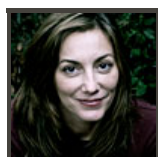


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Dennis Lehane's Gothic Obsessions

by Gina Piccalo



The *Shutter Island* novelist talks to The Daily Beast about the dream that led to the book, seeing *Taxi Driver* at 10, and why he's done writing about violence against children.

For novelist Dennis Lehane, his noir psycho-thriller *Shutter Island* ended a years-long obsession that he once considered “central” to his storytelling. It was an obsession at the root of his most popular novels including *Mystic River* and *Gone, Baby, Gone*, and one that inspired wrenching character pieces that when adapted for the movie screen earned Oscars for Sean Penn and Tim Robbins. The preoccupation? Violence to children.



Paramount Pictures

And Lehane wants the world to know that he's over it.

“After *Shutter Island*, I said, ‘I never want to revisit this again,’” said the 44-year-old author, who, incidentally, just became a father for the first time. “There’s such a fine line between calling attention to an issue and exploiting the same issue. The moment you feel like you may be near the line is when you should stop.”

Lehane said, “Scorsese was an enormous influence on everything I’ve done.”

Martin Scorsese certainly enjoyed strutting up and down that line in his film adaptation of Lehane’s 2003 novel; rendering the nightmarish tale with moments of horror so intimate they are almost beautiful. (Laeta Kalogridis wrote the screenplay.) *Shutter Island*, set in 1954, follows U.S. Marshal Teddy Daniels (Leonardo DiCaprio) as he and his partner Chuck Aule (Mark Ruffalo) visit the impenetrable Ashecliffe Hospital for the criminally insane to investigate the impossible disappearance of a patient (Emily Mortimer) who drowned her three children.

Lehane says he literally dreamed up the plot one evening, not long after the Sept. 11 attacks, when he fell asleep after trying unsuccessfully to track down his mother. He’d just learned via his answering machine that she had been hospitalized but he didn’t know where or why. “I fell asleep on a chair on a really stressful night and woke up and pretty much had the whole plot,” he says, speaking from his home in St. Petersburg, Fla. “It was very ‘Kubla Khan,’ except [unlike that poem’s author] I hadn’t been smoking opium. Also, I was very pissed off about the Patriot Act and the trampling of civil rights going on in the country at that point. It struck me as a new McCarthyism.”

So the book became Lehane’s nod to noir cinema and Gothic literature and yes, the paranoia of the Bush-Cheney years. The story features a sinister psychiatrist

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(played in the film by Ben Kingsley). Flashbacks from WWII concentration camps. An ex-Nazi (Max von Sydow). Whispers of conspiracy. A woman living in a cave (Patricia Clarkson). A hurricane. The ghost of Daniels' dead wife (Michelle Williams). Every set piece of the genre, it seems, except Vincent Price's echoing cackle.

From Lehane's view, there was no director better suited to this material than Scorsese. "I remember when I was 10 years old," recalls Lehane. "I dragged all my friends to see *Taxi Driver*. Everybody hated my guts for it. But I knew that was going to be my journey. Into the arts world. Scorsese was an enormous influence on everything I've done."

Lehane has written 11 books since 1993 (with a 12th on the way), mining his own history as the child of working-class Irish immigrants, living on Boston's gritty South Side during the 1970s, dodging unctuous priests at his Catholic school, and running the streets before his mother's dinner call. His post-college stint spent counseling traumatized children surely fed some pages, too. And if Lehane ever lacked inspiration, there were plenty of heinous crimes making headlines.

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February 18, 2010 | 10:46pm

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