
Politics, Place and Religion in Irish American Noir Fiction. An Interview with Dennis Lehane

Carlos Menéndez-Otero
Universidad de Oviedo, España

Copyright (c) 2012 by Carlos Menéndez-Otero. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged for access.

Dennis Lehane was born in the Dorchester neighborhood of Boston, MA, in 1965, the youngest of five children of a couple of Irish immigrants from Cork. He published his first novel in 1994, *A Drink Before the War*, which introduced the Boston working-class detectives Patrick Kenzie and Angela Gennaro, who have since reappeared in *Darkness*, *Take My Hand* (1996), *Sacred* (1997), *Gone, Baby, Gone* (1998), *Prayers for Rain* (1999) and *Moonlight Mile* (2010). Other works by Lehane include *Mystic River* (2001) and *Shutter Island* (2003), whose successful screen adaptations were directed by Clint Eastwood in 2004 and Martin Scorsese in 2010, respectively. He is also the author of *The Given Day* (2008), a monumental novel set in the Boston of the 1919 Police Strike, and wrote three episodes of the critically acclaimed HBO series *The Wire* (2002-2008).

With thanks to the 24th *Semana Negra* book festival organizing committee, what follows is an edited transcription of Dennis Lehane's press conference and the brief interview the author kindly granted us afterwards in Gijón, Spain, on July 28, 2011.

Keywords: Boston, Dorchester, extremism, fiction, Irish American, Lehane, noir, pedophilia.

Dennis Lehane nació en Dorchester (Boston) en 1965, el menor de los cinco hijos de una pareja de inmigrantes irlandeses de Cork. Publicó su primera novela en 1994, *Un trago antes de la guerra*, donde presentó a Patrick Kenzie y Angela Gennaro, dos detectives de Boston de clase baja que, desde entonces, han aparecido en *Abrázame, oscuridad* (1996), *Lo que es sagrado* (1997), *Desapareció una noche* (1998), *Plegarias en la noche* (1999) y *La última causa perdida* (2010). La lista de obras de Lehane incluye asimismo *Mystic River* (2001) y *Shutter Island* (2003), cuyas exitosas adaptaciones cinematográficas fueron dirigidas por Clint Eastwood en 2004 y Martin Scorsese en 2010, respectivamente. Por otra parte, Lehane es autor de *Cualquier otro día*, una monumental novela ambientada en el Boston de la Huelga de la Policía de 1919, y del guión de tres episodios del éxito de crítica de HBO *The Wire* (2002-2008).

Con agradecimiento al comité organizador de la 24ª edición de la Semana Negra; lo que sigue a continuación es una transcripción editada de la rueda de prensa de Dennis Lehane y de la breve entrevista que el autor nos concedió amablemente el 28 de julio de 2011 en Gijón (España).

Palabras clave. Boston, Dorchester, extremismo, ficción, irlandés-americano, Lehane, novela negra, pedofilia.

Q: It's been said that many Irish American stories are set in the past because that culture has taken over the Irish obsession with history, with rewriting the past. You have been described as a political writer who writes about the politics of the present by looking at the

past, most notably in *The Given Day*. Would you agree with that?

A: I think I write about politics by looking at the past because it keeps me out of the soap box. I don't wanna be known as a political

writer; I wanna be known as a writer first. For whatever reason, writing about the past keeps my perspective on the present. If I should write directly into the politics of the present, I would be – I fear – didactic.

Q: In your work, the dangers of right wing extremism are shown through characters, political parties and organizations that embrace those ideas. Could that be seen as a reflection on the current political landscape of the US, in which extreme parties seem to be on the rise?

A: Let's make a clear distinction. I don't think I write about – at least not yet – the extreme right wing. That seems to be Stieg Larsson [laughs]. What I write about is a type of political oppression, I think, which in the case of *The Given Day* was a Democratic – and not a Republican – government in the White House at that point. It was a Democratic Progressive government that crushed civil liberties in the early 1920s. So my issue is not concerned with being against the political parties so much as it's against the type of repressive thought – or repressive government.

I think that the extreme left and the extreme right – you can see this in the history of the world – are the same animal. It turns into the same beast. The extreme left gave us Mao; it gave us Castro. The extreme right has given us Mussolini; it's given us Hitler; it's given us Bosnia. I mean, the blood is everywhere. I think the issue is extremes, what we're saying right here. The problem is extremes; the problem is lack of complexity; the problem is oversimplification; the problem is extremism. That's the beast, and that's why it would be very good for us to wipe out of it in human character.

My core belief is that the battle of all time has been going on for centuries and continues to this day. It's going on right now, very clearly since the meltdown, your housing meltdown, our mortgage and stock meltdown, what happened in Iceland, what happened in Ireland, what happened in Greece... This is all the case of we're back to the same battle, which is the extreme haves against the have-nots. That's a lot of money in the hands of very few moron people who keep getting richer and a lot of people who keep getting poorer. And that is to me the battle of the ages. You wrap it up in various religions; you wrap it up in various ideologies; you wrap it up in various extremes; but it is the exact same fight. And it is always

going on.

Q: Would you say the noir novel is the social novel of the 21st century?

A: Yeah. A lot of people who dominated literary fiction in the second half of the century in the United States were writing about ideas, they would write into theories and they – I wouldn't say all, I would say some – seemed to forget how to write about people, certainly the working class. The movement that came out of American crime fiction at the beginning of the 1980s, and then extended well into the 1990s, that took a much more social approach to the novel. It was all written by men and women who were concerned with the underclass, just as these movements that fascinate me right now. What's going on right now is this incredible Scandinavian resurgence – or this incredible Scandinavian influence – in crime fiction. Whatever they're drinking over there, we need them to continue drinking it. The same thing is happening in Ireland. Ireland is producing amazing writers. I don't know of Spain, maybe as well, it's just not getting translated to the United States and I've not seen it. Where I've very clearly seen movements right now is in Scandinavia and in Ireland. In the States, we've stopped setting the tone, somebody else is setting the tone, it's not the American pulp fiction writers any more. In my opinion, we're kind of hanging back and washing our cars or something, I don't know.

Q: What noir authors would you identify with? Are there any literary schools or movements you think your work would fit into?

A: George [Pelevanos] and I are – I think – of the same family; as we are Irish, Richard Price... the lot who was supporting *The Wire*. I see myself working in two traditions, the noir tradition and the urban novel. I don't know how many of the writers who most influenced me are translated here, because they're very specifically American, but I would say Richard Price, Hubert Selby, William Kennedy, Pete Dexter, James T. Farrell and Elmore Leonard. That's the tradition I see myself in the most.

Q: Deep social criticism characterizes much of your work. How would you say the English speaking reader has reacted to that?

A: I haven't seen too much reaction at the socio-political level. What I think I rail against the most in my writing – and maybe even in my personal life – is I despise oversimplification

of complex issues. We've become very engrossed in that in the last ten years in the political debate in the United States; we've allowed the extreme fringe on both sides of the broad spectrum to define the debate. I think most people in the United States understand complexity. I guess the people who read my books understand complexity, so they don't have a problem with my addressing those issues in a complex fashion. The people who don't read my books, well, I don't really care what they think.

Q: You have just mentioned oversimplification. Now I would like to bring up the contentious issue of pedophilia. Even though that is *very* present in your novels, you seldom put the blame on priest characters. Given the times we live in, that seems quite remarkable.

A: OK, yeah. Pedophilia existed long before the Catholic Church spent the last hundred years covering up their party network. Priests are hardly the only pedophiles out there, and just because you're a priest it doesn't mean you're pedophile. The issue with the Catholic Church is that – and I think I'm just fairly enraged about I grew up with what happened in Ireland last week¹ – you covered it up, you obstructed justice and you hid behind your cloth. That is inexcusable under any circumstances, but then they are hardly the only people involved in this abomination by any means. That's a gross oversimplification, so I think.

Q: It's been said that the Catholic upbringing of Irish American Patrick Kenzie and Italian American Angie Gennaro is very noticeable. How important would religion be in the series?

A: Nothing! [laughs] I won't say anything about religion. What the Catholic Church definitely gave me as a writer is great themes – I read a lot about guilt; I read a lot about redemption; I read a lot about the search for a state of grace. You could no more take that out of my writing than you could take it out of Graham Greene's books, out of Martin Scorsese's films or out of Bruce Springsteen's songs. It's just a foundation.

Q: In your novels, you put a lot of effort into

character design. Does the mainstream tradition of representation of the Irish American community have an influence on them?

A: It's nothing conscious to it; it's just what I truly understand instinctively. I get the Irish American subculture of the inner city of Boston. I understand it in a way that there're very few people who I think do 'cause I grew up in it. That's why I write about it. It's no plan. In fact, you could write that out and it'd probably go on my headstone, "There was no plan". I just write from a very clear, organic place.

To put it into more perspective, I always find it funny when people say the phrase, "You Americans", because America is so diverse. It's just so massively diverse. The chances are I have more in common with somebody from Madrid than I have in common with somebody from Iowa. It's true, except language. And then you take within the United States, one of the oddest little cities, one of the strangest places that people don't understand is Boston. Bostonians are very different. They just have a different everything about them. You have to get out into the country and then you understand how different you are because people don't get your jokes *at all*. There's whole swaths of the United States in which they don't know what irony is, where I think I was spoon fed from the moment I came out of the womb. Boston in itself is not only odd within the context of the larger world; it's quite odd within the context of the country, of the United States of America.

Q: Then, would *you* feel closer to Europe than to the rest of the States?

A: What I mean, here's the way I put it, at the end of the day, I'm from a cosmopolitan urban area, so I sort of have a base understanding of Madrid, of Lisbon, of Barcelona, of Dublin, of London, of Warsaw... I feel very comfortable in cities and I feel very comfortable speaking to people who live in cities. We get it. We all understand each other, once we have a translator. Where I'm lost is speaking to people who come from suburbs, like places where all the houses look the same and your life is centered around the shopping mall. I don't get that, I wouldn't have much in common with people who live there, no matter what country they're in.

1. The judicial inquiry into the sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic diocese of Cloyne, Co. Cork, issued its report on July 13, 2011.

Q: Could it be that Boston is so odd because, as some people say in Ireland, the city is the fifth Irish province?

A: [Laughs] Well, yeah, but I would say Boston is the most European of all the North American cities. Not just because the architecture – which does, trust me, look very much like Europe —, but because it took the character of Europe to that city. It's very clannish, so that when I was growing up it was very clear you could go into one neighborhood and you would be in Poland, people were Polish and they spoke Polish. And then you could go to Ireland. And then you could go to Italy, because it was very clear there was one neighborhood that was 100% Italian and so it is a very... How would I describe it? It feels like you're walking around a mini-Europe, like if someone went and they said, "We're gonna do a *Europeland* instead of a Disneyland". That would be Boston, you know. At least when I was growing up in it.

Q: What was your home neighborhood, Dorchester, like then?

A: It was working class. There was a lot of racial strife at the time. I'd kind of understand what was going on then. In 1974, when I was nine years old, the City of Boston forcibly desegregated Boston public schools. This social experiment, which came from the left, was a disaster. However well-intentioned – it was quite well-intentioned —, that ripped the city apart. It caused the city to explode, really, and there was a lot of violence amongst the lower class on racial lines, blacks striving whites, whites striving blacks. It was the beginning of my belief that, as far as the wealthy class was concerned, that was good, because as long as the poor were fighting amongst themselves, they weren't looking at the rich to understand why this was happening. And that's the Dorchester I grew up in.

Q: You have said that while growing up you experienced some sort of class prejudice for being from that neighborhood.

A: Yes, yes.

Q: Did you ever feel any ethnic prejudice for being Irish and/or Catholic?

A: No, by then that was gone. It's something my father can speak to. We ran the city, I mean, the Irish ran Boston by that point, there was no prejudice against us. I didn't feel that. But again if you said you were from Dorchester, people took a step back. They thought you were going to pull a gun.

Q: You were born into an immigrant Irish family. Did you keep contact with Ireland? Did you ever return to the island?

A: Yeah, we were back a lot and, yeah, stayed completely in contact with all the relatives, kept traveling back and forth. We were completely connected to the country. Always. My parents were all through their lives.

Q: Writers usually shape characters on people they know or they used to know. Your father has been said to have been the inspiration for the character of Patrick Kenzie.

A: They're very different in fabric but they're both working-class men, and it was important to me that Patrick always stayed a working-class man in that neighborhood. I'm not working class any more – actually, I'm upper class [laughs], which is ridiculous. So the pressures on Patrick, particularly in this new novel, *Moonlight Mile*, are the pressures that my father lived with every day, not the pressures I live with.

Q: Why did you decide to return to Angela and Patrick last year, more than a decade since *Prayers for Rain* came out?

A: They knocked on my door, I did not on theirs. I think two things are going on. I think I was trying to examine my feelings about fatherhood, I had just become a father, like Patrick was on the way to do that, and then I wanted to look at the state of the working class post-2008 meltdown. Also, I just wanted to tell jokes again. I hadn't told a joke in a book for ten years.

Received 17 November 2011 Last version 19 December 2011

Carlos Menéndez Otero es Licenciado en Filología Inglesa y Experto en Periodismo Digital por la Universidad de Oviedo, y Licenciado en Comunicación Audiovisual y Especialista en Edición Digital por la UOC. En la actualidad es Profesor Ayudante en la Universidad de Oviedo, donde ha completado recientemente un proyecto de investigación relacionado con la industria audiovisual irlandesa.