

A Conversation with Ron MacLean Author of *Headlong*



HEADLONG is a departure for you. Why a thriller?

While my story collection and earlier novel weren't as topical, I don't see a categorical difference. To me, everything I write is in some sense a detective story – an investigation. I also love the form. Nothing beats the thriller – and in a broader sense, the crime novel, the mystery – for pure reading experience. I started writing HEADLONG around the time of the financial crisis in 2007-8. I was angry at the gaping abyss between rich and poor, and by the way many of those with power were and still are blithely screwing over the rest of us. I wanted to write something that expressed my anger over these issues. I have no use for activist fiction: lecture disguised as story. In a crime novel or thriller the characters have to confront evil; they are forced to engage it, not just complain about it. And, they have to face the fact that they're dirty, too.

I wondered why people like me weren't taking to the streets during the financial crisis. What had happened, as we matured, to our sense of conviction? Why was I so inclined to grouse about issues over a drink in a bar but reluctant to join the Occupy movement? I forced myself to participate in Occupy rather than just sit on the sidelines. One thing that was obvious: that movement was built by young people who knew their future was at stake. That tension between the complacent middle-aged cynic and the angry, idealistic young protester became the engine that drove the relationship between Nick and Bo.

Is (protagonist) Nick Young a version of you?

No. Nick has problems I've thankfully avoided. He can't find work; he's still in love with his ex-wife; he's a cynical smart-ass even when he knows he's hurting other people. What Nick has going for him is that he knows he's too old – and too alive – to be this kind of emotional burnout.

My primary question about Nick was this: What would it take to knock him out of his cynicism? What might it take to rekindle his lost idealism, and how would he deal with the consequences?

I had a great time creating Nick's snarky Boston persona. Maybe too much fun. One of the many things I had to address in revision was to show how all the snark was a

cheap cover for hurt. It's Nick's terror over his own empty life that compels him to chase the mystery at the heart of the book.

Where did the idea for HEADLONG come from?

I've always wanted to write a crime novel. For years, I'd been quietly trolling for an idea. Then one day, I saw a small item in the *Boston Globe* about a robbery. A kid attacked inside a home in a wealthy suburban neighborhood, and all the thieves took was a few hundred bucks cash. I tacked the clipping to my writing wall; two weeks later, I was still drawn to it. And the idea had grown more complex. Different facets attached themselves to it. That robbery ended up being the germ of the idea for HEADLONG.

Why is Nick a journalist? Why this necessary for him and for this book?

As a former journalist, I can testify that journalists are cynics because we are burned idealists. That was a core theme of the book. There were other factors. Journalists are where news happens, so it was a way to force Nick to be at the scene of major events and – crucial for him – to force him to confront these major stories. Also, I liked the idea of Nick as an old-fashioned reporter who has to ask questions and find facts. He has to care enough to dig to get answers. Investigative reporting of that sort is endangered, and it's something I love, and value big-time, so it was also a way to pay homage.

Nick's estranged father is a major character. In a way he's the catalyst who brings Nick home to Boston. That's not a standard crime story element. Why is Nick's relationship with his dying father such a major element of this story?

It's a major life issue for people Nick's age; that's part of what makes the book more than a standard thriller; dealing with his father is another crisis for Nick and it's a way for me to increase the pressure on him as he looks to reclaim a life for himself. In order to build something of his own, he's got to deal with his father. He has to make peace with who he doesn't want to become. In that sense, it's not at all unusual for a crime novel or mystery. I just dealt with that ghost head on. Also, I knew the story had to be complex: five major plot lines encompass past and present, personal and societal. Because that's what life looks like – those are the pressures we all face, and make our choices in the midst of. One of the fun challenges was to weave all that together in a way that would be compelling and coherent – and lead to the essential, headlong convergence at the end.

What are some of your favorite crime novels?

So many favorites. But in terms of those I go back to often, only a few. James Crumley's *The Last Good Kiss*. Raymond Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*, and Paul Auster's *Leviathan* – I have a broad definition of crime novel.

What's next for you?

I've got fifteen short stories nearly complete, and they all seem to deal, in one way or another, with danger, loss, and fear. One is a novella about a US Attorney who has walked away after failed prosecutions of corrupt Wall Street execs, and who is visited by radical ghosts of the historical past: Emma Goldman and Robert La Follette. But told very realistically. Another is an extremely compressed meditation in the mind of a mad dentist. Oh, and then there's the story from the point of view of a blind rabbit trying to escape the cleaver in a butcher shop.

Is there another Nick Young novel in your future?

I wouldn't have thought so when I was writing HEADLONG, but I've had glimmers that suggest Nick isn't finished with me. I miss him, and lately as I'm walking around town I hear him saying things to me. I've encountered a couple of situations in recent weeks where I can feel Nick's curiosity rising. I wouldn't be surprised if he's off right now digging into those things in his own obnoxious way.