

Crims and celebrities have been staples of Michael Robotham's career. He tells **Charmaine Chan** why he loves delving into their minds

# Ghost stories

**"CHILLING" IS ONE** of author Michael Robotham's pet words. The Sydney reporter-turned-ghostwriter-turned novelist uses it to describe the phone calls he once received every Wednesday night from a killer on the run who just wanted to chat.

The adjective also crops up numerous times as he discusses his new book, *The Suspect* (Penguin), which is, as the title hints, a thriller and, as the cover blurb accurately promises, a heart-stopping one at that. Certain scenes – such as those between a psychologist and his violent, mentally ill patient – send shivers up the spine.

"I've always been fascinated by psychology," the 43-year-old admits. His interest stems from 15 years of journalism, trying to make sense of experiences so unusual "you wouldn't put them in a book because people would never believe you".

He has also spent a decade as a celebrated ghost-writer. Rather like the ventriloquist controlling a puppet that gets all the attention, he's been the voice for 14 prominent figures in the arts, sport, science and military. Former Spice Girl Geri Halliwell, entertainer Rolf Harris and 1960s pop singer Lulu are among the few who don't mind it being known that his was the hand that wrote their books.

Charles Bruce, an SAS veteran better known by his pseudonym, Tom Read, is no longer around to complain about breach of confidentiality. A former paratrooper and veteran of the Northern Ireland and Falklands conflicts, Read told his story in the acclaimed 1999 book *Freefall*,

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before committing suicide two years ago by jumping out of a light plane as it flew over Oxfordshire in southern England.

"He was one of the most brilliant high-altitude freefallers," says Robotham. But he went mad while training to break the record for such feats. "He was totally psychotic," he says. "During the 12 months we worked on the book, he came off his medication and relapsed into psychosis."

*The Suspect* includes psychobabble Robotham heard during Read's episodes of madness. "The dialogues about good and evil and black and white," he says of conversations between his protagonist, Professor Joseph O'Loughlin, and his deranged patient, Bobby Moran, "I experienced first hand with Tom Read."

Robotham has also observed up close the skewed ticking of criminal minds. Apart from his weekly conversations in 1980 with Raymond Denning – at whose trial Robotham had to testify after "Australia's most wanted" had spent 19 months taunting police – he also covered the case of a British missionary in India accused of raping or otherwise assaulting hundreds of boys for 25 years. Robotham was then an investigative reporter for *The Mail on Sunday* in Britain, where he lived from 1986 to 1996, before returning to Sydney. The missionary successfully sued the paper after a six-week court hearing. "My love for journalism died with that case," he says. "As a journalist, you know you're not going to change the world, but you at least have this expectation you're going to help people at times."

The soft side of Robotham, father of three young children, resurfaces when he talks about the girl who became Ginger Spice. The one clue to the authorship of *Geri Halliwell: If Only* is in the line: "Thanks to Michael ... and all at Transworld." He says the book "broke the mould for celebrity autobiographies" because it she was so honest.

Because of her openness, he says he found it easy "becoming" Halliwell. "I remember her telling me stories about when

she was a kid, and how these boys were arguing about who was going to snog her," he says. "It was such a funny story, her voice stuck in my head. I felt as though I knew what it was like to be a 26-year-old former aerobics instructor from Watford."

Much as he excels at telling his own stories, Robotham was a natural at "ghosting". His new job also paid much better than journalism, considering that sought-after writers reportedly earn as much as one-third of a celebrity's advance and royalties. Halliwell, whose book sold 250,000 copies in hardback in Britain, alone, was paid £500,000 (HK\$6.9 million) up front, while David Beckham made three times that for his story.

"You start off small and do books of

people you've never heard about," says Robotham. "If they're successful, publishers give you other books. I know people who can't do it because they can't divorce themselves [from their subjects] or leave their egos behind."

It was enough for Robotham that his family and publishers knew he was a major reason two million copies of other people's books have sold. "At one point I had three ghost-written books in the Top 10 in the UK, none of which had my name on it," he says. "I got a buzz from that."

Robotham is also high on the success of *The Suspect*, which has ended his anonymity for good. The book is to be sold in close to 30 countries in 11 languages. The BBC is also turning the story into a long-running series (Robotham imagines British actor Damian Lewis in the main role) and a major Hollywood studio (he won't say which) is apparently considering adapting the novel for the big screen.

A classic psychological thriller, *The Suspect* takes readers down main roads, across roundabouts and into dead ends before paths merge and all is revealed.

Respected psychologist and family man O'Loughlin sees his comfortable life disintegrate when he is accused of murdering a woman given to self-mutilation who had accused him of assault. To say more would spoil the book, although it's probably fair to reveal that Robotham is intrigued by psychological experiments such as Daniel Wegner's 1987 work on thought suppression. "He asked a group of people not to think about a white bear," the author says through his main character. "No matter how hard they tried, no person could avoid the forbidden thought for more than a few minutes."

Another, more affecting, test involved

chimpanzees purposely starved and then given the choice of food or a mother's warmth. That each went for the latter "sort of explains why we create psychopaths. You can give a child food, but if you don't give them love and hugs and what not ..." Robotham's unfinished sentence provokes dark thoughts.

Turning the conversation back into the sunshine, he talks about his second novel, a sequel of sorts to *The Suspect*. The story is told through the eyes of Vincent Ruiz, the detective in the first book whom O'Loughlin impresses but also intimidates with his powers of perception.

Although a best-selling author many times over, Robotham seems genuinely awestruck to have been "discovered" and given a two-book deal. He also marvels at the trust publishers showed in him. "I knew how *The Suspect* was going to end," he says. "So it was a bit like knowing you had to get between Sydney and Hong Kong, but being able to go via Paris, New York or whatever."

He says he's shocked that *The Suspect* was bought on the strength of its first 117 pages. "None of the publishers asked me how it ended, which I found fascinating," he says. "But I was horrified, really, because it's like buying a house when you've only seen a photograph."

And how does his family feel about his work now that his name is splashed on covers around the world? Robotham laughs and reels off another anecdote, this time about his 10-year-old eldest daughter. "We were in the ABC studios [in Sydney] the other day, and I had to sign the guest book," he says. "She signed Alexandra Robotham under mine, and in brackets wrote 'future author and daughter of the above'."

