

**BAD THINGS HAPPEN**

**By Harry Dolan**

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**CONTACT:**

**Matthew Venzon**

**Associate Director of Publicity**

**212-366-2558**

**matthew.venzon@us.penguin.com**

## **A Conversation with Harry Dolan**

### **Author of**

# **BAD THINGS HAPPEN**

**You have a master's degree in philosophy. How did you make the switch to writing a crime novel?**

I earned my master's degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and then moved to Ohio and worked for eight years as the managing editor of an academic journal. After eight years, I was ready to try something new. I had wanted to be a writer as a teenager—in the way that a teenager wants to be a writer, without really knowing how to translate the dream into a reality. I had written some stories in college, at Colgate University, and had studied creative writing with the novelist Frederick Busch, who saw some promise in my work and encouraged me to keep at it. But it was only after I left my full-time editing job that I got serious about writing. I had always loved mysteries and crime novels—I devoured all of Raymond Chandler's books in college when I should have been reading philosophy—so I guess it's no surprise I set out to write crime novels. The first (unpublished) novel I wrote was actually something of a hybrid: part love story, part crime novel, part family saga, with vaguely autobiographical elements. It was a very long manuscript and I spent nearly three years on it, but it taught me a good deal about how to tell a story—and how not to. With my second book, I made a conscious decision to write something more focused, more fast-paced, more of a straightforward crime novel, and the result was **BAD THINGS HAPPEN**.

**Does your philosophy degree inform your characters and your writing?**

I think it does, but the influence is fairly subtle. None of the characters in **BAD THINGS HAPPEN** have any background in philosophy, but they tend to be thoughtful and self-aware and to think of things in moral terms. They believe it's important to justify their actions. When Tom Kristoll asks David Loogan to help him dispose of a body, it's clear that he's thought about why he wants to do that rather than going to the police. And the explanation he gives to David makes a certain amount of sense—it's not just a rationalization. Many of the other characters are the same way. Even the villains in the novel have thought about what they're doing and try to justify their actions.

**David Loogan has rather slippery morals, yet he's sympathetic and easy to root for in this novel. Is David a hero, antihero, or neither?**

I think of him as a hero, but I may be biased. He's certainly flawed, but he also strives to do the right thing. He has an affair with his friend Tom's wife, but the most important thing about that, for me, is that he realizes it's wrong and he breaks it off. And in a sense, he spends the rest of the novel trying to make amends for that mistake. David's loyalty to Tom is at the heart of the novel; it drives him to find out the truth about what happened to Tom, and I think it's a big part of what makes David sympathetic.

**Many of your characters seem deliberately hard to define in terms of "good" or "bad." They battle demons in one way or another. Which of them were the most difficult to write?**

Tom and Laura Kristoll were tricky to write because I wanted to give the sense that their affection for David is genuine, yet at the same time they both use him, each in a different way. They're constantly deceiving him—either by withholding information or by lying to him outright. They have reasons for acting this way, but it's essential to the plot that their reasons remain obscure for most of the book. I never get inside their heads, so the reader, like David, can only judge Tom and Laura by what they do and what they say. So it was a challenge to keep their various motives straight in my mind even when they weren't clear on the page—and to make it plausible that David would remain loyal to them, even though he knows they haven't been entirely honest with him.

**It's interesting that *Gray Streets* plays such an integral role in the novel, yet the magazine's office is rarely seen during business hours—only after everyone has left. Why did you choose to stay away from the magazine while work was going on?**

That was really a practical decision. The day-to-day workings of a magazine are not the stuff of drama or suspense. I think it was Elmore Leonard who said that you should leave out the stuff that the reader's going to skip. I occasionally describe David Loogan editing a manuscript, but it's always in passing and always leads to a scene that moves the plot along, like a conversation with Tom or Laura Kristoll. The scenes that are set in the office serve specific purposes. Early on, the purpose is to establish the friendship between David and Tom, who meet in the office after hours to talk and have a drink. And later on, of course, the office is where Tom is murdered, and where Elizabeth Waishkey begins her investigation of the crime.

**You have some experience of your own working at a literary journal—*The Mage*. What was your experience like there, and how did it tie into your work on **BAD THINGS HAPPEN?****

*The Mage* was a student magazine at Colgate University that published fantasy and science fiction stories; I started out as an associate editor and later became editor in chief. Some of my best friends in college were the people I worked with on *The Mage*. There's a direct parallel between *The Mage* and *Gray Streets*. In the novel, the back story of *Gray Streets* is that it was originally founded as a student publication at the University of Michigan, and several of the characters (Tom and Laura Kristoll, Cass Hifflyn, Bridget Shellcross) met each other while working on the magazine as students, so they've known each other for twenty years and have a long history together. Tom is the one who was always the most obsessed with *Gray Streets* and who transformed it from a student project into a successful commercial magazine. *Gray Streets*, of course, publishes mysteries and crime stories. I think of it as a throwback to the pulp magazines of the 1920s and 30s. Its name is

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an amalgam of *Black Mask* (the pulp magazine founded by H.L. Mencken, which published hard-boiled detective fiction) and the phrase *mean streets* (coined by Raymond Chandler in his essay “The Simple Art of Murder”).

**Integral to Detective Elizabeth Waishkey’s character is her relationship with her 15-year-old daughter, Sarah. How does this relationship define Elizabeth’s role in the book?**

I decided early on that Elizabeth should have a daughter because I thought it would be interesting to deal a little with her home life, and not just her work as a detective. Most of the other major characters in the book—including Tom and Laura Kristoll and David Loogan himself—are childless, so giving Elizabeth a daughter sets her apart. In a sense, she has more at stake than the others, more to lose, and I wanted to explore how she would react if her daughter were threatened. Sarah Waishkey was fun to write because she’s a very smart 15-year-old and I had the idea that she would have absorbed a lot about police work just from living with a mother who’s a detective. And that meant that I could have Elizabeth and Sarah taking about cases that Elizabeth is working on—in ways that are hopefully amusing and entertaining and also serve to move the plot along.

**Surprisingly, David Loogan also befriends Elizabeth’s daughter. Is that out of character for him, or do you think it matches the dichotomy of his nature?**

David Loogan is a classic loner, but he wasn’t always that way. There’s a violent incident in his past—which is hinted at in the novel but only fully revealed near the end—and that incident has caused him to withdraw from people. In a sense, *BAD THINGS HAPPEN* is the story of David coming out of his shell and reconnecting with the world. It starts with his friendship with Tom Kristoll, which he enters into almost by accident and with a good deal of reluctance. But once he befriends Tom it’s almost as if he’s crossed a threshold, and that leads to other entanglements. After Tom is killed, David resolves to find out who’s responsible for his friend’s death, and that leads directly to the unusual bond that he forms with Elizabeth. And since Elizabeth’s daughter Sarah is so important to her, I thought it would be very interesting to have David and Sarah meet. In his interactions with Elizabeth and her daughter, you get a glimpse of who David Loogan used to be—a friendly, appealing, charming man.

**David and Elizabeth have a precarious relationship—both characters trust each other, albeit hesitantly. Was it difficult while writing their interactions to keep true to each character while still maintaining their rapport?**

The scenes between David and Elizabeth were the ones I was most eager to write, because there’s a lot of dramatic tension between them. On the one hand, they have the same goal: they both want to find out who killed Tom Kristoll. On the other hand, they’re working at cross purposes: Elizabeth is a detective in charge of a murder investigation; she doesn’t need to have a friend of the victim interfering with her work. David has no business investigating anything; he’s a magazine editor. And what’s more, he’s keeping information from Elizabeth that he really should turn over. Later in the novel, the stakes are raised even further: David is the chief suspect in another murder and is on the run from the police, and Elizabeth is charged with tracking him down. But all the while I wanted to make it clear that they like and respect each other, and in the end they need each other too, because they have to confront the killer together. And it was a difficult balancing act, especially with regard to Elizabeth, who has to maintain her professional integrity and needs to be careful about getting too close to a murder suspect.

**Since you live in the city, did you use real Ann Arbor sites for the story? For instance, does the building that houses *Gray Streets* actually exist?**

I didn't really have a particular building in mind as the one that houses *Gray Streets*, although there are one or two buildings on Main Street that fit the general description. But there are a number of real locations around Ann Arbor that I use in the book: There's a scene set in the Nichols Arboretum, for example, and David Loogan takes Laura Kristoll to a jazz bar called the Firefly Club. And Laura's office is in Angell Hall, a real building on the University of Michigan campus. In many cases, I've taken some liberties with the details of settings. For instance, David and Tom bury a body in Marshall Park, and Marshall Park really exists. But it's been years since I've been there and the details I give—the gravel parking lot bordered with old railroad ties, the path leading up the hillside into the woods—those are all taken from memory, and the memory may not be very accurate. The important thing for me is filling in the details in a way that serves the story I'm trying to tell.

**In *BAD THINGS HAPPEN*, several of the characters mention that no one starts out to become an editor; instead, people fall into it. Is that how it happened for you?**

Definitely. It was never my ambition to be an editor. When I was younger, I was very interested in art and photography, and I originally went to college to study graphic design. That didn't work out, and eventually I majored in philosophy because I was intrigued by ethical and political questions. I went to graduate school in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and earned my master's degree and had to decide whether I wanted to go on to get a Ph.D. But the only reason to get a Ph.D. in philosophy is if you want to teach at a university, and I didn't think I was cut out to be a university professor. And at that point I heard about a job opening at a think tank in Bowling Green, Ohio; they were looking for a managing editor for a journal called *Social Philosophy and Policy*. I happened to have the right set of skills—I had always been a strong writer, and I had experience editing a literary journal, and a master's degree in philosophy—and that's how I fell into my first job as a professional editor. There was never any plan.

**Do you envision *Bad Things Happen* as part of a series or a standalone novel?**

Originally, I didn't intend for the novel to be the start of a series. I had a very specific story to tell about David Loogan and Elizabeth Waishkey, and when it was over I thought I would be done with them. But a number of people who read the manuscript early on suggested that they might make good series characters, and when I gave it some thought I decided there might be more stories to tell about them. So I'm currently working on a second novel that features both David and Elizabeth.

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**Associate Director of Publicity**  
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**matthew.venzon@us.penguin.com**