

New mystery master

With hot whodunit 'Mystic River,'
Dennis Lehane hits his stride

By MICHAEL GILTZ

If Dennis Lehane were a hero from one of his crime novels, it would be time to throw him a few curves: Life is simply going too well for the 36-year-old author.

In a chat from Florida — where Lehane and his wife attended the Super Bowl, courtesy of an old friend — the author reflected on the acclaim surrounding his new novel, "Mystic River" (William Morrow; \$25), which came out Tuesday.

It's garnered the best advance reviews of his career and at a time when he's adapting his previous book, "Prayers for Rain," into a screenplay for Hollywood producer Alan Ladd.

Why so much good fortune? The writer believes it's all in the numbers.

"I've seen a very odd phenomenon," says Lehane. "My even books seem to be better than my odd books — the

second, the fourth and now the sixth, 'Mystic River.' They're definitely the three books in which I was swinging for the fences, as opposed to maybe taking it back a notch."

His latest doesn't just swing for the fences; it hammers one deep. A tense, insightful whodunit, "Mystic River" focuses on three boyhood friends in Boston: Sean Devine, who becomes a cop; Jimmy Marcus, a legendary criminal who goes straight; and Dave Boyle, an anonymous little hanger-on.

The guys are tied together by two events, one from the past and one in the present. There's a haunting encounter when two men who pretend to be cops con-

front the kids and abduct Boyle (he escapes after four days). Later, as adults, the three all reel from the sudden, violent death of Marcus' daughter, a senseless crime. Devine investigates, and the trail of evidence somehow keeps leading toward the hapless, troubled Boyle.

The advance buzz in the publishing industry has been growing. Booklist dropped the "crime novelist" tag and declared Lehane "one of our best fiction writers period." Publishers Weekly has profiled him twice in the last few months, calling "Mystic River" "emotionally wrenching."

It was just as wrenching for Lehane to write.

"It's the single worst experience I've had of writing a book," says the author. "I got so lost. The first 100 pages were murder, just grueling."

He can take comfort in a growing legion of fans. When Stephen King spent a year in rehab after his car accident, he said what helped him most were the Harry Potter books and the crime novels by Lehane.

Lehane is one of the few writers who returns the compliment, unabashedly hailing King — which is an unpopular opinion among the literary crowd.

"I remember hanging out in a bar with a critic and a room full of writers," he says. "Me and the critic were the only people who would argue that Stephen King was a good writer. You cannot piss off a group of writers faster than by saying that. But there are sections of 'The Green Mile,' for example, that are transcendent."

Maybe his empathy for King comes from working in a genre often dismissed as pulp. The people Lehane grew up with were dis-



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missed as well: the Irish, working-class laborers of Boston. That's where all his books are set, five detective novels featuring the team of Patrick Kenzie and Angie Gennaro and his latest.

Lehane is glad he fell into the genre of mystery novels, even if he'd rather have readers feel

moved by the story than stumped by the crime.

"The mystery to me is not the least important thing, but it's not nearly as important to me as the characters. Ever," says the author.

"The puzzle can be brilliant, but if the characters aren't there, who cares?"



"Mystic River" by Dennis Lehane
William Morrow
401 pages, \$25