

CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

John F. Dobbyn – *Black Diamond*

How and when did you start writing?

I began by writing a short story for a creative writing course that I took only to be with my wife, Lois, while she took tennis lessons at the Main Line Night School. The story sold to *Mike Shayne's Mystery Magazine* (now defunct – no connection, I hope). I was so hooked that when I went on to garner enough rejection slips for future short stories to paper Grand Central Station, I couldn't give up. Finally the editor of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, Eleanor Sullivan, wrote on a rejection slip, "You're almost there. Don't quit!" The next one sold, and *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* bought the next twenty short stories. Another six sold to *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*.

When the time came to climb the mountain and write a novel, it took eight years before *Neon Dragon* finally sold to the University Press of New England, whose editor was the husband of Linda Landrigan, the editor-in-chief of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. With the second novel, *Frame Up*, I moved to Oceanview Publications, with which I hope to remain for the next hundred novels – or as many as I can live to write. Oceanview will publish my next novel, the third in the Michael Knight/Lex Devlin series, *Black Diamond*, in the fall of 2011.

What inspired writing the novel, *Black Diamond*?

All of the following inspirations collided to produce *Black Diamond*:

- a. A love of every aspect of horse racing that began when my parents began taking me to Suffolk Downs around the age of three;
- b. A desire to roam the streets and old haunts of Boston again in my mind as I led Michael and Lex through familiar and beloved locations;
- c. A desire to breathe life once more into the cast of characters who came alive in the previous two books and who have been patiently waiting in central casting for another outing – and a crew of new characters – mostly of the Irish persuasion – with whom I wanted to share an adventure.

d. A long latent wish to get to know the land of my ancestry, Ireland, and to introduce the reader to some of the characters and history they might encounter in a reading journey to that unique island.

e. The desire to share with my wife, Lois, once more that exhilarating, sometimes heart-pumping ride that we so much enjoyed after our first two books were born.

Please tell us about your life experience and professional background.

Having been a trial lawyer in Boston – both criminal and civil – and having been a part of that wonderful agglomeration of characters that make up the trial bar of that city, it was a natural to write a legal thriller. I've drawn on my experience with the rhythm and flow of criminal trial tactics, as well as the way defense and prosecution antagonists spar with each other, to give a certain resonance of truth to the fiction.

Is there anything biographical about the novel?

I wish! I could only dream of being as courageous, quick-witted, and, at times, deviously heroic, as my friend and character, Michael Knight. I feel as if he's become more my brother than myself.

Are any of your characters based on real people?

Most of my characters are a conglomerate of features or characteristics of speech and motivations and style of people I've known. The only direct copy is that Lex Devlin IS my Uncle Dick, God rest his large and beautiful soul. I loved and admired him to pieces, and I thank God that we became close enough for him to share some of the greatest stories I've ever heard on our long walks on golf courses together.

Do you feel that your novels are more plot or character driven?

I'd have to say that it is strongly driven by both. Without a powerful plot, with enough breadth and twistiness to keep surprising the reader in every chapter, it could hardly be legitimately sold as a thriller. But without an array of characters who have an unusual and engaging stamp about them - such that the reader really cares whether they live or die, the novel would be one-dimensional and not likely to hold the reader's interest through to the last chapter.

Who is your favorite character?

One of the reasons that I feel strongly about continuing the Michael Knight/Lex Devlin series is that, truth be known, I dearly love both of them so much that even the prodigious effort it takes to build an entire novel is worth it to spend time in their company. I must admit also that as the other perennial characters - such as my Chinese buddy, Harry Wong, and my jazz musician friend, Big Daddy Hightower - have taken shape more fully in each new novel, I've grown to actually love to spend time with them too.

Who is your least sympathetic character?

None. I learned a lesson early on that it is counter-productive to form a completely unsympathetic villain or antagonist. They become dull and inhuman and uninteresting. All of my characters, good and bad, have enough redeeming characteristics to be hopefully believable, and to some degree, sympathetic.

What was the most challenging part of writing *Black Diamond*?

Since I don't outline the book completely in advance, it is occasionally challenging to wake up in the morning and face the blank page in the hope and faith that the Lord is once again going to supply me with workable ideas. I must add that He has never failed me, and I have faith that He never will.

What do you hope readers will take from the book?

My hope is that readers will come away with the satisfying feeling that they have come through an absorbing, challenging, constantly surprising adventure that has been well worth their time spent reading it, as well as the sense that a fair and just solution for all involved was reached, and that they have had the pleasure of spending time with characters who have entertained them thoroughly, and at the same time, taught them something about the subjects of the book – the Irish mafia in Boston, the criminal justice system, The remnants of characters who have come through “the Troubles” in Ireland, and the absolutely fascinating world of horse racing.

How do you dial up the tension in your writing?

There are a number of techniques, but one of the best I heard from Sandra Brown. She said that whenever she reaches an impasse in the plot, she sits back and asks herself – “What is the worst thing that could happen?” That has worked for me - even if I have to kill someone – on paper.

What writers have inspired you?

In no particular order – Arthur Conan Doyle, Rex Stout, Mickey Spillane, James Lee Burke, Lewis Carroll, James Melville, Lee Child, Jeremiah Healy, and others who don't come instantly to mind.

What is the writing process like for you?

As a wild guess, it is something like giving birth, needless to say without the actual pain. When my wife and I see the new book in its physical form for the first time, it is something like our having another child. The birth-pangs are, of course, not to be compared to child-birth, but they are spread over a gestation period of two years.

What is your best advice about writing?

My best advice is never to forget that novel writing is just story-telling. It's as if you have guests at your dining room table and you want to tell them a story. Make it gripping, alive, direct, entertaining, teaching, and above all interesting with every word. The trick is to grab their attention and never let it loose to the end of the story – and have a great finish.

What is the worst advice you have ever received about writing?

I was once ill-advised not to write a series. Fortunately, I ignored the advice, because the most frequent question I am asked is “When can we see Michael Knight and Lex Devlin again?”

What is the gist of the storyline for your latest book, *Black Diamond*?

The next adventure of Michael Knight and Lex Devlin has just been completed and edited and is due for publication in the fall of 2011. The title is ***Black Diamond***. Michael and Lex take on the defense of a jockey who is charged with the murder of a fellow jockey during the running of a fixed horse race at Suffolk Downs in Boston. The investigation places Michael in the direct line of fire in a conflict between South Boston's Irish mafia and the criminal remnant of the terrorist branch of the Irish Republican Army (IRA). The action runs between the familiar turf of Boston and the part of Dublin that is still hurting from “The Troubles”.