Dennis Lehane Talks

The author of *Mystic River* talks about the local writers' conference he co-founded that's quickly garnering national respect. He talks about his current book, film celebrity, a surprising knack for teaching, and the influence long ago of Eckerd College on a cocky, aspiring writer.



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I walked into the Vinoy hotel, took a deep breath and made sure my palms weren't sweaty. I couldn't believe I was about to interview award-winning novelist Dennis Lehane. A guy whose seven books I had read, loved and shared with countless friends. A Boston guy whose descriptions of the place I used to live rang so true they made me homesick. A famous guy whose novel, Mystic River, *was made into an Oscar-nominated movie directed by Clint Eastwood. When he sauntered into the lobby right on time, Lehane caught my eye, raised one eyebrow, returned my smile. And with one more calming breath, I reached out to shake his hand thinking, "For a reader and a writer, it doesn't get any better than this."*

We settled in at a table on the veranda, where Lehane talked about returning to his favorite St. Petersburg location exactly 20 years after coming to study creative writing at Eckerd College.

"I wouldn't live anywhere but the Old Northeast," he says, "in a house, not a condo."

He's renting a place for a year while he finishes his current book, teaches as Eckerd's writer-in-residence and co-directs Eckerd's second annual Writers in Paradise conference in January. Lehane co-founded the conference with his mentor, novelist Sterling Watson, director of Eckerd's creative writing program.

"If the conference gets to be as good as we want it to be, it will become nationally and internationally known," says Watson. "In five to ten years, with Dennis' enthusiasm and connections, and word of mouth, this can be one of the things that really enhances Eckerd College's reputation."

The eight-day conference follows Eckerd's "running workshop model" of teaching writing, which includes peer review and critique and learning from teachers who are working, publishing writers. Lehane has already recruited his friend, Stephen King, to teach at the 2006 conference, and promises that a couple of additional big names will be added to the roster.

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AFTER DROPPING OUT OF two Boston-area col leges, Dennis Lehane arrived at Eckerd College with "the embarrassment and insecurity of the self-taught." His appreciation for the support he received there remains strong.

"I took my first two regular classes, and then Sterling (Watson) bumped me up to the advanced class," he says. "It was one of the happiest days of my life. I confirmed what I felt … that I can *do* this."

Dismissing writing programs that produce technically flawless writers who lack passion, Lehane praises the Eckerd model that emphasizes craft and respects each individual's aspirations.

"You can't put a price on the attention a small school can give you. There's a level of commitment that you don't find at the big machines. A lot of teachers subconsciously teach students to write like them. At Eckerd – you want to write a mystery? Go ahead. You think you can write science fiction as wel

as Ursula LeGuinn or Ray Bradbury? Do it. If you want to write esoteric avante garde stories, write them. There's no contempt for form, but you have to learn the rest of the stuff – depth of language, depth of insight, depth of character. You learn to use the tools and your individual voice will bubble up."

When Lehane approached Watson about starting a writers' conference, his vision didn't end there. He had been involved with the Solstice Summer Writers' Conference at Boston's Pine Manor College, which has a proposal for a new master of fine arts program in creative writing. If approved, Eckerd will host the two-week winter residency portion, and Pine Manor College will host the summer residency and serve as the accrediting institution.

When Lehane walks into an Eckerd classroom this fall, he'll be filling a professional role that got its start during his student days. "Sterling gave me a great chance – senior year he was going out of town and asked another guy and me to teach his class. That's when I got the bug," he says. "Then I taught while I was in graduate school at FIU (Florida International University) and thought, 'this may be the only other thing I'm a natural at.'"

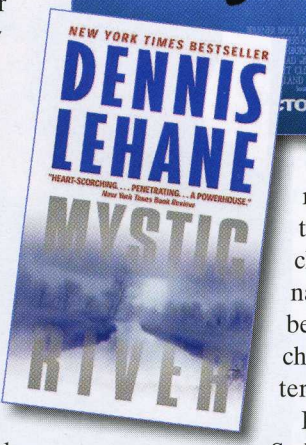
Lehane has taught at Harvard, Tufts and Pine Manor. "One of the first things I ever heard from a teacher when I was about 16 was that a writer never explains. And then Sterling said, 'Anything you have to say about your work is irrelevant. It has to stand on its own.' I hammer that to my students. I think I'm a very gregarious, supportive teacher and my classes are fun, but I can be murderously tough."

"Dennis is very provocative and opinionated," Watson says. "He probes and he's direct, but he's able to wrap the tough message in a caring wrapper that lets them know that the agony they feel is the same agony we all feel in trying to create something that's good."

Lehane's success in creating good things is evident. He won the Shamus Award for Best First Novel for *A Drink Before the War*, the first book in his five-book series about Boston detectives Patrick Kenzie and Angie Gennaro. *Mystic River* won the Anthony Award and Barry Award for Best Novel, the Massachusetts Book Award in Fiction and France's Prix Mystere de la Critique.

His most recent book, the psychological thriller, *Shutter Island*, is a *New York Times* bestseller and is optioned for a film. Unfazed by the celebrity aspect of turning books into movies, Lehane laughs when asked about rumors that Ben Affleck wants to direct and/or star in *Gone, Baby, Gone*, the fourth in the Kenzie/Gennaro series.





"I don't believe anything until the camera rolls," he says. "Yes, Ben Affleck owns the rights and developed a script. And Wolfgang Petersen (director of *The Perfect Storm*) has the rights to *Shutter Island*. What stage are they in? I don't know … I have nothing to do with them."

Movie adaptations aren't on his mind, but his current book is. As he describes the historical novel set in the early 1900s, his passion for the subject matter is clear. "1918 to 1921 was one of the single-most fascinating times in our history, with unbelievable parallels between then and now," he says, leaning forward in his chair. "You think people are nervous now … domestic terrorism was at an all-time high in the United States."

His speech quickens as he touches on the Alien and Sedition Acts, bombs at Boston's Postal Annex, A. Mitchell Palmer, Sacco and Vanzetti, John Ashcroft and civil liberties in the space of a minute and a half.

A little more than halfway through the novel, he knows when his story will conclude (1921) but not quite how, and he's too superstitious to reveal the title.

Lehane received an honorary degree and delivered the commencement speech at his alma mater in May. He told the audience that although he appreciates the success that enables a guy with humble origins to get good seats for Patriots football games and hang out with movie stars, he refuses to traffic in the myth of the self-made man.

"When I came here I was a tad on the wild side, a little reckless, a little angry, a whole lot cocky. I was bouncing off the walls because I was so scared at what this cold, mysterious world was going to ask of me. Whenever I think back on this place, I see individual attention and a boatload of caring. This place is about what's noble in mankind. It's about empathy. The helping hand, the shoulder to lean on or cry on, the passing on of accrued wisdom and experience."

Lehane's commitment to the Writers in Paradise conference is a natural extension of his gratitude to his alma mater and his desire to extend a hand to a new generation of writers: "Andre Dubus said, 'You can't hold the elevator car up on the floor where you get off … you gotta send it back down.' You gotta give back."