

UNDER THEIR SKIN

By Rick Sullivan

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FRESH from early-morning TV's *The Today Show*, best-selling crime writer Michael Robotham is relaxed, informal and thoughtful.

As we discuss his work, it's plain that he has a clear vision of what he's doing as a writer. "There's an unwritten contract between the readers and the writer," he says. "They're relying on you to take them on a frightening journey, but then get them safely home."

Easier said than done, but Robotham has made good on his words. His third crime thriller, *The Night Ferry* - this month's Big Book Club selection - promises to become his most successful yet. It's just the latest step for a man who seems to have known his direction from early on.

"I've known since I was 12 that I wanted to write," he says. "My father was a teacher and there were so many books around it seemed natural to pick them up."

Robotham, who grew up in small towns, began at 17 as a cadet journalist at *The Sun* in Sydney. After 10 years as a successful journalist in Australia and England, he was offered the opportunity to ghost write a celebrity autobiography. He eventually wrote 13 others for people such as Rolf Harris, Lulu, and Gerri Halliwell. It was good training for a novelist.

"The hardest part of ghost writing other people's stories is capturing their voices, so that it isn't you talking, it's them," he says. "To get their voice in your head, you have to live with them, be in their pockets, listen to tapes of their interviews. In many ways, I approach novels the same way."

Even as he built a successful career ghost writing, Robotham had fiction in the back of his mind. While waiting to start on Lulu's autobiography, he began writing a novel about a psychologist whose past comes to haunt him when a woman is found murdered.

With just 117 pages completed and no outline, he began showing it to publishers. A bidding war started, and when a lucrative contract was signed the book was still just 117 pages and no one, including the publisher, had even asked how it was going to end. On publication, *The Suspect* broke from the gates like a racehorse, critics and readers alike heaped praise on it, and the BBC bought the rights for a television series.

Suddenly Michael Robotham was a successful crime novelist.

The Suspect was followed by *Lost*, a gripping novel about a driven police officer seeking redemption through the recovery of a missing girl. *Lost* won the Ned Kelly Award for Crime Book of the Year in Australia and was short-listed for the Barry Award for Best British Novel of 2005.

The Night Ferry involves the murky world of sexual slavery and child brokering and possesses the qualities that readers are coming to expect from Robotham: an intricate

plot, complex and interesting characters and a moral issue at the heart of the story. To Robotham, all three are important, but character is critical to his writing. "My books are character driven," he says.

"I believe that if the story is fleshed out and the characters more believable, the reader is more likely to take the journey with them. In addition, the plot can be more complex. My characters are very real to me, and I want each of my characters to be different. Alisha Barba (in *The Night Ferry*) was a huge challenge. She was Anglo-Indian, female and young. But she became as real to me as a person.

"Again, it comes back to the ghost writing. For me, plots are the hardest part. I hate doing them. Readers are very sophisticated now: they expect a twist, so you need a second twist. But they know that's coming, too, so you need a third. But it has to be believable, so when it's revealed they go, 'Ooh, I should have seen that coming.' It's like being a magician, you want them watching one hand while the other hand is busy."

Robotham's stories are grounded in strong moral issues and reflect a deep awareness that the truth often lies in the grey areas, if anywhere.

"It's in the nature of my books that villains are not black and white," he says. "An example is the philanthropist, Shawcroft, in *The Night Ferry*: is he really a criminal? He does a great amount of good; is that outweighed by the bad things he does?"

"I think one of the things about that book that puts it above the first two is that you're left with questions about what's right and what's wrong. The reaction from my readers is that *The Night Ferry* is the one that stayed with them afterwards."

After *The Suspect*, many people expected a series about psychologist Joseph O'Loughlin. But Vincent Ruiz, a secondary character from *The Suspect*, was the protagonist in *Lost* and Alisha Barba, a supporting character in *Lost*, starred in *The Night Ferry*. Robotham has explained that he didn't want to become trapped in a series that might limit the possibilities for future stories. Now he's given his readers another surprise.

His next book, called *Shatter*, has as its main character Joseph O'Loughlin.

"I didn't want to go back to any of my main characters," says Robotham, "but I came up with an idea that only worked for Joe. It's the darkest thing I've done, a very pure psychological thriller and absolutely terrifying. It's not blood and gore: the fear is mental. It's what you fear, not what you see, that's really scary."

Today, Robotham lives on Sydney's northern beaches with his wife, Vivien, and three daughters, aged 13, 10 and almost 7. He's very definite about his future plans.

"I'm very fortunate to be doing what I dreamed of, what I love," he says. "So few people get that opportunity. So while people continue liking what I write, I'm going to happily continue."