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writing tips
from Lee Child, Val
McDermid, George
Pelecanos, Ian Rankin
and other bestselling
authors

THE arvon BOOK OF
CRIME
AND THRILLER
WRITING

Michelle Spring and Laurie R. King

Series Editors: Carole Angier and Sally Cline

'...the perfect primer for any aspiring writer with
echoes of murder and mystery in their bones.'

John Harvey

B L O O M S B U R Y

The Arvon Book
of Crime and
Thriller Writing

Endorsements

With its stress on a writer's obligations to language and to humanity, as well as the necessary craft and graft, this guide to planning, writing and finally selling crime fiction hits just about every button square on. Michelle and Laurie are not only accomplished writers, but helpful and persuasive teachers, leading you from the perfect first sentence to the perils of plotting (Orderly or Organic anyone?) and beyond. Peppered with advice and inspiration from 20 or so established masters and mistresses of the genre, this is close to the perfect primer for any aspiring writer with echoes of murder and mystery in their bones. **John Harvey**

The good thing about the *Arvon Book of Crime and Thriller Writing* is that, unlike many How To guides, it is not prescriptive. The authors, Michelle Spring and Laurie R. King, don't say there is a right and a wrong way of writing a crime novel. They accept that there are many equally valid approaches to the task, but then with practical advice and well-chosen exercises demonstrate how any writer can make their book better. There is also input from a distinguished list of Guest Contributors, whose short essays provide a wider perspective on the business. The *Arvon Book of Crime and Thriller Writing* is full of invaluable, extremely sensible advice for every aspiring crime writer and I, as an experienced practitioner in the genre, also picked up some very useful tips. **Simon Brett**

Novels by Michelle Spring

Every Breath You Take (Simon and Schuster, New York; Orion, London, 1994)

Running for Shelter (Simon and Schuster, New York; Orion, London; Ballantine, New York and Toronto, 1997)

Standing in the Shadows (Ballantine, New York and Toronto; Orion, London, 1998)

Nights in White Satin (Ballantine, New York and Toronto; Orion, London, 1999; Ostara Publishers, 2010)

In the Midnight Hour (Ballantine, New York and Toronto; Orion, London, 2001)

The Night Lawyer (Ballantine, New York and Toronto, 2007)

Novels by Laurie R. King

The Kate Martinelli novels

A Grave Talent (1993)

To Play the Fool (1995)

With Child (1996)

Night Work (2000)

The Art of Detection (2006)

The Mary Russell novels

The Beekeeper's Apprentice (1994)

A Monstrous Regiment of Women
(1995)

A Letter of Mary (1997)

The Moor (1998)

O Jerusalem (1999)

Justice Hall (2002)

The Game (2004)

Locked Rooms (2005)

The Language of Bees (2009)

The God of the Hive (2010)

Beekeeping for Beginners (an
e-novella, 2011)

Pirate King (2011)

Garment of Shadows (2012)

Standalone novels

A Darker Place (1999)

Folly (2001)

Keeping Watch (2003)

Califa's Daughters (2004)

Touchstone (2008)

Books from 1993 to 1998 were first published by St Martin's Press, New York; books from 1999 to present by Bantam Books, New York. UK editions and other publications are listed on the website.

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The Arvon Book of Crime and Thriller Writing

Michelle Spring and Laurie R. King

Carole Angier and Sally Cline, Series Editors

B L O O M S B U R Y

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Foreword

by P. D. James

The crime novel is one of the most enduring and resilient forms of popular literature; it is also one of the most versatile, ranging in scope and intention from Agatha Christie's Poirot and Miss Marple stories, with their usually rural and domestic settings and their comfortable orthodoxies, to Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and some of the highest works of the human imagination. In the so-called Golden Age of the detective story between the two world wars, the crime novel most frequently written was the English detective story. Readers could expect a central mysterious death, a closed circle of suspects, clues inserted in the story with essential fairness but deceptive cunning, a dominant romantic and multi-talented hero, and a final scene when the detective calls all the suspects together and the murderer, his methods and motives, are revealed. Our world has changed drastically since the last war and the crime novel has changed with it, moving closer to the virtues and social realism of the best creative writing. Today it includes a remarkable variety of fiction: the fast action thriller, historical mysteries, those set in the future, and stories where the emphasis is on horror or psychological mystery.

The detective as the protagonist, of which Sherlock Holmes was among the earliest and most successful, still remains, but modern crime novelists have invented an extraordinary variety of private eyes of both sexes and varied nationalities and backgrounds. They are less likely to be perfect examples of gallant and romantic heroism than professional men and women undertaking an arduous job in a dangerous world, who are sometimes physically disabled or psychologically flawed, and who have domestic or other personal problems with which to cope. The best crime writers today are producing books which combine mystery and excitement with social realism and are rightly regarded as distinguished novelists.

The Arvon Book of Crime and Thriller Writing not only explores the history and varieties of crime fiction, but provides practical advice on writing a

crime novel and includes contributions from highly regarded novelists who are among the most successful and popular in their field. The word Arvon on the cover is itself a guarantee of success. The Arvon Foundation is among the most highly regarded of voluntary organisations, which exist to promote literature and the love of the written word, and those of us who have been privileged to teach one of Arvon's residential courses know how much those brief periods spent in writing and talking about writing can mean to those who take part, including the tutors.

This book will appeal strongly not only to established writers and newcomers to the genre, but to those many readers who have found in this most popular form of literature entertainment, excitement, intellectual stimulus and relief from some of the traumas, violence and uncertainty of our age, and it is with confidence that I wish every success to *The Arvon Book of Crime and Thriller Writing* and to those who read it.

Preface to series

Who has not dreamed of writing a crime novel? Crime stories offer a classic structure – mystery, quest – and a solid base in research. We all read them and love them; and if we dream of writing at all, we think, *Maybe I could do this*. The message of this book is: with devotion and practice, we can.

This is the second in a new series of Arvon books on writing. Like the others, it is written by two distinguished writers in the field: in this case, one American and one British. In Part One they tell with riveting honesty why and how they themselves write about crime. In Part Two their twenty-six invited guests – all top practitioners, some British, some North American (and one Icelandic!) – add generous, lively and fascinating reflections on their trade. And in Part Three the two co-authors return, to offer a detailed practical guide to writing every kind of crime story, from classic whodunits to fast-paced thrillers.

We mustn't give the authors' secrets away, especially in a book about mystery.

But here are just some of their reasons to write about crime: for catharsis, and the thrill of research; to explore social questions without having to give answers, and to combine entertainment with the deepest exploration of the human soul. If these sound like reasons to do any kind of writing, that is because they are. This is not a book about crime writing, the authors say, it is a book about writing, crime.

All writers, not only crime writers, will enjoy it.

Carole Angier and Sally Cline, series editors

Introduction

by Michelle Spring and Laurie R. King

We are writers, and the books we write are crime novels. This delightful situation is one that neither of us expected. Neither of us came from a literary background. One of us was sidling towards middle age, the other only a few years younger, before we turned our hands to fiction. Michelle, for one, grew up in a time and place where reading was considered an eccentric pastime, and writing as a career was never considered at all.

Times have changed, and in this respect, for the better. As a population, we are now more educated and, in spite of competition from computer games and television, many of us have a hunger for reading. A staggering range of fiction is easily available from bookshops, supermarkets, online sellers, and (where they've escaped the cuts) libraries. Thanks to the spread of reading groups – virtual and real-life – the pleasure found in novels is once again a shared activity.

The idea of writing fiction is also less exotic than it used to be, and somewhat less the prerogative of the privileged. Writers seldom find their footsteps dogged by the paparazzi, but the names of authors such as Lee Child or Tess Gerritsen are widely recognised. Literary festivals, book events, blogs and interviews have made the route to writerdom more public than in the past.

Is it surprising, then, that more and more people aspire to write? Men and women fresh out of university commit to writing as a career. Mothers with young children try to shoehorn writing into their busy lives. People approaching retirement look to writing for fresh challenge and a supplement to the pension. The proliferation of courses in creative writing (and of books such as this one) is both a response to the demand from budding writers, and an invitation to people to regard writing as something they might try for themselves.

But though there is great enthusiasm for the novel, many people puzzle over making the leap from 'wanting to write' to actually doing it. Many are bursting with ideas and ambition, but unsure how actually to produce a work of fiction that is worthy of being read.

One aim of *The Arvon Book of Crime and Thriller Writing* is to help such people move from intention to result. This book says: You want to write? To write a crime novel or a thriller? Here's how to go about it.

By the way: unlike some guides, we don't suggest that writing is easy. Far from it. Writing takes imagination and commitment and mountains of hard work. But we do show how to lay the foundations, so that – if you put in the effort – you'll be able to direct it in a way that will produce the best novel possible.

The second, and perhaps the more important, aim of this book is to explore the nature of crime writing today. What exactly is this genre that occupies such a large portion of the shelves in any bookshop and many of the top spots in best-seller lists? What are the boundaries of the genre, and the subgroups within it? What are its roots in literary tradition, and where is it going today? Why is crime fiction so appealing to readers, and what propels some writers to devote their working lives to it?

In pursuit of our aims, we've enlisted the help of over two dozen of the best thriller writers and crime novelists working today. They give their highly diverse takes on crime and thriller writing, and provide the kind of insights that emerge only from experience. Their passion for story-telling and for the genre is illuminating and inspiring.

Having a substantial range of guest authors is one way of signalling an idea we regard as primary: there is no one way to write a crime novel. No single approach or 'formula' is right for everyone. People bring to writing their individual talents and convictions, and shape what they do accordingly. We hope that the arguments and examples and exercises in this book will nudge readers into cultivating their own views of what crime writing is and how it can be done.

The emphasis on diversity of approach extends to the two co-authors, as well. We have a great many shared views about crime fiction – what it is, and how it should develop – but we are by no means carbon copies

of each other. In our 'Reflections', in Part One of this book, we lay bare our lives as crime writers, and our individual views on what we believe to be important and challenging about the genre. We describe our markedly different work habits. One of us begins a book with a carefully constructed outline; the other plunges in and leaves the specifics to the rewrite. The crucial thing is that both approaches do the business: both can produce great novels. By revealing alternative ways of getting the book you want to write on to paper, we hope to extend your range of options as a writer until you identify the approach that works, absolutely, for you.

This guide to crime writing is, in short, just that: a guide, not a recipe. There are two main authors and twenty-six guests in order to give a faint indication of the breadth of the genre and its writers. We all have to invent our own wheel in this business. What is comfortable for one writer causes another to look on in horror. One writer sits down to the keyboard only when mortgage payments threaten to overcome bank balance, while another clocks in at the same time every day – literally, with a time card. None (that we know of) follows the system of Kent Haruf, who composes on a manual typewriter with his knitted cap pulled over his eyes, but if you find that appealing, by all means try it, and do let us know how it works for you.

The Arvon Book of Crime and Thriller Writing might be considered a collection of Things We Wish We'd Known When We Started. Neither the co-authors nor their twenty-six crime-writing guests are keen to reveal the wrong turns taken and the hours wasted before each of us discovered our own right way to write. The goal of the present volume is to bring together some of the things we learned, to free your creative mind to soar while your feet are grounded on solid technique.

Find your way, experiment with differences, see what works for you. Have fun while you're doing it, because joy reveals itself in your work.

But above all – keep writing!

Notes on format and terminology

The Arvon Book of Crime and Thriller Writing stems from the residential classes taught through England's Arvon Foundation, which combine structured tutorials, intense personal contact with two professional writers leading the course, guided writing exercises, and a mid-week guest writer to offer a different perspective. Similarly, this printed guide to crime writing offers a pair of professionals and a mid-book guest section (with twenty-six visitors rather than just the one!) to offer a full range of views. Where sections of the book are written by one or the other of the authors, her name will appear. Bullet points and unsigned portions are joint ventures.

Part Three of the book gives detailed advice about the craft of crime writing, from the mechanics of plotting to promoting your book. When we talk about publication, we mean the traditional publishing industry. Writers happy to upload their book online may be able to set aside some of the industry's requirements.

Fiction that includes country house detection and graphic serial killer novels makes for a broad church. Our guest authors represent every position on the crime spectrum and are content to be included in a book devoted to 'Crime and Thriller Writing'. But constant repetition is cumbersome, so we use 'crime writing' to mean all degrees within the spectrum, but 'thrillers' or 'detective stories' when we are looking at a particular type. (The 'spectrum of crime' is analysed below.) Similarly, because of the mix of nationalities, we chose to stick to British spelling, and trust the American eye will not stumble over 'plough' and 'colour'.

In North America, the umbrella term for 'crime writing' is often 'mystery'. In this book, the term 'mystery' will usually be reserved for the specific type of crime novel known also as 'traditional detective stories' or 'whodunits'.

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Part 1:

On a life of crime

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Reflections I

by Michelle Spring: Thoughts about crime

I became a crime writer in my middle years, from a rather unlikely starting point, and I'm very glad I did. The reflections that follow deal with the life experiences that inform my writing, the challenges that crime writing presents and the wonderful things that it offers for writers and readers alike. The reflections are written from an entirely personal perspective, but I hope that reading them will nudge people to explore further the rich genre of crime fiction for themselves.

1. 'I always knew I wanted to be a writer'

I never cease to wonder when I hear others say: *I always knew I wanted to be a writer*. I'm struck by an image of them as newborns, their faces wrinkled with the effort of exposition; scribbling ideas on the trays of their highchairs; parading the premise of their latest story during show-and-tell. Their sense of vocation bowls me over. It wasn't like that for me. I grew up in a small Canadian town in which, at the time, the principal employer for men was the pulp mill and most married women stayed at home to mend and make do. My grandfather was a logger, my father a commercial fisherman. The idea of writing as a career simply didn't occur to me.

I adored reading, however, as did my mother. Mom concealed racy romances behind the furnace, and I hid my love of reading, because, among so many of our peers, reading was considered somewhat weird and not a little suspect.

In career terms, luck was on my side. I went to college, developed a passion for social science, and eventually, after moving to England, became a university professor. I wrote academic books and papers on a bulky old electric typewriter. I co-wrote a textbook which ran to four editions and earned a small fortune.

But until the 1990s, I never turned my hand to fiction. It was an encounter

with a stalker (of which more later) that compelled me to have a go at writing a novel. To my astonishment, *Every Breath You Take* was snapped up by publishers in several countries, and I found myself with a new career.

Selling a first novel is a thrilling experience. But by then I was hooked on the writing itself. Writing turned out to be a challenge – and after years and years of teaching, a challenge was a welcome thing.

Writing became an escape. At the end of the day, I'd feel as if I'd been somewhere new, and had an adventure.

Writing freed me to have a new relationship with the world around me. As an academic, I tended to bury myself in my thoughts. Now, I've become expert at listening in to other people's conversations. I plunder the landscape for the materials for word pictures. I stare openly at people on the Underground. (Yes, *that was me. Sorry.*)

These are some of the pleasures that I've found through writing. Of course, there is a commercial interest, too. Books sell, sometimes for relatively little money, sometimes for a lot. That fact allows me to spend most, though not quite all, of my time in writing.

But beyond the prospect of money is the vast delight to be found in the act of writing itself. I've never had a talent for music, but I imagine that the rewards of playing an instrument are rather similar to those of writing. Writing involves playing with language. I get a huge buzz out of the rhythm and sound, the crash and hum and tinkle of words. What could be more delicious?

As the writer Anne Lamott says in *Bird by Bird*:

“... publication is not all that it's cracked up to be. But writing is. Writing has so much to give, so much to teach, so many surprises. The thing that you had to force yourself to do – the actual act of writing – turns out to be the best part. It's like discovering that while you thought you needed the tea ceremony for the caffeine, what you really needed was the tea ceremony. The act of writing turns out to be its own reward.”

2. Reasons to write a crime novel

Do you remember that British slogan, *Go to work on an egg?* (Penned, as it happens, by an advertising team led by novelist Fay Weldon.) It's not a bad idea, but here's a better one: Go to work on a crime novel.

People are, generally speaking, keen on the idea. At parties, I often meet accountants or toy-model makers with fiendishly clever plot synopses in their waistcoat pockets; the book clubs I visit are bursting with dental nurses who are burrowing away at serial killer stories. When I run crime-writing workshops, lawyers turn out in droves. Even – but perhaps this is less surprising – prisoners are keen.

For those who have the urge to write a crime novel, there are dozens of reasons to do so. I have pared them down to the few that chime most closely with my own experience:

- **To lighten up.** While it is not infrequently the case that writers of, say, experimental fiction find an emotional release in their work, for crime novelists (who deal with the dark things that we push aside in order to get on with everyday life) the cathartic attraction of writing can be decisive. This was certainly the case for me.

There was a time in my life when my sleep was punctured by nightmares. When I was constantly scanning for signs of danger. When I couldn't pass a dark doorway without stiffening in fear.

Writing crime changed all that. I transferred my dark thoughts on to the page, and the nightmares receded. As long as I'm beavering away at a crime novel, I sleep like a lamb.

- **To satisfy the story-telling urge.** Items in the news, memories from the past, things that puzzle or fascinate or frighten you: once you begin to exercise your imaginative muscles, you'll find yourself, as I did, constantly bumping up against stories that demand to be told. They just keep coming, and they won't be denied.
- **For companionship.** It's an open secret that writers can be difficult people to know: gloomy, competitive and bitchy. Romantic novelists are reputed to be backstabbers to a woman – though it goes without saying that the few whom I know well are sweetness and light. But crime writers are a

remarkably convivial and good-hearted lot. They work hard – the pressure to produce a book a year is no joke – but they pass up no opportunity for fun. Crime-writing conventions are just one such opportunity, exhausting, exhilarating and irresistible. (We'll give details at the end of the book.)

- **As an outlet for aggression.** It is widely mooted within the crime fraternity that crime writers are easy to hang out with precisely because they channel belligerent impulses into their writing, leaving them, in real life, meek and mild. I wouldn't like to confirm or deny that rumour. But I can tell you that a crime novel is a great place to park your rage. The prospect of giving vent to righteous anger in a safe form can be particularly attractive for women, who are taught, from an early age, that aggression is unfeminine. A sharp-tongued woman is subject to sanctions that rarely apply to a sharp-tongued man, and a woman who meets provocation with an outburst of rage – let alone a well-placed punch – is likely to be deemed a shrew and a slag.

But draft a crime novel and all that's set aside. When I first came to write a scene where my private investigator was required to defend herself against a knife-wielding man, I drew on that submerged feeling of rage. Once I'd made the leap into my imagination, punches and kicks came surprisingly easily. More than that, I found that writing a fight scene was good clean fun. I suspect that I'm not the only one who derives from writing crime novels the pleasure of letting rip – entirely on the page.

- **For the thrill of research.** As someone who's done both, I can confirm that the research you do as a crime writer is every bit as satisfying as scholarly research – and it's far more diverse.

Research has given me an entrée into worlds that I wouldn't otherwise know. It has taken me to see children, some as young as eleven, who had been locked up for murder, arson and rape. It's taken me to a refuge in Notting Hill to interview Filipina maids who've fled abusive British-based employers – TNTs, as the women are called in their own language. It's taken me to a formal tea with diplomats at an Arab embassy, while in the background a horse race thundered across the television screen.

In the interests of research, I've breached security in Britain's tallest skyscraper, provoking an outburst from a security guard who was caught

napping on the job. I've worked with a forensic artist as she reconstructed human features from a fleshless skull and magicked into being up-to-date 'photographs' of a child who'd vanished years before. I've posted notices in women's washrooms inviting prostitutes to interview; one of the conversations that followed was a poignant exchange with a teenager who begged me to find her a job as a call girl. Dilemmas about the ethics of research, you see, are not confined to scholars alone.

The central character in my series novels, Laura Principal, is a cool and likeable private investigator, so I am spared the need to master the intricacies of police work. But even so, I get a lot of help from the police, particularly from a high-ranking officer who once upon a time was my graduate student. The Inspector keeps me on the straight and narrow. She provides information on serious matters – like airport security and the condition of corpses – and on more frivolous matters, too. After she'd read a draft of one of my novels, I received a fax from police headquarters with a stern reprimand: *Female police officers do not, I repeat not, wear regulation underclothes.*

- **To foster humility – and freedom.** If you are determined to produce a really outstanding novel, but you want to avoid becoming swell-headed, then crime writing is for you. No matter how sparkling your prose, how penetrating your insights, how prolific your output, how ambitious your writing, you are unlikely to be ushered into the salons of the Literary Elite.

Instead, you will be greeted by phrases like – 'What *do you do?* What *sort of books?* *Oh, I see, a crime writer.*'

Or – '*D'you know, you're good enough to write a real book.*'

Or by the smug declaration, '*I don't read crime.*'

Incidentally, when someone says to me, '*I don't read crime*', I am pierced by a suspicion that the speaker's knowledge of crime fiction is trapped in the world of Agatha Christie.

FOR SOPHIE HANNAH on ...

the psychological depth of Christie's whodunits, see 'Tips and tales – guest contributors', p. 124.

I've got nothing against Christie; in fact, I defended her recently on BBC3's *Battle of the Books*. But I do consider her approach to the crime novel – the formulaic puzzler, the tricky but not entirely credible plot, and the dearth of critical reflection about the world around – distinctly limited and definitely out of date. Crime fiction long ago moved beyond the generic bounds that reigned in Christie's time. There are still *whodunits*, but more prominent now are *whydunits* and *howillbedones* and – the staple of the thriller – *willhedoits*. Some crime novels revel in pure action, and a very few concentrate on puzzle alone, but many more are engaged in an interrogation of psyche and society as acute as that on offer in so-called 'literary fiction'.

So when someone says to me: 'I don't read crime', I bite back the obvious response: *What? Don't read stories in which transgression or violence (or the consequences thereof) play an important part? Don't read who, then? J. M. Coetzee? Truman Capote? Peter Carey? Joyce Carol Oates? Ian McEwan? Harper Lee? Margaret Atwood? Dostoevsky? Dickens? Shakespeare?*

But don't be put off by the disdain of Literary Types; even this has its positive side. When you come out, so to speak, as a crime novelist, you no longer have to worry about whether or not your writing is 'avant-garde'. You are free to create a cracking good story, with vividly drawn characters and sharply etched locations. Free to dive into the darkest corners of the human heart. Free to surface again into a world enriched by the reflection (so central to the genre) on life and loss and death.

What's not to like?

3. The shadow of violence

I was fourteen years old, at high school in Canada, when I first came face to face with murder. An RCMP squad car pulled up in front of my school and Mounties broke the news to one of the boys in my year that his sister and her boyfriend had been brutally murdered. The killer was a man for whose children she used sometimes to babysit.

Not long after, a girl who'd been a close friend of mine came home from

the cinema to find that her father had shot her mother, little brother and baby sister, and then turned the rifle on himself.

I grew up in the 1960s; like many of my contemporaries, I didn't want to live the corseted lives of earlier generations of women. I wanted, as it seemed at the time, something more: to have a career, to pursue causes I cared about, to travel, to have fun. And one thing was always clear to me: if it's adventure you're after, you mustn't think too long or too hard about violence. Worries about danger – about strangers who can't be trusted, about the risks you take when you're far from home – can stop an adventurous girl (or a boy, for that matter) dead in her tracks.

So I put those childhood murders out of my mind.

Except at night, when brutal nightmares were always with me. Afraid to go to sleep, I read novels late, late and later, and slept less and less.

During the day, I persuaded myself that violence was something that happened only to others. That I was safe.

Except that it wasn't and I wasn't.

I'd just finished university when, for the first time, I experienced stranger-violence that was aimed directly at me. I lived in Venice Beach, in southern California. At that time, the place was a haunt of Hell's Angels and drug addicts, with a scattering of elderly couples who played cards on the promenade and closed their eyes to much of what went on. Other people tended to avoid Venice Beach, which left me able to enjoy long stretches of golden sand in solitude. I felt at home there.

Until one day, after a morning by the sea, making my way home across the beach, I found myself surrounded by a group of men.

They were young, tall, strong and well-spoken, like a college basketball team on their way to a match. They formed a horseshoe around me and began to push and prod, rerouting me in the direction of Venice Pier. *Let's play under the pier*, they said, and I knew I was in serious trouble. Even when the Los Angeles sun blazed down, the space under the pier was darker than sin.

That walk across the sand lasted minutes; it felt like hours. I could see the apartment where I lived, with the blinds pulled down to cut out the midday sun. I could see the promenade in the distance, but the card

players and the bikers were too far away to hear me if I screamed. I wept, and the proddings turned to punches.

Then, only a dozen yards short of the pier, we were accosted by an extraordinary-looking man. He was short and brown-skinned and muscular; he was dressed like Huckleberry Finn, in cut-off dungarees and a straw hat. He ignored the men and focused on me.

'What's your name?' he said. None of the others had asked me this.

I told him. What did I have to lose?

'Hey, brothers,' he said. He looked up and locked eyes with the six much larger men who surrounded me. 'This here's my friend, Michelle.'

There was a prolonged pause. Then, one by one, my captors mumbled their goodbyes, and jogged off towards the promenade, leaving me alone with Huckleberry. When the basketball team was out of earshot, I asked the obvious question: *Who are you?*

He showed me the contents of his wallet. It contained arrest warrants from different states, all in his name; the charges were armed robbery and murder, several times over.

'Who am I?' He smiled, a most engaging smile. 'Honey,' he said, spreading his arms expansively, 'I'm da King of da Beach.'

Looking back on this episode, what amazes me now is how coolly I took it. How easily Roberto became part of my life, dropping in every so often to visit, wrapping a mantle of protection around me. I was never hassled again on Venice Beach.

Roberto was not so lucky. He failed to pay a drugs debt and was dragged behind a motorbike until dead.

There have been other brushes with violence during my adult life. There was the occasion, also in Los Angeles, when a policeman leapt out of an alley and put a gun to my head. In England, there was the armed raid on a building society in which I was caught up, and the student who threatened to kill me and my family. I'll leave these aside for the moment. Enough, surely, is enough.

Why am I recounting the murders that spooked my schooldays? My close shave with a fate worse than death on Venice Beach? Because they explain, as nothing else can, why, partway through my adult life, I've taken

to writing novels, and why I write the kind of novels that I do. I've met many men and women who enjoy reading books about the mafia, say, or about brutal underworlds. They find these stories exhilarating and perhaps, also, curiously consoling, because such stories validate the comforting view that violence takes place 'out there'. That it occurs to other people – criminal classes, low-lifes, gang members – in other places – the projects, the inner city, the East End – and that it won't much intrude into their safe little world.

My own life won't allow me that kind of comfort. Violence hovers at the edge of my vision, like the monster in a horror film.

It's because I can, and do, imagine the worst sort of events in the most mundane places that crime writing feels like coming home. I write about the kind of dangers that burst into the everyday lives of ordinary folk. I write about the nasty things beneath the scrubbed-clean surface.

I write to exorcise the ghosts of violence. I weave my fears into stories and I offer them to readers in the form of suspense. And once I've done that, the murders in my childhood and even the meeting with da King of da Beach seem to have taken place a long, long time ago.

4. Just when you thought it was safe to come out of the water ...

You know those occasions where people are honoured for their achievements? For scripting the best film, building the steadiest Millennium Bridge, or composing the funkiest military march? There's always that embarrassing moment when they become very solemn, and begin a sentimental speech of thanks to the mother, the co-writer, the agent, who made them what they are today.

Well, I recently had a curious thought. What I am today is a writer of crime novels. And the person who was most important in making me that? My family was supportive, and agents and editors offered wisdom and encouragement. But, strange as it seems, the person who deserves the greatest credit is the man who stalked me.

I taught for over twenty years at university. I came into contact with