



Crime time

A weird link with jail escapee Raymond John Denning led to a fascination with the darker side of human nature, best-selling crime writer Michael Robotham recalls.

WHY CRIME? This is the question I've been asked more than any other over the past five years by readers and interviewers at home and overseas. For a long while I couldn't answer it. Honestly, I had no idea. To start with I don't read crime. I know this is a very weird confession to make and it will probably see me strung up at the Sydney Writers' Festival where crime fans will make a bonfire beneath my feet, using copies of *The Night Ferry* to fuel the flames. (And I'm telling you, it's a very combustible book.)

I was even once famously misquoted in a newspaper as having read only *one* crime book. (Unfortunately, this quote has followed me ever since.) What I meant to say is I'd read one of each: one Rankin, one Connelly, one Cornwall, one Grisham . . .

Don't get me wrong – we live in a golden age of mystery and crime writing and there are some brilliant practitioners – but I prefer to read lots of different styles and genres.

I can answer the question now. I know why I write crime novels. I can even pinpoint to the day when the seed was planted (although it took more than 20 years to germinate).

On April 2, 1980, a young man called Raymond John Denning hid amid prison garbage and became the first inmate in 80 years to escape from Grafton Jail, about 650km north of Sydney. I was 19 at the time, a cadet journalist on the old Sydney *Sun*, working the graveyard shift, midnight to eight.

Denning was serving a life sentence for the savage bashing of a prison warden during an earlier attempted escape. The warden later died. Although only in his early 20s, Denning was already a hardened criminal, who had been in and out of prison since he was 15 and was notorious for his many escape attempts.

He was immediately classified as the second most-wanted man in Australia (behind Russell "Mad Dog" Cox who comes into the story later). He was almost caught within days in the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney, when police stopped a car being driven by a girlfriend. Denning fled into dense bush land and evaded police roadblocks and helicopters. He spent the next 20 months on the run, not just avoiding the police but taunting them. He managed to turn himself into a modern-day folk hero by pulling publicity stunts designed to embarrass the police. He rang talkback radio shows, did film reviews for radio

station Triple J, and appeared on *60 Minutes*. He visited Parliament House and sat in the public gallery; and strolled among the crowd at a prisoners' art show attended by the chairman of the Corrective Services Commission.

These stunts were comical and outrageous, but they carried an important message. Denning was waging a campaign against the use by police of unsigned statements and "verbals" to convict criminals. These have since been outlawed, but in those days the police were notorious for claiming a suspect had confessed to them in the back of the police car. This verbal "confession" and accompanying unsigned statement were then used to get a conviction.

Working nights at *The Sun*, police and crime stories were my bread and butter. I was a siren chaser. I scanned the police, fire and ambulance frequencies, picking up reports and dashing to the scene with a photographer.

One night at about three in the morning, I had a call from Ray Denning. I don't know why he called me, but there weren't many journalists awake at that hour, so he probably just tried his luck.

It was the first of many calls from Denning over the next six months. Sometimes he'd rant about police verbals, but mostly we talked about football, movies, books and stories in the news. I remember him telling me that he wasn't a bad person when he first went to prison at 15 – just a kid with an attitude.

"Prison brutalised me," he said, describing how warders would hose him down with freezing water and leave him shivering in his cell.

"Why did they do it?" I asked.

"Because they could," he said.

These phone calls became the foundation for a mutually beneficial relationship. Whenever Denning pulled a publicity stunt, he would tip me off. For example, he walked up the front steps of the NSW Police headquarters in Sydney and taped a letter to the glass door, putting his palm prints on

Ray was only a couple of years older than me and I remember asking myself why was I sitting in the witness box and he in the dock? What choices, mistakes or twists of fate had made our lives turn out so differently?



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either side. He phoned me and I raced to the scene. We got photographs of the police finding the letter. They were furious, of course, but the story made the front page the next day.

I was interviewed by the police and cooperated fully. At their request I taped subsequent phone calls. It's possible they were also being traced but Denning was careful not to stay on the line too long or to use the same phone box more than once.

Towards the end of 1980, I was listening to the police radios one night when I heard a report of shots fired at Parramatta Jail. Someone had fired a high-powered rifle at the perimeter guard towers, sending bullets through the windows. Within minutes, my phone rang. The gruff voice read from a prepared statement. An organisation

calling itself the Reform Justice Devils was claiming responsibility for the shooting, as part of its campaign against police brutality and corruption.

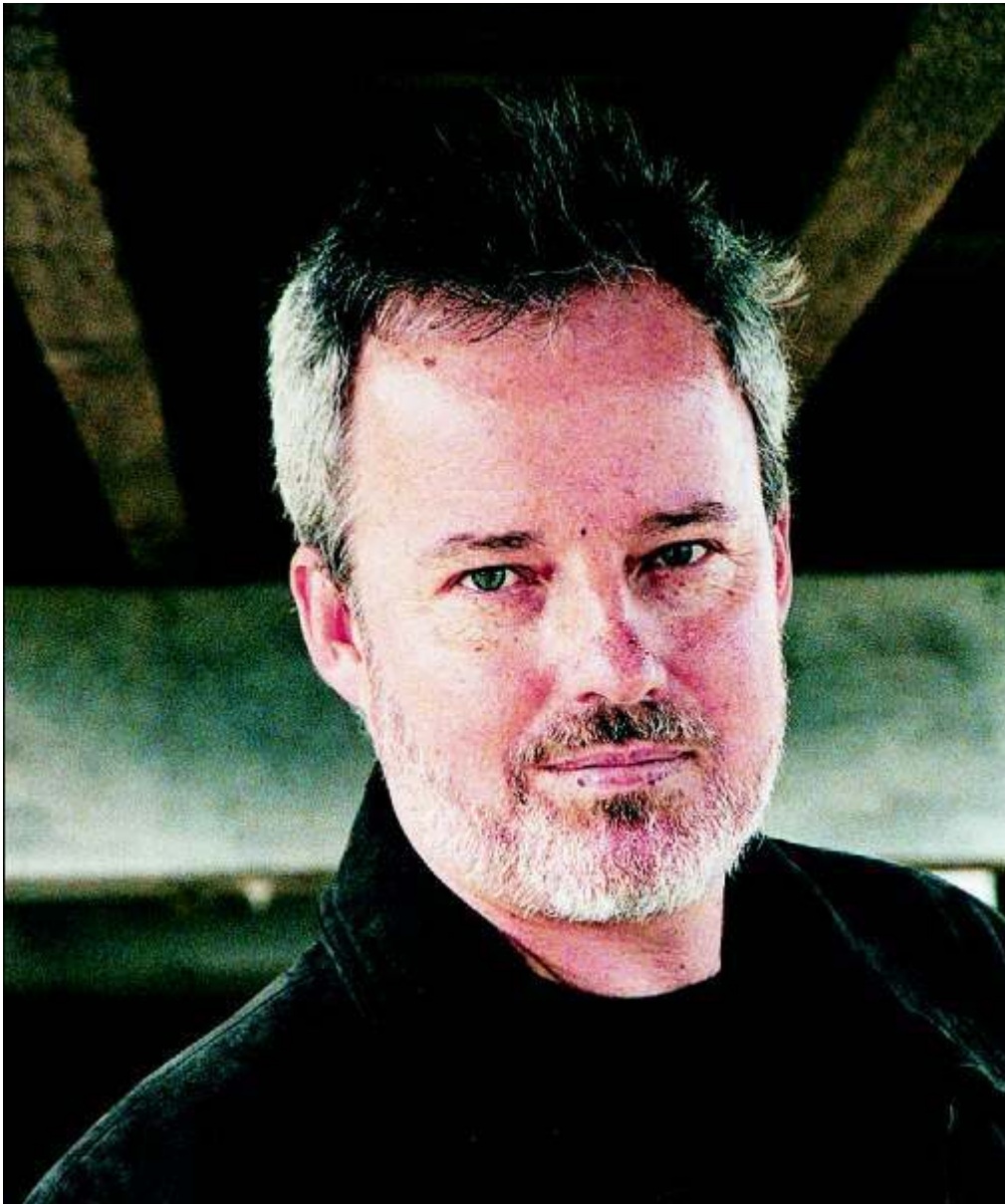
I looked at the initials, R. J. D. Raymond John Denning. "Is that you Ray?"

"No."

"C'mon Ray, I recognise your voice?"

"It's not me. It's the Reform Justice Devils."

I laughed, but Ray didn't see the funny side of it. He hung up and that was the last I heard from him for more than a year. Later I learned he'd gone to Queensland and hooked up with Russell "Mad Dog" Cox, who had been on the run since 1977, and they went on a crime spree, robbing banks and credit unions. In September 1981, they pulled off Queensland's biggest payroll robbery netting \$327,000.



Michael Robotham was a cadet journalist working the graveyard shift when he took a life-changing call



Michael Robotham: crime time

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Denning was finally captured two months later. His girlfriend had gone to collect him from the Manly ferry on Sydney's north shore. As they waited at traffic lights, a man in a straw hat and swimmers approached the car and put a pistol in Denning's face. Denning didn't have a chance to reach down for the gun he'd stashed under the passenger seat. At his luxury condo in Mona Vale (only a few kilometres from where I live now) police found a .357 magnum and three rifles.

Even though he was already serving a life sentence, Denning was put on trial. I was called as a witness. Summoned into the courtroom, I swore an oath and then raised my eyes to meet his. It was the first time I had ever seen him. I expected him to look frightening. I thought his crimes would be like a badge or a tattoo. But the thing that struck me most was how ordinary he looked. He could have been taxi driver or a mechanic or a builder. I could have passed him in the street or stood next to him at a bar and it would never have occurred to me that he was capable of such violence.

Denning was only a couple of years older than me and I remember asking myself what made us so different? Why was I sitting in the witness box and he in the dock? What choices, mistakes or twists of fate had made our lives turn out so differently? I know now that this is why I write the books I write. I am fascinated by the criminal mind. Everything we think we know and understand – the good, the bad and the inexplicable – is produced by

a couple of kilograms of grey porridge in our heads

Why crime? Because I'm fascinated by the dark side of human nature. I'm interested in how people react under extreme pressure – criminals, victims and onlookers.

I still hear some readers say they feel guilty about reading crime fiction – as though it should be something they wrap up in a brown paper bag, like a cheap bottle of port. This is ridiculous. Why do they have to be close readers? Some of the finest literary writers in the world have embraced the genre at various times.

People like Faulkner, Thurber, Allende, Twain, Greene, and more recently the likes of Martin Amis, William Boyd and John Banville. They all understood the fascination and that this genre, at its best, is worthy of the most demanding and sophisticated of readers.

I might not read crime books, but I love writing them

Postscript: Raymond John Denning escaped from jail again in July 1988 and established contact with Russell "Mad Dog" Cox who was still on the run. Eight days later they were recaptured in a police shoot-out at Doncaster in Victoria. Offered a deal, Denning rolled over and became a police "supergrass" in prison, revealing criminal networks operating behind bars. He served 19 years and died of a heroin overdose after being released.

Michael Robotham's new novel *The Night Ferry* (Sphere) is published this month by Hachette.