in the most recent *Star Wars* episode and had worked on the TV show *Farscape*. Ten

high-powered water pistol onto clean white surfaces. It all looks sharp and professional and, if it weren't for the acting, you could really believe you were watching a store-bought movie. The \$10,000 creature appears for all of ten seconds.

"With *Contest*, I set about not making a short film, not a music video, not a trailer. Because I felt that didn't show movie-making skill. I wanted to show people in Hollywood that I could tell a story, but I didn't want to shell out for a whole movie, so we made the first 12 minutes of *Contest*. It's got the creature, the Karanadon, in it. It also involves special effects ... it ends with a three-foot-six actor dressed as a little alien guy welcoming the hero to the contest.

"We FedExed it to my agents in the States a couple of months ago. I got on the phone with them and they said, 'Matthew, we've never seen anything like this before. People do a short film because it's got a beginning, a middle and an end, or people do a music video ... nobody does a short film with an actual animatronic creature head, let alone special effects, and we don't quite know what to do with it.'

"People tell me, 'You don't do it that way; you do it with a short film.' And I go, 'No, I'm going to do it this way. Because I reckon this is what will convince someone I've got the goods and they can give me \$20 million to make the rest.' It's funny when you go to Hollywood. They're the big boys – they don't play around; they want to look you in the eye and think, 'Can I give this person a hell of a lot of money to come back and make a film?'"

EVEN AS I'M SITTING AT THEIR dining room table, Natalie is reading a script that's just come in for *Ice Station*. A young American "previsualisation art director" on some of the biggest blockbusters of recent years, Rpin Suwannath, has picked it as his pet project to move himself up a level and become a director. He's written a script off his own bat and is spruiking it around Hollywood.

For his part, Reilly's been having a few weeks off. His idea of time off is massages and golf and turning the script of *Contest* into a pilot for a television series. Still, he doesn't seem quite as intent on cracking Hollywood as he did back in 1998. He realises how much you have to give away in the process of design by committee. "But it's something I've always wanted to do. I want to tell some stories as a book and others I want to tell on screen. Some just work better on film. I love seeing people jump in the cinema and I'd love to be the guy that makes people jump." ☉

Seven Ancient Wonders is published by Pan Macmillan (\$49.95, hardback). Staff writer Mark Whittaker's previous story was about the Australian scientists who developed the flu drug Relenza (October 29-30).



"I don't buy that many toys now," insists Reilly (with his DeLorean sports car, and the animatronic space creature featured in *Contest*).

the film that your predecessor bought, your predecessor gets the credit."

Meanwhile, Rogers' big movie, *The Core*, had flopped and suddenly *Ice Station* had the smell of death about it. Reilly has had interest from computer-game makers wanting to make an *Ice Station* game, but he can't sell the rights because he knows that whoever makes the movie is going to want the franchise. And he knows it will get made.

Last year, his kids' novel *Hover Car Racer*, which he published in instalments on the internet, was bought by Disney before the studio had even seen the second half. He wouldn't let them have it until his readers had read it. It is "in development" and the best part is he's on 5 per cent of merchandise sales. His people have said Disney are excited about the project because they see theme park ride potential. "I'll be the first in line to go on the *Hover Car Racer* ride," says Reilly, with boyish enthusiasm.

But despite all this, his movie career

that they'd make a calling card for Hollywood. She quit her job as a psychologist in a hospital mental health crisis team to become his producer.

They then gathered together a bunch of people who knew about the film business, such as director of photography Greg Hunter, who used to live over the back fence from Reilly's parents' house. Hunter has been in the business 30 years, but most of it in advertising. He met Reilly one day while he was shooting an ad in nearby Willoughby Park. Reilly, having just finished an HSC exam, sat down and watched him all afternoon as he filmed a policeman holding a speed gun.

About eight years later, Reilly was contacting Hunter about a film idea he had for a terrorist plot during the Sydney Olympics. They could shoot the movie any time, explained Reilly, but they needed to get the aerials while the flame still burned.

"People ask you questions all the

thousand dollars later, they had the profile of a space creature's head, complete with pipes for drooling saliva, a radio-controlled eye and little cables to create an Elvis snarl. He used his dad and some of his old comrades from the Willoughby Musical Society as actors, but he put himself in the lead. ("I've seen so many Bruce Willis movies I knew I could get it down.")

All up, Reilly spent \$85,000 making his little movie. He pulls out the disc and slips it into his excellent flat screen home entertainment system. The movie opens with the credit he's been dreaming of: "A Matthew Reilly film", although it might read more correctly: "One-tenth of a Matthew Reilly film".

There's a thumping original soundtrack written and performed by friend-of-a-friend Blair Joscelyne, and special effects by another friend-of-a-friend, Gavin Tyrrell, who worked on *Superman Returns*. And there is a generous use of gummy fake blood spattered out of a