



Interview with Dennis Lehane

ANDREW COTTO

Dennis Lehane is the author of nine novels—including the New York Times bestsellers *Gone, Baby, Gone*; *Mystic River*; *Shutter Island*; and *The Given Day*—as well as *Coronado*, a collection of short stories, and a play. He is currently at work on a new book set during prohibition in Boston, Tampa, and Havana. This interview—a thesis project for Andrew Cotto, an MFA in Creative Writing candidate at the New School—was conducted online in April 2008 and April 2011.

Andrew Cotto: *What was your neighborhood like growing up?*

Dennis Lehane: It was a bit of a war zone. We were situated between Roxbury & Mattapan (both primarily poor and black) and South Boston (poor and militantly white) at the exact moment the powers-that-be decided to desegregate the public schools (great idea) by way of busing (bonehead idea.) The neighborhoods exploded and the underclass fought a race war amongst itself that my little Dorchester parish was caught smack dab in the center of. So, yeah, fun.

Andrew Cotto is the author of two novels—*The Domino Effect*, to be released this spring on his own *Brownstone Editions*, and *Promised Land Blues*, coming in spring 2012 from *Ig Publishing*. He has written numerous articles for national journals and is a regular contributor to the *Good Men Project Magazine*. He holds an MFA in creative writing from *The New School* and currently teaches composition courses at *ASA Institute* in downtown Brooklyn. More about the author can be found at www.AndrewCotto.com.

AC: *What were the first books you remember reading?*

DL: The first book I ever read was about Smokey the Bear. I got it out of the library when I was six. On one page it said “For ages eight and up,” and I thought I was pretty slick because, hey, I was only six. From that point on, I begged my mother to take me to the library at least once a week.

AC: *Did you go to Eckerd College in Florida to study writing?*

DL: I did. I’d dropped out of two other colleges, Emerson and UMass, where I’d clung to two different safety majors. I realized there was no way to become a writer by playing it safe, so I scored a partial scholarship from Eckerd and took the leap which was, for a kid of my background, a pretty scary leap.

AC: *As a fledgling writer, did you have a mentor?*

DL: I’ve had a few. The first was Larry Corcoran, a Jesuit priest I had in high school. Then it was Sterling Watson, who guided me through the writing workshop at Eckerd. After him, John Dufresne at FIU, who truly walked the walk as a working writer and seemed incapable of artistic compromise, which was exactly what I needed to see at 26, 27. Mentoring, after a certain point, is not about teaching mechanics. Mentoring at the grad school level and beyond becomes more about helping you come

to grips with whether, now that you know how to write, you have to fortitude to actually do it on a consistent basis. And John, Sterling, and the late Andre Dubus, whom I consider my final mentor, they were all ass-in-the-chair guys—get up every morning and write. No whining, no hand-wringing, no drama about the horror of the empty page. Sit there and force it out of you, day in day out. Which, in the end, is the only way it gets done.

AC: *Your first novel, A Drink Before the War, was a detective story genre. What inspired this type of story?*

DL: What ultimately led me to genre fiction was that I knew I didn't have a *bildungsroman* in me at that point. Did the world really need another white-boy-goes-to-college-and-learns-about-himself book? I didn't think so. But I also didn't know how to plot. Nobody had ever really talked about it, so I had no real clue how to do it. What I did know was that in crime fiction something bad had to happen and by the end there had to be some kind of reckoning in terms of that bad thing. Once I understood that, I understood how to loosely plot a crime novel. And I was off to the races.

AC: *Patrick Kenzie and Angelo Gennaro appear in six of your novels. Where did these characters come from?*

DL: The character-getting place, I guess. I dunno. That's creative process which I've never been good talking about. You sit in a room, you stare at the ceiling, and somehow in the doing of that you stare through a morass of crappy ideas and undercooked characters and you pluck out a successful character and place him or her on a page. Who knows how it happens? I've been doing this 20+ years now and I don't have the faintest clue.

AC: *What was the response to your writing genre from the faculty at FIU? Your classmates?*

DL: I wasn't really writing genre fiction when I was at FIU. I was primarily a short story writer, even though it was common knowledge I had a genre novel being shopped around NYC. And, yeah, there was a certain looking down the nose at genre fiction. Hell, I looked down my nose at genre fiction. But what was also happening at that time—we're talking the early nineties—was the beginning of a backlash against faux-literary fiction. If you were published by Vintage, did that automatically make you literary?

If you wrote a self-indulgent, sexually embarrassing, "semi"-autobiographical novel in which the protagonist referenced Virginia Woolf and Moliere enough times for us to accept that you'd *read* literary fiction, did that make your work literary? What, in essence, was literary fiction? I'll accept that it's Edith Wharton or Julian Barnes, but I refuse to accept that a writer like, say, Brett Easton Ellis can hold the jockstrap

of James Lee Burke or James Crumley or that some precious, plotless model of post-modern, post-structural masturbation is comparable to something as majestic as Ellroy's *L.A. Quartet* or Thom Jones's *The Pugilist At Rest*.

AC: *How do you feel, in general, about writing workshops?*

DL: I think they're great. You identify the peers you respect and you hopefully have a professor you respect and you take what you can about your work from them—good *and* bad—and ignore the rest. You can also never underestimate the positive impact of both having a deadline every four weeks or so and going into a room every week and talking about the

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craft. It keeps your head in the game, keeps the instruments oiled.

AC: *About MFA programs?*

DL: At the very least, they're a great place to hide from the world and work on your craft for another two/three years. That's a luxury you will not have in the real world ever again and it's no small thing. It's everything, in fact. When people go to McDowell or Yaddo, what are they doing except trying to emulate and recapture the ethos they had in grad school? A writer is a mutant, a freak of nature who thinks about flowery, intangible things like sentence construction and the music of paragraphs—things nobody else in the population gives two shits about—but in an MFA he's surrounded by like-minded mutants. He's not alone, he's embraced. Never underestimate the enormity of that.

AC: *Can you describe your own writing process?*

DL: I write in the morning because if I get to my desk as soon as I wake up, I'm much closer to the dream state than to reality, which is better for me as a writer. As soon as the real world intrudes, the words are 50% harder to lay my hands on. I need to write in an office that makes me feel comfortable and where it's unlikely I'll be disturbed. I don't get people who can write in coffee shops. More power to them, believe me, but I need seclusion.

AC: *How do your roles as teacher and writer overlap?*

DL: Full time teaching is bad for writing because the workload for a full time teacher is insane. I wouldn't have written ten books if I'd had to grade 160 papers four times a semester for the last 15 years. And design quizzes and tests. And go to meetings. And deal with department politics. And raise a family. No way I would've been able to balance all that. But if you have the kind of luxury I had to sub-contract and design my own classes and contractually refuse to go to meetings, well, teach-

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ing can be great. The give and take with students is always helpful because it gets you thinking about your positions and defending them, if only to yourself. And it's happened more than half a dozen times that I'll be showing a student why a scene doesn't work—because there's no change in the energy of that scene, say—and I'll realize that the scene I just wrote doesn't work for the same reason.

AC: *When did the first inkling of *Mystic River* come to you?*

DL: Writing my graduate school thesis. I'd moved back to Boston and was living in a once-tough, hardscrabble neighborhood that was undergoing gentrification. I wrote myself a note—"What happens when Pat's Pizza becomes a Starbucks?" That was *Mystic River* in a nutshell. After I failed to write it as a successful novella, I knew my reach was extending beyond my grasp. So I went back to the Kenzie and Gennaro books to teach myself how to write better. With each book I'd challenge myself in a different way until around '99 I finally felt I had the muscles necessary to tackle this story again.

AC: *How long did it take you to write the novel?*

DL: Two years. Lots of mistakes, lots of blown ideas, lots of wrong turns. A largely unpleasant process across the board if you must know.

AC: *What was the greatest challenge, craft-wise, between this story and your previous books?*

DL: Third person POV. It was liberating to suddenly have it at my disposal after five books told in first. It felt like getting handed wings in a prison yard, you know? Wow—I can fly! But then I immediately had the "be careful what you wish for" experience

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because all these decisions I never had to make with Patrick, I now had to make. Whose POV do I choose? Whose story is this? When do I go into Sean's POV? When do I go into Celeste's? How many POVs are too many? Must a POV justify itself or can I just go into someone's head for the hell of it? (The answer to that is "yes" and then "no," by the way.) And—again—Whose fucking story *is* this?

AC: *Did you set out to write something that went beyond genre into more literary terrain?*

DL: I could lie, but the answer is yes. I wanted to blow some doors off.

AC: *Why?*

DL: In '99, I was on vacation and tried to read a particular type of commercial novel—one of those crass, plot-is-the-only-thing pieces of shit that line the racks at the supermarket checkout—and it opened with this fourteen year old girl being murdered. It was immediately obvious the author was pretending to condemn violence against poor 14 year old girls who also happen to be black and therefore prostitutes (as if it's all so axiomatic that) but in reality he was getting his rocks off and expecting the reader to get her rocks off depicting the sensational and the salacious aspects of said death. It disgusted me and I decided to write a book in which someone dies and dies off-stage in the best Greek tradition and yet that one death hurts like hell. Hurts everyone within the orbit of this girl's life. I was very determined to make that loss of life rip the reader's stomach out. Because violence does not exist for our fucking entertainment. Death is finite and wasteful and it destroys the lives of those who cared about the victim and sometimes even the lives of those who

didn't even know the victim. Violence ripples out from the center and those ripples can scald anyone they touch.

AC: *What particular elements of story allow a book to crossover from genre into literary fiction?*

DL: Labels are marketing tools that have no real bearing on you, the author, until after you're dead. Only then can a sober assessment of your body of work take place. The rules of all literature—be it the science fiction of Ray Bradbury and Ursula Le Guin or the magic realism of Garcia Marquez or the dystopic paranoia of DeLillo—are the same. A book is to be judged on its depth—depth of language, depth of character, depth of insight, depth of structure. If those are successfully in place, then a book is literature. If they're not, a book is not.

AC: *Why are noir stories rarely recognized by the mainstream literary establishment?*

DL: I think they're beginning to be. Richard Price's latest novel, *Lush Life*, has all the trappings of a classic noir and it's been critically lauded and commercially successful at a level his work has never enjoyed before. *No Country for Old Men* is nothing if not pulp fiction straight from jump street and both the book and the film met with a tidal wave of praise. I was lucky enough to have an overtly noir/pulp story "Until Gwen" selected for *The Best American Short Stories*, so I think the pendulum has definitely shifted.

AC: *Why is genre, in general, so rarely taught to students in literature or writing classes, on an undergraduate or MFA level?*

DL: I don't think it should be taught in writing classes. I mean, what're you going to say about how to write a mystery? Dude dies in Chapter One, someone spends a whole bunch of chapters looking into why he died, the killer is revealed in the penultimate chapter. End of lesson. The laws of literature

are the same, no matter the genre, and should be taught thusly. Let's not Balkanize things any further by teaching a class on how to write the thriller or how to write chick lit. The issue isn't whether how to write genre should be taught but whether books that have been ghettoized as "genre," can be taught as literature in literature classes. I think they can. Put another way—*The Heart Of Darkness* is a great book, a masterpiece, and well worth teaching, but by the time I finished undergrad and grad school, I'd been assigned it five times. Isn't there something else we could have studied? How about Greene's *The Quiet American* or DeLillo's *Players* or Ellroy's *American Tabloid*, all of which are thematic cousins to Conrad's work.

AC: *Do you find that the study of craft is something students can use more of?*

DL: Sure. I like to teach plot because very few teachers talked about it when I was coming up in the late 80s/early 90s. And because I taught myself how to do it, I had a heightened clarity about what I was learning and I've since tried to pass that along in as concrete terms as I can muster. But—here's the kicker—plot's about the last thing I think about when I envision a story. I'm naturally inclined toward character first, then language second. Plot occurs to me somewhere around 10th or 11th on the list of Things I Need to Write a Story. And that's why I teach it—because you do need it. People read for it. At the end of the day you can do whatever you want with every element of your novel as long as you've obeyed the first law of storytelling which is quite simple: Tell the fucking story. If you do that—and it's hilarious how much we all forget to bring that to the table initially—then everything else you do will be indulged. But if you forget the story, God have pity on you because the reader sure won't.

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AC: *You've taught writing courses at Harvard and Eckerd, as well as at your Writers in Paradise Conference, what aspects of story do you try to get your students to focus on?*

DL: It's always about the Ds I mentioned before—depth of character, depth of language, depth of insight, depth of structure.

AC: *How do you teach this?*

DL: Painstakingly.

AC: *Is there any part of story you advise your students not to stress over?*

DL: Yeah—stop worrying if we'll realize how brilliant you are. Stop showing us how well you write. I call it WRITING, as opposed to writing. WRITING is often just smoke and mirrors to shroud the fact that you're not telling a story. Look at Pat Barker, for example, one of the finest living writers we have; I defy you to find me an example of her showing off. Good writing is a whisper.

Bad writing is a scream. Stop screaming. Otherwise, I make sure to remind my students that writing is not open heart surgery; you can't lose a patient on the table. It's a story—have fun with it. Hell, fail. You learn as much from your failures as you do from your successes. Take your story out and drive it around the block and goose the gas pedal and even smash it into a tree if you feel like it. It's all cool.

AC: *Do you instruct your writing students to read differently?*

DL: No. They get there on their own. You can't teach someone to love Henry James. You can only teach them what the difference between good writing and bad is. Once they realize what bad writing

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is, they'll find themselves unable to read it, if they're any good themselves. If they're not unable to read it, then they're probably not going to get any better because they've failed to fashion a respectable aesthetic. At which point, you can't save them.

AC: *If you were teaching a general literature class specifically to writers, what novels would you use?*

DL: *The Great Gatsby* definitely. I can get a lot of mileage out of *The End of the Affair* and *The Age of Innocence* too. *Under Western Eyes* is a good one. So is *Sula*. I enjoy teaching contemporary books that aren't as well known or certainly aren't taught much—O'Nan's *A Prayer for the Dying*, Johnson's *Middle Passage*, O'Connor's *Buffalo Soldiers*. But as I mentioned above, I really don't know until the class is scheduled and I've got no choice but to deal with it.

AC: *What makes noir, or crime stories, so consistently popular in America?*

DL: I don't know. Readers throughout history have loved to read about life lived at the extremes. Cormac McCarthy has a term for it—fiction of mortal event—that may explain why so many people dig noir. In noir, shit's *serious*, man. Characters don't have a whole lot of margin for error.

AC: *Three of your novels, Mystic River, Shutter Island, and Gone Baby Gone have been made into movies, what, most of all, is missing from the page?*

DL: A movie is \$40 million Cliff Note. And sometimes it's a tremendous Cliff Note, outstanding. But it's never the book. The book is an apple, the movie's a giraffe; they have that much in common. They're both examples of narrative art, yes, but similarities pretty much end there. Books require your active participation. Movies are passive entertainment. What's missing from the movie adaptation is about,

well, 80% of the book. Nature of the beast. If that 20%, however, compels people to read the book—yay. If it doesn't, it doesn't.

AC: *Is there any area where the film surpasses the novel?*

DL: A film can get to the heart of a scene. One glance from a good actor can replace pages of a book.

AC: *Can shows like The Wire which you've written for, or socially conscious novels such as yours, have an effect on America?*

DL: If you go into narrative art trying to change the world or “teach” people something, you will write a polemic. You want to write polemic, become a speechwriter. If you're a narrative artist, however, your job is to tell a story. First and foremost. And then (if I may be so pretentious for a moment) it is to birth something universal about the human condition from that story. And if, ancillary to your original goal, something with social ramifications organically manifests itself from your tale, well, good. Nice job.

AC: *What is the responsibility, if any, of the artist in our society?*

DL: E.L. Doctorow said an artist's responsibility is to be true to the times in which he lives. I love that line. I can't top it, so I'll just quote it and be done.

AC: *What is the single most important issue in the world today that artists, of any discipline, can address?*

DL: There isn't one. Jeffrey Eugenides is going to go out into the artistic wilderness and come back with something completely different than, say, Marilynne Robinson would. But I know it will be a light of some kind, an illumination. And I'll be grateful for it. ☺