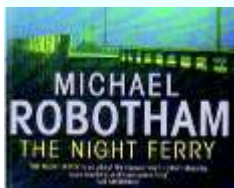




Light shines on sex slavery



BETWEEN THE **lines**
CHRISTOPHER BANTICK



The Night Ferry
by Michael Robotham
Sphere
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MICHAEL Robotham is a former journalist and it shows. He has the nose for a good story. More than this, his capacity to evoke situation, circumstance and character is acute. But reporting is not his long suit. Robotham has a penchant for investigating and peeling back the layers of individual lives.

His debut book, *The Suspect*, introduced him as a writer with poise and refined awareness of narrative movement. It became a hot-button book at the London Book Fair and was the subject of a vociferous bidding war. The novel went on to be published in 17 languages, with television rights sold to the BBC. This was followed by *Lost*.

While second novels may be problematic after initial success with a first book, this was not the case with *Lost*. The book won the Ned Kelly Award for Crime Book of the Year in 2005 and was shortlisted for the 2006 Barry Award for the Best British Novel published in America.

Without giving too much away, in his new book, *The Night Ferry*, Alisha Barba — who emerged in *Lost* — becomes aware that all in the life of an old school friend, Cate, is not what it seems. As Barba endeavours to find the truth, this takes her to Amsterdam's red light district and the shadowy world of sex slavery, people trafficking, surrogacy and exploitation.

But while the plot's momentum is maintained by the drive-shaft of being a thriller, Barba is an immensely satisfying character. As a 29 year-old detective constable who suffered in *Lost*, she happens to be a London-born Sikh.

She is also an athlete who is sassy and funny. There is plenty here for readers to explore and Robotham says Barba fitted his ambitions for the direction of his fiction to date.

"What I have set out to do is make each book different. I don't want to be a thriller writer who writes the same book over and over. I think the way to achieve a different feel is to look at the world through a new pair of eyes. I wanted a woman to be my main character," he says.

"Alisha Barba stood out. For me the challenge was to get her and her family right and the possible conflict between her family, who want her to dress in saris and not go to the gym. But Alisha is her own woman.

"I spent a lot of time building the back story. This was because I think knowing about the past is helpful to understanding the nature of everyone's lives. Our lives are not black and white. I tried to make her as real as possible. I wanted to show that, at least in terms of the complexities of life, she is like us. Even so, what she goes through is extreme."

While Robotham has a certain surety with his fluent style, writing from a woman's perspective and from a specific cultural perspective did, he says now, present him with some unsettling moments.

"In hindsight, writing as a woman terrifies me. Part of the research to get the voice right was to check out on-line blogs. I looked at diaries being written by women in their late 20s. Many of them wrote about the troubles they were having with relationships and some were very funny," he says.

"The truth I discovered is that women don't stand around talking footy. They talk about all sorts of stuff and they reveal much about their sex lives as well. I don't think men do this."

With this level of attention to detail —



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including numerous trips to Amsterdam — and developing an ear for how a 20-something woman would negotiate contemporary life, Robotham knows how to pace a narrative. It comes as a surprise when he says this is not easy.

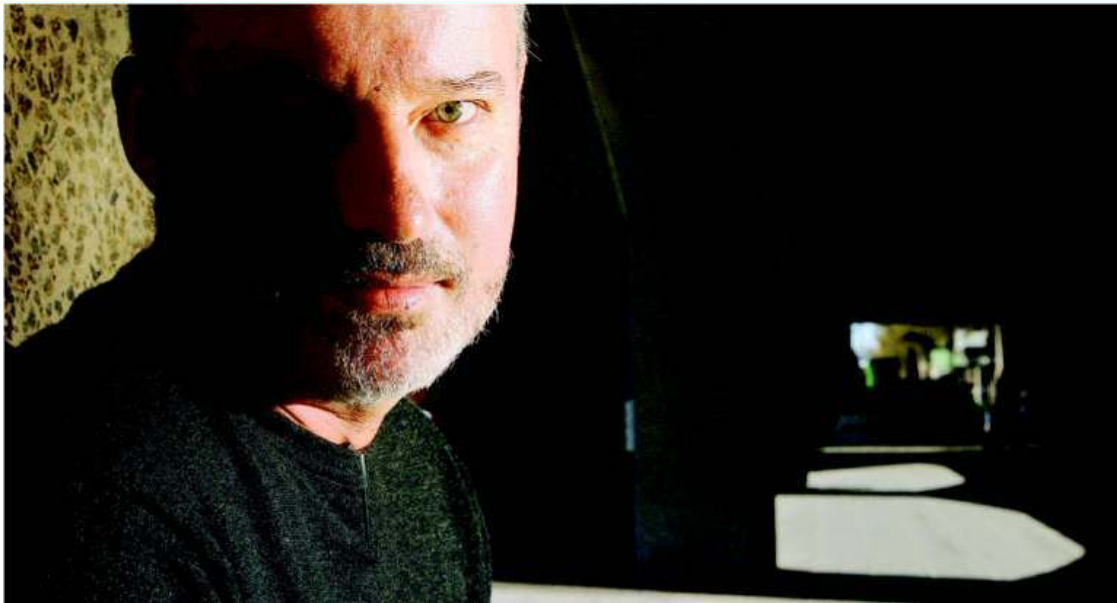
“I hate plotting. It’s not the idea of a plot but the process that bores me. It’s like playing three-dimensional chess,” he says.

“Readers are so sophisticated these days. They know there is going to be a twist somewhere. I

have to ask myself how am I going to prevent them from knowing what’s coming? Give me character creation any day.”

Chess seems an entirely appropriate metaphor for Robotham’s outlook on fiction. He has not made a false move in *The Night Ferry*.

As much as we anticipate what we think are his intentions, his beguiling capacity to lead us on results in us being checkmated — albeit ever so satisfyingly.



UNSETTLING MOMENTS: Michael Robotham gives a woman’s perspective, and also one of a London-born Sikh