

TV Close-Up: Tom Selleck

by Eirik_Knutzen

It took about 30 seconds for Tom Selleck to become engrossed in Robert B. Parker's best-selling novel "Stone Cold," featuring a small-town police chief named Jesse Stone, a good cop with a yearning for his ex-wife, a weakness for sexy women (just reasonably attractive will do) in general and a big problem with alcohol.

TOM SELLECK - Tom Selleck plays Jesse Stone, a police chief in Paradise, Mass., in the drama 'Jesse Stone: Sea Change.' CNS Photo courtesy of Chris Reardon.

A huge television star since "Magnum, P.I." rode the airwaves all the way from Hawaii, Selleck took the book to the powers-that-be at CBS and sold the story and character as a two-hour telefilm - with script approval as the show's star and an executive producer. After mulling it over, the suits finally agreed to Parker's proviso that his character's integrity in "Stone Cold" would remain intact - and Selleck was there to be sure it happened.

"Jesse is the mystery in every story, warts and all," explained the 62-year-old actor.

"Stone Cold" was a solid ratings hit, leading the network to order two more installments in 2006, and the fourth, "Jesse Stone: Sea Change" is now a reality. Selleck's police chief in Paradise, Mass., is bored enough with issuing parking tickets to open a 12-year-old murder case involving a bank teller while investigating an alleged rape aboard a luxury yacht.

A fifth Jesse Stone TV movie installation is in the works (already with a serviceable script), but no order has been given by CBS. Meanwhile, Selleck has had several serious "creative talks" with the producers of the NBC series "Las Vegas" about a recurring role as a new casino owner in Sin City.

"I like the idea of being part of an ensemble cast on a non-regular basis, as I did on 'Boston Legal.' It really appeals to me because I'd work pretty steadily, shoot in L.A. and still have time for my family," said Selleck. "And, call me old-fashioned, but I think that I've got an ethical obligation to do the fifth Jesse Stone movie if CBS wants it. It would be complicated, but possible."

But Selleck readily admits that he was offered - and initially declined - to turn the "Jesse Stone" franchise into a weekly series soon after the original movie aired.

"It would be very much like doing 'Magnum' again," he mused, "where I worked every day in every shot. 'Magnum' wasn't yanked off the air - it ended, basically, because I wanted it to."

With tons of money in the bank, Selleck simply wanted to interact with his family while all were awake at the same time. Family means his comely British singer-dancer-actress wife Jillie Mack; their champion equestrienne daughter, Hannah, 18; and Kevin - his stepson by a previous marriage - a real estate developer and the father of his five rambunctious grandchildren.

Between acting and producing gigs, Selleck mends fences and hauls bales of hay on his 63-acre horse ranch located in Ventura County just north of Los Angeles. There are plenty of open spaces for Hannah to practice her horsemanship, a relatively rare skill that now can lead to scholarships at certain universities.

"Jillie is now a self-described horse-show mom - which is not very much like her - because Hannah misses about 30 days per school semester traveling to (riding) competitions and events," Selleck said, laughing. "So, my wife has taken a sort of hiatus from show business to be there for Hannah and manage the details, what has become an extremely expensive sport. We dearly love our daughter, of course, and soon Hannah will be off to college ... and our lives will change somewhat."

Selleck, a Detroit native, also shares his daughter's love for horses - including for business and pleasure. In recent years, the Emmy and Golden Globe winner has almost single-handedly revived the Western genre with "Quigley Down Under," "Last Stand at Saber River," "Crossfire Trail" and "Monte Walsh."

"Westerns are extremely hard to get made, partly because they're expensive, and partly because - for some

reason - people in show business tend to distinguish it by genre. When a cowboy movie flops, they go, 'Westerns aren't working.' I don't want to shock anybody, good Westerns work and bad Westerns don't. I have a script ready to go based on Louis L'Amour's 'Empty Land,' but CBS wants to see how its new 'Lonesome Dove' project from Larry McMurtry will turn out first."

Now that the next chapter of "Indiana Jones" is about to unfold with the creaky Harrison Ford back at the helm, it occasionally crosses Selleck's mind that the huge part once was his for the taking.

"When I read the script and did a screen test they said, 'The part's yours,'" he recalled once more. "The hard part was when I had to turn it down because CBS wouldn't let me go, yet 'Magnum' was just a pilot that wasn't even sold at the time. But I was proud that I didn't try to weasel out of the 'Magnum' deal, which in retrospect was the best thing to ever happen to me."

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