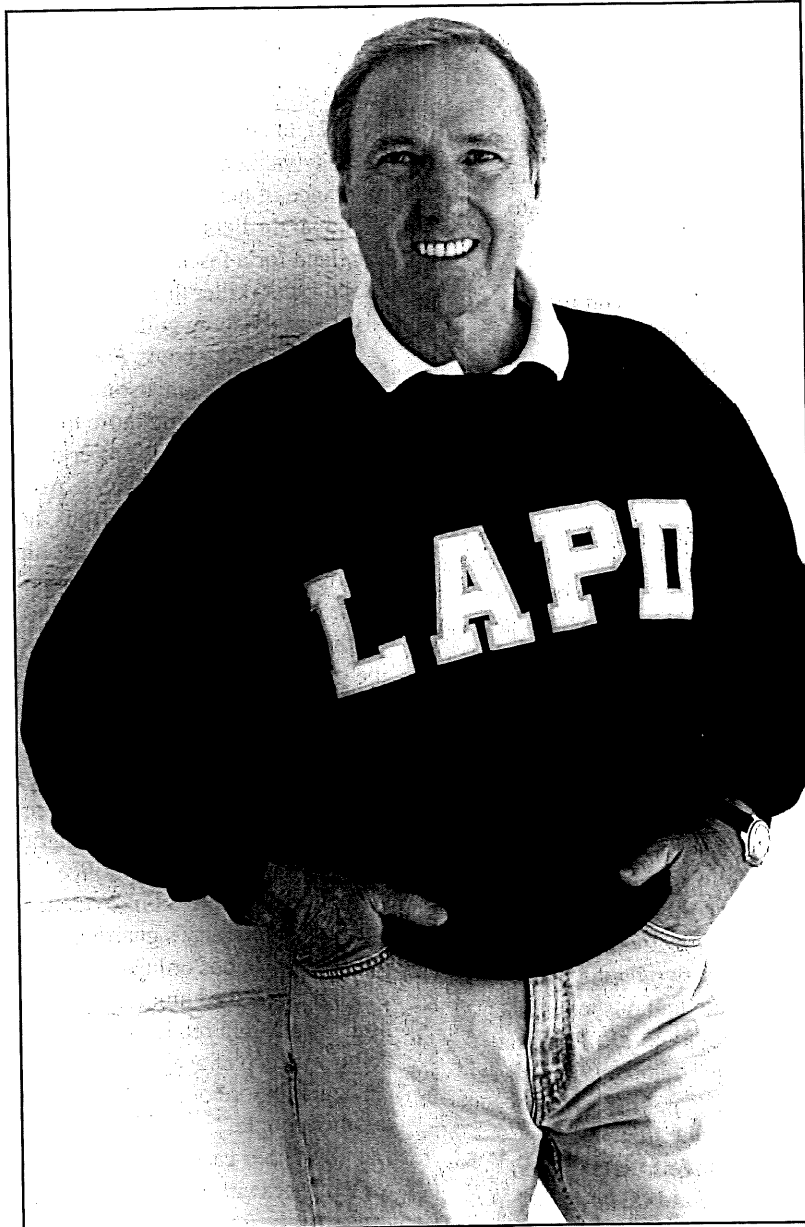
Grand Master Joseph Wambaugh

DICK LOCHTE

"A writer of genuine power, style, wit and originality who has chosen to write about police in particular as a means of expressing his views on society in general." That's how our Grand Master Joseph Wambaugh was described in the pages of the *New York Times Book Review* by Evan Hunter (himself an MWA Grand Master under his crime fiction nom de plume Ed McBain). The occasion was the 1971 publication of Wambaugh's maiden effort, *The New Centurions*, a novel chronicling the lives of three rookie cops struggling through their first five years as members of the Los Angeles Police Department.



Wambaugh was then a member of the LAPD, a plainclothes detective sergeant with eleven years in, who loved being on the job. Born in East Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, but a resident of Southern California since his fourteenth birthday, he'd joined the force at the age of twenty-three. By then he was a married man (to his high school sweetheart, Dee); he'd served in the Marine Corps, had put in three years working in the Kaiser Steel mills, and had begun taking night classes at California State College at Los Angeles.

From the blue line to literary lion: He added prestige to the term 'police story'

His father had been a policeman, but, as he explained to interviewer Larry Linderman in a 1979 issue of *Playboy*, that wasn't why he joined the LAPD. "I was going to college and was going to become a teacher and I guess I wanted a job with a little more machismo than teaching offered. I thought I could knock down doors and drive fast cars and have people shoot at me and I could shoot back."

He discovered it was a little less dramatic than that. "The average policeman spent a full twenty-year career without firing a gun in combat," he told Linderman. "But that same average policeman will suffer all sorts of blows to his self-esteem . . . It's not a physically dangerous job, but when you look at the figures for suicide, divorce, alcoholism, mental illness and so on, police are at the top of the list." It's one of the points he addresses in nearly all of his books, the "emotional violence" of police work and its often disastrous results.

By 1974, he'd published two more bestsellers — *The Blue Knight* about a beat cop facing retirement, and *The Onion Field*, a powerful work based on a real crime–the execution of a young officer — and its effect on his surviving partner. He had also become a

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major player in the entertainment industry (the movie version of *Centurions* had been released, a *Blue Knight* television miniseries had aired and he had created *Police Story*, a popular NBC-TV series). He had literally changed the public image of policemen from Jack Webb stoic supercops to believable human beings, but in doing so, he'd brought his days on the LAPD to an end.

"It was a mark of my immaturity to think that a celebrity of any kind could also be effective as a cop," he once explained. "Guys I'd arrest would ask if they could audition for parts on *Police Story*. It was ridiculous. I wasn't a cop anymore, I was just going through the motions."

The Choirboys, published in 1975, marked a significant change in the author's style. When asked about the writers who've influenced his work, Wambaugh has been quick to mention Truman Capote and Joseph Heller. For *Choirboys*, the Heller influence took over. Just as that author used dark humor and absurd situations to underline the grimness and insanity of war in his classic, *Catch-22*, Wambaugh employed gallows humor and satire to show the outrageous off-duty antics of a group of precinct cops reacting to the inhuman demands placed on them by the brutality of the job and the rigidity and ignorance of their superiors.

"I never believed I could be fired from the force for writing *The New Centurions* or *The Blue Knight*," Wambaugh has said. "But if I'd written *The Choirboys* first, even if F. Lee Bailey and Melvin Belli both took my case, I'd have been out of there."

The novel's departure in tone and content were too much for his publisher. A senior editor informed him that everybody at the house hated the manuscript and suggested he scrap it and try something else. This was not good news for an author who was having trouble adjusting to "civilian" life. He "went on a downer lasting six months."

Eventually, he took another look at the manuscript and decided to confront the negative reaction. He informed the editor that *The Choirboys* was what their hefty advance had purchased; they could publish it or not. They did publish it — to rave reviews and a solid run as number two on the hardcover bestseller lists. (Agatha Christie's death had pushed her *Curtain* to the top, prompting Wambaugh to note, "If Agatha wanted to have the number-one best seller that badly, who was I to stand in her way?")

Since then, the author has enriched the literary crime genre with twelve books, eight of them novels that build on his original concept of showing the warts-and-all humanity and heroism of men and women engaged in law enforcement. *The Black Marble* (1978), *The Glitter Dome* (1981) and *The Delta Star* (1983) follow their often reckless, boozy, desperate and despairing heroes toward salvation of a sort along the mean streets of Los Angeles.

The locale shifted to the less gritty, if no more law-abiding Southern California cities of Palm Springs in *The Secrets of Harry Bright* (1985) and Newport Beach in *The Golden Orange* (1990), no doubt reflecting Wambaugh's own withdrawal from L. A. to various homes in Orange County.

Though his protagonists have continued to be cynical, alcohol-fueled burnt-out cases, their chances for redemption have improved immeasurably. The mood of the writing has been lighter, too, resulting in laugh-out-loud sections in his last three novels — *Fugitive Nights* (1992), *Finnegan's Week* (1993), and *Floaters* (1997).

Though his outlook in fiction has brightened, Wambaugh's true crime books have remained as dark, meticulously researched and riveting as *The Onion Field* (which merited a Special Edgar® in 1974; a 1984 Edgar ® was merited by his screenplay adaptation of *The Black Marble*). *Lines and Shadows* (1984) is a gripping study of the lawmen who police the California-Mexico border. In *Echoes in the Darkness* (1987), his investigative reportage of the 1979 murder of Pennsylvania high school teacher, Susan Reinert, and the disappearance of her children, is as suspenseful a read as the best of fictional thrillers. *The Blooding* (1989) transports the reader to England for a fascinating account of a police manhunt for a serial rapist-killer that marks the first use of DNA in conclusively establishing guilt.

His current book, *Fire Lover*, now in paperback, is the story of John Orr, an arson investigator who was probably responsible for setting more than 2000 fires in Southern California over a ten-year period. The book won the 2003 Edgar® for Best Fact Crime. As Wambaugh recently said to Bookreporter.com's Ann Bruns, he'd been "vegetating" for about six years when a fan sent him a copy of the *Nova* television report on Orr. "The thing that really fascinated me, that made it irresistible, was . . . here was a guy that wanted to get on the LAPD, where I was, and he wrote a novel. I'm thinking: the guy wants to be me."

In a lightning 130 days – the first 30 for research (interviewing everyone involved in the case, including Orr himself) and the rest for writing – he had a first draft. A few months later, he had a book, not merely about Orr but focusing also on a company of courageous firefighters who were even more eager for justice than the police.

It's one more bit of evidence of the author's ability to portray this country's guardians and protectors not as supermen and women but as ordinary mortals engaged in the good fight.

Bruns asked him if he preferred writing nonfiction or fiction. Wambaugh replied that research "gives me some pleasure being a detective again and doing investigation," but "the novels contain more of my DNA. . . . The nonfiction story belongs to other people."

In either case, we eagerly await the result of our Grand Master's next inspiration.

Dick Lochte is an award-winning literary critic and the author of twelve novels, including the new legal thriller, Lawless, *written in collaboration with attorney Christopher Darden.*