

Original sin

Dennis Lehane's Patrick Kenzie/Angela Gennaro series

A Drink before the War

Avon (pb), 1996

(paperback, ISBN: 0-380-72623-8, \$6.99)

Darkness, Take My Hand

Avon (pb), 1997

(paperback, ISBN: 0-380-72628-9, \$7.99)

Sacred

Avon (pb), 1998

(paperback, ISBN: 0-380-72698-7, \$6.99)

Gone, Baby, Gone

Avon (pb), 1999

(paperback, ISBN: 0-380-73035-9, \$6.99)

Prayers for Rain

Harper (pb), 2000

(paperback, ISBN: 0-380-73036-7, \$6.99)

by Len Abram

"This is America," Ryerson said, "where every adult should have the full and inalienable right to eat her young."

—from *Gone, Baby, Gone*

In five novels and seven years, Dennis Lehane has established his Boston-based Patrick Kenzie/Angela Gennaro series for readers and critics. Lehane has created a niche within the PI genre and nudged Robert Parker's Spenser to become the second most famous detective from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Lehane's crime stories are first-rate, with suspenseful plots that twist and turn and the balletic violence of a Sam Peckinpah movie. Lehane also offers us an insight into the thinking of his protagonist. According to Patrick Kenzie's mentor, Jay Becker, a good detective has two brains, one to participate and the other to observe. One viewpoint experiences life without self-consciousness, representing conventional thought. The other epitomizes the detective, who, following Becker and Plato, observes and examines experience from a distance. Kenzie has this gift; he can see into events and behaviors to solve crimes.

Lehane draws engaging characters, flecked with flaws. Part of their charm is their struggle with inner demons as well as criminals. Their past suffering heightens sensitivity to injustice. The gravest injustice, the original sin for a lapsed Catholic like Patrick Kenzie, is the mistreatment of children, from neglect to abuse, from pedophilia to outright murder. The theme gives his noir stories a Dickensian outrage. In the nature vs. nurture debate, Lehane is 90-10 in favor of nurture. People, especially children, are good until taught otherwise. The subversion of that good runs through his stories.

The three major characters in the series, detectives Patrick Kenzie and Angela Gennaro and their violent friend Bubba Rogowski, are all victims of child abuse or neglect. In their adult lives, they have constructed the protection missing in their youth. At the same time, they have chosen a dangerous line of work. A rough start in life has prepared them to be crime fighters as much as it has prepared many of the criminals they face. In putting themselves in harm's way, Patrick, Angie and Bubba may be resolving cruelties now that they had to endure without recourse as children. They

get payback while the detectives' clients get services.

As many parents know, children can be willful when they do not get their way; they are not rag dolls of passivity. Nevertheless, their power is limited to what adults, entrusted with their well-being, allow them. Lehane's Kenzie observes that we treat children more like property than people. Neglect is the milder form of abuse, subverting emotional growth. Five-year-old Amanda McCready, in *Gone, Baby, Gone*, is so neglected that she sits, passive and depressed, in front of her mother's TV for hours. There is more light on the TV screen than behind her eyes. Patrick must deal with the guilt for returning her to an alcoholic mother.

Neglect is Angie's losing her father, a Mafioso, to an underworld hit before she was ten. She never recovered from the murder. Lehane shows that a traumatic event like this can affect a person's entire life (like the molested Dave Boyle in the later novel, *Mystic River* (Drood #172, May/June 2001)). So, too, Karen Nichols in *Prayers for Rain* is only six when her father is murdered. The event casts a shadow on her life and contributes to her suicide. The pathos is evident for Angie when she visits the park in Boston where her father had been before his death. The critical loss has undermined her self-esteem, perhaps because, as children often do, she blames herself. She spends the first two novels as a battered wife, a paradox for a woman who is as brave and a far better shot than Patrick. Angie smokes and drinks heavily. When she is widowed, again touched by murder, she runs through more sleepover boyfriends than Patrick has girlfriends. Her halting steps toward a home life and even children are poignant. Angie and Patrick, in the sentiment of romantic songs, are made for each other. They know each other's deepest fears and injuries. Their romance and the friendship of Bubba are some of the bright spots in Lehane's dark world.

Neglecting children is corrosive to their growth, but abuse is plain assault. Abuse is not sending a kid to bed without supper or tapping lightly on a wrist exiting a cookie jar. Abuse is Patrick's father, the hero firefighter and alcoholic, holding a hot iron to his son's abdomen until the flesh sears and — worse — making the child feel responsible for the attack. His father's betrayal of trust has meant that Patrick the adult can hardly trust anyone. Patrick is not sure, he tells Angie, if he is worthy of love. The betrayal puts the chip on Patrick's shoulder about hypocritical authority and the powerful rich.

It is easy to see why Patrick, Angie and Bubba trust so few. They form a clique — Patrick calls the gang the Little Rascals — for the protection that they lacked at home. In the latest novel in the series, *Prayers for Rain*, Patrick relates a dream in which he finally is a father not like his own father: "I have my son. He's safe. I'm safe." In the waking life of the series, feeling safe is a fleeting goal.

Bubba's experiences are a lethal mixture of neglect and abuse. When he was five, Bubba arrived motherless at Patrick's neighborhood from Poland. Relatives neglected him and he spent most of his time on the streets until, reminiscent of violent Mike Tyson's upbringing, a Jewish bookie took him in. Patrick describes Bubba as a psycho without conscience, capable of murder and even torture, but Bubba is most cruel when protecting Patrick and Angie. They are the family he

loves deeply, who share his injuries and outrage. Bubba's abuse actually happened later in his life.

It may be a stretch to say that a Marine, at 17 or 18, is the victim of child abuse. In his eyes, however, Bubba is a victim of betrayal. In 1983, the Marine Corps shipped Bubba's unit to peacekeeping duties in Beirut, where a suicide bomber killed 241 of them, asleep in their barracks. The State Department had the Marines issued rifles but no bullets. The Marine guards only had sidearms to stop the terrorist truck. Bubba spent months in the hospital and took three years to get his sense of smell back. The American government never brought the terrorists to justice; the Marines left Beirut. Is it any wonder that Bubba, who sells guns to anyone, holds authority in contempt, with nothing sacred except his friends?

The most obvious example of the child mistreatment theme is the third novel, *Gone, Baby, Gone*, but Lehane introduces recurrent themes and characters from the first. *A Drink before the War* (1994) explains Patrick's abuse at the hands of his father and the nightmares that accompany the injury. Politicians hire Patrick and Angie to accompany a black cleaning lady who has allegedly stolen documents from them. The war in the title refers to a Boston gang war, which pits father against son.

Fathers fare poorly in this story, not only because of Patrick's father, who used his hero status to run for office and join in political corruption. Even Devin Amronklin, Patrick's cop friend, notes that he "took so much shit from [my father] growing up, I swore I'd never take it from anyone else for the rest of my life." It is easy to see why Patrick and he are friends. The stolen documents are photos incriminating one of the clients in the rape of a young black boy, with the assistance of his own father.

In the second novel, *Darkness, Take My Hand* (1996), Lehane's epigraph from Graham Greene reminds us of the "horrors and degradations lying around childhood." Patrick and Angie are hired to protect a young college student and discover that they are dealing with serial killers that have murdered and tortured their client, along with other adults, and dozens of children. The kidnapping of children for exploitation and murder anticipates *Gone, Baby, Gone*. In the 1970s, two clowns try to kidnap and molest Patrick and his friend Phil. (The event anticipates again the molestation of a boy in Lehane's *Mystic River*.)

Lehane is hardly a proponent of taking the law into one's hands, though Patrick and Angie do so in *A Drink before the War*. In *Darkness, Take My Hand*, Patrick's father is again key. In the 1970s (circa 1975 is pivotal in Lehane novels), the father leads neighborhood vigilantes against the pedophiles; this action ends in torture and murder. Crimes in the name of good intentions start a fire for revenge that smolders for 20 years until it literally flares up at the conclusion of the novel. At grave personal risk, Patrick saves a child and her mother, but his heroism costs him his future wife Grace and stepdaughter Mae. Patrick's violent life has proved intolerable for them. Angie exerts herself against her battering husband, who models his behavior on that of his own father. With the murder of Angie's husband, Angie is free to recast her relationships with men, especially with Patrick.

The younger serial killer in *Darkness, Take My Hand* is a good example of goodness subverted. Evandro Arujo was 19 when sent to prison for a victimless crime, auto theft. He was not then a killer or sadist. Lehane shows a system of justice that has betrayed him. The rapes and beatings in prison lead him toward the brutality that he eventually embraces. Two

older serial killers initiate Evandro into Satanic cruelty. They believe they can do this with anyone, and that the hate they profess is stronger than love. Their destruction is catharsis for a metaphysical evil.

Sacred (1997) is Lehane's lightest novel, to be read, he has said, with a wink. Nevertheless, child abuse as a theme is strong again, as well as innocence under attack. Patrick, Angie and Jay Becker try to find a missing daughter for her father. Like the *Rashomon* movie upon which Lehane patterned the story, the truth about the characters is hard to discern since all the speakers that Patrick and Angie interview are biased. Trevor Stone, an amoral billionaire, seems to have taken whatever goodness his daughter Desiree originally had, and created a sociopath. In one scene, Patrick looks into her eyes and finds no recognizable humanity reflected back. Father and daughter have no empathy for each other or others. The only thing they can do with relationships is to betray them.

When Patrick works with his PI mentor, Jay Becker, they are "like little boys" in their happiness. Jay represents the ideal detective, the investigator who has two brains, accepting and critical selves, the latter always on alert for hypocrisy and lies. Although he falls under the spell of Desiree the siren, Jay's critical self knows the truth, even if it costs him his life. When he dies, Patrick describes Jay looking like a 14-year-old boy; he has returned to his basic goodness. In the repair of his own lost innocence, Patrick realizes that his love for Angie — they now live together — is "sacred."

Gone, Baby, Gone (1998), the fourth novel in the series, focuses on child abuse and neglect. Patrick's research teaches us that 2300 children disappear each day in our country and several hundred of those are never found. As in *Sacred*, Patrick and Angie are hired to find another daughter, here a kidnapped four-year-old, Amanda McCready. Her mother Helene is so centered on her social life and her addictions that she hardly interacts with the child. When Patrick looks into Amanda's eyes, he sees the passivity and dullness that are products of neglect. Emotionally impoverished herself, Helene seems incapable of better parenting, even after Patrick and the police return her daughter.

Remy Broussard, one of Lehane's most complex characters, is a decent cop who takes the law into his own hands. Remy has been on the same side as Patrick, especially in the Peckinpah-like storming of a pedophiles' house, which gets Remy's partner killed. Remy and Patrick's close relationship is a further test of Patrick's two brains at work; a detective is always alert to lies and inconsistency, even when his emotions plead differently.

Not only do Remy and Patrick each execute pedophiles in the waning heat of battle, but also they weep together when they see the abject cruelty to children. As a policeman, Remy has seen too much child abuse. He feels compelled to kidnap children and give them to nurturing couples. Remy himself has such a son, whom he took out of a crib in a Boston project from a crack-addicted mother, the baby's diaper stuck to the mattress. Tragically, Remy's well-intentioned crimes lead to worse crimes and more violence. Why the authorities fail so often in protecting children is murky, but for the sake of the novel, the outrage of Remy and Patrick works well. Patrick reminds us several times of Remy's "boyish grin" and the "Tom Sawyer innocence in that grin of his." Remy has somehow maintained his innocence, although for society and Patrick he is guilty of heinous crimes. Remy's last words are "I love children."

Gone, Baby, Gone is Lehane's strongest indictment on how America treats its children. Ryerson, the FBI agent on the case says, "This is America ... where every adult should have the full and inalienable right to eat her young." Amanda goes back to her mother because the law requires it. Angie, who now wants a child herself, is so furious at Amanda's loss of love that she leaves Patrick. The novel ends sadly, aside from Remy's death, when Patrick observes Amanda McCready back in her neglectful home in front of the TV. At least Remy Broussard's wife has escaped the law with the kidnapped son. They head for Texas. The love between mother and son is strong and the boy is safe. One Texas fisherman muses with unwitting irony, "Love like that? It seems so pure, it's damn near criminal."

Prayers for Rain (2000), the last novel, pulls together some of the themes of the previous four. Patrick seems too lazy or distracted to return a former client's call. Several weeks later, he finds she killed herself. For his own integrity, he decides to find out why she did it. He needs to prove that "her life had value."

Thinking through his guilt gives Patrick the opportunity to grow and understand himself. Karen Nichols comes from a rich family. Her "Noxzema" good looks and debutante demeanor made him take her less seriously than he should have. In his investigation, the pattern of loss is there, much to Patrick's regret: a neighbor murdered Karen Nichols's father, a Marine officer, when she was six years old. There was a dark sadness in her personality, which opened her to evil manipulation.

Lehane often uses a framing technique, an italicized prolog and epilog, sometimes surreal, that attempts to enrich the remainder of the novel. Nightmares hound Patrick, but the dream in the prolog has a nice resolution; Patrick has the child ("*I have my son. He's safe. I'm safe*") that Angie wished for. Although Angie and he live and work apart, they seem to be moving forward in the repair of themselves, the healing from childhood mistreatment. Patrick's father tried to teach him to hate and to enjoy hurting others. Patrick has been trying to unlearn the lesson from the original sin. Patrick and Angie do not marry and have a child — at least yet. If Lehane decides to continue the series (see the interview, *Drood*, January/February 2002), he may have to follow where his characters are leading him.

Bubba, on the other hand, shows the most change for the better. Through Patrick, Lehane recounts Bubba's pathos-heavy upbringing, the motherless Bubba on the streets with Patrick, Angie, Phil and the gang becoming his family. Bubba's later experiences in the Marines taught him the tools of modern war and then, after the Beirut bombing in 1983, to trust only his martial skills and a few friends. The roguish Rogowski seems to be overcoming his flaws and limits. As Patrick says, "This was not a Bubba I'd seen before. All traces of psychosis had seemed to have vanished."

Bubba is still the warrior, with bravery and intensity. He leads Patrick and Angie on a successful attack against the murderers' underground fortress; the fire fight wounds Bubba and Patrick badly. Nevertheless, Bubba has a girl friend, his first in years, and is in love. The two of them go to the dog pound to get not another attack dog, but a pet that he can simply love. Patrick describes Bubba with a "baby's face." Bubba has recaptured a childlike joy that he only exhibited when planning or executing destruction.

The serial killers of *Darkness*, *Take My Hand*, like cruel characters who prey on children in the other novels, especially

Patrick's father, are wrong: love is stronger than hate, or at least its match. Patrick lost his fiancée Grace, but may possibly find grace with Angie, and she with him. In what Remy Broussard has called a "nasty world," the world of the Kenzie/Gennaro series, Lehane offers hope.

PETERSON

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web of mysterious occurrences surrounding, and perhaps entrapping, the Renstone family, their servants and their neighbors. A surprising murderer is eventually caught in a self-spun web of deceit. An array of good and decent people achieve happiness or solace. An arrogant young man blithely hastens toward future misery. Audrey Peterson knows the history and the territory of her chosen setting and her plotting is deft. Jasmine Malloy, we trust, will face many further adventures with intelligence and daring.

Advice to browsers: As usual, don't regard the blurb as an indication of the author's writing style. Why, I wonder, do publishers pay to have skillfully written books summarized and advertised in clichéd, semi-literate style? What about letting authors describe their books? Or is it the theory that readers are chumps who can be fooled into buying good books if the back covers present them chumpily? (Blurbist, if by chance you read this, do not despair: read books other than fads-of-the-week, think about what words mean, purchase and consult manuals of style and usage. Try Lederer and Dowis, *Sleeping Dogs Don't Lay*.)

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