

# Novelist Bennitt to become a first at BC3

Author to read from work at college's Heaton Family Learning Commons

Oct. 16, 2018



Tom Bennitt, a former Butler Township resident and a John Grisham Fellowship recipient at the University of Mississippi at Oxford, is shown Friday, Oct. 5, 2018, in Butler County Community College's Heaton Family Learning Commons, which opened in 2016. Bennitt, of Cranberry Township, will become the first author to read from his work in BC3's new library when, on Oct. 24, he discusses "Burning Under," his legal thriller published this month by Stephen F. Austin State University Press. The reading and book signing event is open to the public.

(Butler, PA) A John Grisham Fellowship recipient who wrote part of his debut novel within Butler County Community College's former library will become the first author to read from his work in BC3's new library when, on Oct. 24, Dr. Tom Bennitt discusses "Burning Under," his legal thriller about the pursuit of truth following a southwestern Pennsylvania coal mine explosion.

Bennitt, 44, was raised at 278 Old Plank Road, a property abutting BC3's main campus in Butler Township. The Cranberry Township resident will read from his novel, published this month by

Stephen F. Austin State University Press, in BC3's \$6.4 million Heaton Family Learning Commons, which opened in 2016 and replaced the John A. Beck Jr. Library, which dated to 1973.

The reading and book signing will be held from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m., is open to the public and will include light refreshments, according to Ruth Purcell, executive director of the BC3 Education Foundation and who will introduce Bennitt at the event. Twenty-five signed copies of the book will be available for purchase at \$20 each.

The 182-page novel will then join 40,000 other volumes inside the 24,000-square foot facility, whose architecture and state-of-the-art amenities were recognized in a November 2017 article in *Library Journal*, the nation's oldest magazine devoted to libraries.

"That is exciting to me," Bennitt said. "I remember a couple of summers ago getting a tour of the Heaton, and I thought, 'This is beautiful. This is something you would see at a Penn State or at a big university.'"

A portion of the first draft of "Burning Under" was written while Bennitt was a graduate student at the University of Mississippi at Oxford, where he in 2009 was one of two recipients of an annual fellowship funded by Grisham, a graduate of the University of Mississippi's School of Law and author of best-selling legal thrillers such as "The Firm," "The Client," "The Pelican Brief" and "The Rainmaker."

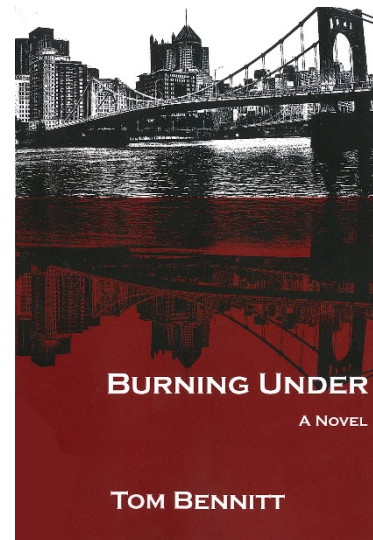
## Characters search for the truth

"I was very fortunate to have three years to concentrate exclusively on my writing," said Bennitt, a Penn State Dickinson School of Law graduate who worked seven years as a legal compliance manager before receiving the Grisham Fellowship on the strength of short stories published in literary journals.

Bennitt, a 1992 graduate of Butler Area Senior High School, earned a doctorate in English from the University of Nebraska, a master of fine arts degree in creative writing from Mississippi at Oxford, and a bachelor's degree from Bowdoin College.

He is the son of Fred Bennitt, who worked at his family's Moonlight Mushrooms business in Armstrong County; and the late Sue Bennitt, an academic counselor at BC3 from 1979 to 1999 who served on the BC3 Education Foundation board of directors from 1996 to 2013 and became its chair in 2005.

"I have this memory of her walking up the street toward the college during a blizzard and she would be wearing this big Russian hat," Bennitt said of his mother, laughing. "It was a different



"Burning Under," the debut novel by Tom Bennitt, of Cranberry Township, is a legal thriller about the pursuit of truth following a southwestern Pennsylvania coal mine explosion. The book was published this month by Stephen F. Austin State University Press.

experience, too, because in the 1970s and '80s, most of my friends did not have working mothers, yet I came from a two working-parent household.”

Working-class characters in “Burning Under” search for truth in the aftermath of a coal mine explosion in Millburg, a fictitious southwestern Pennsylvania town with features not unlike Butler’s neighborhoods, such as Lyndora Hill.

The novel’s major event, a coal mine explosion, was influenced by disasters in Tallmansville, W.Va., where 12 employees were killed and only one survived a Sago Mine blast in 2006; and in Montcoal, W.Va., where 29 of 31 workers were killed on the site of an Upper Big Branch Mine-South explosion in 2010.

The U.S. Department of Labor’s Mine Safety and Health Administration in 2011 reported that Massey Energy’s “corporate culture was the root cause of the tragedy” at Upper Big Branch-South, issuing nearly 370 citations, including “an unprecedented 21 flagrant violations,” and levying nearly \$11 million in fines – the largest in the agency’s history at that time.

The agency in 2007 found that measures could have been taken by International Coal Group and the Wolf Run Mining Co. to prevent the Sago disaster, one likely caused by a lightning strike. While federal investigators reported 149 violations, none were found to have led to the explosion, the agency reported.

## Author “interested in hearing the whole story”

In researching his novel, Bennitt traveled to West Virginia, where he discussed the accidents with local residents.

“I would tell them I was just interested in hearing the whole story,” Bennitt said, “and what really happened.”

Which is what the characters in his polyphonic narrative intend to do as they uncover a massive cover-up engineered following a blast that kills 10 miners and leaving as its sole survivor Larry Jenkins, who cannot avoid the media spotlight or a hero label.

Denise McCurdy, wife of another miner; Jenkins; and an attorney named Simon Yoder – the surname of Bennitt’s maternal grandmother – form an alliance to determine whether Yoder’s company, Commonwealth Energy, caused the accident as a result of its low safety and ethical standards. Assisted by his girlfriend, Anita Sekran, a Pittsburgh reporter, Yoder uncovers a trail of evidence implicating George Blount, Commonwealth Energy’s chief executive officer.

“The point of view,” Bennitt said, “shifts between three people whose lives are shaken by the disaster.”

## “No pure heroes. No pure villains”

“Chock-full of Western Pennsylvania atmosphere and attitude, Bennitt’s debut opens like a whistleblower novel before snowballing into a thriller about the price of loyalty and betrayal,” wrote Stewart O’Nan, a Pittsburgh resident and author of “Snow Angels” in a review of “Burning Under.”

“As folks around here know,” O’Nan wrote, “lawyers, guns and money can’t fix everything.”

O’Nan advised Bennitt that “Every line of dialogue should be a punch or a caress, and that each line should be something very powerful.” He told Bennitt to “Take out all the small talk.”

Another of Bennitt’s mentors told him that “‘There are no pure heroes. No pure villains. When you are writing good characters, they both have this mix of good and evil, like we all do.’ I always think about that when I am writing my protagonist or my villain.”

Part of the writing of “Burning Under” also occurred at BC3. During Bennitt’s visits home from Mississippi, he would often go to the John A. Beck Jr. Library to work.

Bennitt describes Oxford as a “great place to learn how to write” with a literary culture that attracts well-known authors on national book reading tours. It was also a great place to learn to write, Bennitt said, because of its many story-telling residents, including bartenders and waitresses. Oxford was also once home to Grisham, and Nobel Prize Laureate and Pulitzer Prize-winning writer William Faulkner.

## “There are some people who go a little awry”

As Bennitt drafted the novel he imagined Millburg as a town that included steep inclines, much like Lyndora Hill, and a vista that would open up to brownfields, where company-owned rowhomes encroached the town tavern under the watchful gaze of golden-domed churches.

Western Pennsylvania readers may recognize something of themselves, or in someone they know, in “Burning Under,” according to Bennitt.

“I try to be true to these people,” he said. “I try to show that they are honest, hard-working, God-fearing people who believe in the system. They are, for the most part, the salt-of-the-earth kind of people who make an honest effort to earn a living and raise families. But there are some people who go a little awry, as well.”