

Distilling Crime Fiction to its Essence

By Michael Connelly

As a Grand Master of Mystery Writers of America, Joseph Wambaugh has blazed a unique trail. Incredibly, he has written bestsellers in five different decades with both his fiction and non-fiction capturing the essence of the risks and rewards of police work.

It takes one to know one. Wambaugh was a patrol officer and detective with the Los Angeles Police Department for fourteen years before becoming a writer. The police experience was the foundation of his fiction and his first novels in particular featured casts that focused on the officers who put their lives on the line every day. The gritty realism of this focus was something not seen before, and the critical community immediately recognized that Wambaugh was doing more than writing entertaining cop stories. He was revealing a part of America that nobody knew much about. Beginning with *The New Centurions* in 1971, Wambaugh's novels were massive bestsellers. He then tried his hand at non-fiction and produced the ground-breaking classic *The Onion Field*, which told the true story of two LAPD officers who were abducted and taken to an onion field to be executed.

Jumping back and forth from fiction to non-fiction, Wambaugh has produced twenty bestsellers, among them *The Choir Boys*, *The Black Marble* and *Finnegan's Week*. His 1989 non-fiction title *The Bleeding* told the story of the introduction of DNA in crime solving.

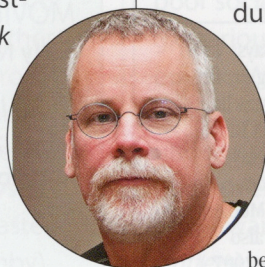
Along the way Wambaugh has also been a pioneer writer in Hollywood, where he took control of how his stories were



presented by writing and producing his own film adaptations.

Wambaugh created the groundbreaking television series *Police Story* in 1973, a cop show that focused as much attention on the lives of the officers and detectives as the actual police work. It was a stark departure from the just-the-facts style of *Dragnet* that came before it, and it influenced all cop shows that followed.

Writers who worked on *Police Story* were taught an invaluable lesson by the master. Wambaugh told them to always remember that the best police stories are not about how cops work on cases but how cases work on cops. It was a distilling to the purest essence what it was then and remains now the key to great crime fiction in any medium. Police procedure and technology is only window dressing on character. Character is king and always will be.



Michael Connelly is the author of twenty-seven novels, several of which have been bestsellers and adapted for film and television. His first novel *The Black Echo* featured LAPD detective Harry Bosch and received the 1992 Edgar Award for best first novel. He lives in Florida and California.