

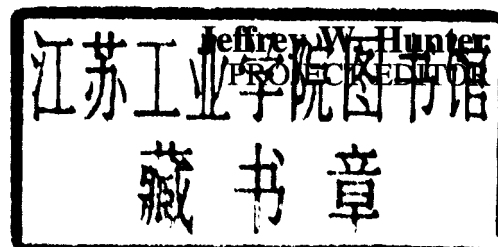
☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC 269

Volume 269

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers



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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
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Harlan Coben

1962-

American novelist.

The following entry presents an overview of Coben's career through 2008.

INTRODUCTION

Coben is best known as the creator of the "Myron Bolitar" crime fiction series. These works and his stand-alone novels have garnered a large readership both in the United States and abroad.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Coben was born January 4, 1962, in Newark, New Jersey. His father was an attorney and his grandfather owned a travel agency, where Coben worked in early adulthood. He notes that he came from modest means and describes his family as "the poor Jews in Livingston," New Jersey, where he grew up. He recounts that as a child he had no plans to be a novelist, but once the idea took hold, he never doubted he would make a living by writing. In interviews, Coben often references the work ethic he learned from his family, which guides his daily writing schedule. Rather than waiting for inspiration to strike, Coben aspires to a more traditional approach. "It's my job," he told interviewer David Gregory. "I wake up in the morning, this is what I do. And I think about writing all day long. If I'm not writing, I feel guilty I'm not writing You can't say today, if you're a plumber, 'Oh, I just can't do pipes.' You can't really be that much of an artist about it."

Coben has been recognized with many awards, including several for his early works. In 1996, he received the prestigious Anthony Award for best paperback original novel from the World Mystery Conference, an Edgar Award nomination from the Mystery Writers of America, and a Nero Wolfe award nomination, all for *Deal Breaker* (1995). In 1997, he received the Edgar Award for best paperback original mystery novel, Shamus Award for best paperback original novel from the Private Eye Writers of America, and the OLMA Award for best paperback original from the America Online/Microsoft/Internet Newsgroups, all for *Fade Away*

(1996), and numerous other awards and nominations have since followed. Coben lives in Ridgewood, New Jersey, with his wife, Anne, a pediatrician, and their four children.

MAJOR WORKS

Coben produces an average of one book per year and reportedly now earns \$3 to 4 million per book. His first two novels, *Play Dead* (1990) and *Miracle Cure* (1991), receive more attention in hindsight than they did at initial publication. His early novel *Deal Breaker* introduced his now-famous protagonist Myron Bolitar, a former college basketball star who wants to be a successful sports agent but finds himself perpetually drawn into applying his investigative skills. Bolitar is in some ways an Everyman with relationship problems, career problems, and ongoing entanglements with his parents. His life course was dramatically altered when a knee injury ended his promising basketball career, and years later he remains somewhat bewildered and adrift. Coben's characterization of Bolitar as a nice person who regularly encounters horrific situations has been described as Hitchcockian. Coben also provides Bolitar with a friend named Win, an independently wealthy, cold-blooded killer who is regularly called upon as enforcer and rescuer when situations exceed Bolitar's control. Together they are a study in opposites and Coben puts the contrast to good use. In *Deal Breaker*, Bolitar represents a young football quarterback in business negotiations and soon thereafter becomes mired in a murder mystery. *Drop Shot* (1996) again finds a client of Bolitar's suspected of murder, this time the deceased is a competitor killed at the U.S. Open tennis championships. With *Fade Away*, Bolitar is drawn back into his past when a professional basketball coach calls on him to find a missing player. *Back Spin* (1997) features the kidnapping of the child of professional golfers, and *One False Move* (1997) introduces a female professional basketball player receiving death threats from the Mob. In *The Final Detail* (2000), crime hits especially close to home when Bolitar's assistant is accused of murdering a New York Yankees baseball player. With *Darkest Fear*, (2000) Bolitar grapples with the universally poignant struggles of aging parents and sick children.

Coben's fan base grew with each new Bolitar story, but a "stand-alone" book, *Tell No One* (2001), in which Coben temporarily benched Bolitar, brought him

widespread attention and six-figure advances from his publisher. The story begins with a happy couple celebrating the anniversary of their first kiss, but the wife is soon murdered and the husband left to grieve, until, eight years later, he receives an email that seems to prove she is alive after all. *Tell No One* made the *New York Times* bestseller list for two weeks and set the bar for subsequent works, many of which present further exploration of personal loss, grief, and human suffering to which readers can easily relate. Modern social problems are also explored in Coben's novels, such as teen drunk driving in *Promise Me*, (2006), and issues related to matters of personal privacy and internet spying in *Hold Tight* (2008).

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Coben enjoys vast popularity among readers but is relatively ignored by scholarly critics, as are most authors in the crime fiction genre. Those reviewers who do acknowledge his work praise Coben's ability to keep readers enthralled, but opinions vary on the literary quality of his writing. Some describe it as skillfully complex with engaging character development and globally relevant themes, while others consider his works formulaic—although, most hasten to add, the formula is a wildly successful one. While he has sometimes expressed a fleeting, wistful desire for attention from serious critics, Coben has more often reiterated his love of the crime fiction genre and his contentment at creating stories readers appreciate.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Play Dead (novel) 1990
Miracle Cure (novel) 1991
 **Deal Breaker* (novel) 1995
 **Drop Shot* (novel) 1996
 **Fade Away* (novel) 1996
 **Back Spin* (novel) 1997
 **One False Move* (novel) 1997
 **Darkest Fear* (novel) 2000
 **The Final Detail* (novel) 2000
Tell No One (novel) 2001
Gone for Good (novel) 2002
No Second Chance (novel) 2003
Just One Look (novel) 2004
The Innocent (novel) 2005
 **Promise Me* (novel) 2006
The Woods (novel) 2007
Hold Tight (novel) 2008
 **Long Lost* (novel) 2009

* Novels in the "Myron Bolitar" series.

CRITICISM

Harlan Coben and Bryant Gumbel (interview date 19 June 2001)

SOURCE: Coben, Harlan, and Bryant Gumbel. "Interview: Author Harlan Coben Discusses New Book, *Tell No One*." *CBS News: The Early Show* (19 June 2001): <http://www.cbsnews.com/sections/earlyshow/main500202.shtml>.

[In the following transcript of a television interview, Coben explains his choice to write a novel without his regular protagonist, Myron Bolitar:]

[Gumbel]: A lot of mystery lovers are already familiar with author Harlan Coben and his Myron Bolitar series. Now the award-winning author is out with his first stand-alone novel. It's called **Tell No One**. And everyone of note in Hollywood seems to have read it because the movie rights have already been bid and sold.

[Coben]: Yeah.

Harlan, good morning. Congratulations.

Thanks very much, Bryant. Good morning.

Now why—why a stand-alone novel after—after all these years? Why—why'd you leave Myron Bolitar behind?

Well, I thought of this terrific idea about a man who—whose wife disappears or—or he thinks she's dead, and all of a sudden, we find out that she's maybe not, and it just wouldn't work for my series character. So I tried figuring out a way he could tell the story. He just couldn't. All of a sudden, a guy named David Beck popped into my head, and he wanted to tell the story, so I let him.

Is there anxiety involved in leaving a character who's been so good to you for so long and so predictable for you for so long and suddenly, sitting and looking at the typewriter and knowing he's not taking the journey with you?

Yeah. Oh, sure. I mean, I've been with Myron for seven books. So it—it was very freeing actually also. It let me try something totally different. It let me tell a more romantic story, I think a more compelling and gripping story, without the baggage that the series already had with it. So it was—it was a lot of fun. It was also freeing.

Yeah. Once you—talk about freeing, once you give it up to Hollywood, do you have to kind of do the Pontius Pilate bit and wash your hands of it . . .

Yeah.

. . . or—or do you stay involved?

Well, I think it's a little bit of—th—th—going to a—you go to a barbed wire fence, you throw the book over, they throw the money over, you run, they run. Think about it. If you think about it too much, you'll go nuts. So I just—I went right back to writing the next book as soon as I sold it.

Is that right?

Yeah. I wa . . .

Because you're scared of what they might do with it.

I didn't even want to think about it. It's their re—you know, I just I wanted to get back to what I should do.

But you must have some private thoughts on who you'd like to play your—your characters as you write them, right?

Ehh.

I mean, when they come out of your typewriter, don't you kind of see them?

I see them. The problem is I see them in such a way that no one really could play them. I mean, they're just—they're some—they're total individuals in my mind. So a lot of different people I think could play them well, but no one will ever fit in my own—my own mind that . . .

Yeah.

. . . or yours.

*Did you—did you go about writing **Tell No One** in the same fashion that you go about writing a Bolitar book? I mean, do—do—do you—are you an outline guy or do you kind of put him in the typewriter and let them write themselves?*

I know the beginning, I know the end. I compare it to driving from New Jersey to Los Angeles. I may take Route 80. I may go via the Panama Canal. I may stop over in Tokyo, but I know I'm going to end up in Los Angeles. The key for me is I have to know that last twist or turn, because I want to surprise you, then surprise you again. And then in the case of **Tell No One**, the very last page surprised you one more time.

Essentially, what is your job? Just to make—make me or any reader just keep—keep turning the pages?

I think that's the first most—first in your mind has to be compelling and gripping. Every sentence has to be something people want to read. I think it was Elmore Leonard who said, 'I try to cut out all the parts you'd normally skip.' So that has to be first and foremost on my mind. The character development, the—the heartbreak, all of that stuff, the sense of loss and redemption—all of that comes into it. But in my mind, I have to be telling you a story. It's like a—it's like a—like a knife against my throat and I'm telling you a story. And if I'm boring for a minute, you're going to slice my throat.

Is that to say you never get blocked?

Oh, I get . . .

There's no perspiration involved in this?

Oh, yeah, there's a lot of perspiration involved in that.

Yeah.

Yeah. Always working to try to think, how am I going to fool you next? What can I do that hasn't been done before? How am I going to keep you turning pages? How am I going to keep you up all night so you curse me in the morning?

Yeah.

That's my job.

Do you read the—do you read your reviewers?

Some, yeah, I do.

What do you think when they say, as so many have, that this is your breakout book, that this stamps you as the next big thing in publishing?

God, I hope they're right. It's—it's wonderful. I mean, reviewers—it's one person's opinion. I was more excited that the independent book sellers picked the book as their top hardcover pick . . .

Yeah.

. . . for July and August because they usually pick more literary novels.

If it's a . . .

That was more exciting for me.

. . . if it's the runaway success we think it's going to be, is Bolitar ever coming back?

Yes.

Definitely?

I—I can't live without Myron. Yeah, he'll come back. I don't know when, but Myron will definitely come back.

All right. The book is called Tell No One. Harlan, congratulations.

Thanks very much, Bryant.

All right. Travel safe.

Thanks.

Harlan Coben and Bryant Gumbel (interview date 7 May 2002)

SOURCE: Coben, Harlan, and Bryant Gumbel. "Interview: Harlan Coben Discusses New Book, *Gone for Good*." *CBS News: The Early Show* (7 May 2002): <http://www.cbsnews.com/sections/earlyshow/main500202.shtml>.

[In the following transcript of a television interview, Coben reacts to the success of Tell No One and describes his next novel, Gone for Good.]

[Gumbel]: When the book Tell No One became a fast-moving best-seller, it was characterized as veteran author Harlan Coben's breakout novel. With that thriller now ticketed for the big screen, Coben's newest work is already generating a lot of buzz and praise, too. It's called Gone for Good. Harlan, how you doing? Good morning.

[Coben]: Good morning, Bryant. Good to see you.

Have you yet—have you yet figured out why Tell No One proved to be your biggest book?

I don't know. Something about it just resonated with people. I—I think it was the—the combination of romance and the page turning and things like that. I don't know. I—I—I've been working a long time. It just happened to work for this.

Does—once—once a book like that becomes as big as it did . . .

Yeah.

And by the way, aren't you up for an—an award that's being given away next week?

The Edgar Award. I was up for it. 'Was nominated' being the euphemism for didn't win.

Oh, you didn't win. OK, scratch that.

That's all right.

Does it—does it put a lot of pressure on the second one? Does it put a lot of pressure on Gone for Good?

I think it does, but it's good pressure. I mean, that's what I live for, to have these books start selling well. So it just means I want to get it up a notch, make it even more exciting, make you turn the pages even faster, keep you up even later at night. It's just a—it's more a pressure I put on myself.

Like—like its predecessor, Gone for Good basically centers on a—on a character in present-day life who's rocked by events—personal events . . .

Right.

. . . of his past. Why does that theme resonate with you so much?

I just love the idea of buried secrets. I love the idea of family ties, family bonds, family betrayal. I love the suburbs. I love the idea of—of the—people trying to go out and do right, but wrong just still seems to find them, you know. That's the kind of thing I love to write about, and that's—that's what we all re—you know, we all relate to.

But—but I—what's the genesis of this one? I mean, this one, it's a guy who goes searching for his past and winds up also searching for the truth and a killer.

Yeah. Well, there's a number of things. One of the ideas I—I was exploring was the idea of suppo—as a murder, not just how it affects the victim but affects the—the perpetrator's family. In this case, the brother—his brother commits a murder, supposedly, and runs off and disappears and there's often—so what kind of effect does that have on the family, a nice suburban family? What kind of effect does that have on the people whose—whose child is killed? And that whole thing resonating back and forth just was—was just too ripe.

The last time you were here, you told me that when you start writing, you know the beginning . . .

Yep.

. . . and you know the end.

Yep.

But you don't know the middle.