

An interview with Michael Robotham

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For readers that don't know much about you, would you like to start off by giving us a bit of background information about yourself? I know from my research that you have ghostwritten a number of well-known autobiographies and you have been a journalist. How did this start?

I'm 43 years old, I'm married with three beautiful daughters, and I live in paradise. The northern beaches of Sydney - just a few minutes away from the beach, but I spent ten years in London as a journalist and was a ghost writer before that. I grew up in a very, very small country town in Australia, and when I say small we're talking a few hundred people, maybe at least three hundred people, five hundred dogs and three million flies and where they still deliver the mail by horseback! When I came to Sydney for my first job interview as a cadet journalist I had never been in a building more than three floors high, I had never been in a lift and I had never seen an escalator. So I was an absolute hayseed. I started out as a journalist at the age of seventeen on a newspaper called The Sun in Sydney, and in 1986 I came to London to try and break into Fleet Street eventually becoming a feature writer for the Mail on Sunday. In 1992/3 I left the Mail on Sunday to freelance for The Sunday Times, The Tatler and a lot of magazines and I also began ghost writing. So basically my ghostwriting career spanned ten years and I did fourteen biographies.

When did you decide that you wanted to concentrate on writing novels and was there a pivotal event that persuaded you?

I wanted to write novels from the age of twelve and it was almost as though back then Mark Twain had stolen all the best plots. It's growing up in a tiny town - I thought that there was nothing to write about. Obviously you discover now that you can write about anything, but back then it just seemed that there was no adventure or excitement or drama in what was a very idyllic childhood and becoming a journalist was one step along the way of becoming a writer. For a long while I thought journalism would satisfy me. I traveled the world, met fascinating people, and did some amazing stories. But I kept on coming back to this desire to write and ghostwriting was the next step, because I met someone who was a ghostwriter and I thought wow, great lifestyle. It's like a writer's lifestyle. If you wake up with a hangover you don't have to work that morning and if you want to work at 2 o'clock in the morning you can work at 2 o'clock and you work from home. But it also lets you discover whether you have the discipline to be totally on your own to produce the writing and do a certain number of words a day, and to have spent a career writing very few pieces with more than a thousand words then suddenly you have to write something with over one hundred thousand words - it's a whole new ballgame.

Can you give us some background as to how your book (Suspect) came about?

One of the very first ghostwriting projects that I did was a book with Margaret Humphreys, a Nottingham social worker, who uncovered the child migrant scandal. From around 1850 through to 1960 around a hundred and fifty thousand children from Britain

and Ireland were sent to America, the Colonies, and supposedly to a new life to be adopted. They were coming out of children's homes; they were products of single mothers, in an era where there was great shame. They were told that they were going to be adopted, have a new life with loving families. In fact most of them went on to be almost slave labor. Young girls were put on farms and the boys were kept in institutions and were made to build churches. They were physically and sexually abused. It was a terrible sort of stain really. It was a piece of social engineering that went horribly wrong. I was working on Margaret's book, and she told me a story about having to take a new born baby from a mother who was deemed to be too unfit to care for the infant. This baby is literally straight out of the womb and the mother's screaming and Margaret is walking down the corridor (it is a scene that is actually in the book) and she looks down at this young baby and thinks to herself, one day are you going to come looking for me and are you going to thank me for saving your life or blame me for having ruined it. That was the sort of "what if" moment for me. When she told me the story I think that's what stuck in my mind. That was ten years ago she told me that story. As a novelist, or a would-be novelist, I thought that there is a story in this.

But isn't it those kind of things that give you a germ of the idea?

Absolutely. That was the absolute seed of the idea. And then it is a bit like over ten years it grew a little bit. There are other seeds that grew along side it, but the strongest one ultimately is the one that grows the tallest and overshadows all the others. Other ideas fed into it and I worked with and used psychologists. I suppose people asked me why it's a thriller. My agent calls me the reluctant thriller writer. I've read very few in my life. It's not that I don't like thrillers, it's just that over the last ten years if I have had time to read then I feel that I should be writing. So I don't read a great deal. It was almost although it was natural to tell it in that genre and which is why I chose to tell it in that way.

Can you tell us about the characters and where they came from?

This is where people often ask me the differences between writing non-fiction and fiction. It is much harder writing fiction, much, much harder, because with non-fiction you have all the material in front of you. The point in ghostwriting, the point in which it works, is when you capture the voice of your subject so completely that you are inside their head, you think the way they think, you can write the way they would write if they could write that way. Not even their closest friends or family would recognize the ghostwriter's fingerprints on the story. Now in many ways Joseph O'Loughlin was the same deal. I created this character and captured his voice and then it became like writing his autobiography. I was writing his life story and he was real in my head. The moment I captured his voice I was reading a story in a magazine about a sufferer of Parkinson's disease. A journalist who had Parkinson's disease; and it was almost a single line in the midst of the story when he said, "I know when it's going to be a good day when I can bend down and tie my shoes". There was just something about that line, and I suppose the self-deprecating sense of humor that he portrayed; and I thought there's my voice. That's where he came from.

What about the others? For example DJ, who I felt was really hard, in some ways I felt sorry for him, but on the other hand I really, really hated him: I thought how

could you do this, because he was such an angry person.

It's a great truth, and even though I was a journalist for a lot of years and worked on cases like Fred and Rosemary West, what you'll uncover invariably behind even the very, very worst people that commit the worst crimes is that they were not born evil. Psychologist friends of mine say that it is very rarely in life that someone is born evil - occasionally someone is born lacking any empathy or the ability to empathies, and therefore is a psychopath. The vast majority of psychopaths are created by circumstances, e.g. society, in which case if you bear that in mind when you look at horrible people like DJ, somewhere in the background there has got to be someone that turned him this way and therefore you have to give him a little sympathy. I know that it is hard to sympathize with someone like Fred and Rosemary West, but if you know the background not every abused child turns out to be a monster. Some of them don't and some of them have other facts that come into play and other figures in their lives that socialise with them and teach them right from wrong. With Bobby and with DJ I wanted there to be an element where they too were victims. Because I think that's real life, you don't have these monsters out there that just get born monsters or just for the sheer hell of it decide to be a monster. So I wanted there to be some sympathy or at least people to empathize with how they may have reached that point.

***The Suspect* is a mixture of a psychological thriller and a love story but it also deals with the theme of alienation and social isolation. Why these two topics in particular?**

Good question. Again it stems from my fascination with this idea about the butterfly effect. That is, the butterfly flapping its wings in the Amazonian jungle causes a tropical storm to wipe out Southern China three weeks later. But everything is so interrelated and I suppose I was trying to create a story that had as many layers as real life has and people always talk about creating three dimensional characters, but the thing is the fact of life is that characters are not just three dimensional, they are multi dimensional. Every single individual has so many dimensions it is almost impossible (and I know that for having written all those autobiographies). When you think that someone's life can fill a library and I just have to condense it down to a book. I was trying to create a book that had enough themes to make it realistic so it wasn't just some sort of formulaic, two or three plots, or characters. I wanted people to understand the cause and effect of the idea of the butterfly effect. But when something happens here or someone makes this decision there, like Bobby's mother who all those years ago made that decision to allege that her husband had abused them, then that butterfly flapping of wings ripples all the way through their lives so you fast forward and suddenly it is causing a hurricane all those years later.

One can't help feeling sorry for Joseph O'Loughlin, the clinical psychologist, as he is in an insidious position where not only his life, but also all he holds dear is put in jeopardy. After reading it I thought that the lie was the crux of the matter. Was this deliberate?

I don't know whether it is deliberate. The lie was necessary. Alfred Hitchcock was brilliant at taking a very ordinary man and just having him in the wrong place at the wrong time. *North by North West* is an amazing example as it is a case of mistaken identity. I suppose what I was looking at was that sort of idea with Joseph; the wrong place at the wrong time, or the small mistake that just snowballs. I don't think I was

trying to create the idea of the big lie or the small lie or some philosophical context. A lot of women who have read the book talk about the fact that they liked Joe right from that opening chapter and they didn't want him to have slept with a prostitute and not used a condom because they said he wouldn't do that. But I am saying that he would, because everyone makes mistakes. It is impossible to suddenly create someone who is perfect. Nobody is perfect. This is again what I am trying to do by making him human in their reactions to things and their ability to make mistakes.

Some crime writers will say that their characters just get away from them. Is this the case with you?

That surprises me if they are crime writers because I think that one of the big problems with crime writing is often the characters aren't strong enough; that the plots are what drive the book. I suppose good crime writing has great characters and to a degree they can. But if it is a crime book it involves a murder and you know that at the end you have to unmask someone; so you do sort of know which way it is going. But it may be with some writers that they don't know who the killer is going to be.

I have heard some say that sometimes they don't always know who the killer is going to be when they start writing, but most of them do know, it's just that it doesn't always go according to plan when they are writing the book.

It's a bit like having a chassis of a car; a structure that you have in your mind a rough idea, but you can build that car anyway you want. You can accessorize it any way possible. You can put mag wheels on it, fluffy dice on the window. And that's what you build up, what you go back to and add extra clues in and I suppose try to create the twists or leave little landmarks behind that someone is going to trigger further down and people are going to gasp and understand why that was there.

This leads me back to *The Suspect* again. Did you have trouble letting go of your characters once you finished writing the book?

No, but I'll tell you what I did have trouble doing is that I don't think you know the background of this book. It was actually sold right round the world on one hundred and seventeen pages.

You did a synopsis?

What happened was that I had written a hundred and seventeen pages when I was asked to do write Lulu's autobiography, and then Ricky Tomlinson's came up after that. I was having lunch with Ursula McKenzie, the head publisher at Time Warner, and she just asked about the novel I was writing. I told her a bit about it and she became very enthusiastic and badgered my agent. My agent had read it and said we want you to finish it and we will take it to the Frankfurt Book Fair in October. He said I think people will want to buy this and what happened is when Ursula finally read the hundred and seventeen pages she made an offer for the whole book which was beyond what we expected. Then two months later the London Book Fair came around, all the European and American publishers descended on London and they all got word of the rumor about this book that had been sold on one hundred and seventeen pages. And the more they asked about reading it, the more they were told no, you have to wait until the whole thing

is finished; the more they said no, no, we want to read it now, it was almost like they were bleeding money just to read the hundred and seventeen pages. So in the end we had three American publishers bidding against each other and three Dutch publishers, four French, German, and Italian. The thing is, not a great deal happens in the first hundred and seventeen pages. I always liken it to buying a house when you've only seen the photograph. Not once did they ask me how the book finished. Not once did they want to know the plot, they were just happy to buy this thing because they loved the characters and obviously thought I could write. Going back to your original question as to whether or not I could let go of them, because no one knew the ending except me when Joseph O'Loughlin got into all this trouble, I suddenly had this fear. Because he lived and breathed in my head, he was alive, he was sort of my best friend. But if something happened to me and I got run over by a bus, no one could save him, he would be stuck there. So there was this absolutely manic period for several weeks where I was getting up at ungodly hours and just writing to get the story down because if I had a heart attack or I died in my sleep, no one would be able to save him. I credit a lot of the pace in that second half of the book, where it absolutely rockets along, to that feeling. I could let him go afterwards but I'm just giving you an idea how real he was during the process.

If you know you have a good book in you when you're writing it, isn't it the case that you need to get everything down otherwise you begin to think you may have missed something?

Sometimes, when things are going well, you just want to keep writing and don't want to stop once you're tired because you're thinking no, I'm on a roll here. You know that there are days when there is going to be nothing in your head and all the ideas would have dried up. Particularly when you know what's ahead. Often people talk about the book they are going to write and leave their ideas in the air instead of putting them on the page. It's very much like this, seeing that the idea was over ten years ago and during that process other things came into totalize the idea; I took notes, sometimes mental notes, to build up the ideas and when I came down to it, the writing probably only took eight months but I had to spread it over three years because I had two other ghostwriting books to finish in between times.

How did you feel once you had finished writing the book?

I felt a tremendous burden of expectation of all these people who had bought it on only a part manuscript. I felt all these people now owned a part of this and they had all taken this enormous risk because they didn't know how it ended. The big fear when I delivered it was Christ, if they don't like it they are going to think we have blown our money here. And so that delivery was very nerve-wracking when they finally got a chance to read it. As it happened, because I have written so many other books, everyone just assumed I was really cool about it. They didn't realize the difference between writing your own and writing someone else's is enormous. So no one even asked me about it, they just assumed they could relax and read it, and even after they finished reading it no one jumped on the e-mail saying how much they liked it. For a month I sat back in Australia and honestly, I was a pain in the ass to live with. To my wife I was saying, "they hate it, they hate it, no one has e-mailed me, and they hate this book". Even the BBC bought in on only a hundred and seventeen pages. They bought the rights to make it into an extended drama

that runs over a Sunday and a Monday night, then they are taking the characters on.

I am not sure if you have seen the Val McDermid Wire in the Blood series?

That sort of thing or like *Prime Suspect* where each story runs over two or three episodes and a few months later you do another special.

This brings me on to a question that I was going to ask you later. As Joe has Parkinson's, was this intended to be a standalone novel or were you intending it to be a series?

It was intended to be a standalone. And, oddly enough, as much as I wanted to give him Parkinson's because it made Joe that little bit more vulnerable as when his life is disintegrating, so is his body, in the back of my mind I thought the only really good thing about it is that it could be standalone because no one is going to ask me to carry him on if he's got Parkinson's. It doesn't work that way! The BBC jumped at it. Their scriptwriters said, "Listen, Joe's got ten to fifteen more years with Parkinson's. There is new genetic research, new operations, there are all sorts of things we can do to prolong all this". So the BBC jumped at it. And I suppose that I did like the idea of selling it to the BBC because that means that they can carry the character on and I get some control with what they do with the characters. It takes the burden off me. I was under a lot of pressure from people wanting me to carry the characters on, so I have made Detective Vincent Ruiz the narrator and it is all told through his eyes, and Joe comes into it but it's not his voice, it's Vincent's voice. Things have happened since then. Initially I was adamant I wanted to do a standalone because I could see the perils of people like Patricia Cornwell. The thing I would hate most about it is as much as Joe is a very strong character and because of his skills you could write any number of novels with him as the central character, but having to re-tell the back story in a new interesting way for those readers who are picking up the books for the first time would be so tiresome: having to think of a new way to describe his family, Parkinson's and all that. So I was totally adamant that I was going to do a standalone, but since then Dennis Lehane, a guy that I really admire a lot and one of the few thriller writers that I have read (*Mystic River*), has managed to write a number with the same group of characters and then move on. What a star the man is, such a nice writer. That made me realize that yes I can do it. So I am quite happy and I'll do the next one through the eyes of Vincent Ruiz. You don't get the impression from the first book but he is actually a fascinating character and so I can do two or three with Joe and Vincent and then move on to something else.

What were you looking for as a novelist that made crime fiction or thriller writing so attractive?

As I said I was a sort of reluctant thriller writer - I didn't set out to write a thriller. I suppose I was a realist from the point of view of having several practice novels in my bottom drawer as most people do. I realized that the story was best told that way. Also I was realistic enough to know that having spent ten years earning a very good living as a ghost writer and supporting my family doing it, if I was going to be a novelist I couldn't live like Hemingway on a bag of oranges in a freezing garret in Paris, I was going to have to earn my way. And so I thought to myself that the thriller genre was clearly quite popular and, while I don't read many of them, the ones I have read I can understand why

people read them, it is real escapism. I think the story lent itself. The idea lent itself to being a thriller, the whole idea of other people playing God with other peoples' lives.

Who were your influences when you started to write as a journalist? I'll tell you the people that influenced me the most, and what I aspire to be. People like Donna Tartt and *The Secret History*, or David Guterson with *Snow Falling on Cedars* or Peter Høeg with *Smilla's Sense of Snow*. They are beautifully written books, but in their hearts they are mysteries or thrillers and I love them. That's what I would aspire to write one day not simply write a thriller where it's just a plot driven, almost formulaic, bang, bang sort of airport thriller. But something that people could pick up and say that's actually really well written.

One of my favourites is Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*.

Absolutely, again a mystery story. Critics now are realizing, for a long while there was this very snooty attitude towards crime writing. But every so often a book comes out which straddles the whole mystery thriller/crime genre as well as being seen as literary. Even something simple like *Vernon God Little* in its heart is a story about a crime and it's so much more. But that could have been labeled as a crime book.

Have you noticed that crime books have never won a major writing award? And I am not talking about a crime writing association award.

Smilla's Sense of Snow was the Time book of the year. There are books that every so often come out and *Secret History* probably won some award somewhere along the line. But again I don't think they were labeled crime books, that's the thing, and partly that's just the publishers. You get labeled and nowadays they label you as a thriller writer or a crime writer or a literary writer. So maybe if Donna Tartt or Peter Høeg had been labeled crime writers they wouldn't have won the awards. It is perhaps a problem with the labeling of writers more than the quality of the writing, I think, and again the snootiness of the critics. There are some wonderful writers working; like I said, Denis Lehane's *Mystic River*. That was a beautiful piece of writing and characterization and with hair absolutely standing on the back of your neck. Even though you pick the ending very early on in that book it doesn't matter. The quality of the writing is such that just you have to get through it.

So what are the last five books you have just finished reading?

The last five books! You've got *My Little Friend* by Donna Tartt, *Vernon God Little* by DBC Pierre, *Atomised* by Michel Houellebecq, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* by Dave Eggers and *Mystic River*.

What's your work schedule normally like?

I'm very much a workaholic. I start at 9:00 in the morning, an hour for lunch, work through till five and go back in the evening and work again until eleven. I suppose in terms of writing schedule I do most of my best writing in the morning and at night when I am tired I do a lot of the research using the internet, which is powerful stuff. It's amazing when you want to find out little pieces of information such as is it possible to tell from a human hair whether it came from a dead person or a live person. In the old days when

you needed to find that out then it would be a trip down to the British Library or a phone call to a forensic laboratory and trying to get someone to call you back. But now in twenty-five seconds you can have that information.

Writing a fiction novel is totally different from writing a non-fiction novel. Has *The Suspect* turned out how you expected?

Yes it has, and you are right, it is more difficult to write as I explained earlier. On a good day as a non-fiction writer I can write five thousand words. On a good good day as a fiction writer, five hundred words. Some days a single line. There is a line in the opening page of *The Suspect* when the boy, the little cancer patient, is on the roof about to commit suicide and the line that just says "chemotherapy is a cruel hairdresser", I remember spending a whole day coming up with, and I still thought that's a good day. You have to trash so much material.

What do you enjoy doing when you're not writing?

I live in a beautiful part of the world and I've got three wonderful daughters and I enjoy spending time with them down the beach. In the summer we spend a lot of time down at the beach. And there is always the beauty about the freedom of being a writer as there are the ballet lessons and tennis lessons and swimming lessons and so you are forever going from one to another. But I enjoy spending time with them.

What do you find the most difficult when you're writing?

Plotting. Developing character is the most enjoyable part, as multi-dimensional as I can make them and as real as possible and with great believable dialogue or stuff that will make people smile when they read. I love all that. But the plotting I find the hardest bit of the whole thing.

Do you have any foibles when you are writing?

I talk to myself when I write because it is a bit like having conversations with your characters, you are actually speaking the dialogue. Oddly enough, earlier you were talking about psychopaths and people playing God with other people's lives and I think writers are borderline psychopaths in the sense that we create a fantasy world just like psychopaths do. Psychopaths do it because they are all powerful; writers create fantasy worlds in which they are all powerful, they can kill off whom they want to kill off, they can marry whom they want to marry. Psychopaths hear voices in their heads - psychotics do any way - and writers hear voices in their head. All of these sort of things come into it so it is a wonder the white van and straitjacket are not waiting outside. But I think my only foible is really spending so long in this other world. Living in two other worlds, this fantasy world of the book which sort of takes over to the extreme; I'll be driving the girls to school and I'll totally miss the school turn off and they'll say dad, dad school was back there and it's because I'm in the book. I'm actually in the book at this time. It's a bit like my wife always says to me "I can't wait for you to finish so we get you back" because she feels that she's never got me completely when I'm writing.

Do you miss the world of journalism?

No I don't. For a while I thought I would every time a big event happened - the reason I

came from Australia to London to work is because all the major events in the world happen in the northern hemisphere. At that point you had the Berlin wall falling and Eastern Europe changing so dramatically. For a long while after I quit journalism and a big event was happening and I knew the journalists that were reporting it, I was reading their bylines and I would think "Oh God wouldn't it be great to be in Kosovo". The turning point came with September 11 and I don't know whether it was because it was so horrifying or whatever but I had no desire to be reporting it. I actually thought I am so glad I'm not there, I'm so glad I'm not a journalist.

Is there a book out there you would have liked to have written?

I would love to have written Smilla's Sense of Snow. It's got a lousy ending though. Great book, great character. When I read I dissect books and I can often say that this book would have been better if they had done this or that. But every so often you read something that is so heartbreakingly good that you think I don't want to be a writer any more because I'm not going to be that good. I suppose I felt that when I read *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, which is just beautiful, that is the book that I wish I had written.

We did mention it earlier, but what are you currently working on?

I am working on another novel, a psychological thriller. It's going to be called *Lost* and the main character is Vincent Ruiz. It's about a seven year old girl who goes missing and someone is convicted of her murder but three years after they go to jail, and at the same point Vince Ruiz is telling the story, he is lying in a hospital bed having lost his memory after being shot while delivering the ransom. So the ransom is missing, he can't remember how he got shot and it's Joe's job to try and help him recover his memory.

Would you go back to ghostwriting?

Not if my novels sell well, no. My agent says never say never but I think far more successful novelists than people realize do ghostwriting in their spare time when they want to take a break because fiction is so tiring. But people don't realize that they are doing it and so maybe sometime in the future I might just publish something if they want me to.

One last question, if you were on a desert island and you could take five authors with you who would they be?

Not books, they have to be authors? John Irving would be my first novelist, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Salman Rushdie, F Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway because he would probably punch Salman out or take him to the cleaners!

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