

He Puts You in the Bad Guy's Shoes

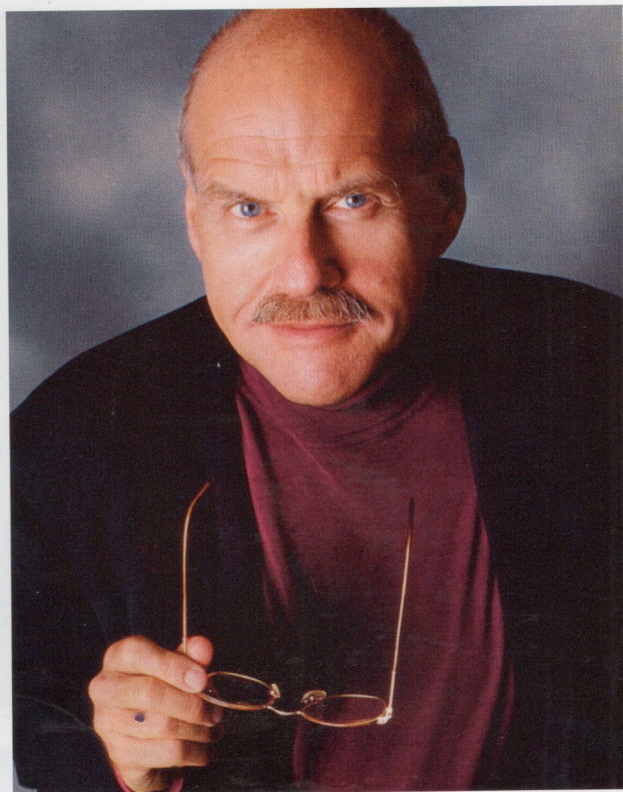
By Charles Ardai

There are plenty of MWA Grand Masters whose books made me want to be a writer. Lawrence Block is the only one whose books made me want to be a criminal.

It began with Bernie Rhodenbarr, the charming and urbane hero of Block's *Burglar* books. I was fourteen when *The Burglar Who Painted Like Mondrian* came out, and immediately upon finishing my library's copy, I hunted down *The Burglar Who Liked To Quote Kipling*, *The Burglar Who Studied Spinoza*, and the rest. The books were revelatory. Not just funny as hell and ingeniously plotted and full of clever dialogue and set in a New York I recognized; they also did something no author had done before, which was to put me deep inside the head of a criminal and leave me thinking, "Can I do that, too? What a fine occupation!"

And it wasn't just Bernie. Evan Tanner, the international rogue who travels the world fomenting revolutions and never sleeping, made me wonder if espionage and smuggling mightn't be for me. Keller, the hired killer, made murder as a profession seem eminently reasonable. Paul Kavanagh, the loner protagonist of Block's brilliant standalone thriller *Such Men Are Dangerous*, made me seriously consider chucking it all and living naked on an island in the Florida Keys. Even the Matt Scudder novels, bleak and grim as they are, made me nod approvingly at Scudder's extra-legal activities in the name of justice. So he sometimes kills people. Is that so bad?

This is Block's supreme gift: He can put you inside any character, no matter how bad, no matter how far beyond the pale his criminal acts, and show you the world persuasively through his eyes. Villains rarely



think they're villains; to them, what they do makes sense, is logical, is sane. And portraying truth as your characters would see it, not as you or your reader would, is the hallmark of a great writer.

The ultimate example is the killing spree chronicled in *Not Comin' Home To You*, based loosely on the real-life Starkweather/Fugate rampage. In Block's hands, we see the young killers' aching frustration and boredom and anger and alienation – not from without, as most writers would portray it, but from deep within, so that when they cross that fatal line, we're right there with them, and we feel our own finger tightening on the trigger.

There aren't awards enough for a writer who can do that. With grace, with sensitivity, with profound honesty—and in his lighter moments with infectious wit—Lawrence Block puts you in the criminal's shoes, and leaves you tempted to wear them home.

Without paying for them, of course.



Charles Ardai is an Edgar, Shamus, and Ellery Queen Award-winning author, editor and publisher. Hard Case Crime, his imprint, has published ten books by Lawrence Block, with an eleventh, *The Girl With The Deep Blue Eyes*, coming in September.