



"I was always useless," says Westlake of his pre-best-seller days. "I was an English major at three different colleges and got nowhere."

# 'Bad

## Mystery master Donald E. Westlake reveals the origins of his new comic caper

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Writer Donald E. Westlake isn't quite sure how many books he's written. "Maybe a hundred?" he guesses from his home in upstate New York. He's not even sure how many pseudonyms he's used to disguise that prolific output.

"Around 10, I think," hazards the 67-year-old, who these days limits himself to his own name and Richard Stark for the long-running series featuring master thief Parker.

"Particularly in the early days, I was writing a lot of short stories for magazines. One story was by James Blue; I remember that because it was the name of



**"Bad News" by Donald E. Westlake**

Mysterious Press  
352 pages; \$23.95

my cat."

He laughs and then offers as an aside: "That was a story for a magazine when I had three stories in [the same issue!]"

However many books he's written, however many names he's used, one thing is clear: Westlake is more popular than ever. "Bad News" — the latest and perhaps funniest comic novel featuring criminal John Dortmunder — is out Wednesday.

And "What's the Worst That Could Happen?" — a movie based on the last Dortmunder book — hits theaters

June 1, with Martin Lawrence as the hero/crook and Danny DeVito as a Trump-like mega-millionaire villain.

# News' bared

"Bad News" is classic Dortmunder. Against his better judgment, our bumbling hero agrees to remove a body from a graveyard and plant a substitute. That quickly leads to tangling with a gang of would-be criminals.

Their plan is to pass off the hard-nosed but beautiful Little Feather Redcorn as the last remaining member of an Indian tribe, making her (surprise!) eligible for one-third ownership of an Indian casino.

With Dortmunder involved, you can be sure things will go wrong.

"You know that!" says Westlake, who peppers his books with useful tips, such as how to determine which are the best cars to hot-wire for a job.

In fact, "Bad News" begins with a primer on what to do if you find yourself about to be caught by the police when burglarizing a department store. The scenario is what gave Westlake — who never follows an outline — the idea for his book.

"The very first thought I had was of Dortmunder in a department store sloping along with two tote bags filled with [stolen] cameras," says Westlake. "And suddenly every light in the place goes on. What now? And I sat there and thought, well, what now?"

"What now?" isn't a question Westlake has faced very often. He always knew his future was in writing.

"I was born in Brooklyn and raised upstate in Yonkers and Albany and then I finally found a bus station and went back to New York," he says. "I was always useless. I was an English major at three different colleges and got nowhere."

When pressed, the writer admits that he might have ended up a supermarket manager. (Westlake worked for a while at Empire markets in Albany and Schenectady.) He also dabbled in theater.

"Many, many years ago, I was an apprentice at a summer stock Equity theater in Binghamton, N.Y.," he remembers. "I was working backstage and having single-line roles. In Equity theater, the unpaid help is called an apprentice.

"At the end of the season, you then qualified for an Equity card. So in the middle of the season, Equity sent around some material about the union. And the thing that got me — and they said this with pride — was that in the preceding year on the average day, 21 percent of the

membership was employed.

"Wait a minute. They're happy that only one in five is working? I better find another job."

At least his books, which have been filmed a number of times, have provided work for other actors.

Westlake hasn't seen the latest movie adapted from one of his books, but Hollywood's track record with the author is pretty good.

His favorite is 1967's "Point Blank," starring Lee Marvin. That classic was based on a book starring the no-nonsense Parker (and was just remade less successfully as "Payback" with Mel Gibson).

Just as thrilling was "The Grifters," his adaptation of a Jim Thompson novel, which garnered Westlake an Oscar nomination in 1991. Even 1972's "The Hot Rock" — with Robert Redford, of all people, playing the down-on-his-luck Dortmunder — is looking better with age.

"In an odd way, it's a better movie now than it was when it came out," says Westlake.

"The problem at the time was that it was simply impossible to look at Robert Redford and think, 'loser.' That has changed over the years. You don't look at him and think 'golden boy hero' anymore. He did a nice job playing the part, and it's easier to see that now."

Clearly, his two most popular characters are winners for Westlake, but even this award-winning writer has had the rare stumble over the years.

In 1997, he published "The Ax," a gripping stand-alone thriller about downsizing gone amok. It received such good reviews for the popular but under-the-radar Westlake that he felt enormous pressure to write a worthy follow-up and suffered writer's block for a while.

He realized that "after 40 years, you can have second-book problems."

And years earlier, despite dipping into other genres, such as science fiction, with aplomb, he couldn't quite nail his one try at writing a children's book.

"I don't think it was particularly successful, and I never did it again," says Westlake. "I think you have to be really clear and sincere to write for children."

Does that mean you have to be shifty and untrustworthy to write about criminals?

"Yes," he says with a laugh. "Absolutely."

***'The very first thought I had was of Dortmunder in a department store with two bags filled with [stolen] cameras,' says Westlake.***