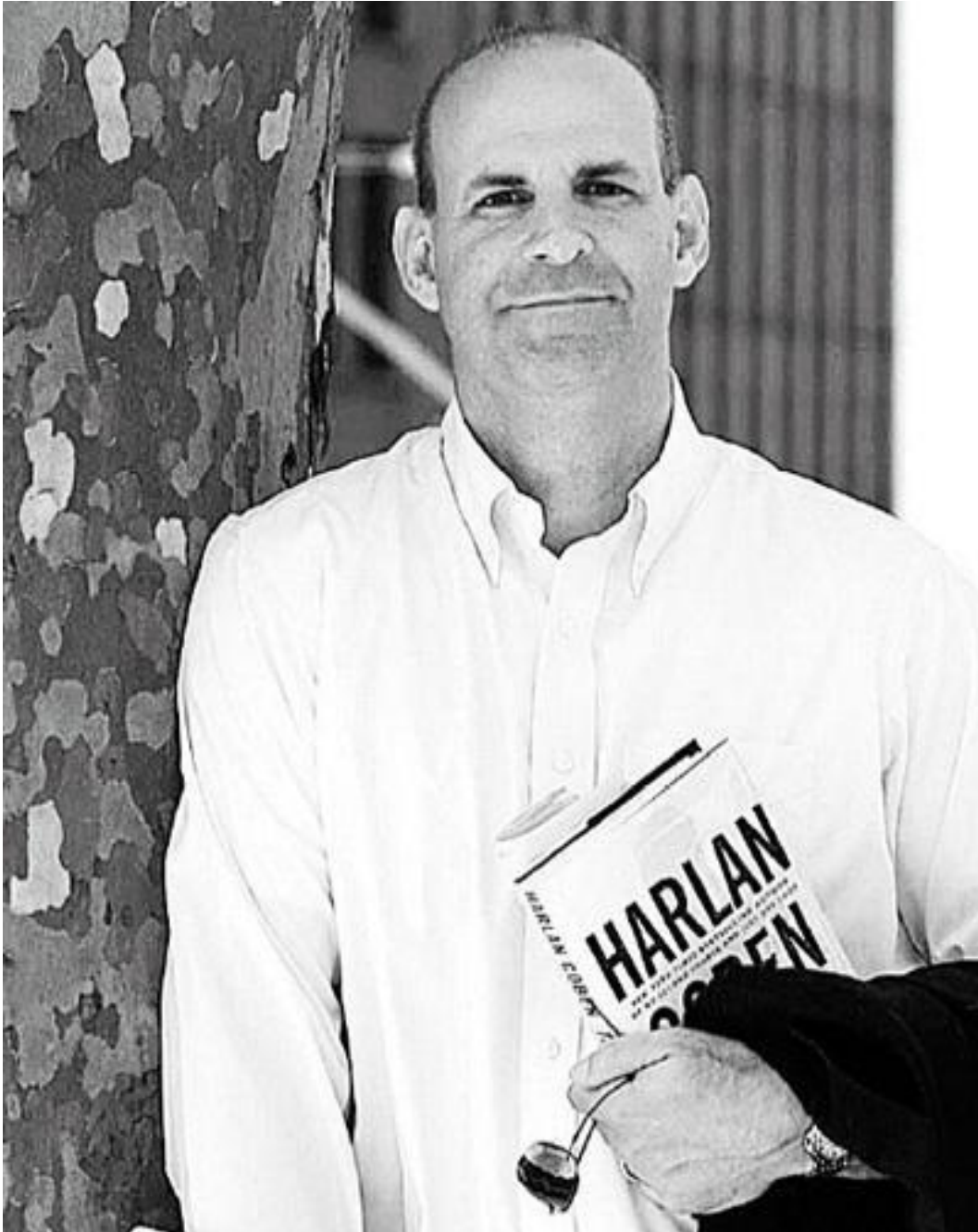


ENTERTAINMENT

Thriller idea: “What if?”



You have to have dreams, says Harlan Coben, who has hit No. 1 on the best-seller list and won the Edgar prize for mystery writing.

By **MIA GEIGER** and **SPECIAL TO THE DENVER POST** | Special to The Denver Post

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Harlan Coben lives his life with a lot of “what ifs.”

What if you picked up a roll of film and there was a picture in there you didn’t recognize? What if you tried to break up a street fight and you accidentally killed a man? What if you made a promise to two girls and one of those girls took you up on the promise and then went missing, leaving you as the last person to see her?

Coben puts those “what ifs” to pen and paper. The result is a series of thrillers that have won him an international following.

In “Promise Me,” the author’s 13th novel, entertainment agent Myron Bolitar overhears two girls talking about getting into a car with someone who has been drinking. Bolitar makes them promise that if they’re ever in that situation, they’ll call him and he’ll drive them home, no questions asked.

One of the girls does call, but that is the last anyone hears from her, and Bolitar becomes a suspect in the case.

Coben got the idea for the story when he recalled a similar conversation he had about five years earlier with friends of the family. He did, in fact, give two of the boys his card with his phone number.

His ideas, which typically involve an ordinary person thrust into extraordinary circumstances, often come from the thoughts, “this could happen to me” and “what if” it did.

“There’s not a moment where I’m not thinking about it,” the 44-year-old author said from his cellphone, just after getting his four children off to school. “My friends are used to it. They’ll just see my eyes drop off and they know – ‘Harlan’s gone off into novel land.’ Strangers find it rude, but my friends understand it and deal with it.”

For his newest book, Coben brought back Myron Bolitar, the sarcastic and tough-yet-vulnerable protagonist from his seven-book mystery series, which he wrote before writing individual suspense novels – books that put him on national best-seller lists. His goal was to write a thriller that featured Myron.

“I didn’t want to write the eighth Myron Bolitar novel. It’s hard to go back in time,” said the author, who shares child-rearing duties with his pediatrician wife, Anne Armstrong-Coben. “One of the problems was that series do get tiresome. I never wanted Myron to just solve a case. I wanted it to be emotionally wrenching and personal. After seven books, there’s only so many catharses a man can go through. This gave him a fresh perspective.”

As in his previous books, the suburban landscape provides fertile ground for fodder in “Promise Me.”

“I live here. I think it’s the battleground of the American dream,” he said. “This is where people go and you get married and have 2.4 kids and a two-car garage and a picket fence, and life is supposed to be perfect. In that ideal setting, a small ripple can really cause damage.

“I don’t write about political conspiracies. I don’t write about serial killers where people get chopped up for no reason. I prefer to write about people like you and me who try to do their best, but wrong just still seems to find them.”

Despite selling millions of books and winning numerous awards (including the top prize in mystery, the Edgar), Coben still fights flashes of insecurity, particularly after one book is finished and he’s about to start the next.

“I’m always worried. Being a writer is being insecure,” he said. “The good thing is you feed off that. Part of what feeds me is thinking, ‘Oh my God, I can’t do it anymore. I’m not that good. I’ll never be able to do it again.’ That insecurity drives you. When you lose that insecurity, you probably start phoning it in a little bit.”

Success didn’t happen right away for the Newark, N.J., native who grew up in nearby Livingston.

His first Myron book, “Deal Breaker,” was published in paperback only, and the author got just “four figures” for it. Now his books are published in 34 languages, and he has sold film rights to each novel.

The movie version of “Tell No One,” filmed in France with actress Kristin Scott Thomas, is due later this year. (Coben and his wife and kids appear in a 15-second scene.)

Being in the movie was another in a series of dream-come-true experiences for the writer, who, after graduating from Amherst College with a political science degree, worked in his family’s travel business for eight years before deciding to write full time.

“My first dream was just to have a novel published,” he said. “I thought, ‘I don’t care if it sells, I just want one novel published and one day seeing it in the window of a bookstore.’ Then after that, it’s ‘Can I make a living at this?’ Then, ‘Can I make a good living at this?’ Then I won the Edgar, which was another dream come true. Then ‘Tell No One’ hit No. 1 (on the best-seller lists).

“You have to have dreams. You have to love what’s going on each step of the way and appreciate it, and you have to love the dream and you have to keep dreaming for more.”

Mia Geiger is a freelance writer who lives in the Philadelphia area.

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