

Be afraid. Be very afraid. 'The Scarecrow' cometh

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
Friday, 29 May 2009 13:42



When Michael Connelly sat down to write “The Scarecrow,” his second book about journalist Jack McEvoy, he didn’t have to do much research. He was writing what he knows.

“I was a reporter,” Connelly said during an interview conducted while he was driving from Tampa to Gainesville in his native Florida.

“When I write about Jack, I don’t have to hold back. I write about what I would do, about my instincts. That really speeds up the process.”

In the 1980s, Connelly spent time as a crime writer for the *Daytona Beach News Journal*, the *Fort Lauderdale News* and the *Sun Sentinel*

, where he covered the cocaine wars. He was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for his work on a story about the survivors of the 1985 Delta Flight 191 crash. The nomination brought him an offer from the *Los Angeles Times*

It was during his stint at the *LA Times* that Connelly wrote his first book, “The Black Echo” (1992), that featured Los Angeles Police Department Detective Hieronymus “Harry” Bosch. Connelly published three more novels about Bosch before giving up his day job with the paper.

Connelly says that the new book came “pretty fast.”

“The books that I write the fastest seem to be the ones that connect with readers better than

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others," Connelly said as he navigated through traffic along Interstate 95 north. "My most successful book so far has been 'The Poet,' my first Jack McEvoy book. I wrote it in less than six months."

Connelly's new book could have been ripped out of today's headlines. In fact, Connelly had to do a "stop the presses" trick to change part of the story.

"The book had already been put to bed," Connelly explains. "There was a part in the book that told about a job offer that Jack received from the *Rocky Mountain News*. However, between the time I sent the book to the publisher and when it went to press, the *Rocky Mountain News* had closed its doors."

Connelly said his publisher agreed to let him make the necessary changes to the storyline – on one condition: He had to do it on the same page.

"I had to write the change to fit the space," Connelly explains. "I was lucky that they let me change it, but I couldn't use more than the one page."

Connelly regrets the closing of the *Rocky Mountain News*.

"I interviewed with them about 20 years ago," he said. "I used it in several scenes of 'The Poet.' I didn't work there, but I'm still a journalist at heart and felt badly about its closing."

"The Scarecrow" finds Jack McEvoy being laid off from his job at the *Los Angeles Times*. McEvoy's given his pink slip, given two weeks to tie up loose ends, and to add insult to injury, he's asked to train his replacement.

"Hopefully, the book has a sense of realism," Connelly said. "I have friends who have been downsized. While I understand the business decisions behind the closing of newspapers, I'm

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concerned that there is no replacement model that works.”

In the midst of all the turmoil in McEvoy’s life, he realizes that he’s made a mistake. He’s written a story about a young man accused of a brutal murder, and after a particularly emotional meeting with the young man’s grandmother, McEvoy realizes there’s more to the story than the cut-and-dried version the cops gave him.

He promises the grandmother that he’ll look into the matter and as he digs into the case, he becomes convinced that the young man is innocent.

And that’s when McEvoy’s life is turned upside down. His cell phone is silenced. His credit cards are cancelled. E-mails explaining his whereabouts never reach his editor. There’s a dead body under his bed.

McEvoy’s life is upended because a chance Internet search alerts a serial killer named Wesley John Carver, one of the most maniacal serial killers in modern fiction.

Carver, a computer genius, works at a “farm,” a facility that plays host to row after row of computer servers, begins to stalk McEvoy through cyberspace.

When asked about Carver, Connelly drew upon personal experience.

“I went back to a killer I wrote about when I was a reporter,” he said. “The guy was representing himself, so he had almost full telephone access. He would call me from jail and taunt me about what I didn’t know.”

Although he was never in danger from the killer, Connelly acknowledges a “heavy creepiness” to the situation.

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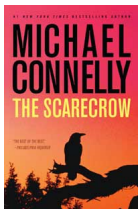
Connelly also said it is easier to write about a bad guy because “there are no limits.”

In the book, McEvoy quickly realizes there's some real danger lurking out there, so he calls on his old friend, FBI Agent Rachel Walling, to help stop the madness.

“Jack doesn't know what's closing in on him,” Connelly explained. “You can really create momentum for the reader in a scenario like that.”

Connelly says “there is a twinness [in the plot] because Jack has lost his job due to the Internet crunching the newspaper economy, and then he hooks onto this story about a killer who uses the Internet to prey on people.”

While working on the new book, Connelly said he took care to keep his writers connected to the plot. He succeeds. I found myself turning pages as quickly as I could, drawn in by a very tightly written plot, peopled with fully dra



wn characters.

After finishing the book, I questioned the need to ever log onto a computer, send an e-mail or post a blog again. Who knows what's lurking out there in the heart of cyberspace?

“The Scarecrow” knows.

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For a look at a computer "farm" similar to the one described in "The Scarecrow," check out this website: www.fastservers.net/network-data-center/dc-tour.html