Dennis Lahane: The Life-Warping Consequences of Our Unequal World

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Like many of us, no doubt, my introduction to Dennis Lahane came through *Mystic River*, and yes, it was first through the movie. It seems to me, though, that that is not such a bad way to start, particularly for those of us who had not yet been seduced by the pleasures of mystery and detective novels. I think I missed out on that pleasure because I thought these novels were merely who-done-its rather than fictional investigations into the dark side of the human heart--the side Dostoyevsky, Freud and so many others have also explored.

But what a revelation the book was. It was Lehane’s first departure from the successful Patrick Kenzie/Angelo Gennaro series, but still set in the same tough Boston working class neighborhoods. Just before reading the novel, I had finished a collection of essays called *Facing Social Class*, and I read *Mystic River* in part through that lens. The essays analyzed class privilege. The problem is not just that some groups have a lot more money and things than others, but that people in these groups apprehend society and its institutions, as well as themselves and their life possibilities, in different and deeply advantaged ways. One group tends to experience the hope of possibilities, the confident certainty about their place in society. They are the ones, a character in one of Lehane’s other novels states, who confuse being lucky with being better. Those in other group sees restrictions rather than possibilities and recognizes that they have little to lose because they have little to gain. It is the distinction in *Mystic River* between the factory foreman and his detective son Sean on the one hand, and on the other the fatherless and friendless Dave who, even before his abduction, knows that it is much more just the neighborhood they live in that separates his life prospects from Sean’s. The rich details with which the gradations of social place are presented make the novel both engaging and disturbing for what it says about our society.

Urban anthropologist Sherry Ortner asserts that “Novelists, or good ones anyway, are the traditional ethnographers of their own cultures.” That is one way of seeing Dennis Lehane. His fiction shows us troubling slices of our unequal world, book after book, and somehow mesmerizes us with the life-warping consequences that his down and out characters experience. They are in a world they seem unable to control, except through violence.

Lahane shows us the other side, too, with similar astuteness. In novels like *Live By Night*, we find a critique of the nouveau riche—the impeccably dressed and mannered bosses longing for respectability. This is not unlike Edith Wharton’s fiction, say *House of Mirth*, although Wharton writes about a different sort of gangster on the other side of the law.
Yet Lahane give us not just sociological perspicacity but psychological insight as well. For example, at one point his protagonist in *Live by Night*, Joe Coughlin, watches as his plan to blow up a transport ship succeeds, and he reflects, “This was why we became outlaws. To live moments the insurance men, the truck drivers and lawyers would never know.” This seems a classic noir sentiment, a fine vicarious moment for truck drivers and lawyers and university professors as well. However, that’s not the end of the Joe’s story. He changes; he accepts happiness with his wife Graciela and their son. He comes to recognize that he was “starting to live by day . . . where the civic meetings were held and the little flags were waved at the Main Street parades.”

This not what we expect from crime fiction. Is it redemption, or has Joe merely become a victim of comfort, like so many of us? Either way, it is “an evolution masterfully rendered,” as one reviewer remarked.

I wouldn’t bet on redemption, and neither would that 18th century Puritan Jonathan Edwards, Dennis Lehane’s fellow Bay Stater—although it was only a colony then. Both the Puritan theologian and the detective writer have looked carefully into the human condition and found what one reviewer quaintly called “the sometimes repellent human frailties,” or what Jonathan Edwards more boldly called original sin. Edwards would have understood Angie Gennaro saying that she felt like a god when she shot a man. And I think the novel *Darkness, Take My Hand* could be read as a gloss on *The Freedom of the Will*, in which Edwards explains that as we associate ourselves with evil and increasingly choose it, we gradually lose our ability to choose anything else. It is this creeping transformation, the change from Dr. Jekyll to Mr. Hyde, that Patrick Kenzie fears and the novel explores. It’s what makes his friend Phil ask, as they stalk a mass murder and are seemingly intent on murder themselves, “How do you live with yourself?” And Patrick gives him no answer.

In his best writing, and we may not agree on which books they are, Dennis Lehane does what critics from Sir Philip Sidney to W. H. Auden have continuously called on writers to do: to teach and delight. Our speaker’s teaching may be bitter and the delight he offers disturbing, but here we are tonight, hoping for more of both. And so please welcome Dennis Lehane for a new lesson on the dark side that so fascinates and troubles us.