

# **Mystic River Study Guide**

## **Mystic River by Dennis Lehane**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">Mystic River Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Introduction.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Author Biography.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Social Sensitivity.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Techniques.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Historical Context.....</a>	<a href="#">27</a>
<a href="#">Critical Overview.....</a>	<a href="#">29</a>
<a href="#">Criticism.....</a>	<a href="#">30</a>
<a href="#">Critical Essay #1.....</a>	<a href="#">31</a>
<a href="#">Critical Essay #2.....</a>	<a href="#">35</a>
<a href="#">Adaptations.....</a>	<a href="#">40</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Further Study.....</a>	<a href="#">41</a>
<a href="#">What Do I Read Next?.....</a>	<a href="#">42</a>
<a href="#">Key Questions.....</a>	<a href="#">43</a>
<a href="#">Literary Precedents.....</a>	<a href="#">44</a>
<a href="#">Further Study.....</a>	<a href="#">45</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles.....</a>	<a href="#">46</a>
<a href="#">Bibliography.....</a>	<a href="#">47</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">48</a>

# Introduction

*Mystic River* (2001) established Dennis Lehane as more than a mystery writer. Lehane had previously written a successful series of novels centered around two detectives named Angie Gennaro and Patrick Kenzie; *Mystic River* was his first stand-alone novel.

Like most of Lehane's novels, *Mystic River* is set in Boston, the city he grew up in and eventually returned to as an adult. Lehane's familiarity with the area allowed him to create authentic dialogue and speech inflections. His background also afforded him insight into how the working class of Boston's neighborhoods really thought and lived. He spent nearly ten years thinking about *Mystic River* before actually writing it.

In *Mystic River*, three young boys—Dave Boyle, Sean Devine, and Jimmy Marcus—are linked for life after Dave is kidnapped while Sean and Jimmy watch. Dave's subsequent molestation scars him deeply and leaves the other two boys with conflicting feelings over how close they came to being victimized. Twenty-five years later, the three are thrown together again when Jimmy's nineteen-year-old daughter Katie is murdered. Sean is the state trooper investigating the crime, while Dave becomes a lead suspect. *Mystic River* explores the nature of the tightly knit neighborhoods and families of Boston, and their response to outsiders. This close-knit environment serves as the backdrop for a story that spotlights how one incident acts as a thread that can be woven into so many lives.

*Mystic River* was popular with readers, spending several weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Critics also gave it generally good reviews. Clint Eastwood directed the acclaimed film version of the novel, which was shot in Boston. Sean Penn won the 2003 Academy Award for Best Actor for his portrayal of Jimmy Marcus, and Tim Robbins won Best Supporting Actor for his role as Dave Boyle.



## Author Biography

Dennis Lehane, the youngest son of Irish immigrants, was born August 4, 1965, in Dorchester, Massachusetts, a working-class neighborhood of Boston. Growing up in Dorchester during the 1970s, the author witnessed his close-knit, insulated neighborhood undergoing some radical changes, sometimes violently, while still retaining its core values.

As a child, Lehane was an avid reader. He was attracted to writing by the time he was eight years old, and began creating short stories by the age of seventeen. After graduating from high school, he attended two colleges in Boston, Emerson College and the University of Massachusetts, but dropped out of both.

In 1985, Lehane finally found a program that suited him. He moved to Florida to study writing at Eckhard College. In 1986, while a student there, he took a job that would inspire his later work. He became a counselor at a state facility for children that were emotionally disturbed, developmentally delayed, and mentally handicapped.

Lehane graduated from Eckhard in 1988 with a degree in English. He left the counseling job in 1991 when he entered Florida International University's creative writing M.F.A. program. He graduated in 1993, returned to his hometown of Boston, and spent two years working as a valet and limousine driver at a hotel, jobs that allowed him ample time to pursue his writing.

Though Lehane had focused on dark short stories while he was a student, he decided to try his hand at writing a mystery/crime fiction novel. The result was his first published book, *A Drink Before the War* (1994). The novel, which featured a pair of Boston-based detectives named Angela Gennaro and Patrick Kenzie, was well received and won a Shamus Award for Best First P.I. Novel in 1995.

The success of *Drink Before Water* led Lehane to an unexpected career as a mystery novelist. Gennaro and Kenzie are the primary characters in four more novels, all of which were popularly received: *Darkness*, *Take My Hand* (1996), *Sacred* (1997), *Gone, Baby, Gone* (1998), and *Prayers for Rain* (1999).

Lehane made the transition from mystery novelist to stand-alone fiction novelist with *Mystic River* (2001). Like his other books, this novel is set in Boston and is about crime. However, the stand-alone work—his first novel without the characters of Gennaro and Kenzie—is much deeper than his previous works. *Mystic River* focuses on the effect a crime has on three friends, as well as a working-class Boston neighborhood. The novel soon became a bestseller and won the Anthony Award and the Dilys Award from the Independent Mystery Booksellers Association.

In 2003, Lehane followed *Mystic River* with another novel about Boston called *Shutter Island*. Set in an insane asylum in the 1950s, it centers on a missing patient who is criminally insane. After the publication of *Shutter Island*, Lehane began working on

another novel, which focuses on the 1919 Boston police strike. Beginning in 2004, Lehane wrote scripts for the HBO series *The Wire*. As of 2005, he has been contributing articles to various magazines.



# Plot Summary

## Part 1: the Boys Who Escaped from Wolves (1975)

*Mystic River* opens in 1975 and introduces three young boys who are ten and eleven years old and live in East Buckingham, a working-class part of Boston. Two of the boys, Jimmy Marcus and Dave Boyle, live in the Flats area, while Sean Devine lives in the nicer Point area. Sean's father works as a foreman in a candy factory, where Jimmy's father is also employed. Dave tags along wherever Jimmy goes, including the Saturday visits that Jimmy and his father make to Sean and his father.

After an incident where Jimmy, the daredevil of the group, jumps onto the subway tracks to retrieve a lost ball and has to be dragged off the tracks, Sean's father tells Sean he can only play with Jimmy in front of their home. The next time Jimmy and Dave visit Sean's house, Jimmy is not as exuberant. His father has lost his job. Dave tries to lighten the mood by telling a joke, but his efforts are ignored by the other two.

Jimmy suggests they find a car with its keys under the seat and take it for a joyride. He asks Sean which cars on the block would be best to take, but internally Sean does not like this idea. He suggests to Jimmy that they do this some other time. Dave punches Sean in the arm for his suggestion, and Sean punches him back, hard. Sean and Jimmy get into a physical confrontation.

As Sean and Jimmy are fighting, a car, "square and long like the kind police detectives drove," stops near them. The driver, who looks "like a cop," gets out and asks the boys where they live. Jimmy lies and says he lives in the neighborhood, but Dave tells him that he is from the Flats. The man insists that Dave get in the car with them, warns the boys about fighting, and tells them that Dave will be taken home to his mother.

After the car leaves, Sean's father learns of the incident and immediately realizing that it is a kidnapping, calls the police. The men in the car were not police officers, but kidnapers. Sean feels guilty about not getting in the car and wonders what has happened to Dave. Jimmy feels resentful of Sean and does not believe he will ever see Dave again. Apparently, the kidnapers leave Dave alone at one point and he escapes. Four days after his abduction, Dave is found alive. His neighborhood is overjoyed at his return and throws a block party. Dave looks shell-shocked and withdrawn. Seeing him at the party, Jimmy knows that something has changed in Dave.

Though Dave initially receives support from his neighbors, his classmates harass him when he returns to school. He does not fully understand what happened to him, especially why the men picked him and not Sean or Jimmy. He relives part of the experience and tries to come to terms with what happened to him.

As they grow up, Jimmy and Dave no longer see each other very much. Jimmy steals a car and is sent to another school. Meanwhile, Sean cannot stop dreaming about the



experience. One year after the incident, he learns that one of the men who abducted Dave has been caught and killed himself. Before his suicide, the man reports that the other kidnapper died in a car accident the previous year.

## Part 2: Sad-eyed Sinatras (2000)

It is now twenty-five years later and Brendan Harris, the secret boyfriend of Jimmy's nineteen-year-old daughter Katie, is preparing for the couple's elopement to Las Vegas the next day. Brendan's preparations and hopes for life are contrasted with background about Jimmy's life since that fateful day in 1975. Jimmy still lives in the Flats. He has served time in prison, during which his first wife, Marita, died of skin cancer, leaving him a single father. He later remarries and has two more daughters. After serving his time, he leaves his life of crime behind for Katie's sake.

That same night, Dave, who also still lives in the Flats, is preparing for a night out. His wife, Celeste, is having her girlfriends from work over to watch the movie *Stepmom*, while their young son Michael sleeps in his room. As Dave walks to a local bar, he worries about having to move away from the neighborhood. Yuppies and college students have been moving into the area, raising property values and rents.

Katie goes out with her best friends, Diane Cestra and Eve Pigeon, to celebrate her impending marriage. They go to dinner, then to a number of bars. Dave's evening intersects with Katie and her friends. He watches the Boston Red Sox baseball game at the same bar where Katie and her friends drink and dance on the bar top. After a night of drinking, Katie drops off her friends at Eve's house. As she drives home, she hits something in the street and stops the car. Someone familiar approaches the car, but he is armed with a gun.

Meanwhile, when Dave returns home to Celeste, he is cut across the chest, has an injured hand, and is bleeding profusely. Dave tells Celeste that he was mugged, and he beat the attacker so badly that he might have killed him. Celeste does not believe his story, but still takes care of him, agreeing not to call the police or take him to a hospital. She immediately washes Dave's bloody clothes and plans to destroy all evidence from Dave's attack. Though she is scared of what has happened, she is protective and fiercely loyal to Dave.

The next morning, Jimmy learns that Katie has not shown up for her Sunday morning shift at the Cottage Market, the corner store he owns. Jimmy is especially tense because it is the morning of the first communion of his youngest daughter, Nadine. As he dresses to go into the store, his wife Annabeth is annoyed that her stepdaughter has created tension on Nadine's special day. Jimmy reflects on the loss of his first wife and his early days with Katie when he was unsure how to be a father. While Jimmy covers Katie's shift at the store, he makes calls to try and find her. Brendan drops by the store with his younger brother, a mute named Ray, and tries to learn where Katie is without attracting suspicion. Jimmy does not like Brendan and has forbidden his daughter from ever seeing him.



Sean re-enters the narrative as a state trooper working homicide after a week-long suspension. His personal life is in disarray because his wife, Lauren, has left him. He is put on a case after two kids call 911 to report a car covered in blood near Penitentiary Park in the Flats. At the scene, Sean meets with his partner, Whitey Powers, a veteran in homicide. Though a body has not yet been found, the authorities assume from the blood in the vehicle that the victim has been murdered.

During and after Nadine's communion service, Jimmy is angry that Katie has not shown up, but he is also worried. He reflects on his past again, revealing that he was a very clever criminal who had his own crew. He went to prison to protect the others in his gang.

When Celeste wakes up on Sunday morning, she is still worried about what actually happened to her husband the previous evening. She is certain he lied to her about the incident. She knows something happened to her husband as a child, but he has never told her exactly what the experience was. The tension increases between Celeste and Dave.

Jimmy, on a hunch, follows the police cars to the area where the car has been found. When he sees that Katie's car is involved, he knows in his heart that she is dead. Jimmy asks to see Sean, who is reluctant to talk to him. When they meet, Sean informs him that she has not been found yet, but Jimmy cannot accept that answer. Rather than wait on the police, Jimmy decides to find his daughter on his own.

The police find Katie's body behind an old drive-in movie theater screen in the middle of the park. She has been shot in the head and beaten. As Sean surveys the location, Jimmy and his brother-in-law, Chuck, enter the park through a back entrance and approach the murder scene. Jimmy learns that his daughter is dead. Sean and Whitey are the lead investigators of the crime.

After Jimmy identifies Katie's body at the morgue, Sean and Whitey question him and Annabeth. Jimmy brings up what might have happened if he and Sean had gotten into the car with Dave. Though internally Sean reflects on the fact that he has asked himself the same question over the years, he keeps focus on the case at hand. As Whitey and Sean begin their investigation, Sean tells him what happened with Dave all those years ago.

At Jimmy's home, Jimmy has another brother-in-law, Val, look into the possibility that Katie's ex-boyfriend, a criminal named Bobby O'Donnell, had a hand in her death. Whitey and Sean question Eve and Diane, and learn that Katie was going to elope to Las Vegas with Brendan. The next day, they question Roman Farrow, a friend of Bobby's. He reminds them that Bobby could not have killed Katie because he was already in jail on a DUI charge. Whitey and Sean go to Brendan's house and he confirms his and Katie's plans to elope.

When Sean returns home, he reflects on his life. He had met Lauren in college, and now she works as a stage manager for traveling shows. The couple has been growing





apart for some time, and she has had an affair. She becomes pregnant around the same time, and Sean is unsure if the child is his. Lauren calls, but as always, she is silent on the line and says nothing.

### Part 3: Angels of the Silences

The next morning, Celeste is staying with Annabeth, her cousin, to help her out with family and friends that have come to pay their respects. Celeste observes how grief has affected the family. Jimmy struggles deeply with the loss of his daughter, but keeps his grief internalized.

Sean and Whitey continue their investigation by questioning Dave. They know that he was at one of the bars that Katie and her friends were at on the night she was murdered. Dave lies to them, saying he left the bar at about 12:45 a.m. and went straight home. He tries to hide his injured hand in his pocket.

After Sean and Whitey leave, Dave reflects on his past. He struggles with what happened to him as a child and calls this part of his personality "The Boy Who'd Escaped from Wolves and Grown Up." He takes his son to Jimmy's house. When Jimmy asks Dave what happened to his injured hand, Dave tells him that he cut it helping someone move a sofa.

Sean and Whitey discuss the state of their case and fear it could be a random crime. Whitey suggests that Dave could be a suspect, though Sean is dismissive of that possibility. When they present their findings to their superiors, they mention that there was a suspicious car seen in the parking lot of the bar, the Last Drop, where Katie was last seen alive. There was also blood in the parking lot. The authorities are unsure how these facts relate to Katie's death.

Sean and Whitey park near Jimmy's house. Dave is outside, heading into the nearby convenience store. When Whitey asks about Dave's injured hand, Dave tells him a pool cue smashed it into the wall while he was making a difficult shot. Whitey and Sean notice a dent on Dave's car that matches the description of the dented car in the parking lot of the Last Drop. They do not believe his story about the night Katie was killed.

Celeste overhears the conversation between Dave, Sean, and Whitey. She is worried that her husband is involved with Katie's death. When Sean talks to Celeste alone a short time later, he tries to get her to tell him what time Dave came home that night. Celeste becomes confused and defensive, and she lies, telling Sean she was asleep when he came home. Sean knows that she is scared, and thinks that she knows more than she is saying.

Sean talks to Jimmy alone and informs him that his daughter was dating Brendan and planning to elope. Jimmy is surprised. Sean asks why he hates Brendan so much, and Jimmy tells him that he had issues with Brendan's father, who was known as Just Ray.



When Sean and Whitey talk again, Whitey is more convinced that Dave is a leading suspect, but Sean is reluctant to completely agree. Whitey asks Sean if there is a conflict of interest with him being on the case of a friend's murdered daughter with another friend as the lead suspect. Sean assures him that he is after the killer, whoever it is. Off the clock, Sean spends some time with Annabeth, sharing his marital troubles to get her mind off her own problems.

When Celeste returns home from dropping off Katie's dress at the funeral parlor, Dave is angry at her and accuses her of thinking that he killed Katie. She tells him that she overheard Whitey and Sean talking. She wants Dave to tell them the truth about what happened to him on the night of Katie's murder. Dave has a breakdown and tells Celeste what happened when he was kidnapped and molested as a child. He tells her, "The kid who came out of that cellar, I don't know who the f—k he was—well, he's me, actually—but he's sure as s—t not Dave. Dave's dead." He does not think that he trusts himself anymore.

Dave walks in his neighborhood, reflecting on what happened on the night that Katie was murdered. He admits to himself that he sometimes fights the urge to molest children as he himself was molested, but he will not cross that line. When Dave goes out, Celeste takes her son and leaves her husband.

## Part 4: Gentrification

Whitey tells Sean that he has towed Dave's car as evidence. Blood was found in the front seat and the trunk. He also tells Sean that the gun used to kill Katie was also used in a 1982 robbery, which Sean says points away from Dave. Whitey brings Dave in for questioning. The troopers confront him on inconsistencies in his story. Dave eludes them, telling another lie about his injured hand, saying that he fell against a ragged chain-link fence in his backyard. In the interrogation room, Dave grows smug in the knowledge that they cannot pin Katie's murder on him and that he has a secret: he murdered someone else and no one can prove it. He is released when a witness cannot pick him out of a lineup.

Sean investigates the gun used to kill Katie. Just Ray, Brendan's father, is linked to the weapon. Just Ray was an associate of Jimmy's who disappeared in 1987. Sean and Whitey learn that Just Ray had ratted on Jimmy when Just Ray was arrested in the 1980s, which is why Jimmy ended up in prison. They figure that Jimmy must have had a hand in Just Ray's disappearance, either murdering him himself or ordering someone to do it.

After Jimmy buys the headstone for his daughter's grave, he and Val talk about what Val has learned through the informal investigation Jimmy has asked him to undertake. Val verifies that the murderer could not have been Bobby O'Donnell or Roman Farrow. He mentions that Little Vince, a child prostitute known to hang around the Last Drop, suddenly left town. Jimmy learns that Dave has been taken in for questioning.



Celeste finds Jimmy and tells him that she has left Dave. She relates everything that has happened, and says that she believes Dave killed Katie. In the meantime, Sean questions Brendan again, asking about his father and his father's gun. Brendan does not believe his father is dead because he sends monthly checks postmarked from New York. When Sean asks Brendan if his father kept a gun in the house, Brendan denies it. They can connect the gun to Katie's murder through its use in an earlier robbery, and arrest Brendan on suspicion of murder.

When Dave gets home, he starts drinking. He thinks back to what actually happened the night Katie was murdered. He happened upon a man with a young male prostitute in his car, and Dave, consumed with rage over his own abuse, beat the man and then shot him. In the melee, Dave was injured. He first put the body in his trunk, then moved it to the man's Cadillac. Dave's motive was not only rescuing the boy prostitute, but also rescuing the Boy Who'd Escaped from Wolves living inside him.

Whitey and Sean learn that the suspicious car from the bar had been towed. They find the body of the man that Dave killed and link this murder to him. Sean returns to question Brendan, but Brendan demands a lawyer and is soon released. After listening to the 911 call tape again, Sean and Whitey realize that the boys who called about Katie's abandoned car had actually seen her while she was still alive.

In the meantime, Dave runs into Val, who invites him to lunch. Jimmy shows up at the restaurant and joins them. As they drink, the tension between Dave and Jimmy is palpable and makes Dave sick to his stomach. When Dave goes outside to vomit, Jimmy and Val follow. Jimmy tells Dave that he killed Just Ray on principle for betraying him, even though he did not want to. When Val pulls a gun and Jimmy pulls a knife, Dave insists he had nothing to do with Katie's death, telling them that he killed a child molester that night, not Katie. He then tells Jimmy that he *did* kill Katie, believing that Jimmy will let him live if he tells him what he wants to hear. Jimmy stabs Dave in the abdomen and then shoots him in the head. Jimmy and Val dump Dave's body and the murder weapons in the Mystic River.

When Brendan returns home from the police station, he looks for his father's gun in the place he knew it should be. It is not there. At the same time, Whitey and Sean figure out that it was Brendan's brother, Ray, and his friend Johnny O'Shea that the witness saw and heard in the street before Katie's car stopped. They were the ones who made the 911 call. Brendan confronts his brother and Johnny, beating both of them.

Sean and Whitey arrive to find Johnny holding Brendan at gunpoint. After a tense stand-off during which Johnny points the gun at Sean, Sean diffuses the situation and takes Ray and Johnny into custody for Katie's murder. Sean goes to Jimmy's house and informs him that they have caught Katie's killer. Sean also tells him about the murder of a child molester and asks if he knows where Dave is. Jimmy realizes that he has killed the wrong man. Sean can see in Jimmy's face that he killed both Just Ray and Dave. He vows to collect enough evidence to arrest him but knows that Jimmy is too smart to have left any evidence behind. Sean calls Lauren and they reconcile, and he learns the name of his daughter, Nora. When Jimmy returns home, he confesses everything he



has done to Annabeth, who tells him he did the right thing to protect his family from those who are weaker than they are.

## **Epilogue: Jimmy Flats (sunday)**

On Sunday morning, a parade is about to take place in the neighborhood. Jimmy reflects on the events of the past two days as he wakes up from a deep sleep. Celeste had come to Katie's wake, screaming that Jimmy was a murderer. The gravity of Jimmy's crime weighs on him, as does his past. He decides that with Katie dead, his reason for going straight is gone, and he returns to his former criminal lifestyle.

Sean and his wife reconcile, and Sean meets his infant daughter, Nora, for the first time. They attend the parade. Celeste appears in the crowd and tells Sean that Jimmy murdered her husband. Sean promises to prove Jimmy did the crime and bring him to justice. Sean and Jimmy make eye contact across the crowd. Sean hopes that Dave has achieved some peace in death.



# Characters

## Big Wolf

Big Wolf is the name Dave gives Henry, one of the men who kidnapped him when he was a boy. Big Wolf, the driver of the car, and his partner Greasy Wolf pose as police officers and force Dave into their car. Big Wolf is never caught for the kidnapping and molestation of Dave. Later, he allegedly dies in a car crash.

## Celeste Boyle

Celeste is Dave Boyle's wife, the mother of Michael, and the first cousin of Annabeth Marcus. Celeste is loyal to Dave but is greatly troubled when he comes home one night, bloodied and injured. She does not believe the story he tells her about being mugged and fighting to defend himself. Eventually, she fearfully concludes that her husband murdered Katie. When Celeste tells Jimmy her fears, it confirms his suspicions and he murders Dave. Not knowing her revelation would end in murder, Celeste later regrets her actions and blames Jimmy for her husband's death.

## Dave Boyle

Dave Boyle is the feeble childhood friend of Jimmy and Sean, neither of whom seems to like Dave. Like Jimmy, he lives in the Flats, the lower working-class area of East Buckingham, Boston. Sean knows Dave only because he tags along with Jimmy when Jimmy visits Sean's house.

Dave is fighting in the street near Sean's house, when two men posing as police officers kidnap him. They put Dave into the back of their car and tell him they are taking him home to his mother. Instead, Dave endures sexual abuse at the hands of the men he nicknames Big Wolf and Greasy Wolf. When they leave him in a cellar alone, Dave manages to escape and returns home after four days. The incident greatly scars Dave.

He is married to Celeste and has a son named Michael. He does not tell her exactly what happened to him as a child. Internally, Dave struggles with his own desires to molest, though he vows never to act on them. Instead, his inner conflicts reveal themselves when, after a night of drinking, he murders August Larson. Dave comes upon Larson engaged with a young male prostitute and takes out all his pent-up rage on Larson. Though Dave is injured in the incident, he does not tell anyone the truth about what happened.

Because of Dave's unexplained injury, his wife suspects him of killing Jimmy's daughter, Katie, and she leaves him. Jimmy also suspects Dave of killing Katie. Dave finally tells him the truth about killing August Larson, but Jimmy does not believe him. After Dave is killed, his body is weighted and sunk to the bottom of the Mystic River.



## Michael Boyle

Michael is the eight-year-old son of Dave Boyle and his wife Celeste. Like his father, he is a very talented baseball player who plays the catcher position.

## Diane Cestra

Diane is one of Katie Marcus's best friends. Along with Eve Pigeon, she spends a last night on the town with Katie before Katie is supposed to leave for Las Vegas. Instead of driving home with Katie, she spends the night at Eve's house, leaving Katie to drive home alone in the car.

## Lauren Devine

Lauren Devine is the wife of Sean Devine. The couple met in college, and she works as a stage manager for traveling shows such as *Lord of the Dance*. Sean and Lauren are separated for much of the book, in part because she had an affair with another man. The couple has a daughter, Nora, though Sean is not sure he is the father until the end of the book. Throughout the novel, Lauren calls Sean from the road, but she does not speak. He talks to her, but she does not say anything back. After Sean faces the gun held on him by Johnny O'Shea, he takes the first steps towards reconciliation, which she accepts. By the end of the book, the couple has reunited.

## Sean Devine

When *Mystic River* opens, Sean is about ten years old and living in the Point, an upper working-class neighborhood in the East Buckingham section of Boston. He is playmates with Jimmy Marcus and Dave Boyle. The boys play together only on Saturdays because Sean goes to a Catholic school, while the other two go to public school. Sean is sometimes put off by Jimmy's wildness and Dave's clinginess. However, when Dave is kidnapped right in front of him by men who are posing as police officers, Sean develops a lifelong guilt over the incident.

After Sean graduates from college, he becomes a successful state trooper. However, his marriage to Lauren is troubled by an affair she has with another man. Just before the action of *Mystic River* begins, Sean has served a suspension and probation for giving his wife's lover unearned parking tickets. The murder of Katie Marcus is his first case back with his partner, Whitey Powers. The pair investigates the case while Sean struggles with the past, especially the fact that he did not get in the car with the pedophiles. Unlike his partner, Sean is somewhat reluctant to consider Dave Boyle as Katie's murderer.

Sean finds the clue that points the investigation to the true murderers: mute Ray Harris and his friend, Johnny O'Shea. Arresting the boys and facing the gun that Johnny aims



at him puts Sean's life in perspective and allows him to make the first step towards reconciliation with his wife and child. Sean also realizes that Jimmy killed Dave and vows to arrest him someday for the crime.

## Greasy Wolf

Greasy Wolf is the name that Dave gives to George, one of the men who kidnapped him when he was a child. George was the passenger in the car that stopped on Sean's street, posing as a police car. He was eventually caught by the authorities but committed suicide before he was prosecuted.

## Brendan Harris

Brendan Harris is the older brother of Ray Harris and the son of Esther and Just Ray Harris. He is about nineteen years old and in love with Katie Marcus. The pair have been secretly dating and plan to elope in Las Vegas. When Katie is found murdered, Sean Devine and Whitey Powers briefly consider Brendan as a suspect, though neither ultimately believes he killed her. In the end, Brendan realizes that his brother and friend killed Katie just as Sean and Whitey arrive at the door to arrest them.

## Ray Harris Jr.

Ray is the mute younger brother of Brendan, and son of Esther and Just Ray Harris. His father ratted out Jimmy Marcus, which led to Jimmy's prison time and eventually to Jimmy murdering Just Ray. With friend Johnny O'Shea, Ray murders Katie because he does not want to see his brother move away.

## Ray Harris Sr.

See Just Ray

## Just Ray

Though Just Ray does not appear as a living character in *Mystic River*, his presence is felt nonetheless. Just Ray is the husband of Esther Harris, and the father of Brendan and Ray Harris, Jr. Just Ray was a criminal in league with Jimmy Marcus but also held a few legitimate jobs along the way. He disappeared in 1987 while his wife was pregnant with Silent Ray. His family thinks he just moved away and abandoned them, primarily because each month they receive five hundred dollars in an envelope with a New York postmark. In reality, Jimmy murdered Just Ray because he gave the police information that led to Jimmy's arrest and prison sentence. Jimmy is the one who sends the monthly checks. Because of Jimmy and Just Ray's negative relationship, Jimmy does not like Brendan and has forbidden his daughter from ever seeing him.



## August Larson

August is the man whom Dave murders. He is in the company of Little Vince, a local child prostitute, when Dave comes upon them and kills August. Dave first puts August's body in his trunk but later moves him to the trunk of the man's own Cadillac, where it is later found.

## Little Vince

See Vincent

## Annabeth Marcus

Annabeth is Jimmy Marcus's second wife and the mother of two of his daughters, Sara and Nadine. She is also the only daughter of Theo Savage, sister to the Savage brothers including Val and Chuck, and the first cousin of Celeste Boyle. Throughout the story, Annabeth's severe nature is highlighted. At one point, Sean asks her, "Anyone ever tell you that you're a hard woman?" She replies, "All the time." Annabeth is very supportive of her husband and immediate family. She allows Celeste and others to take care of her after Katie's death, although she despises weakness. Annabeth knew Jimmy was going to kill Dave and could have stopped him, but she does not because she regards Dave as feeble.

## Jimmy Marcus

At the beginning of *Mystic River*, Jimmy is about eleven years old. He is an only child and lives in the lower working-class neighborhood of the Flats in East Buckingham. Jimmy is a wild child who takes extreme risks. Yet he also allows Dave Boyle, who was easily led and without many friends, to tag along with him.

Jimmy's street smarts prevent him from being kidnapped. When two men posing as police officers pull up, Jimmy saves himself by lying, saying that he lives nearby. The men kidnap Dave, and Jimmy does not believe Dave will be coming back until he actually shows up. Even as a child, Jimmy resents Sean and his wealth. After the kidnapping, Jimmy steals a new baseball mitt off Sean's bed when he leaves Sean's house. This resentment colors their relationship as adults.

Unlike Sean and Dave, Jimmy does not succeed at school. He is expelled from one school after stealing a car, and bussed to another one. By the time he is seventeen years old, Jimmy is the head of a criminal gang. He meets and marries his first wife, Marita, the mother of his first daughter, Katie. However, Jimmy is betrayed by one of his associates, Just Ray Harris, after a robbery. Refusing to turn in the rest of his friends, Jimmy goes to prison for a few years. During his time inside, Marita dies of skin cancer.





Upon his release, Jimmy becomes a single father to Katie. He later remarries and with his new wife, Annabelle, has two more daughters, Nadine and Sara. To take care of them, he leaves his life of crime behind and runs a legitimate business, a corner store. He exacts his revenge on Just Ray by executing him in secret. But Jimmy also arranges for money to be sent monthly to Just Ray's family, in part so they will think he is still alive.

Jimmy is extremely close to Katie and her death devastates him. He relies on family, like his crazy brothers-in-law Val and Chuck Savage, to help him find out who killed her. When Celeste shares her belief that Dave killed Katie, Jimmy murders Dave. Jimmy feels slight remorse when he learns the truth but will not admit to his crimes. Instead, he decides to make a return to his criminal past.

## **Katie Marcus**

Katie is the nineteen-year-old daughter of Jimmy Marcus and his first wife, Marita. She is the stepdaughter of Annabeth Marcus. Katie and her father are extremely close. Her mother died while her father was in prison, and after his release, Katie and Jimmy build a strong bond. Despite this closeness, Katie does not tell her father that she is dating and planning to elope to Las Vegas with Brendan Harris. Before Katie can put this plan into action, she is murdered by Brendan's brother, Ray, and his friend Johnny O'Shea. Her death drives the plot in *Mystic River*.

## **Marita Marcus**

Marita is Jimmy's first wife and Katie's mother. She dies while Jimmy is serving his prison sentence. Her loss haunts him throughout the novel, and he secretly admits to himself that he loved her more than he loves Annabeth.

## **Bobby O'donnell**

Bobby is a twenty-something small-time crime boss who, among other things, runs some prostitution rings and acts as muscle in the neighborhood. Bobby had been dating Katie Marcus. As far as she is concerned, the relationship has ended, but Bobby does not necessarily agree. Because of their relationship, Bobby is an early suspect in her death but it is discovered that he was in jail on a drunk driving charge at the time.

## **Johnny O'shea**

Johnny is Silent Ray's friend. He takes part in the murder of Katie Marcus. When Sean and Whitey figure out that Ray is involved in the crime and go to the Harris apartment to confront him, Johnny holds a gun on Sean before he is arrested. This experience leads Sean to reconcile with his wife.



## **Eve Pigeon**

Eve is one of Katie Marcus's best friends. She and Diane Cestra celebrate Katie's last night in Boston, and then they spend the night at Eve's house while Katie drives away alone. Eve reveals to Sean and Whitey that Katie was planning to elope with Brendan.

## **Sergeant Whitey Powers**

Whitey is Sean Devine's partner in the investigation into Katie Marcus's murder. A sergeant, Whitey is very experienced with similar crimes and diligent in his pursuit of the truth. Whitey questions Sean's motivations for being on the case, including his ties to Jimmy and Dave. However, Whitey also uses these links to help solve the crime.

## **Val Savage**

Val Savage is the son of Theo Savage, brother of Annabeth Marcus, and brother-in-law to Jimmy Marcus. Like all the Savage brothers, he is very short in stature and somewhat psychotic. Val is involved in criminal activities. He used to be in Jimmy's gang before Jimmy went to prison, and remains very loyal to him. Val helps Jimmy murder Dave and dump his body in the Mystic River.

## **Silent Ray**

See Ray Harris Jr.

## **Vincent**

Vincent is a young male prostitute known as Little Vince. An encounter between Little Vince and August Larson prompts Dave to murder August. After August's murder, Little Vince disappears from East Buckingham.



# Social Sensitivity

Dennis Lehane's *Mystic River* is a character study of three childhood friends who choose different paths in life and ultimately reap the consequences of these choices twenty-five years later. Jimmy Marcus, Dave Boyle, and Sean Devine are friends whose fathers work together at the Coleman Candy plant in East Buckingham, a fictional blue-collar section of Boston. The defining moment in all their lives takes place as they are fighting in the street one summer day when two strangers, claiming to be cops, break up the fight and order the boys to get into their car. Eleven-year-old Dave gets into the car while Sean and Jimmy do not. The "cops" are pedophiles who imprison Dave for four days. He is able to escape and return to his old life but as "damaged goods," according to Sean's father.

The psychological damage Dave endures, and the guilt that haunts Jimmy and Sean, are still fresh twenty-five years later when the three are thrown together again. Sean is investigating the murder of Katie Marcus, Jimmy's nineteen-year-old daughter. Dave emerges as the prime suspect when he comes home covered in blood on the night of the crime, and his excuses do not ring true to his wife. Jimmy favors a brutal and swift justice, perhaps as a result of his past criminal activity and his stint in prison. But Sean, whose personal life is falling apart and affecting his job as a state homicide detective, is a seeker whose actions propel the narrative toward its tragic conclusion.

One of the overriding social concerns of the novel is its attention to the aftermath of child molestation. Few details of the four days of Dave's ordeal are included, but scene after scene explores the damage Dave suffers afterward. Trapped by bullies in the school bathroom the week he returns from the kidnapping, eleven-year-old Dave senses "a range of emotions pouring from the boys that cut into him. Hate, disgust, anger, contempt. All directed at him. He'd never bothered anyone his whole life. Yet they hated him. And the hate made him feel orphaned."

Even Jimmy and Sean, his former good friends, find it difficult to deal with Dave's shame. "It felt to Dave as if their friendship had died when Dave climbed into that car."

The pent up rage and shame do not dissipate as Dave ages, but he is able to compartmentalize his emotions, at least until the night of Katie's murder.

The effects of Katie's sudden, violent death are explored in depth. Readers are plunged into the consciousness of Jimmy, the bereaved father; Annabeth, Katie's loving stepmother; and Brendan, her secret fiance. The segments in which Katie is missing are nearly as excruciating to read as the ones in which she is found, identified, grieved, and buried. Perhaps this is because the search for Katie's murderer is secondary to the exploration of the three men's lives and her death's psychological effect on the characters and the community.

The setting of the novel is an urban neighborhood, whose culture and morals are examined in anthropological detail. One of the two epigraphs is from Gongora: "There is



no street with mute stones and no house without echoes." Lehane studies the streets, the houses, the channel, and the river of East Buckingham to determine the effect of this environment on the characters of the novel. Sean's family is from the Point, while those of Jimmy and Dave are from the Flats, the two areas twelve blocks and a world apart. The Point families are solidly working class with Chevrolets and Fords parked in front of the small Victorians they own. Their children go to St. Mike's school and on Sundays, to Mass. Flats families live "like animals", sometimes ten to a rented apartment. They get divorced, and attend the local public school, Lewis M. Dewey Elementary, scornfully called the Looey and Dooley. The Flats butts up to the Penitentiary Channel, a not-so-subtle metaphor for the limited options of the children who grow up there. That Sean becomes a state homicide investigator and Jimmy an inmate of a state penitentiary is hardly surprising.



# Techniques

Lehane uses several literary techniques that are unique to this, his sixth novel.

The previous plots have proceeded chronologically, with numbered chapters, but this novel begins with a twenty-five year flashback, and the book is divided into four segments: I. "The Boys Who Escaped from Wolves 1975"; II. "Sad-Eyed Sinatras 2000"; III. "Angels of the Silences"; and IV.

"Gentrification." The novel's epilogue is entitled "Jimmy Flats Sunday."

Within the other segments, there are more flashbacks, created primarily to create startling juxtapositions in the narrative. For example, the search for the missing Katie is contrasted with Jimmy's younger daughter's First Communion. Jimmy stands, holding his middle child in her church finery, feeling as "happy as you could get," and reflecting on Annabeth's falling in love with him years earlier, all only seconds before he understands that Katie is dead. Similarly, Sean finds Katie's body immediately after a flashback to the happiest time in his life. A further ironic contrast is the extensive description of Katie's mangled body, trapped in the room with stored scenery behind the park stage where the summer before she had been "transported" by the production of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*.

An omniscient narrator weaves in and out of the consciousness of multiple characters, including Katie. In previous novels, Lehane has primarily used the first person consciousness of Patrick Kenzie, his wisecracking detective. This novel's multi-layered perspectives allow the plot to develop more organically from the characters and at a much slower pace. Because readers' information is limited by the filter of the characters' consciousness, the suspense is heightened significantly. Readers know, for example, that Dave has been involved in a murder, but he refuses to divulge that part of his memory. That aspect of his character, the "The Boys Who Escaped from Wolves," as he refers to it, is the part of Dave's mind that could possibly reveal the truth about Katie's murder, but it is blocked off for readers because Dave himself cannot face it. This technique allows Lehane to effectively expose the scars as well as the strengths of his main characters.

Lehane has not abandoned his trademark crackling dialogue, the cadences of the Boston neighborhood so vivid that readers feel as though they are eavesdropping on actual conversations. Words are dropped from sentences so that the natural rhythms of "The hell you talking about?" replace the more stilted version of "What the hell are you talking about?" Gallows humor in even the most serious descriptions enlivens the narrative. Brendan Harris, for example, knows that although he has never before met anyone who didn't like him, Katie's dad, Jimmy, truly hates him. The Savage brothers, aptly named, arrived as "their thin, sainted mother popped them out one after another, eleven months apart, like they were running a midnight assembly line for loose cannons." Sean later comments on their collective character, referring to the Savages as "legends of psychosis and really, really bad impulse control." Lehane's ability to

recreate dialogue at all points on the social register is deadly accurate and his most recognizable literary strength.



# Themes

## Power of the Past

A primary theme of *Mystic River* is the power the past can have over people's lives. While the friendship between Sean, Dave, and Jimmy is not particularly deep, Dave's kidnapping and molestation tie them together for life. Both Sean and Jimmy are aware that their lives would have been very different had they gotten in the car that day. Dave does not understand why the kidnappers picked him and does not talk about what happened to him.

Sean has always been much more troubled by the kidnapping incident than Jimmy. It affects his thoughts, concerns, and motivations. Jimmy does reflect from time to time on what could have been, but he does not dwell on it as heavily as Sean and Dave do. Just after he identifies his daughter's body, Jimmy and his wife are giving Sean and Whitey initial information for their investigation. He tells Sean, "If we had gotten in that car, been driven off to God knows where and had God knows what done to us.... I think I would have been a basket case."

Dave's kidnapping and molestation have colored his entire existence. He has shut this part of himself off from everyone else. Most people who know what happened treat him differently. The few times when Dave thinks or talks about what happened, he talks about his own desire to molest, which he has been curbed successfully. However, Dave's rage gets the better of him when he sees a man having sex with an underage male prostitute. Dave's continual battle with his past ultimately costs him his life.

## Family and Familial Relations

Another prominent theme in *Mystic River* is the importance of family. Each of the three main characters has families and familial relationships that provide depth and motivation for their actions. For example, Jimmy's entire adult life has been focused on providing for his family. Upon his release from prison, he is a single father to young Katie. They develop a very deep, loving bond, broken only by her death. Instead of returning to a life of crime after his release, Jimmy opens a corner store, remarries, and has two more daughters. He lives in an apartment below some of his in-laws, who help him when he decides to conduct an informal investigation into his daughter's death. Jimmy even reconnects with Dave when Dave marries his wife's first cousin, Celeste.

After Jimmy kills Dave, Annabeth defends his actions by telling him he was protecting his family. She tells their children that they never have to worry about being safe because "Daddy is a king, not a prince. And kings know what must be done—even if it's hard—to make things right."

Sean's and Dave's family relationships are more fractured than Jimmy's, yet still important to who they are and how they act. Sean has a distant relationship with his



parents, especially his father, and cannot communicate well with them. Though Sean fulfills their expectations and goes to college, his marriage to Lauren, a college sweetheart, is temporarily broken by infidelities. She continues to contact him, calling him from the road, but does not say anything. He talks to her, hoping to re-connect. When Sean calls her after Johnny pulled a gun on him, the couple reunites and their family is restored. Sean becomes a loving father to his infant daughter, Nora.

Dave was raised by a single, overprotective mother, with his uncles acting as his male influences. After his kidnapping and molestation, his mother becomes even more protective of him, worried that the men will return for him. As an adult, Dave marries Celeste and they have a son. Celeste's difficult mother, Rosemary, lives with them until her death. Dave keeps a part of himself hidden away from his wife as well as from the rest of the world. He does not trust even his wife to fully understand what happened to him as a boy and how it has tainted his whole existence.

## Neighborhood and Community

Related to the theme of family is the strength and importance of the neighborhood in *Mystic River*. The bulk of the action takes place in a part of fictional East Buckingham called the Flats. It is a working-class neighborhood with many Irish American families. Everyone seems to know everyone else, and many people in the neighborhood go to Jimmy's corner store. A key clue to Katie's murder is the fact that she said "hi" to one of her killers.

Many who live in the Flats feel protective of the neighborhood and resent the yuppies and college students who are gentrifying the area and raising the cost of living for long-time residents. Dave rants on several occasions about how these people negatively affect both him and the others who live in the Flats. Nearly every character in *Mystic River* has spent his or her whole life in the neighborhood and fears being forced to leave by economic factors.

## Violence and Crime

Petty crime and violence are facts of life in East Buckingham. While the narrative shows how crime and violence have lasting detrimental effects, it also shows that crime can be committed with honorable ends. The novel's catalyst is the kidnapping and molestation of Dave Boyle in 1975. As the victim of a horrible crime himself, Dave acts violently. The trauma of his molestation causes him to kill August Larson, a man who is having sex with a child prostitute in a car. Dave commits a crime, but given the atrocity of his victim's actions, readers are unlikely to feel that what Dave has done is really wrong. Jimmy was a successful criminal in his youth, and his in-laws continue to live on the wrong side of the law. Jimmy does not trust the authorities to bring Katie's killer to justice. He takes matters into his own hands and murders Dave in cold blood because he believes Dave killed his daughter. After this incident, Jimmy plans to return to his criminal ways. At the same time, the fact that Jimmy kills Just Ray and then sends





money to his victim's family shows how he has some integrity. Sean's job as a trooper is to investigate acts of crime and violence, so though he is not the victim or the perpetrator, he is still affected by their consequences nonetheless.

## Strength and Weakness

An underlying theme of *Mystic River* is the strong versus the weak. From the beginning, the book presents Dave as a weak person. He is first described as "a kid with girl's wrists and weak eyes." The narrative implies that Dave's needy weakness contributed to his kidnapping; in fact, Dave often thought, "How had they known he'd climb in that car, and that Jimmy and Sean wouldn't?.... Those men ... had known Jimmy and Sean wouldn't have gotten into that car without a fight." Dave wants to be strong as an adult but never achieves this goal around Jimmy and those he has known his whole life in the Flats. At the same time, though the murder he commits derives from his personal pain and demons, the act does exhibit some strength of character, as he is attempting to protect a child from a fate similar to his own.

When Jimmy confesses to Annabeth the murders of Just Ray and Dave, she admits she knew what was going on with Dave but did not prevent Jimmy from murdering him. She tells Jimmy, "They ... are weak." She then clarifies her statement by saying "Everyone ... Everyone but us." Later, she says, "We will never be weak." Both Jimmy and Annabeth are strong, domineering people who have gotten their way and seemingly will continue to do so.



# Style

## Third-person Point of View

The point of view describes the perspective from which the story is told, while structure is the way the author sets up the plot of the story. These qualities are linked in *Mystic River*. Lehane uses a third-person omniscient point of view, allowing readers to see every character and action from an all-knowing perspective. This allows the reader insight into characters' motives and thoughts. Lehane uses this technique to create a structure of shifting perspectives. *Mystic River* is told in brief episodes that move between the characters and their thread of the story.

## Inner Monologue

Conversation between characters is called dialogue, while a character's thought process is an inner monologue. Lehane uses a significant amount of revealing dialogue between characters in *Mystic River*, but also discloses Sean's, Dave's, and Jimmy's innermost thoughts and motivations through their internal voices. The characters do not talk to themselves; instead, Lehane describes what each character is thinking about themselves, their pasts, and their presents. The style of each monologue reflects each character's psychology. Sean and Jimmy's thoughts are usually organized, reflective, and reactive. At times, especially when Dave is thinking about his abduction, his inner monologue is chaotic and rushed.

## Triple Protagonist

A protagonist is a primary, driving character in a story. *Mystic River*, employs three protagonists, Jimmy, Sean, and Dave. All three characters play significant parts in the development of the novel's story. None dominates the story individually, and each has his own strengths and weaknesses. Jimmy could be considered the villain, Sean the hero, and Dave the victim. However, Jimmy has many redeeming qualities, including love for his family, while Sean is plagued with self-doubt and fear in his personal life. Alternatively, all three of the men could be considered both victims and survivors. It is the collective qualities of Sean, Jimmy, and Dave that make a complex single protagonist in *Mystic River*.

# Historical Context

## Child Abduction, Victimization, and Pedophilia

Though child kidnapping and rape are not new crimes, the methods predators use to find victims have changed over time. In *Mystic River's* prologue, set in 1975, Dave is taken by two strange men in a car. The fear of men looking for random victims on the street was a common one in the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1970s came the realization that children were generally sexually abused by people they knew rather than strangers. The focus of public education campaigns gradually changed to reflect this knowledge. Laws were also passed to help protect children. The 1978 Sexual Exploitation of Children Act made illegal obscene materials (primarily sexually explicit magazines and other types of pornography) that feature minors.

In the early 2000s, when *Mystic River* was written, many children were being lured into sexual situations in a different way: over the Internet. According to an article in *CQ Researcher*, the FBI investigated at least 1,500 cases of the exploitation of children via the Internet in the early 2000s. While these numbers continued to increase, the same article also stated that "most child sexual abuse occurs with family members or adults known to the child."

Though children are still kidnapped off the street or from their homes, by both strangers and family members, the Internet allows pedophiles and other sexual criminals to build a relationship with their victims. Whenever a child is online, he or she can be easily and unknowingly approached by someone seeking a sexual relationship. A 2000 study by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children revealed that almost one in every five Internet users in the United States between the ages of ten and seventeen has been approached. This means that millions of children have been approached: by 2002, more than twenty-eight million children in the United States have used the Internet.

## Gentrification

Gentrification occurs when population shifts, upgraded housing, and a surge in investments transform an older, working class neighborhood into a more affluent one, displacing the working class people who live there. The idea of gentrification underlies the story in *Mystic River*, and was indeed a motivation for Lehane writing the novel. He told Bob Minzesheimer of *USA Today* that he pondered "what would happen to [a working-class Boston] neighborhood once the Saabs outnumbered the Chevys and the corner store became a Starbucks."

In Boston, this process was accelerated in the late 1990s and early 2000s with a hot real estate market and increasingly high housing costs. Campus housing for the many institutions of higher learning in the city was often in short supply. College students and

young urban professionals moved into neighborhoods like the one depicted in *Mystic River* because housing was cheaper than in other locations. As these new tenants moved into the area, rents increased. The newcomers were willing to pay more than the working-class people that had been living there. This action forced out longtime residents, who had a hard time finding new housing. City officials, including Mayor Thomas M. Menino, and activist groups worked to provide affordable housing solutions for lower income families.

## Critical Overview

*Mystic River* is regarded by many critics as Lehane's breakthrough novel, and it received generally positive reviews. Though the author had seen success with his five previous novels, a crime fiction series featuring the detectives Angie Gennaro and Patrick Kenzie, *Mystic River* is widely regarded as being of a higher quality than his Gennaro-Kenzie books. Critics praised many literary elements of the novel, including character, setting, and writing style. Carol Memmott of *USA Today* wrote, "Lehane has let loose with a standalone novel of depth and fervent passion."

A particular aspect of *Mystic River* that a number of critics commented on was the complexity of his characters. David Pitt wrote in *Booklist*, "Lehane is one of the small group of crime writers whose novels reveal a deep fascination with people, with motivation and inner turmoil and the subtle things that make characters walk off the page."

Others noted how carefully Lehane crafted his text. In Charleston, South Carolina's *Post and Courier*, Mindy Spar claimed, "Lehane has created a writer's crime novel. His style is almost poetic, and his descriptions convey feeling and detail without wasting a word."

Some critics found fault with *Mystic River*, including a few who admired his previous works. Bella English of the *Boston Globe* wrote, "*Mystic River* is neither as fast-paced nor as tightly written as his Kenzie-Gennaro series. Lehane fans no doubt will miss the chemistry between those two." While praising some aspects of Lehane's work, including his style and character development, *Washington Post* writer David Corn commented, "Lehane does a better job creating the threads than weaving them together."

Even the somewhat negative reviews had positive aspects to them, and most critics regarded *Mystic River* as an artistic triumph for Lehane. Thomas Mackin in *World of Hibernia* states, "Singular adjectives fail to capture the engrossing power of this murder mystery."

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2



# Critical Essay #1

*Petruso is a freelance writer and editor, with an undergraduate degree in history and Master's degree in screenwriting. In this essay, Petruso considers how the idea of insider versus outsider manifests in the characters of the novel, as well as the dynamics of their neighborhoods.*

In *Mystic River*, a palpable tension exists between insiders and outsiders—people who belong and people who do not. Although the events in the novel blur the distinction between insider and outsider, the tension between these two conditions plays as important a role in the plot as it does in the daily lives of the novel's characters. The communal characteristics of the Flats neighborhood create opportunities for safety, victimization, criminalization, and absolution, and thus, this theme drives the action of the story.

Nearly all the residents of the Flats have spent their entire lives in the neighborhood, with the exception of a few who have served prison time. These residents are insiders; everyone else is an outsider. As the definitive representative of the Flats, Jimmy understands the unwritten rules of living in his tight-knit community. The rules appear to be that one insider cannot betray another; an insider criminal should not inform on a cohort; an insider should not kill another insider's child. Jimmy's actions show one of the major features of insider status: community members understand and follow a set of rules different from the authority of law. Jimmy kills Dave because he thinks Dave killed his daughter. Yet when Jimmy learns the truth about who Dave killed and why, he has no problem with what Dave did. In one respect, this may be because of the atrocious act August Larson commits. On another level, however, it seems that an insider killing an outsider is okay. Summarizing this idea, Bella English of the *Boston Globe* writes,

The novel ... underscores the clannish, skewed morality in the neighborhood: It's no big deal to bash in the brains of a suburban man who's in the wrong place at the wrong time, while killing a local teenage girl is a capital offense.

The underlying insider/outsider tension plays an important role in the moment that ties Jimmy, Dave, and Sean together for life. The three are not particularly close friends as ten- and eleven-year-old boys. They play together on a few Saturdays because Sean's father and Jimmy's father work together, and Dave always tags along with Jimmy. Dave and Jimmy, residents of the Flats, possess a neighborhood identity that eventually would have caused them to drift away from Sean, a resident of the nicer Point area. Had it not been for Dave's abduction, Sean, Dave, and Jimmy probably would not have considered themselves more than passing acquaintances.

One might argue that Dave's outsider status in the Point neighborhood contributes to his victimization. Only Dave, who does not say that he lives in the Point, is kidnapped and molested. To evade the pedophiles, Jimmy lies and says he lives nearby, and the incident happens in front of the relative safety of Sean's house. The tragedy is a thread



that links the three and affects them in a way that those outside the situation can never fully understand.

Ironically, the event assigns Sean a quasi-insider status, in spite of the fact that he is set up as an outsider from the beginning of the novel. He lives in the Point, a neighborhood distinct from the Flats, though part of the same general area of Boston called East Buckingham. While the Point is working class like the Flats, people consider the area a little better off than the Flats. "It wasn't like the Point glittered with gold streets and silver spoons.... But people in the Point owned. People in the Flats rented ... and the Point and the Flats didn't mix much." While Jimmy and Dave attend a public school, Sean attends private parochial school. Later, Sean goes to college, while Dave has his glory years in public high school as a baseball star and Jimmy becomes an accomplished criminal who is brought down only by another's betrayal.

Ultimately, Dave's kidnapping further emphasizes Sean's outsider status. Sean never goes to the Flats to see Jimmy and Dave. Although Sean does not invite them, Jimmy and Dave visit Sean in the Point. They leave the familiar environment of their neighborhood and, as a result, Dave suffers the consequences of going to an outsider's place. Because he is not in his own neighborhood, the men are able to convince Dave to get in their car.

As someone from a neighborhood where "families went to church, stayed together, and held signs on street corners during election months," Sean makes choices in his life that continue to make him an outsider to those he once knew in the Flats. He graduates from college and while a student, he meets Lauren, the daughter of hippie liberals who served in the Peace Corps. The couple marries and though they have marital problems that create tension, they ultimately get back together and work on their marriage and family.

One of the most important choices Sean makes to cement his outsider status is becoming a state trooper. The cases he investigates take him many places, including the same neighborhoods he has been trying to leave his whole life. Though it is not stated directly in the text of *Mystic River*, it would seem that Sean made the choice to become an authority figure because of what happened to Dave and how helpless Sean had felt when it happened. Though Sean was too young at the time to investigate that crime, as an adult he can make a difference in other cases. Given his background, it is fitting that he chooses to do so using the upstanding, legal path. As *Mystic River* unfolds, it is as if Sean must work through Katie's murder case to atone for what happened to Dave. As someone with a personal stake in the case, Sean probably should have pulled himself off the case but could not.

While Sean is an outsider to the Flats, Dave's kidnapping ties him to Jimmy and Dave, and by extension, to their community. Because of his connection to Jimmy and Dave, Sean's participation in the murder investigations of Katie and of August Larson borders on conflict of interest. His partner, Whitey, asks him early on if he is too personally invested in the case, but Sean dismisses his concerns. He is determined to see justice





in the case involving his friends, perhaps to atone for what happened when they were children.

The police and other authorities are not exactly trusted in the Flats. The way Lehane writes it, many Flats insiders consider those on the opposite side of the law more trustworthy than the police. As an insider, Jimmy earns more respect in the community for his career choices than Sean does. Jimmy's first job is as a professional criminal, until someone he trusts, Just Ray Harris, rats him out. After an honorable prison sentence—taking the fall so no one else would have to—Jimmy leads a relatively straight life but does so as a neighborhood insider. He supports his family by owning a corner store, an institution that can be the heart of a neighborhood. Though he lives a straight life, Jimmy's in-laws are still criminals, and Jimmy himself still has power derived from criminality in the area.

Early in the novel, insider Dave Boyle complains on several occasions about how yuppies are taking over the neighborhood and causing rents to rise. He worries he will lose his home and perhaps have to leave East Buckingham. He tells Whitey and Sean that the neighborhood needs a good crime wave to make it unappealing to the outsiders who are steadily encroaching. Interestingly, the man Dave murders is a suburbanite who was in the area specifically to have sex with a young male prostitute.

While Jimmy Marcus, a consummate neighborhood insider, shares some of Dave's anxieties that gentrification will permanently change the neighborhood, he is not as hostile to outsiders as Dave. His first marriage was to an outsider, a Puerto Rican woman named Marita. Although she died of cancer while he was in prison, he admits that he loved her more than he does his second wife, who is a neighborhood insider. After his daughter Katie's death, he remembers a time when he and Katie saw a production of William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* and how Katie spent the next six months expressing her desire to live in Italy after high school. Jimmy was dismissive of her dreams. He considered her a resident of the Flats for life; an insider, just like himself.

The tension between outsiders and insiders contributes to the underlying drama in the novel and helps add depth to the plot. This tension which manifests itself in the character of Sean without much detriment to him, takes a much greater toll on Dave. He is simultaneously an insider and an outsider and cannot reconcile that conflict. While Dave is definitely an insider in the Flats, as an adult he questions that status because of his abduction and its consequences. It is as if he is an outsider because of what happened to him as child. He is the boy taken away from his neighborhood, his mother, and his friends, and abused by two men he dubs wolves. The fact that he struggles with the compulsion to victimize other children, the ultimate betrayal of a community's integrity, makes his status as a solid community member uncertain. By the time he reaches adulthood, his accomplishments on the baseball field in high school have caused people's memories of him as a child victim to fade. As far as most people in the Flats are concerned, Dave is one of them. But he cannot let the incident go.



Dave's kidnapping raises an important related question: What if the incident had happened in front of Jimmy's home? Would the Flats, depicted as being more close-knit than the Point, especially in 1975, have been quiet enough for this incident to occur? After the kidnapers force Dave into their car, Sean's street becomes "empty again ... gone mute with the slam of the car door." Furthermore, only one witness heard anything the night of Katie's murder because the street it occurred on was empty, burned out, and lost in the urban shuffle; only one old woman lived there. In 1975, the street had been more vital. While Sean's street was not exactly vacant, Lehane depicts those who live in the Point as more concerned with their own well-being than that of the neighborhood as a whole. When Dave returns to the Flats after his kidnapping, the narrator compares the lively block party he receives with what might have occurred in the Point: "They had block parties, sure, but they were always planned, the necessary permits obtained, everyone making sure everyone else was careful around cars, careful on the lawns...."

In the Flats, neighbors are the same as family; people who live there are less concerned with the privacy of others. Flats residents are insiders because their community encourages it. They possess a unified identity of extended family. Point residents appear to have no community to be inside of at all, and therefore are a neighborhood of outsiders. When Dave returns, it seems everyone who lived in the Flats attends his party. Although crime and violence seem to be commonplace in the Flats and the Point neighborhood may contain more law-abiding citizens, the investment that Flats insiders have in their community may have made it a safer place to live.

**Source:** A. Petruso, Critical Essay on *Mystic River*, in *Literary Newsmakers for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.



## Critical Essay #2

*In the following essay, Dunn visits the south Boston neighborhoods on which Mystic River's fictional Buckingham is based to learn about Leane's impetus to write and how his experiences in those neighborhoods inspire his fiction.*

Dennis Leane did not want to work for Boston Gas. Nor did he want to work for Boston Edison or the post office. He had no ambitions to enter the priesthood or politics. Instead, he wanted to write. His parents (who emigrated to Boston from Ireland in the 1940s) were duly horrified.

Fortunately, Ann and Michael Leane's son seems to have made the right decision. *Mystic River*, his sixth novel, finds the author transcending the genre label of crime novelist that his earlier books have earned him, placing him at the intersection of crime and literary fiction. *Mystic River* is a mystery novel that pushes up out of the genre, a book that uses the whodunit premise to delve deeply into the conundrum of how people who are supposedly "close" are actually as far from one another as distant planets whirling through the void. The book which has strong backing from publisher William Morrow, is a Book of the Month Club Main Selection and has had its foreign rights already sold in five countries—could put Leane's rising literary star into a whole new orbit.

Not bad for someone whose most lucrative job, not so long ago, was parking cars.

Leane's journey has had its snags. Prior to the publication of his first novel, the path of his writing career resembled a bungee jump from Massachusetts to Florida, with the recoil snapping him back: "I went to two colleges, two different majors, and dropped out of both of'em," admits Leane, who at thirty-five still looks like a frat boy lost on the way to the party. "I was twenty and I said, 'I really suck at everything. The only thing I've ever been good at is writing.'" His parents wanted their restless son to settle into a more secure profession. "It's the immigrant dream," Leane says, slouched in a chair in what is best described as a writer's fantasy office: floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, wall-to-wall desk space and no telephone. "Get the secure job. Get the pension. Lock it in. Until a couple of years ago, my father was still telling me when the postal exams were, just in case."

While Leane was growing up, South Boston and neighboring Dorchester (where he lived) were reeling from poverty, street violence (particularly against forced busing), lethal street drugs (cheerfully supplied by the notorious Irish-American gangster James "Whitey" Bulger and his ilk) and an alarming suicide rate.

Yet both South Boston and Dorchester were some of the most tight-knit, closed neighborhoods in the city, where outsiders were distrusted and visitors unwelcome. Over beer, and under the eyes of his two faithful bulldogs, Leane explains the dynamics of Dorchester in the 1970s in a subdued but frank voice. "When I was growing up it was, 'We are all Irish, we are all Polish, we are all Catholic—all others, stay the f—



k out.' Boston's neighborhoods went through explosive tensions, not always racial. A lot of times it was just, 'Outsiders, go away.'" That grim take on neighborhood communality forms the backdrop of Leane's serial novels, as well as the fictionalized world of *Mystic River*.

"Dorchester is one of many built-in neighborhoods in Boston, and sometimes neighborhood pride has a dark side," says Leane's high school friend Chris Mullen (whose name Leane used for a drug dealer character in his fourth novel, *Gone, Baby, Gone*). "Not quite a Charlestown code-of-silence pride, but akin to that. My family moved out of Dorchester during busing. Dennis' didn't, and I think from his point of view, there was a constant tension. Within a block of his home, things got very dicey during the busing era—for a while that whole neighborhood was going in the wrong direction. I can see the basis for some of the crimes he writes about. I think that when Dennis portrays the neighborhood in his books, and especially when he writes dialogue, his voice rings truer to me than many other writers, because he was there."

Leane convinced his worried parents that he'd be able to take care of himself as a writer. "I'd been doing it since I was eight. I said I wanted to major in writing, that I could get a degree and teach, so I could always make a living doing that." Leane got a scholarship and left crowded Dorchester, heading south to Eckerd College, a small school on the Gulf of Mexico in St. Petersburg, Florida—an area he now refers to as "paradise." "I remember stepping on the campus and thinking, This is it. This is my life. All I wanted to learn was how to be good."

Eschewing the concerns typical of many young writers, Leane hunkered down in his newfound paradise and began to do the hard work necessary to become a "good" writer. "I didn't care about publishing. I didn't even like hearing about publishing in workshops—it's putting the cart before the horse. I still get annoyed by that. It's a very simple theorem: Learn how to write, write a good book, it'll get published. You'll get published—just learn how to write first. There's no other method that I know of."

Leane's early attempts involved short stories, which he believed to be his niche. Some of his teachers and classmates encouraged him to send some of his best to *The New Yorker*; he decided against it and continued working on his craft, a decision he does not regret. "I look at people who can do it well—like Andre Dubus or Denis Johnson or Thom Jones or Alice Munro or Lorrie Moore—and there's still a little part of me that wishes I could do that. But I've always been lucky in that I have a very good instinct and very little sentimentality about seeing my own limitations. I thought, If I can't write a short story as well as Dubus, then why the hell am I doing this?"

While earning his MFA at Florida International University, Leane casually tried his hand at mystery writing, a genre he always enjoyed as a reader. The book he began to write turned out to be the first draft of *A Drink Before the War*, the debut novel of his highly successful Kenzie-Gennaro detective series, which centered on a brutal gang war with nods to the Charles Stuart race killing. It took him three weeks to write (but months to rewrite before it was ready for publication).



"Coming from the world I was in, writing very esoteric short fiction, when I wrote a mystery, I knew exactly what boundary I was stepping over. I was leaving one camp and stepping into another, and I had no illusions about it," the author says.

After receiving his master's, Lehane returned to Massachusetts, where he found work best suited for someone of his qualifications—parking cars. "I needed to do that," he says. "I got ragged on a lot—'Hey, how's that master's workin' for ya?'—but it was fun. It was my last little-kid job." By the time Lehane's first book had been published, he had upgraded to being a chauffeur—a job he says is well suited for writers. "I wrote a lot of *Darkness*, *Take My Hand* and most of *Sacred* from the front seat of a limousine," he chuckles.

Lehane laughs a lot, which, given the course of events in his life, is not surprising, though it does belie an intensely serious creative drive that has seen him through six books and innumerable short stories.

Lehane's first novel, *A Drink Before the War*, was followed at the pace of about one per year by *Darkness*, *Take My Hand*; *Sacred*; *Gone, Baby, Gone*; and *Prayers for Rain* (all of which share Dorchester and South Boston as common settings). After the success of *Prayers for Rain* (film rights for which were purchased by Paramount Pictures, with Lehane writing the script), the author decided he needed a break from the Kenzie-Gennaro detective series. He wanted to go deeper into the streets and secrets of the neighborhood of his youth than he ever had before.

"When I first started writing short stories, when I was around seventeen, I'd come up with this little world in my head, which I discarded sometime in college. I thought, OK, if we're going back to third person, just step back as a writer to a place I'd once been very comfortable, let's go all the way. Let's do Buckingham."

What may have been plain boredom with the first-person point of view of his earlier books gave way, unexpectedly, to something far richer: the world of Buckingham, a fictitious amalgam of the Boston neighborhoods of Dorchester, South Boston, Charlestown and Brighton, described in *Mystic River* as "a neighborhood of cramped corner stores, small playgrounds and butcher shops where meat, still pink with blood, hung in the windows."

What better place to set a crime novel than amid the various crime scenes one has witnessed in childhood? The day after the original interview, Lehane offers a drive through "Buckingham," a tour that would likely never pass muster with Boston's tourism bureau.

Various points of interest include the bleak, sloping grounds near St. Margaret's Church, where one childhood acquaintance murdered another over a pair of sneakers, and the Southie convenience store where a friend's night shift unexpectedly ended with a shotgun blast at pointblank range. (The store sits in the middle of a busy intersection, and no one claims to have seen a thing.) Lehane refuses to stop or even slow down his truck when we come upon the Old Colony housing projects, still a major source of South



Boston's drug trade. We drive slowly by the intersection of Gannon and Bakersfield streets, site of the child abduction at the outset of *Mystic River* that reverberates throughout the lives of its three protagonists.

Our final stop is by the tangled girders beneath the Tobin Bridge, where even full sunlight cannot reach through the maze of steel. Lehane describes this final destination as "a good place to die."

Clearly, he has no shortage of background material from which to draw Buckingham. But he believes there was enough room in *Mystic River* to explore such deeper issues as marriage, parenthood and self-determination. The three protagonists struggle to make sense of a sudden murder in their midst (which takes place in a theater in a park that Lehane still refuses to enter alone), and proceed to make a fine mess of it. These thematic interests, as well as Lehane's extraordinarily fleshed-out characters (whom Claire Wachtel, his editor at William Morrow, calls "ten-dimensional"), will signal to attentive readers early on that *Mystic River* is no workaday whodunit story.

The novel also breaks from Lehane's previous books, with its stark attention to real-life details within real-life situations. "The private-eye novel is limited to a certain structure," he says. "You're dealing with an archetypal form; it's basically what replaced the Western. There are certain laws to that form, and the more you write about those characters, the less they can do, the more confined they become." Gone are the wild shoot-outs and chase scenes from the Kenzie-Gennaro series. With help from Trooper Robert Manning of the Massachusetts State Police Homicide Bureau (a connection arranged by Lehane's brother-in-law, Sgt. Mike Lawn of the Watertown Police Department), Lehane was able to depict the police investigation in *Mystic River* with incredible detail and accuracy: "I think Dennis, without speaking for him, was looking for concrete specifics on how a case is completed from start to finish, instead of some fictionalized account that's dramatized," Manning says.

Lehane's attention to detail forced him to revisit some difficult experiences of his own. While still in school he drifted into social work and eventually worked with abused children. "Every summer and Christmas I'd come home, and all my friends were working with the handicapped, because overtime wasn't a problem. Eighty-hour weeks weren't a problem." Lehane does not elaborate much on his short career working with abused children, save to imply that the overall experience was unpleasant. But it reverberates throughout his serial novels, culminating in *Mystic River's* Dave Boyle, a man with a secret of childhood abuse that is slowly and horrifically resuscitated over the course of the novel.

The fragmentation and denial within Dave's mind is illustrative of what happens to everyone in *Mystic River*. The murder at the heart of the book sets the stage for a collision between the novel's three main characters, themselves childhood acquaintances and witnesses to a terrible crime twenty-five years earlier that tore their friendship apart. As adults, they are adrift and isolated, from themselves and everyone around them, ever since a car that "smelled like apples" rolled down Gannon Street, changing things forever.



"I have an obsession with innocence lost," Lehane says. "I try to get rid of it, but I can't. What I can do, as a craftsman, is not repeat the details. Pedophilia is done. I've done it in three books. Now I've said all I have to say about it. There's a fine line between writing about some thing and exploiting it."

With *Mystic River* flowing on course, Lehane's thoughts are with his next novel, in which he plans to return to the Kenzie-Gennaro series. "The series isn't over, but I thought that the characters needed a break," he says. "In *Prayers for Rain*, I wrapped up some character lines that have been hanging there since the first book."

The new Kenzie-Gennaro novel will be the second in a five-book contract with William Morrow, of which *Mystic River* was the first. Lehane seems on firm ground with his direction. "The perfect balance," he says, "would be to do a series book, then do a standalone and so on in that sequence. It keeps the characters fresh."

**Source:** Adam Dunn, "A Good Place to Die," in *Book*, Vol. 52, March 2001, p. 52.

# Adaptations

- *Mystic River* was released in an abridged version on four audiocassettes by Harper Audio in 2001. The text is read by David Strathairn.
- *Mystic River* was adapted as a film in 2003. Brian Helgeland wrote the screenplay and Clint Eastwood directed the production. The film starred Sean Penn, Tim Robbins, and Kevin Bacon as Jimmy, Dave, and Sean. It was nominated for six Academy Awards, winning two. It was also named Best Film of 2003 by the National Board of Review.





## Topics for Further Study

- In a one-page essay, compare and contrast the film version of *Mystic River* with the book. What aspects of the novel changed when it was adapted to film? Would you have left in these parts? What was lost and what was gained by adapting the book into a movie? Which version most effectively depicts the basic story?
- Look up the definition for "feminism in literature" and in a one-page essay, examine the complex way in which women are depicted in *Mystic River*. Would you consider LeHane a feminist author? Are any of the women feminist in nature? How would you describe the kinds of women depicted in the book?
- The issue of social class underscores the story in *Mystic River*. Most of the characters in the book are working class. Throughout its history, Boston has been known for its class tensions. Find a book or film that explores this topic. Make a one-page list that compares and contrasts how the book or film you find and *Mystic River* deal with social class.
- The ending of *Mystic River* leaves open the possibility of a sequel. Sean has yet to prove that Jimmy killed Just Ray and Dave Boyle, while Jimmy plans a return to the criminal life. If you were going to write a sequel to the novel, where would you take the story? How do you see the drama playing out based on what you know? Write a one-page summary of the sequel, giving the second book an original title.

## What Do I Read Next?

- *Darkness, Take My Hand* (1996) is another novel by Dennis Lehane that deals with pedophiles and children. The effects of these attacks also have long-term repercussions. The novel is part of Lehane's series featuring the detectives Angie Gennaro and Patrick Kenzie.
- *The Wanderers* (1974), by Richard Price, is a book that Lehane cites as influential in his writing career. The story focuses on a gang of teenagers living in the Bronx in the 1960s.
- Lehane's *Shutter Island* (2003) is another stand-alone novel. Like *Mystic River*, the book focuses on a criminal investigation, which is conducted by two federal marshals. This case involves a missing patient from a mental institution who is criminally insane.
- National Book Award nominee *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1993) is a novel by Dorothy Allison. The story focuses on a young girl who is sexually abused.
- *Gone, Baby, Gone* (1998) is another novel by Lehane that focuses on a missing girl. The novel also features the detective team of Kenzie and Gennaro, who are investigating her disappearance.
- *Dark Harbor* (2005), a murder mystery by David Hosp, features a story set in Boston with characters from that city's neighborhoods.



## Key Questions

Lehane has often said that he is fascinated by mortal acts, not by the pursuit of the criminal who committed those acts. In this novel, the murder of Katie Marcus and its effects on the family and the neighborhood are explored in as much depth as is the question of who killed her. A group discussion could begin by analyzing the circumstances surrounding the nineteen-year-old's death and the scenes in which Jimmy reflects on her last hours, scenes in which he gains total reader sympathy. Discussing how Lehane shows both the strengths and the weaknesses of his main characters can also be insightful.

1. Why were Dave, Sean, and Jimmy thrown together as children? How was their childhood status affected by their fathers' work?
2. How did each boy's family situation affect his choices as he grew older?
3. How is each man changed by the woman he chooses to marry?
4. What roles do the women in the novel play in unraveling of the plot?
5. How does Lehane depict Brendan and Katie as classical star-crossed lovers without resorting to clichés?
6. What does Lehane do in the conclusion of the novel to change the reader's perceptions of Jimmy and of Dave?
7. Lehane has referred to the river as the central character in the novel. In what ways does he use the river, literally and metaphorically?

Harriett S. Williams, Ph.D.



# Literary Precedents

Lehane is often referred to as the heir apparent to Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, the originators of the noir genre.

Like them, he aims to please readers with complicated plots, characters from the seamy underside of society, and hard-boiled yet decent detectives who, despite frequent personal conflicts with what they find, continue to search for the truth. Lehane has acknowledged his high regard for the talents of these men.

Lehane has credited his initial interest in writing, however, to Richard Price's *The Wanderers*, a saga about street gangs he first read at age fourteen. Price attempts to combine humor and tragedy, sudden violence and deep feelings, and he accomplished this melding primarily through cutting and accurate street dialogue. Lehane also cites James Crumley as an inspiration, and he describes reading *The Last Good Kiss* in college and being awed by the world Crumley creates. The novel chronicles a tough yet tender detective and his Montana environs in a plot that is as concerned with place and character as it is with solving its obligatory mystery. Lehane has included this novel in an American crime fiction course he has taught.

More recent precedents are James Ellroy's *The Black Dahlia*, a fictionalized narrative recreating the notorious Los Angeles murder case of 1947, and Michael Connelly's series of novels featuring Hieronymus (Harry) Bosch, also set in Los Angeles.

These works capture the feeling of being in Los Angeles, the city's importance equal to that of any character.

George Pelecanos, another contemporary writer, has put Washington, D.C. on the noir map, celebrating the area's gritty working class neighborhoods and aging suburbs. Lehane, too, takes great care to recreate neighborhoods much like his native blue-collar Dorchester in Boston, areas far removed from the tourist maps of the city.

*Mystic River* also owes a debt to writers whose work is far removed from the crimedetector genre. In several interviews, Lehane has expressed his appreciation for the literary talents of Toni Morrison and Martin Amis. In *Mystic River*, he attempts to create a much more complex, ambiguous work.

The characters, as Amis's and Morrison's tend to be, are not clear-cut good or bad, but much more flawed and human. Lehane acknowledged this shift in his characters' sensibilities in a 2001 *Borders.com* online interview: "If the good guy is far less good than we thought, so be it."

## Further Study

Bluestone, Barry, and Mary Huff Stevenson, *The Boston Renaissance: Race, Space, and Economic Change in An American Metropolis*, Russell Sage Foundation, 2000.

This work contains a number of essays that consider the economic and social history of Boston, focusing on the twentieth century and its impact on residents and businesses in the city.

Fass, Paula S., *Kidnapped: Child Abduction in America*, Harvard University Press, 1999.

This nonfiction work explores the history of child kidnappings in the United States from 1874 forward and includes analysis of major public cases.

Lanning, Kenneth V., *Child Molesters: A Behavioral Analysis*, National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2001.

Lanning, a profiler with the FBI, analyzes in depth what makes a child molester tick.

Smith, Neil, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*, Routledge, 1996.

In this book, Smith expounds on many aspects of gentrification and its effect on cities.

Tarbox, Katherine, *Katie.com*, Plume Books, 2001.

This memoir features the story of the author who was lured by an online sexual predator when she was fourteen years old. Tarbox describes the experience that ultimately led to her sexual assault by the man.

## Related Titles

Mystic River is Lehane's sixth novel set in a vividly drawn working class Boston neighborhood and peopled by gritty Irish and Italian immigrants. The first five novels, however, are more traditional mysteries, featuring detective partners Patrick Kenzie and Angie Gennaro, whose complicated emotional relationship adds the only break from fast-paced action. The Kenzie-Gennaro series includes *A Drink Before the War* (winner of the Shamus Award for Best First Novel); *Darkness*, *Take My Hand*; *Sacred*; *Gone, Baby, Gone*; and *Prayers for Rain*.

Although the pace is much faster and the action more outlandish in the detective series than in this much slower-paced psychological analysis, Lehane does touch on some of the scenes and themes he explores in depth in *Mystic River*.

In *Darkness, Take My Hand*, Patrick recovers a memory of a pivotal childhood incident in which he and a best friend are lured into a car by men he later learns are pedophiles. This memory breakthrough allows him to solve the mystery of a twentyyear string of strangely similar killings. This brief echo of childhood terror remembered is amplified in "The Boys Who Escaped from Wolves," the opening segment of *Mystic River*. In the latter novel, Lehane builds the moment slowly and artfully, surprising the reader as well as the boys, who are duped into believing that the men identifying themselves as cops are friendly policemen rather than the embodiment of evil they turn out to be.

It is not surprising that Lehane, who has worked as a counselor for troubled and abused children, would explore the twin sins of sexual abuse and simple neglect. In *Gone, Baby, Gone*, Patrick and Angie are hired to find a missing four-year-old and subsequently tangle with cold-blooded kidnapers, vicious pedophiles, and well-meaning cops who kidnap children from drug addicts' neglectful homes. Patrick and Angie are forced to consider the moral ambiguities resulting from the facts uncovered by their detective work. This consideration of child abuse and its after-effects, as well as the realization that cops whom they like and respect have abused the system, are themes that Lehane explores much more thoroughly in *Mystic River*.



# Bibliography

Corn, David, "Lies and Whishers," in the *Washington Post*, March 4, 2001, p. T09.

English, Bella, "*River* Doesn't Flow Like Earlier Novels," in the *Boston Globe*, February 22, 2001, p. D2.

Hansen, Brian, "Can Internet Child Sexual Exploitation Be Controlled?" in *CQ Researcher*, Vol. 12, No. 8, March 1, 2002, pp. 1, 2, 10.

Lehane, Dennis, *Mystic River*, William Morrow, 2000.

Mackin, Thomas, "The Critical Reader Review of *Mystic River*," in *World of Hibernia*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Autumn 2001, pp. 20-22.

Memmott, Carol, "Mysteries Probe Modern Hearts of Darkness *River* Runs Through Life's Nether Regions," in *USA Today*, February 8, 2001, p. 8D.

Pitt, David, Review of *Mystic River*, in *Booklist*, Vol. 97, No. 6, November 15, 2000, p. 588.

Spar, Mindy, "*Mystic River* well-crafted," in the *Post and Courier*, April 15, 2001.

Stillinger, Alice, "Can't Take Dorchester Out of the Writer," in the *Boston Globe*, March 25, 2001, p. 3.



# Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Novels for Students*.

## **Project Editor**

David Galens

## **Editorial**

Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

## **Research**

Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

## **Data Capture**

Beverly Jendrowski

## **Permissions**

Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

## **Imaging and Multimedia**

Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

## **Product Design**

Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

## **Manufacturing**

Stacy Melson

©1997-2002; ©2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc.

Gale and Design® and Thomson Learning™ are trademarks used herein under license.

*For more information, contact*

The Gale Group, Inc

27500 Drake Rd.

Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535

Or you can visit our Internet site at

<http://www.gale.com>

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any





form or by any means—graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution or information storage retrieval systems—without the written permission of the publisher.

For permission to use material from this product, submit your request via Web at <http://www.gale-edit.com/permissions>, or you may download our Permissions Request form and submit your request by fax or mail to:

*Permissions Department*

The Gale Group, Inc  
27500 Drake Rd.  
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535

Permissions Hotline:  
248-699-8006 or 800-877-4253, ext. 8006  
Fax: 248-699-8074 or 800-762-4058

Since this page cannot legibly accommodate all copyright notices, the acknowledgments constitute an extension of the copyright notice.

While every effort has been made to secure permission to reprint material and to ensure the reliability of the information presented in this publication, The Gale Group, Inc. does not guarantee the accuracy of the data contained herein. The Gale Group, Inc. accepts no payment for listing; and inclusion in the publication of any organization, agency, institution, publication, service, or individual does not imply endorsement of the editors or publisher. Errors brought to the attention of the publisher and verified to the satisfaction of the publisher will be corrected in future editions.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". © 1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". © 1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

## **Introduction**

### **Purpose of the Book**

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's "For Students" Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently



studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

### Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals—helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

### How Each Entry Is Organized



Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as “The Narrator” and alphabetized as “Narrator.” If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name “Jean Louise Finch” would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname “Scout Finch.”
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).



- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

### Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.



Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

### Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

“Night.” Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography* (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

### We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: [ForStudentsEditors@gale.com](mailto:ForStudentsEditors@gale.com). Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Novels for Students  
Gale Group  
27500 Drake Road  
Farmington Hills, MI 48331–3535