

THE ELEMENT OF CRIME

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AUTHOR OF *BACK ON MURDER*

My first novel, written in heady undergraduate days, concerned a network of spies claiming credit for the fall of the Berlin Wall in a craven bid to ensure their agency's financial future. I'd read Philip Knightley's *The Second Oldest Profession* side-by-side with a brace of Robert Ludlum novels, and the result (in my estimation) was pure albeit cynical genius. I did two things with that manuscript: first, I boxed it up and shipped it to Knopf for what I imagined would be grateful publication, and second I posted the first few chapters to the University of Houston's graduate program in Creative Writing, where I expected to be admitted with equal gratitude. My future would consist of authoring one blockbuster after another right up until old age (which began, I thought at the time, around thirty).

Fortunately for my reputation, the book received a curt photocopied rejection from Knopf. (If memory serves, it was a photocopy unevenly aligned on a small strip of paper.) And the submission deadline for grad school ended before I dropped my envelope in the mailbox. It was returned to me unopened. I enrolled in some writing workshops over the next year, waiting for the deadline to roll back around, and quickly discovered that genre blockbusters were not at all the thing at the University of Houston—or indeed any writing program. What was valued was something called “literary” writing.

I struggled at first to figure out what this was. People said literary stories are driven not by plot but character. Since every story needs both, however, I had a hard time telling the difference between the driver and the passenger. In time, with plenty of reading, I grasped the essentials, and after years in the grad program produced a book of literary short stories. When I graduated, all thoughts of spies and criminals, all thoughts of driving plots were banished.

Even then, however, there were challenges. My mentor, Dan Stern, who oversaw my Master's thesis, pulled one of the stories I'd written out of the book. It happened to be a favorite of mine, about a carload of Western journalists holed up in an abandoned Bosnian hotel. There was a pistol, too—with a silencer, no less—and the only character development to speak of consisted of the heroine managing to hide at just the right time, thus avoiding death. Even in a bastion of all things literary, I couldn't keep the genre gene out of my writing.

After graduation, things got worse. Where many of my fellow grad students had been fascinated by recent philosophy, I had a near-antiquarian interest in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theology. Good and evil, the corruption of human institutions, injustice—these are theological interests at heart, out of place in a context where the most profound gesture is the shrug. I found that whenever I wrote about the things that really animated me, the stories that resulted involved the *Sturm and Drang* of classic crime fiction. I'd set out to write something literary, and it would come off as crime noir.

And that's what people liked about it.

"You should write more of this stuff," they'd say.

I was slow to take the hint. Even though I'd fantasized for years about writing a series of detective novels, I never took the possibility seriously until my editor, David Long, made the suggestion. Would you be interested in doing a detective novel? *Hmm, I don't know. I mean, yes.* The moment I agreed, a light came on. Roland March already existed in my mind. I'd played around with his scenario not long before, not really seeing it for what it was. Now, everything came into focus.

Back on Murder and the other March books represent a fusion of influences. I haven't abandoned literary writing for genre, any more than I could leave the genre out of my literary production. In these books, I've found a way to make the various pieces fit. And that's how a literary snob with a theological bent ended up writing crime novels. *

Be sure to read:

Back on Murder

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www.backonmurder.com