



Mystic River

by Dennis Lehane

Source: Contemporary Authors Online, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Entry updated: 08/31/2006

“Sidelights”

“There was never any doubt in Dennis Lehane’s mind that he was going to be a writer,” stated January editor Linda Richards following her interview with the author. “It wasn’t much a matter of ‘if’ as much as ‘how’ and ‘when.’” The son of working-class Irish immigrants, Lehane grew up in Boston during the 1970s and 1980s “with a sense that life was hard and unfair and you just tried your best,” he told Publishers Weekly interviewer Louise Jones. “Your children were your life and you did all you could for them.” By age twenty, Lehane--a dedicated reader since childhood--was writing stories but did not submit them “because my stories didn’t meet my high standards,” he said to Jones. After graduating from college in 1988, Lehane entered the M.F.A. program in creative writing at Florida International University. From there it was just a few years until Lehane’s first mystery novel was published. In fact, he bucked the stereotype of the typical starving artist: “My publishing career is such a fluke. I got to it faster than I expected. I have no publishing horror stories,” he told Jones.

Lehane garnered several admiring reviews for his debut. The author’s voice, “original, haunting and straight from the heart, places him among that top rank of stylists who enrich the modern mystery novel,” noted a Publishers Weekly writer. Numerous other critics remarked that Lehane’s hard-edged style, ambiguous characters, and unresolved endings combine to create some of the best in modern mystery writing. The main characters in most of his novels are Patrick Kenzie and Angela Gennaro, two young, cynical detectives based in Boston where they grew up together. Their debut in *A Drink Before the War* showed “plenty of promise,” according to Emily Melton in Booklist. New York Times Book Review critic Marilyn Stasio felt that the novel was marred by “a lot of cornball cliches and puerile private-eye humor,” but she admitted that Lehane “has some honest things to say about racial and class warfare in working-class neighborhoods.... This is good, serious stuff, but it’s not easy to reconcile it with the flippant style.”

Darkness, Take My Hand was the next novel featuring Patrick and Angie, and it drew rave reviews from numerous critics. In this story, the detectives search for a brutal rapist and killer with connections to their own past. Melton described it in Booklist as “an explosive story that is at once gut-wrenchingly violent and achingly melancholy.... In a series of heart-stopping climaxes that grow ever more terrifying and bloody, Patrick and Angie lose nearly everything. Lehane’s perfectly crafted plot leers, teases, taunts, and lulls, scattering bits of humor and heartbreak among the soul-chilling episodes of death and destruction. A tour de force from a truly gifted writer.” People Weekly’s Pam Lambert was also enthusiastic, calling the book a “crackling thriller.” She added, “Lehane’s plotting is heart-poundingly suspenseful. However, even it is topped by the novels’ subtler attractions: a sense of place as palpable as the pungent tang of garlic in the North End air, haunting characters and a gracefully elegiac style that lingers long after you’ve closed the covers.”

Sacred is “another gritty and surpassingly entertaining mystery” that proves Lehane “belongs in the big leagues,” in the opinion of a Publishers Weekly reviewer. The writer pointed out Patrick’s “smart and of-

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ten funny narration" as one of the strengths of the book and commented that "for most of the novel, the punishing pace and internal plot logic perform in perfect tandem." Lambert gave her approval to *Sacred* in her *People* review, calling the book a "dark maelstrom of a mystery." She admitted that in her opinion, the book lacks the "terrible beauty" of *Darkness Take My Hand*, but concluded that it "still crackles with enough suspense to make for many a midsummer night's screams."

The detectives search for a little girl kidnapped by a child pornography ring in Lehane's fourth novel, *Gone, Baby, Gone*. Karen Anderson, a reviewer for *Library Journal*, described it as "a tense, edge-of-your-seat story about a world that is astoundingly cruel and unbearably violent to its most innocent members." And Lambert, in another *People Weekly* assessment, called *Gone, Baby, Gone* a "chilling, masterfully plotted tale into that dark place where men try to play God and everyone gets hurt."

As 1999's *Prayers for Rain* begins, Patrick and Angie, having gone through a romance and a breakup, have turned their separate ways. Patrick works alone in Dorchester, while Angie has signed on for security work in a high-tech firm. But she is tempted away from the corporate life to help Patrick solve the mystery of a former client who has apparently leaped to her death off the Customs House Tower. Reviewing the work for *Booklist*, Wes Lukowsky commented: "Lehane has worked his way into the top echelon of crime writers."

Following five Kenzie/Gennaro stories, Lehane decided to "give those characters a rest," as Adam Dunn put it in a CNN report. He turned his attention to a new kind of writing: the stand-alone novel. Daily Telegraph reporter Michael Carlson noted that it is "exciting" to see such a departure: "Critics tend to devalue 'series' novels.... Recurring characters may be fine for Mark Twain or Anthony Powell, but for detective writers they are seen as just another genre shortcut." Lehane's resulting work, *Mystic River*, is set in working-class Boston, like his mystery series. But, according to Carlson, absent of the trappings of the detective tale, the novel "brings the neighbourhood into bleaker focus."

Reviewing *Mystic River* for *USA Today*, Carol Memmott wrote: "In every generation, a handful of writers of detective fiction set the pace for the rest.... [F]ew can match [Lehane's] capacity for capturing human emotion and our capability to do evil.... His ability to create crystal-clear portraits of humanity and then place them in the darker side of life is a writer's true gift." The story opens in 1975 when two eleven-year-old boys witness a third boy, their friend, bullied into a car and driven off by two strange men. Twenty-five years later, the lives of the three boys cross paths again: Sean is a burned-out cop; Jimmy is an ex-con whose teenage daughter is murdered; and Dave, who suffered abuse at the hands of the strange men in the car, "makes readers aware that he is a ticking time bomb," according to Dunn. Sean is assigned to investigate the murder; the prime suspect is Dave. The author, said Stasio in a *New York Times* Book Review piece, "spares nothing in his wrenching descriptions how a crime in the neighborhood kills the neighborhood, taking it down house by house, family by family." *Newsweek's* Malcolm Jones lauded Lehane's "near-perfect pitch when it comes to capturing the rage that fomented racial war in the '70s and today fuels the resentment of working-class residents being driven out of [their neighborhoods] by skyrocketing property taxes and rents." Like all Lehane's books, added Jones, *Mystic River* "shimmers with great dialogue and a complex view of the world."

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The plot of *Shutter Island*, described by Joanne Wilkinson in *Booklist* as a “blistering page turner,” revolves around a virtually impossible escape of an inmate from a federal institution for the criminally insane on the small Shutter Island in the outer harbor of Massachusetts and two U.S. Marshalls who go to investigate. Wilkinson commented: “A master of the adroit psychological detail, Lehane makes the horrors of the mean streets pale in comparison to the workings of the human mind.”

In her January interview, Richards commented on Lehane’s use of the Irish-American dialect in *Mystic River*. The author responded that “in immigrant cultures, particularly Irish which is a very storytelling culture, a very musical culture ... there’s a certain rhythm to the language.” He credited his parents with imparting their verbal gifts, saying: “My only gift as a writer--the only thing I was given, everything else I worked for--was an ear. I always had a good hear. I could always write dialog.”

Of his method of writing, Lehane once commented: “I barely have a writing process. I have tried to force myself to write every day, keep a journal, and so on, but all that seems to do is make me self-conscious. I tend to write best in big bursts after long periods of silence. During those bursts, I usually write sixteen hours a day, day in and day out, until the battery runs dry. I don’t recommend this process, but it’s the only one that’s ever worked for me.”

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Born August 4, 1965, in Dorchester, MA; son of Michael (a foreman) and Ann (a school cafeteria worker) Lehane; married, 1999; wife’s name, Sheila. Education: Eckerd College, B.A.S., 1988; Florida International University, M.F.A., 1993. Politics: “Relatively apolitical.” Avocational Interests: Directing films. Addresses: Agent: Ann Rittenberg, Ann Rittenberg Literary Agency, 1201 Broadway, Suite 708, New York, NY 10001.

AWARDS

Shamus Award, best first novel, 1994, for *A Drink before the War*; finalist for L.L. Winship/ PEN New England Award, and Anthony Award for Best Novel, both 2002, both for *Mystic River*.

CAREER

Writer. Therapeutic counselor for mentally handicapped, emotionally disturbed children, 1986-91; Florida International University, Miami, instructor in English, 1991-93; Ritz-Carlton Hotel, Boston, MA, chauffeur, 1993-95.

WRITINGS

MYSTERY NOVELS

- *A Drink before the War*, Harcourt (Orlando, FL), 1994.
- *Darkness, Take My Hand, Morrow* (New York, NY), 1996.
- *Sacred, Morrow* (New York, NY), 1997.
- *Gone, Baby, Gone, Morrow* (New York, NY), 1998.
- *Prayers for Rain, Morrow* (New York, NY), 1999.
- *Mystic River, Morrow* (New York, NY), 2001.

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- Shutter Island, Morrow (New York, NY), 2003.

OTHER

- Coronado: Stories, Morrow (New York, NY), 2006.

Writer, director, and producer of the film *Neighborhoods*.

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS

The film rights to *Prayers for Rain* were purchased by Paramount Pictures. *Mystic River* was adapted for film by Warner Brothers in 2003.

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PERIODICALS

- Booklist, November 15, 1994, Emily Melton, review of *A Drink before the War*, p. 582; July, 1996, Emily Melton, review of *Darkness, Take My Hand*, p. 1809; April 15, 1999, Wes Lukowsky, review of *Prayers for Rain*, p. 1481; May 1, 2001, Bill Ott, review of *Mystic River*, p. 1599; April 1, 2003, Joanne Wilson, review of *Shutter Island*, p. 1355.
- BookPage, February, 2001, review of *Mystic River*, p. 10.
- Boston Herald, March 4, 2001, review of *Mystic River*, p. 65.
- Esquire, February, 2001, review of *Mystic River*, p. 38.
- Globe and Mail (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), June 12, 1999, review of *Prayers for Rain*, section D, p. 19; February 17, 2001, review of *Mystic River*, section D, p. 13.
- Houston Chronicle, March 11, 2001, Martha Liebrum, "Murder Reconnects Boyhood Pals in Lehane Thriller," p. 15.
- Kirkus Reviews, May 15, 1999, review of *Prayers for Rain*, p. 757.
- Library Journal, June 15, 1997, Ahmad Wright, review of *Sacred*, p. 98; July, 1998, Karen Anderson, review of *Gone, Baby, Gone*, p. 137; June 15, 1999, Wilda Williams, review of *Prayers for Rain*, p. 108.
- Newsweek, February 19, 2001, Malcolm Jones, "Mean Street Makeover," p. 58.
- New Yorker, February 19, 2001, review of *Mystic River*, p. 223.
- New York Times Book Review, December 11, 1994, Marilyn Stasio, review of *A Drink before the War*, p. 38; July 25, 1999, Marilyn Stasio, review of *Prayers for Rain*, p. 20; February 18, 2001, Marilyn Stasio, review of *Mystic River*, p. 25.
- People, July 22, 1996, Pam Lambert, review of *Darkness, Take My Hand*, p. 30; August 25, 1997, Pam Lambert, review of *Sacred*, p. 38; August 10, 1998, Pam Lambert, review of *Gone, Baby, Gone*, p. 43; March 19, 2001, Pam Lambert, review of *Mystic River*, p. 45.
- Publishers Weekly, October 10, 1994, p. 65; May 27, 1996, p. 67; May 26, 1997, p. 69; May 10, 1999, review of *Prayers for Rain*, p. 61; June 21, 1999, Louise Jones, "Dennis Lehane: Hard-Boiled in Boston," p. 40.
- Washington Post Book World, August 8, 1999, review of *Prayers for Rain*, p. 3; February 25, 2001,



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review of *Mystic River*, p. 4; March 4, 2001, review of *Mystic River*, p. 9.

ONLINE

- Amazon.com, [http:// www.amazon.com/](http://www.amazon.com/) (May 19, 2002), author interview.
- Bookreporter, [http:// www.bookreporter.com/](http://www.bookreporter.com/) (August 22, 2004), Joe Hartlaub, review of *Mystic River*.
- CNN, [http:// www.cnn.com/](http://www.cnn.com/) (January 30, 2001), Adam Dunn, "Author Dennis Lehane Plumbs Depths of Human Misunderstanding in *Mystic River*."
- Dennis Lehane Web site, <http://www.dennislehanebooks.com> (August 22, 2004).
- January, [http:// www.januarymagazine.com/](http://www.januarymagazine.com/) (May 19, 2002), Linda Richards, author interview.
- USA Today, [http:// www.usatoday.com/](http://www.usatoday.com/) (September 24, 2003), Carol Memmott, review of *Mystic River*.

SOURCE CITATION

Contemporary Authors Online, Gale, 2007. Reproduced in Biography Resource Center. Farmington Hills, Mich.: Thomson Gale. 2007. <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/BioRC>