

Playing with fire

Wambaugh's true-crime book tackles an arson hero with a killer secret

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Joseph Wambaugh knew that a murderous firefighter would be a risky subject for his new true-crime book.

But for this detective-turned-author, the tale was too juicy to resist.

In "Fire Lover: A True Story," Wambaugh writes a gripping profile of John Leonard Orr, a top L.A. arson investigator who turned out to be the most prolific American arsonist of the 20th century.

In the post-Sept. 11 fireman-worshipping atmosphere, newspapers that had reviewed his other books told him they wouldn't touch this one.

According to Wambaugh, the papers that snubbed him ignored an important fact: His book highlights firefighters who proved to be heroes.

"If [a newspaper] passes on this," said the 53-year-old Wambaugh, "they didn't read the book. If you read the book, you love those firemen."

In earlier works, Wambaugh revolutionized the public's image of policemen. His bestsellers, "The Onion Field" and "The Choir Boys" deglamorized cops, showing these once irreproachable saints to be flawed, ordinary people.

These past works broke through the thin blue line, but he paid a price for his revelations: All but one of

Wambaugh's nonfiction works resulted in lawsuits, filed by various people he described in his books. His legal bills mounted, and he quit publishing.

But when a fan sent him a video detailing Orr's fascinating case, Wambaugh couldn't resist investigating. Now, he's steeling himself to get sued.

"Yes, I'm prepared," laughed Wambaugh. "I know it's inevitable in our lawyer-driven society. The only non-fiction I've written that didn't get me sued was 'The Bloodline.' It took place in England.

The description of Orr's trial is propelled by Wambaugh's scathing attitude toward the courts. When comparing today's judicial system with the one he wrote about 30 years ago, the author took a dim view.

"It's definitely gotten worse. The jury system has outlived its usefulness — it's too complicated for most jurors now. They're dealing with scientific evidence they can't understand, and you end up with verdicts like the O.J. Simpson case."

Wambaugh thinks it's



Amid post-Sept. 11 fireman worshipping, some reviewers passed on the author's shocking new book, "Fire Lover: A True Story."

time for an overhaul.

"We need a system of professional jurors. They don't have to be judges, or

have law degrees. But they do have to be informed citizens," he said.

In his coverage of the

Orr investigation, Wambaugh refers to the lack of communication between security agencies such as the F.B.I. and the C.I.A., or what he called "the Balkanization of law enforcement."

It's a touchy subject, given the current investigation into the U.S. response to pre-Sept. 11 warnings about terrorism.

"There are at least 15,000 law enforcement agencies in America," said Wambaugh. "We're so afraid of a national police force. When you talk to foreigners about that, they cannot believe it." Despite its contrarian subject matter, Wambaugh thinks his book could shed some light on the way different agencies withhold information from each other.

"More than in any other book, I've revealed how jealous they are and how autonomous they are and how everybody guards his own turf. Every little piece of information is squirreled away; nobody wants to cooperate with anybody else," he continued.

But Wambaugh is still emphatic about his appreciation for the good guys, including most of the firefighters in his new book.

Unlike Orr, a real-life bad guy, he said of the firefighters, "these are fantastic human beings."