

Unmasking the ghost

By James Hall, as printed in The Australian, April 03, 2004

The Suspect

By Michael Robotham, Time Warner, 406pp, \$29.95

AFTER several years reporting the crime scene for The Sun, the old Sydney tabloid, the kid from Casino decided the time had come for the inevitable big adventure overseas in search of fame and fortune. That was in 1986. Over the next seven years he became a Fleet Street star as a feature writer with the Mail on Sunday and other newspapers. During the following 10 years, having quit stingy journalism, he started to build a modest fortune as a big league ghostwriter for the relatively rich and often famous - 14 books, including 11 bestsellers.

Now, at 43, he's also gained all the fame he can handle for the moment by hitting the literary jackpot with his debut novel, the first book he has written under his own name - Michael Robotham.

The Suspect, a psychological thriller-cum-love story set in Britain, netted him \$1 million as publishers fell over themselves to make a deal. It was a bestseller as soon as it appeared and has since been sold to 25 countries. The BBC has a guaranteed plan for a miniseries and the Bertelsmann group, with book clubs covering 28 million members in 15 countries, has declared it the new international book of the month.

So the ex-journo who's only ever read one crime novel in his life - Dennis Lehane's Mystic River - finds himself the new hot name in international crime writing, operating from Sydney's north shore, where he lives with his wife and three young daughters.

Late though it may be, "this is a dream start", exclaims Robotham. "I set my heart on being a novelist at the age of 12, but then I had nothing to write about. Mark Twain had stolen all the best plots. Crime is a very crowded field and I started off with no greater ambition than to see my book published. I thought ghosting was going to make me enough money anyway, so I'd just sneak a little novel in here and see how it goes. And it gets this response."

Robotham, an appreciative smile on his whiskery, youthful face, clearly still can't quite believe his luck. But then luck has been breaking his way quite nicely since he set out for success. Not every Australian journalist lands on a national English newspaper. Or bumps into a ghostwriter who introduces him to a smart agent, who encourages him to give up journalism and get going on a ghostwriting career which, if you are good, pays big time.

Robotham proved very good: autobiographies followed, which involved writing for Ricky Tomlinson, Rolf Harris, Lulu, Geri Halliwell, and Tracy Edwards and Tony Bullimore of yachting fame, among various other prominent figures in sport, science, business and psychology. Who did he like most? Tomlinson tops his poll - a man who is only ever Ricky Tomlinson, "no tickets on him, just the same man as the one slumped in

front of the telly with a beer in his hand in *The Royle Family*", a professional Liverpudlian who hated those who claimed to be (Cilla Black, Jimmy Tarbuck) and weren't. "He resented that they never gave anything back to the city."

Harris? "Interesting man. A professional Australian, but when you got him settled and talking about himself, a man with a very darkside."

Robotham, with all his journalistic experience, soon learned how to get people talking about themselves, even those he might not have liked. "A ghostwriter has to be a kind of psychologist, extracting a person's fears and nightmares. You have to discover what made them the sort of person they are. Sometimes when you unpack it all they often feel better for it, even grateful."

Getting up to one-third of a celebrity's advance and royalties, top ghosts can do very well for four months' work, or even 12 months'. Remember David Beckham got pound stg. 1.5 million (\$3.67 million) for his book. "So am I wealthy? I'm certainly better off than if I'd stayed in journalism," laughs Robotham.

As it turned out, it was his first ghostwriting assignment that inspired his novel to be, *The Suspect*. He was asked to help the Nottingham social worker Margaret Humphreys tell how she uncovered Britain's child migration scandal, which involved sending about 150,000 children to a "new life in distant parts of the empire". *Empty Cradles* became the first of his many bestsellers without his name on them.

This investigation, together with his freelance writing on conflict, crime, espionage and related tragedies, powers the background to *The Suspect*. "People kept asking me, 'When are you going to write your own book?'" This he decided, as a man in his 40s, would be it.

"I wrote 117 pages and showed it to my agent. I didn't want to spend a year doing it if no one wanted it. He loved it and gave me a dozen reasons to finish it. Several months later - I hadn't done much more, because the Lulu job had come up - we were having lunch with a publisher and I told her about one scene. She said the hair on the back of her neck sort of rose up and she spent the next week badgering my agent to let her read the 117 pages. She made a six-figure offer, which I thought was insane - like buying a house on seeing a photograph - but obviously we accepted it and I decided to finish the book."

By the time of the London Book Fair, word had got around. "Suddenly we were being offered money by publishers everywhere - three Americans, five French, four Dutch. Almost unintentionally we had created a feeding frenzy. And not one of them asked how it ended. Astonishing. It was just one of those things." Like luck.

So how good is *The Suspect*? In a word, very.

It's the story of a clinical psychologist with Parkinson's disease who finds himself in domestic turmoil and on the run across Britain as chief suspect in a murder he has been

investigating. It has touches of John Buchan and Nicci French about it. Not, presumably, that Robotham would know it. But for all his ignorance of the genre, he has settled into it like a thief in a jeweller's. Believable and authentic from the first sentence, *The Suspect* is altogether an accomplished piece of work. Robotham doesn't put a foot wrong in his plotting, pace or inventiveness.

It's pleasing to know he is well on the way to finishing his second thriller. This ghost is unmasked to every crime fan's benefit.

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