



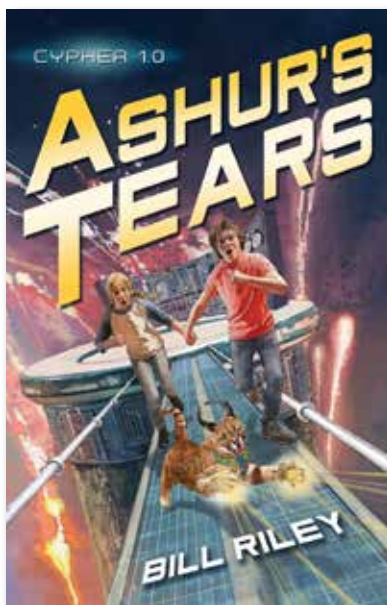
ASHUR'S TEARS

BY BILL RILEY

“An action-packed ride of fantastical tech, ancient oracles and the most likable geek you’ll ever meet.”
—AK Turner, *New York Times* Bestselling Author

“Connects magic and science in an attempt to cultivate a fast-paced addition to the fantasy adventure genre.”
—*School Library Journal*

“I could not stop reading this glorious adventure. Riley is an authentic storyteller with a wicked imagination.”
—Elaine Ambrose, Award-Winning Author of *Melody’s Magical Flying Machine*



Riordan’s *Kane Chronicles* meet *Ender’s Game* in Bill Riley’s thrilling debut upper middle grade adventure *Ashur’s Tears* (Brown Books Kids; on sale: May 31, 2022). Riley lends a voice of authenticity to the over-arching military theme, which he combines with Middle Eastern mythology. Join Toby and Katie Cypher as they face off against a secret government agency, encounter magical forces and decipher the mystery behind their father’s disappearance

Bill Riley has worked with intelligence agencies and special operations professionals around the world. His award-winning adult memoir *Baghdaddy: How Saddam Hussein Taught Me to Be a Better Father* told the true story of how Riley put what he learned growing up into perspective during his missions in Kuwait, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. Living a life of secret missions often meant not telling the whole truth to his kids about where he was going or what he’d be doing. This took creative storytelling, which he’s now channeled into the fictional reality of *Ashur’s Tears*. Fun fact: because of his background, Riley needed the approval of the U. S. Intelligence Community before publishing this book to ensure no government secrets were revealed.

“There is enough room in the world for both technology and magic, and if you never give up, you have the power to change yourself, your fate and maybe the world.” —Bill Riley

SUMMARY: Toby Cypher has it pretty good. He’s on the cusp of success with his mimics (programmable morphing robots advanced enough to be indistinguishable from humans), he’s got a side gig volunteering in the Air Force Museum and a new job tutoring the prettiest, coolest girl in school, Rachel Majeski. Toby’s world falls apart when he learns that his father, Dr. Erasmus Cypher, a scientist whose work is classified, has gone down in a plane crash over Iraq. But then Toby’s sister, Katie, uncovers a secret message in the last song on their dad’s smart phone . . . one sent after the plane crash. Toby and Katie are drawn into the dizzying world of untold danger and profound betrayal, where the two siblings will need all their wits, dark magic and help from an unlikely feline in order to survive.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



BILL RILEY is an award-winning author and retired U.S. Air Force lieutenant colonel. He was the kid who always got yelled at for daydreaming in school but still earned advanced degrees. Mostly, Bill uses his powers for good. He also spent much of his life working in secret worlds. While rarely on the government naughty list, they do keep watch, and this book was reviewed by several agencies for classified information before it was released. Bill wants to assure you—and he is obligated to say—that this story is fiction. The fantastic events depicted in this fantasy book did not happen, and the world was never actually in danger. Really. Bill Riley lives in Eagle, Idaho, with his wife and two sons. You can find him online at billrileyauthor.com, and on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter @billrileyauthor.

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Q&A WITH BILL RILEY

- 1. Your previous title, *Baghdaddy*, became an award- and medal-winning book, and *Ashur's Tears* will be your debut upper middle grade fantasy title. What made you decide to make that genre leap?**

I think *Baghdaddy* was successful because it's a story of family, friendship, and love at its gritty core. *Baghdaddy* was a story I had to tell. It captured my father's death and how I came to put what I learned growing up into perspective during my missions in Kuwait, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, and in my life.

When I was a boy, writers like Tolkien and L'Engle, Heinlein and Silverberg, filled my head with wondrous adventures that took me worlds away from my troubles. As a man, I've seen war firsthand, traveled to exotic, unfamiliar lands and operated within different cultures . . . often in secret places. Now that I've told my story, more than anything I want to take readers on incredible journeys and give them the kind of escape the authors of my childhood gave to me.

- 2. Was it difficult transitioning from adult nonfiction to upper middle grade/tween fantasy?**

From a creative perspective, my transition to upper middle grade fantasy wasn't all that hard. While memoir is tied to real events, fiction is more flexible and offers ways to explore the unreal. Figuring out my approach to this audience was the challenge. Many adults love tween and middle-reader stories and will like this series, but *Ashur's Tears* is written primarily for 12-15-year-old readers whose lives are in a state of change. The physical changes are intense. They're transitioning from grade school and again to high school. Everything in their lives is becoming different, including them. Tween readers have a lot going on.

On top of that, there are more gatekeepers and perceived standards for young readers than for any other audience. I happen to think that's a good thing. Parents and educators work hard to help children grow up to be proficient, and hopefully, enthusiastic readers. So, as I edited *Ashur's Tears*, I found myself recalibrating my storytelling. I also refocused my imagery and revisited my word choices. Those changes helped me show Toby, Katie, and Tansy's journey through their upended world in a way younger readers might relate to and enjoy. That part of writing a tween audience was difficult, but so worth it.

- 3. What led you to choose *Ashur's Tears* as the title for the book? What is/are *Ashur's Tears*?**

Ashur's Tears is an apocalypse-class magical artifact that embodies how the best intentions can have tragic consequences. [spoilers follow] The god Ashur loved mankind. He saw such potential in us, and when he ascended from this world, he left a part of himself behind that held the power of creation and

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a bridge to other realms. For a time, it was known as Ashur's Gift. But its power corrupted the men who sought to use it, and the result was destruction and ruin. As history repeated, Ashur's Gift became Ashur's Tears.

4. Mesopotamian mythology is not a very common mythology in upper middle grade literature. What made you decided to focus on this particular mythology rather than common mythologies like Greek, Norse, or Egyptian?

I was standing atop the great ziggurat of Ur and the day was over. Below me, the Iraqi city of Nasiriyah was hazy and distorted by the smoke and sand hanging in the air. Then the sun set like a goldfish swimming in a fuchsia river. Afterward, city lights flickered, and the ziggurat radiated an orange glow until the moon was a bluish sickle above my head. We were still doing cultural support missions to help protect national treasures after widespread museum lootings, and I happened to cross paths with a legit Iraqi archeologist. This was rare because the only "archaeologists" who worked at night back then were graverobbers. We drank tea at his camp. His English was way better than my Arabic. He told me stories about the ziggurat, the Sumerians, and the moon goddess Nanna. That night left an impression on me that served as my starting point for the Cypher series mythos.

5. What was your inspiration for writing this book?

The idea for *Ashur's Tears* started with the goddess Tansy, and my inspiration for her started with a cat I rescued from a tree on a thoroughbred horse farm in Florida. I named her Smudge because she had a grey marked nose on her otherwise caramel and white face. When I found her, she was a little thing, but she quickly grew into a petite predator pound for pound, fiercer than a lion. One day, she was sitting on the paddock fence, minding her business, grooming herself.

We had a stallion with excellent bloodlines, just back from the track, kicking and throwing a fit in a field. He was dark, 16-hands big, and meaner than a smacked hornet. Until his tantrum was over, no other horses were allowed with him in the paddock because he would hurt them.

He noticed Smudge on the fencepole, galloped straight at her, then turned at the last second, and spun back around, snapping his teeth. When she didn't even flinch, he reared up and came down on top of her.

And Smudge sank a paw-full of claws into his nose. The big horse froze, and my nine-pound cat held that thousand-pound horse in abeyance until she finished grooming. Then she hissed, and when she unsheathed her claws from his nose, that racehorse jumped back, fled, and never came within ten yards of Smudge again. Seeing her grace in action — and unflappable disdain for anything or anyone who wasn't me — inspired the cat-goddess Tansy. The rest of the story grew around her.

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6. **For much of your life, you were involved in top secret military and intelligence operations. Unfortunately, that often meant you were unable to tell your family the whole truth about where you were going/what you were doing/when you'd be back. In fact, to this day, you are still required to have all your writing reviewed and approved by the government before you can publish it! Could you speak to how this part of your life has influenced the writing of *Ashur's Tears*?**

Everyone has secrets. The difference is that a big part of my work meant I had to carry secrets that weren't mine to tell. They still aren't. I was an intelligence analyst during the Cold War. Later, I specialized in communications, strategy, and cyberspace operations. I've also worked with special operations professionals from every service, virtually every intelligence agency, and several friendly foreign governments. I agreed to safeguard and protect missions, sources and, most importantly, people from any harm that might come from any disclosure of something classified.

The problem is kids start to sense there's more to the story. I gave my boys enough truth to cover my absences, but not being there still disappointed them — especially when keeping secrets meant I was away from home for extended periods of time.

That father/son tension is reflected in *Ashur's Tears*. Secrets are tearing the Cypher family apart. Toby and his dad argue over it. Katie ignores it. Both strategies fail.

7. **The book cover for *Ashur's Tears* is quite striking! Could you tell us a bit about the decision-making process that went into making this cover? What scene is depicted here? Why was THIS the scene that was selected? How closely did you work with the artist to ensure the perfect cover? Why did you decide to picture the kids running vs. standing still?**

Ashur's Tears is a visually stunning story, and I worked closely with artist Brian Call. He captured great story moments in his fantastic interior illustrations, but we kept circling around cover art concepts. We knew we wanted to see movement in the cover because *Ashur's Tears* is a story full of action. We had three or four radically different approaches on the table, but no winner. All the sketches were interesting, but each seemed to fall short for one reason or another.

I had fond memories of Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew series' cover-styles, and wanted a design with Toby, Katie, and Tansy in action that looked a little retro but fresh. Our publicity manager, Amy Goppert, also wanted to showcase a key action sequence that a reader would look for and read in the book.

Finally, we had the Zoom equivalent of a cage fight: four ideas enter, one survivor leaves. I thought I was winning with Toby battling monsters in the backyard. Then Brian said, "You know, early on, we talked about maybe showing the kids fleeing from the memory core in Stratos." He did a quick sketch, and we all knew we had a winner. Brian drew the new art, and when it came back from design, it was the perfect blend of past and future.

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8. In *Ashur's Tears*, Katie and Toby are on the same journey but have different paths. They are looking for their father, but Katie is discovering magic while Toby is finding love and coming of age. How did you manage to differentiate their paths yet bring them together at the end? What was your thought process through it all?

Writers talk a lot about two types of people: those who create their story as they go, flying by the seat of their pants (the pantser), and the meticulous outliners who plot every character arc and story development (the plotter). I'm a bit of both. I think a lot about plot, but once I have an idea of where the waypoints are to the finish line, I start running. Usually, I have a clear idea of what I want to happen in a chapter before I write it, but getting there is full of surprises.

In *Ashur's Tears*, Toby is driven by logic and science. Katie starts out lonely. She feels things so intensely it hurts. Katie feels like she's different and missing something, but she doesn't know what. She intuitively understands things Toby doesn't, like when she observes that he trusts the system too much, but Katie doesn't know the hole she's trying to fill in her life is magic. Not until she meets Tansy. Toby and Katie are driven by who they are and how they approach their ever-changing world. Like all of us, they are works in progress as they discover their missing pieces and grow. Along the way they each have epic fails and hero moments, but they have to learn to trust each other, come together and become the family they need to survive.

My dear friend Lucy once told me, "A scar you learn to never get again is progress. It means you got to live another day. It's proof you've grown." Things hurt. If we survive and learn from them, we grow. I think that approach, more than anything else, brought Toby and Katie's different paths together at the end.

9. There are so many characters within this book, and they all have distinct personalities. Which one is your favorite and why?

That's a lot like saying, "Which of your children do you love the most?" I relate to Doctor Cypher. We went through similar things with our children, and I feel for him. He's trying to protect Toby and Katie the best way he knows how, and he loves them more than anything, but he doesn't always get it right.

I enjoyed writing each character for different reasons. I can brag about all of them, like a proud papa with pictures, but how I felt about them will be apparent when you read the book. For me, Katie is the emotional heart of *Ashur's Tears*. I felt her every joy and sorrow and hope when I was writing her, and she never once failed to surprise me.

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10. Throughout the book, there are monumental scenes that happen on an aircraft. For example, Toby takes Rachel on their first date aboard Suzie; during the funeral scene, aircraft fly above; the siblings main form of transportation is the '79 Beechcraft Duchess; and the climatic fight scene happens on the wing of B-2 Stealth bomber. So, what is the significance of aircraft in *Ashur's Tears*?

For me, flight is inextricably tied to freedom and imagination, and it started when I was young. My grandfather made sure we watched every space launch. I was four and in front of the TV when Apollo 11 launched, and Neil Armstrong became the first man to walk on the moon. I don't remember it, but I was there, and to my grandfather, it was something important. Over time love of flight and space became instilled in me. There was technology and poetry and magic in reaching for the stars, and there still is.

Planes fly, I can't fly
Without them, and I love the
Feeling of flying.

It's not only the truth, it's a haiku I didn't even mean to write. My first flight was in the jet from Long Island, New York, to San Antonio, Texas, for Air Force basic training. It was empty except for a dozen of us going to the same place (for different reasons) to be airmen and see where the Air Force would take us. It was a big step. Many of us had never left New York before, and boarding that plane made a bunch of teenage strangers into ... us. We had a common purpose we found on that flight. One that, for me, would last well over twenty years.

The aircraft in *Ashur's Tears* signify freedom and ingenuity and give a sense of where we've been and where we might go. I have had the opportunity to be around and fly in some of the world's most significant aircraft. Through Toby, I share that joy and bring readers along for the ride.

11. You combine the world of magic and technology in your book simultaneously. How has your background in the Air Force influenced the technology and locations used in this book?

One major way my service in the Air Force influenced *Ashur's Tears* was when I was selected to attend the Air Force Institute of Technology (AFIT) on Wright-Patterson AFB (WPAFB), and I was an unusual choice to be a student there. Folks at AFIT will tell you they are the MIT of the Air Force. It's a tough engineering school, and a center for advanced research whose alumni include astronauts. I had done a few noteworthy things, but up to that point, my degrees were in literature and public policy administration, with expertise in communications, information systems, and equine science. I was, by any standard, not an engineer.

But there I was, sitting in a classroom just past the old sarcophagus core in a decommissioned reactor, studying the pros and cons of various nuclear reactions and all their commercial and military applications.

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Our instructor scratched out formulas using ominous figures on the floor-to-ceiling chalkboard, and my stomach dropped. Not because of the material we were covering, which was bracing, because after every video of a nuclear detonation, our task was to determine what made it go boom — that was already insanely complicated. What tied my stomach in knots was our instructor tapping his now crumb of chalk on a squiggle over an equation and saying, “As you’ll recall from your studies in differential equations ...” I was literally soaked in sweat. It wasn’t from stray gamma rays or the temperature in the room (which was kept cool to preserve the special equipment we used); instead, it was the panic of trying to keep up.

My instructor was almost out of chalk when he circled an equation and explained it. What I got out of his instruction was, “and then magic happens.”

That’s when the daydreaming started. In the end, I was banned from the mathematics wing for life, but I graduated with good grades. I took an assignment elsewhere on WPAFB, and learned about the base’s ties to alien lore, worked with the Air Force Research Lab, and did other things.

The National Museum of the Air Force, where the book’s climax happens, is just down the road from the base. With the area’s history and the mind-boggling research conducted there, it was the perfect location for a secret organization in a hidden lab. Then I found a base annex that had been mostly vacant since WWII, and that got me thinking about Asimov Academy. I even mention that old nuclear reactor in *Ashur’s Tears* because it was those classes that brought me to WPAFB and Dayton Ohio.

12. What would you like for your readers to take away from this story?

There is enough room in the world for both technology and magic, and if you never give up, you have the power to change yourself, your fate, and maybe the world.

13. Will there be a sequel? If so, could you tease a little bit of what we might expect in book two?

[spoilers follow] Expect the unexpected. Jack took Katie, and Toby is out for vengeance. Unfortunately, Dayton is still recovering from the EMP bomb, monsters keep popping up, and Toby’s search for Katie has hit a wall. Of course, there are those with the power to help him, but every clue has its price. Hard choices will be made, new enemies will appear, and no matter the cost, Toby will find Katie ... because Cypher’s always find a way.

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METADATA & SYNOPSIS PAGE

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