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Five Questions With: Paramedic, Novelist, and Outdoors Enthusiast Graeme Pole

Jonathan Bassett, MA, NREMT

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EMT William Marshall has dedicated his life to providing patient care in Banff National Park. A seasoned medic, "Marsh" responds to highway wrecks, medical calls, and backcountry disasters with compassion and heart. Struggling with his past and a desperately understaffed service, he coaches new hire Miranda Walker through her first days the job. While answering to an overbearing medical director and with the local fire department vying to take over their service, Marsh and Miranda confront public and private emergencies with professionalism, courage, and humor. Against the odds, they turn their service and each other's lives around.

That's the summary of paramedic Graeme Pole's 2016 e-book *Siren Call*, which combined his interests of EMS and the great outdoors. His career has done the same—here he talks about the book and the backcountry.

EMS World: What is your background in EMS?

Pole: I came to EMS quite literally by accident in 1986, when, at age 30, I was involved in a highway-speed head-on collision three hours from the nearest trauma center. My injuries included a ruptured spleen. In surviving that day (it took 11 hours to get to that trauma center) and its aftermath, I gained a tremendous appreciation for EMS and, without knowing it at the time, an education as to some of what is involved in caring for the ill and injured in remote settings.

Two years later, due to lack of staff, the provincial ambulance service was threatening to close the station in the small town where I lived. I stepped up, volunteering as a driver for a year before getting my first-aid ticket. For the next decade I managed the station, packing a pager 5,000 hours a year. We considered ourselves flush when we had a staff of four.

In 1999 we moved to northwestern British Columbia, where I still work. My personal call volume went from a call a week to a call a shift. Now three or four calls a shift is not uncommon. I became a primary care paramedic (i.e., EMT-I) in 2002 and a paramedic educator in 2009. The combination of teaching while still doing calls mandates I stay sharp with everything in our service. Thirty-two years of experience help me advocate for patient care and paramedic safety.

What's the most interesting thing(s) about being a paramedic in your area that your colleagues may not know?

I tell people in my community that, for every time they see an ambulance lit up or hear one going by in the night, we've run silently to or from calls three other times. Most of the street calls I attend are not matters of medical life and death, but many are matters of mental and emotional life and death. It's frontline social work. For many patients the ambulance is their only safety net.

Being a paramedic is a great leveler. Many of the things you see on the job can take the joy out of your day, and a few things can help to top it back up. But whatever is going on in my day when I book on for a regular shift or respond to a page, I know the person who called 9-1-1 to summon me is having a worse day than I am, so I owe them my professional best.

How did you get your start in writing, and what subjects does your work typically explore?

When I moved to the Canadian Rockies from southern Ontario in 1982, I developed a keen interest in the area's mountaineering history. In my mountain travels I taught myself about the ecology and geology and took tens of thousands of photographs. In 1988 I teamed up with a publisher in Banff and wrote a guidebook: *Canadian Rockies SuperGuide*, published in 1991. It was a huge success and opened the door to many other projects: two hiking guidebooks and books on mountaineering history, the fur trade, and railway history. Each has been a Canadian best-seller. I have also written many historical and environmental essays which I intend to publish as a collection. You can see my catalog at mountainvision.ca.

What was the origin of your novel? Can you tell us a bit about the story?

Siren Call was a logical consequence of my love of the mountains and EMS work. It took 10 years to write—at first in fits and starts but ending with a solid year of honing the story. As any medic knows, the job provides no end of potential material, and it's true that medics see many things in real life that sound too far-fetched to be true. I did not directly portray any real-world incident in the story but used my experiences as departure points for flights into fiction.

The main characters, Marsh and Miri, form an imperfectly perfect EMS crew. Marsh is technically sharp—verging on geeky-sharp—and great with his patients but has a tough time getting along off the job. He lives to work and works to live. Miri comes into this picture as a new hire, a bit hotheaded, just as sharp and much more personable. She really is a breath of fresh air, but he resists. Over the course of a hectic Banff summer, we see this crew challenged by all manner of medical and trauma calls, by an incompetent supervisor, and by an overbearing medical director. In the background the local fire department is vying to take over EMS, so the medics' job security is an issue. After a few months Marsh's resistance begins to crumble. His life begins to open up, and we see him and Miri shine in moments where they are pushed to fight for the best for their patients and each other.

Do you have any writing projects or other initiatives planned for the future?

I usually have a few mountaineering and history articles in the works for publication in various journals. *Siren Call* begs for a sequel. I intentionally left the story open-ended and had by no means exhausted the scope for street calls, backcountry rescues, politics, and the environmental side of the setting in Banff. There is no firm target for completion of the sequel—the chute time on these projects can be long—but its moment will come.

Jonathan Bassett, MA, NREMT, is the editorial director of EMS World.

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