

AN INTERVIEW WITH

John Dobbyn, author of *Frame Up*

Start to finish, how long did it take you to write *Frame Up*?

Subconsciously, the work on *Frame Up* began the day I saw the stark, empty frame still hanging in the Gardner Museum in Boston where Vermeer's *The Concert* had been displayed. The question occurred, "what in the world can a thief do with a painting so famous that it can't even be auctioned on eBay?" Over the next year, the answer to that question brought Michael Knight into contact with thugs of every cut, from gang bikers in a Revere bar to the more sophisticated thugs of high finance along the Herengracht Canal in Amsterdam.

How did you get the idea for *Frame Up*?

I initially decided to build a novel around the concept of the Italian mafia centered in the North End of Boston and trafficking in stolen art masterpieces. Then I literally prayed for ideas. It never fails.

What is your favorite part of the writing process? Why?

I love all parts of the writing process (or am I just addicted to it) so much that that love survived the snowstorm of rejection slips that jammed my mailbox in the early years while I was learning to do that which seemed so simple on the surface. That said, however, without question, the most joyous part is having written and hearing people—especially my wife, Lois—say that my writing entertained them—and sometimes, that they learned something from it.

What is your least favorite part of the writing process? Why?

No question. It is compelling my body to take a sitting position in front of an empty computer screen when there are such tempting alternatives as mowing the lawn, putting out the rubbish, or cleaning the garbage pail.

Did you have to do any special research while writing *Frame Up*? If so, what did you research and how did you conduct the research?

Absolutely. Always. I love to write a book that is entertaining, but equally important, I love to give the reader new knowledge about a field that interests me, and hopefully will interest them. In the case of *Neon Dragon*, it was the inner workings of an organized crime organization so secret that most people don't know that it still exists—the Tong. That took approximately two years of intermittent research. In the case of *Frame Up*, I wanted to introduce the reader to the world of international criminal finance based on stolen or fraudulent art so recognizable that it is impossible to dispose of it or fence it in the usual channels. I also wanted to provide a background in the authentication of works of art, particularly applied to the Dutch masters of the "Golden Era." That also required research. Knowledge of the workings of the Boston family of the Italian mafia came mostly from characters I met, one way or another, in the practice of criminal trial law in Boston. That goes back to the days when I was Michael Knight's age.

Do any of the characters in *Frame Up* have an autobiographical component? If so, which character, and how are you similar?

I'm sometimes asked if Michael Knight is my alter ego. Don't I wish! Michael is far smarter, sharper, braver, cooler, and quick-witted than I ever hope to be. Thank the Lord, the thugs in these books are not autobiographical—at least to my knowledge.

How did you get the ideas for the characters in *Frame Up*? Are any of the characters based on people you know?

Actually, most of the characters in *Frame Up* are, at least in part, composites of pieces of people I've known. If anyone should discover that last line and choose to sue for libel, I never said it.

How does your work as a law professor influence your writing?

Probably greatly. Beyond the background in legal tactics and the law itself, there is another asset to teaching. The basic philosophy that gives me the courage to start the daunting process of writing a novel is this: novel-writing is just storytelling. That's all. I tell a lot of stories in class to groups of 50 to 150 students. The task there is to grab the attention and interest of every one of those students and not drop it for fifty solid minutes. That hopefully sharpens timing, word-selection, pace, sense of suspense, etc. Those are the basics of story-telling. Hopefully they are transferable to the written kind.

What do you admire most about your protagonist, Michael Knight?

He and I have become good friends. I put him in some terrible messes, but he doesn't seem to hold it against me. I guess at bottom, the thing I like most about him is that, even though he'll play a bit loose with the truth when it serves a good purpose (like saving his life), I always feel I can trust him. I hope he feels he can trust me. One other thing is that Michael is not a superhero. When I have him in an impossibly tight spot with a gang of thugs and nothing but bluff to get him out of it, he is truly scared out of his mind—as he should be. But he pulls it off. My hero, John Wayne once said, "Courage is being scared to death, and saddling up anyway."

What do you admire most about Lex Devlin, Michael's mentor and law partner?

Easy answer. Lex Devlin is my Uncle Dick. With the exception of my wife, Lois, there has never been anyone on the face of this planet for whom I have had more affection and admiration than my Uncle Dick. God rest him. I hope I have given Lex at least some of Uncle Dick's rock-solid character, toughness combined with softness, and heart.

What motivates Lex Devlin?

His own sense of justice—rather his own sense of what's right. "Justice" is a much trickier term than "right." But then "justice" has been belted around and squeezed and re-configured, and dressed up by lawyers for centuries. "Right" is just plain "right."

What motivates Michael Knight?

Love, faith in the Lord, and a heartfelt concern for the clients and victims I bring to his doorstep that cause him to take risks and go places I wouldn't go if I had the 8th Army behind me.

Do you think you present an accurate depiction of life as a young lawyer through your protagonist?

Good heavens, no! As Michael said in one of the life-threatening situations I dropped him into in *Frame Up*, "I didn't sign on for this when I applied to law school." If I wrote a novel about what most lawyers do in the course of an ordinary day, the reader would have no need for *Sominex*.

Why did you choose Boston as the setting for *Frame Up*?

I think that wherever in the world Michael's and Lex's adventures take them, and me, Boston will always be the base. I'm a firm believer in personally knowing the locale of the action so completely that you can make it—Boston, in this case—almost another character in the story. After living the first thirty years of my life in Boston, with the exception of three years in the Air Force, I know more than the layout of its streets and buildings. I know and feel its spirit, which is unlike that of any other city. I hope it shows through the writing.

Do you think it is common for young lawyers to try to fast-track their careers in such a way that John McKedrick did (i.e., taking a less-than-honorable job where he could get experience in court from day one)? Why or why not?

It's probably uncommon, but I knew a John McKedrick by another name. His real story was a tragedy. There are only certain parts of the fictional character that parallel my friend's life.

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Art plays a major role in Frame Up. What is your interest in art?

It has always been an interest, particularly the works that came out of the “Golden Age” of Dutch art. I would defy anyone to stand for five uninterrupted, focused minutes in front of the work of Rembrandt or Hals or Vermeer and not be emotionally moved in some way. Injecting these works into the novel has been yet another way to enjoy them from the inside. Yet another reason to love fiction writing.

Why did you choose a work by Vermeer to be central to the story? Why not another artist?

First, why Vermeer? Unlike the other Dutch masters of that era, Vermeer painted only thirty-five paintings that are known today to be his original work. They are each probably the most valuable paintings, in terms of cash value, in the world. Assessments of over a hundred million dollars are not uncommon. Beyond the price, the effects produced in his paintings with colored oil on canvas are absolutely mind-boggling. Also, most of his paintings tell a complete and complex story without a word. I love that. Second, why “The Concert”? Actually I never mention it by name, but clearly the allusion is to the painting stolen from the Gardner Museum in Boston, which has never turned up. That in itself is a magnificent story, and a great springboard for a novel that takes off from there.

At its heart, Frame Up, though a thriller in every sense of the word, is also a book that explores the complexity of relationships, whether the mentor-mentee relationship of Michael and Lex, the broken friendship of Lex and his brotherhood, or the friendship between Michael and John, who clearly chose different paths, but didn’t lose the bond that held them together. Why did you choose to include a very human element in your novel?

Those relationships are even more what the novel is all about than the solving of the mystery itself. If I advertised that fact, I’d sell exactly two copies of the novel — to my wife and my son. So, the relationships are woven into the twists of the plot to get the reader to turn the next page. The plot is like the rye bread that conducts the real corned beef to our taste buds. It’s also those relationships that provide an absolutely essential element of a publishable novel. I.e., hopefully, they make the reader care about what happens to the characters. Otherwise the plot is just a magic trick that amuses but is soon forgotten.

Frame Up moves at lightning speed. What is your secret to keeping such a high level of action throughout the novel?

Before writing my first novel, I wrote twenty-one short stories that appeared in Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine and Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine. There is no better way to learn to make every word and sentence pay its full fare.

What do you hope readers will take away from Frame Up?

A bit of knowledge of the art world and those who infiltrate it, a few entertained evenings of escape into the bizarre world of Michael and Lex, a bit more understanding of what makes people take risks for each other, and, God willing, a desire to spend more evenings listening to the voice of Michael Knight.

Do you have any other books in the works?

Yes. I am a quarter of the way into a murder representation that takes Michael into a world that I find fascinating—horse racing. This time they’re involved with the unique kind of organized crime that exists among the Irish population of South Boston. The working title is Black Diamond.