

THE BOOK REPORT



After 'Midnight'

From joker to junkie and back again, Jerry Stahl serves up 'Perv'

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Some writers sweat blood to put words on paper. Jerry Stahl sprayed blood just to avoid writing — thanks to a heroin addiction, which ruined his television writing career.

He chronicled his sad descent in the critically acclaimed bestseller "Permanent Midnight." And Hollywood being Hollywood, the book brought him fame and a little fortune.

"I was the celebrity dope fiend," says Stahl, who's in town this month to promote his latest literary effort, "Perv — A Love Story." Stahl recalls, "I'd go on talk shows and they'd say, 'So, what celebrities have you shot heroin with?' I even remember being on the

BBC when this woman said, 'Show me your tracks!'"

"Perv" is Stahl's first novel — if you don't count the six manuscripts gathering dust in a drawer somewhere. Set in 1970, this very funny but dark-hearted book chronicles Bobby Stark, an insecure 16-year-old who's kicked out of a tony prep school after making it with a townie and getting a tattoo from the girl's one-armed father.

With a pill-popping mother and a distant dad who threw himself under a streetcar, Bobby is a psychoanalyst's dream. Think of him as the anti-Holden Caulfield: Instead of despising everyone he meets, Bobby simply despises himself.



Early reviews have compared "Perv" to the Southern gothic humor of Terry Southern and Harry

Crews — which is fine by Stahl. "All the books that I've loved have that kind of

humor that makes you squirm as you're laughing," says the 46-year-old Stahl, adding,

"I think I could make more money assembling Nike tennis shoes in the Philippines than I could writing literary fiction," says "Perv" author Jerry Stahl.

"You almost feel creepy as you're laughing, but you laugh anyway."

He wasn't always laughing. Years ago, after some early minor success with a few short stories, Stahl fell into pornography. He worked for Larry Flynt, scripted an adult film and even reached the porno mountaintop — writing stories for the Penthouse Forum letters page.

That eventually led to a



highly profitable stint writing scripts for TV shows such as "Alf," "thirtysomething," and "Moonlighting" — and to a highly damaging addiction to heroin. After bottoming out, Stahl penned "Permanent Midnight," which was subsequently made into a film starring Ben Stiller.

"Can you imagine celebrities re-enacting the worst moments of your existence, 20 feet tall?" asks Stahl. "It's pretty strange."

The film didn't catch fire the way his book did. Regardless, Stahl remained good friends with Stiller, who lent him his downtown apartment for his "Perv" interviews.

Even if writing novels doesn't pay anywhere near what sitcoms do, Stahl says he's happier now. "I think I could make more money assembling Nike tennis shoes in the Philippines than I could writing literary fiction," he says. "But once you've worked at McDonald's at 38 years old, it's just a treat to be working in your own clothes."