

Biography/Interview: Dennis Lehane

by John Bond



Dennis Lehane is a graduate of Eckerd College's undergraduate Creative Writing Program and has an MFA in Creative Writing from Florida International University. His first novel, *A Drink Before the War*, won a Shamus Award for best novel by a new novelist from the Private Eye Writer's Association. That grew into a five novel series featuring Boston detectives Patrick Kenzie and Angie Genarro. For his sixth novel, *Mystic River*, Lehane left his serial protagonists and the first-person point of view behind and forged a new multiple third-person point of view world about new characters. The departure from the tried and true proved successful, as *Mystic River* spent months on *The New York Times* bestseller list, and was purchased by Clint Eastwood's Malpaso Productions. Shooting on the film version of *Mystic River* recently wrapped up, and the scheduled release date is October 3rd, 2003. *Mystic River* won the Massachusetts Book Award, was nominated for a Pen Award, and was said by critics to have blurred the line between literary fiction and genre fiction. His seventh novel, *Shutter Island*, set during the Cold War, is due for release in May, 2003.

John Bond: You don't sound Boston. Is Boston a big part of your life?

Dennis Lehane: Yup, born and raised. I'd never leave. It's just home. It's where people get my jokes. I'm very much a location writer. Place is really important to me. It's what I know.

JB: Give me the short bio.

DL: Dorchester where I grew up is a working class world, between the Boston neighborhoods of South Boston and Roxbury. The big aspiration was to get a job with the electric company, have security and benefits. When I was young there, it was a violent place, mostly due to the racial tensions of the times. I saw a lot of violence in my youth. Ours was an Irish neighborhood. Both my parents are from Ireland, and despite what was going on around us, I grew up in a loving environment. My dad was one of eighteen brothers and sisters, and we had

something like one hundred twenty first cousins.

JB: Do you think the Irish storytelling tradition had something to do with your own growth as a writer?

DL: I'm sure it did. To be Irish is to go down to the pub and trade sad, funny stories over a pint. Dorchester of my youth was a storytelling place. The urban ethnic neighborhood is vanishing for many good reasons, but it was always a storytelling culture where your story better be good and better be funny.

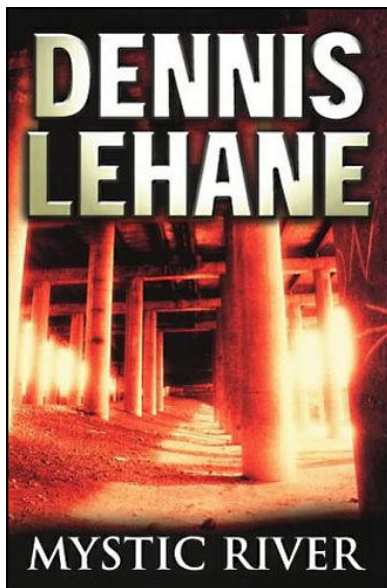
JB: Were you the first in your family to graduate college?

DL: My immediate family, yes.

JB: Catholic School?

DL: St. Margaret's.

JB: And then?



DL: I had dabbled in social work after high school, and knew I was going to be a social worker or a writer. Once I decided on writing, it was full speed ahead. I was fortunate that one of my professors at Eckerd College hooked me up with an agent based on early drafts of *A Drink Before the War*. She's still my agent, and is likely to be for a long, long time to come.

JB: They tell a story about you at Florida International University: during parties you'd slip away to write.

DL: (Laughing) That only happened a couple of times.

JB: What is your writing schedule? How does it integrate into the other parts of your life?

DL: It depends where I am in a project. At the beginning it's mostly sitting around thinking. Which has its advantages . . . my wife can't tell if I'm debating taking the Patriots with the points or fleshing out a character's backstory. Of course if my character would mull whether to take the points maybe I'm doing both. Writer Tim O'Brien said eighty percent of all writing is thinking. As a book gets going, I might write two to three hours a day. As it gets towards the end, I'm cooking sixteen hours a day.

JB: Are you deadline driven?

DL: I've never met a deadline. But if I didn't have deadlines, I'd never finish anything.

JB: Why write crime fiction?

DL: I think more than anything the crime novel lends itself to social concerns, writing about the disenfranchised, the underbelly, the second America that people never see. That's why I love George Pelecanos. It's where noir is today. I love the fiction of mortal event or consequence. I want something dire to happen. Sooner or later I just want someone to die. But my stories aren't like the classic mystery where you challenge the reader to figure out whodunnit, but rather how people are affected by what happens, and the world around them. I'd just as soon tell you in the first chapter who did it. That is less important than why and what happened to everyone else affected.

JB: What drives your writing?

DL: I want to write a book that lasts. The idea of work that lives on after you're dead is ludicrous; you won't know the difference. But that idea is there. I want what I write to still be on the shelves fifty years after I'm dead. And of course you never know if you've hit that. So it keeps you striving.

JB: Do you write poetry?

DL: I write poems occasionally to force myself into concrete imagery. I use the meter and rhythm to force myself into form. They're part of my creative process, but they're for myself only. I don't give them to anybody.

JB: What influences your work?

DL: I read less when I'm writing because I worry about it bleeding in. I try not to let outside stuff in. But you are who you are. I'm a bastard child of pulp and literary fiction, subscribe to *Harper's* and *Entertainment Weekly*. I'm influenced by

a million other writers. Jim Thompson, Donald Westlake, Richard Price, William Kennedy, Pete Dexter, James T. Farrell, James Crumley. George Pelecanos and Daniel Woodrell are the mystery writers I enjoy the most. When I read them, I feel like home.

JB: How do you feel about being cast as a genre writer?

DL: Genre is about marketing. Every writer sets out to write the best book he can. The subcategories of crime fiction--mystery, thriller, psyche, et cetera--are less about the writing than they are about selling the book. Likewise literary fiction, romance, even science fiction and fantasy. Writing fiction is about plot and character. Why characters do what they do, how people change or don't change. The rest is mostly a marketing concept.**JB:** What's your favorite novel?

DL: *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

JB: What books would you recommend to those who want to write?

DL: *Writing Fiction* by Janet Burroway. Gardener's *On Moral Fiction*. *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, Raymond Carver. *On Directing Film*, by David Mamet. Wannabe crime writers should read *The Last Good Kiss*, by James Crumley, the greatest detective novel ever written. It caused the renaissance of crime fiction. Read pretty much everything you can get your hands on. Writers need to be readers. Read everything.

JB: What marks your writing?

DL: My best writing is based on tragedy. I think tragedy is an extremely optimistic form, because through that experience the reader connects to a universal and feels far less alone. We live through Hamlet. My wife says *Mystic River* could have been called *Everybody Loses*.

JB: What's the most important element of writing fiction.

DL: Character. I think plot is a big sign of strength, but you cannot remove plot from character. I find a lot of similarities between character development and Method Acting, immersing yourself in the character a la Stanislavsky's *Sense Memory Method*.

JB: Your novels are very suspenseful.

DL: What keeps suspense and tension isn't what's on the page but what isn't. I like Hemingway's tip of the iceberg theory: the tip of the iceberg is what shows in the book, but what lies below the waterline is what you know that remains unsaid.

JB: Is there a secret to writing?

DL: Yeah. Write.

JB: Beyond that. What works for you?

DL: Writing a novel is like potato salad; everybody has a different recipe. I write with pen in hand, have to write longhand. I don't outline because it squeezes the life out of my work. I start with a beginning and an end, though the end changes. Then I start to write my way through the crap; all the ideas that don't work, the dead ends. All writers have to write through the crap; it's one of the hardest things. But you have to keep on going.

JB: Some advice for writers?

DL: When you write, think about why you read. It's all about telling the story at the campfire and keeping them awake. It takes great bravery to decide to be a writer; nobody said it was easy and it takes a lot of work. I don't have sympathy for people who won't do the work in anything, not just writing. It costs. Remember the thing that writers can deliver that no other medium can is depth of language. Pay attention to the words you choose; every one counts. Death to adverbs. Kill all adverbs, then go back and use the ones you really need. Give heroes a flaw. Give bad guys something cool. And above all remember what Stanley Kubrick said: the job of the artist is not to answer but to ask questions.

JB: Do you foresee getting burnt out?

DL: Never! I get paid to do what I'd do anyway. I love what I do and I have a great publisher who gave me the main thing I need: two years to write a book. Some people can turn out a book a year, but I'm not one of them. I'm going to write till I drop.

John Bond writes and plays computer games from his home in Dania Beach, Florida. He is the co-author of *Real Poker: The Cooke Collection* and *Real Poker II: The Play of Hands*.