

A portrait of Michael Robotham, a middle-aged man with grey hair and a goatee, wearing a blue button-down shirt with white polka dots and khaki trousers. He is standing with his arms crossed, looking slightly to the right.

# MICHAEL

# ROBOTHAM

## *The Master of Suspense*

 **WORDS** MICHELLE MEEHAN

Fans of *Michael Robotham*'s award-winning crime novels know that the real thrill of the story comes from the suspense.

But while they expect plenty of intrigue between the pages of his books, they never suspected the internationally best-selling author would leave them hanging in real life as well.

Twelve months ago Hunter readers were eagerly looking forward to a visit from their favourite crime writer but had to put their anticipation on ice when Robotham was taken off the bill for the 2018 Newcastle Writers Festival at the last minute.

Like all good plot twists, the reasons for the change were not clearly explained at the time, only coming out more than a month later when the Australian Book Industry Awards were announced.

When media reports of the award winners were published, they revealed that Robotham was celebrating a victory on two fronts.

Not only had he finally scooped General Fiction Book of the Year for his novel *The Secrets She Keeps* (he had been shortlisted five times before), but it was also five weeks to the day since he had gone under the knife for a life-saving quadruple heart bypass.

The emergency surgery on March 29 had been kept very much on the quiet – even his mother didn't know until she read the reports in the newspaper – hence the mystery surrounding his non-appearance in Newcastle.

"[The awards were] the first time I publicly announced the fact that I had heart surgery. I didn't document the fact that I was going in to have a quadruple heart bypass or anything like that, I'd kept it all very quiet, even my own mother didn't know until she read the story in the paper the next day," Robotham said.

"[The month before the awards when I was still recovering from the surgery] I was supposed to be at the Newcastle Writers Festival ... [it was the] first festival appearance I've ever cancelled in my entire career.

"When I've committed to going to things I've always made it. I remember when I sent (organiser) Rosemary (Milsom) a message saying I can't make it, and I told her 'Between you and me, I'm going in for heart bypass surgery' she, of course, was saying, 'Oh my God that's far more important, forget about the festival, you just get healthy'.

"But I kept saying, 'No, no, I promise I'll come back next year, I promise'."

Robotham's run-in with heart disease came as a complete surprise to the seemingly healthy 57-year-old, who had gone to his GP for his annual health check only to find out a week later that he was lucky even to be alive. ►



A barrage of tests including an angiogram revealed the extent of the problem – one artery was completely blocked, another was 98 per cent blocked and a third was 46 per cent blocked. Robotham's surgeon was shocked that he hadn't already had a heart attack and said that if he had, the damage to his arteries meant that he would not have survived. It was such a surprising turn of events that even the master of unexpected plot twists himself never saw it coming.

"It's so ridiculous because I had no symptoms, I mean I kept questioning them all the time, saying are you sure I need this surgery because I did not feel anything was wrong," Robotham said.

"You end up having two reactions. One is when you see some morbidly obese, chain-smoking sort of KFC-eating person you think 'Why aren't they the ones that had to go through this?' And another part of you just thinks – because they (the doctors) said I wouldn't have survived the heart attack when it came, it was coming soon and I would have died on the spot. So in that sense, you just keep saying that you're so fortunate, and you embrace life because it could have all ended very, very quickly."

What Robotham also wished he could have embraced more at the time was his long-awaited victory at the Australian Book Industry Awards.

Coming just five weeks after his surgery, Robotham wasn't even supposed to attend the awards night due to the risk of infection during his recovery period. He was also trying to cope with the post-operative depression that is common after open-heart surgery.

"Having been shortlisted so often I didn't expect to win so I actually told my publishers that I wouldn't be going along to the awards because my doctor had said you're not allowed out with people ... the risk of infection's too great," he said.

*"Awards are always wonderful. Writing is a very isolating profession, and you spend most of your time by yourself... they let me out of my box once a year to promote a book, and then I go back into my box and keep writing."*

"(In the end) they pushed the awards late in the night, and they rushed me in and rushed me out again, so I didn't really get a chance to celebrate with anyone or to celebrate with my publishers.

"I was sort of in collecting the award, making a speech and getting the hell out, so I couldn't really enjoy the moment, but it was tremendous for me because it had been a really difficult five weeks since the surgery and the whole issue had been such a surprise from the beginning ... (the award win) came at just the right time really."

Having made the long list again for this year's awards, Robotham may soon have a second opportunity to relish that feeling of success, although with a strong list of finalists the ever-so-humble author has laughed off his chances of going back-to-back.

Regardless of the result, Robotham has already picked up his fair share of nominations and awards during his 15-year career as a novelist, including the UK's prestigious Crime Writer's Association Gold Dagger Award, which he won in 2015 for his thriller *Life or Death*.

"I'd been a bridesmaid five times, and I finally won one (Australian Book Industry Awards), and I'm glad I did because I look at this year's long list and think I can't imagine I'm going to win this year, it's amazing (the quality of finalists)," he said.

"Awards are always wonderful. Writing is a very isolating profession, and you spend most of your time by yourself... they let me out of my box once a year to promote a book, and then I go back into my box and keep writing."

"Little things like this, an award nomination or a short listing or a long listing, they put a little spring into your step when you go to your writing room every day, just to think you're not writing in a complete bubble, there are people out there that are appreciating what you do."

There's no doubt there are millions of people around the world who appreciate Robotham's work.

The former investigative journalist initially began his foray into the publishing word by ghost-writing autobiographies for people in the arts, politics, military and sport including former Spice Girl Geri Halliwell, sixties music legend Lulu and top UK forensic psychologist and criminal profiler Paul Britton. Twelve of these titles became Sunday Times bestsellers.

In 2002 a partial manuscript of his first novel, *The Suspect*, sparked a bidding war at the London Book Fair and has since sold more than one million copies around the world, having been translated into 24 different languages.

Robotham has written a total of 14 crime novels to date, including his newest offering *Good Girl, Bad Girl*, which is due for release in July.

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**“It's not as though they're sitting next to me talking in my ear, but they do *haunt* me, you know because I don't plot my books in advance.**

fingerprints on the page. It would look and sound and feel exactly like the person I was writing for.

“(Writing fiction) is much the same thing. You have to create a voice for this person, for your main character. Most of my novels are written in the first person because obviously my ghost-writing was first person and I became very comfortable with doing that, looking at the world through their eyes. When you create a fictional person, to me they live and breathe as much as any of the real people I've ever written for.

“When my protagonist or my main character, when they're in tremendous danger, I feel that danger and I can't sleep, and I forget to pick stuff up from the shops, and I'm consumed by this other world, this fantasy world in my head because I'm the only person that can save them. I have to work out how they're going to get out of that situation. So at that point, it becomes incredibly real.

“I remember when a couple of times I've written books completely from the point of view of a female protagonist and my wife's had to come to terms with the fact that for 12 months I've been having an affair with another woman. And we'll be out to dinner, and she'll kick me under the table when she sees my eyes glaze over, and she'll say ‘You're with her, aren't you?’ because you're constantly being drawn back to this other world you've created.”

Readers will have to wait a few more months before they have the chance to be drawn into the latest world Robotham has created in *Good Girl, Bad Girl*. Until then they will have to hope he drops a few hints about what is to come during his two appearances at the Newcastle Writers Festival.

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He has garnered a dedicated following of readers, many of whom will no doubt be rejoicing this month when the Sydney-based author finally makes the trip north for the 2019 Newcastle Writers Festival.

The festival runs from April 5-7 with a packed program of more than 90 free and ticketed events across various locations, including book launches, discussions, workshops and panels.

Robotham will join around 130 authors, journalists, poets and artists who will converge on the city for the three-day literary showcase, with the stellar line-up including everyone from renowned Australian journalist Kerry O'Brien to feminist writer, broadcaster and public speaker, Clementine Ford.

Robotham will make two appearances during the event, first discussing the key to creating his page-turners during *The Thrill of It* from 10am–11am on April 6 at The Playhouse in Newcastle, before heading out to the Cessnock Performing Arts Centre that night for a special Secrets and Lies session hosted by Maitland's own renowned crime writer Barry Maitland.

After having to cancel his appearances last year, Robotham said he is looking forward to finally returning to a region that has had many fond memories for him over the years.

“I've got good memories of the area; my father was the very first headmaster or school principal of Rutherford High when it opened in Maitland, and while I'd left school by then my parents obviously moved to Maitland, and I used to go and visit them there,” he said.

“He's passed away now, but I think dad was there all the way until he retired, and so when I've done events up in Maitland and Singleton and Newcastle people have come up to me saying things like ‘Did your father play golf at the Maitland Golf Club?’, and ex-teachers and ex-students have come up and asked me whether I'm related to Kevin Robotham.

“I've always had great crowds when I've gone up to those areas, and I think partly that's because of that connection, that family connection I had there.”

More likely the great crowds have been drawn to Robotham's events for the chance to gain an insight into the mind of a crime writing master known for his innate ability to keep readers guessing to the very end.

His two sessions at this month's Writers Festival will delve into the complex plot twists and in-depth characters that have helped his books earn worldwide acclaim.

Robotham credits his years as a journalist in Australia, Britain and America, and his time ghost-writing autobiographies, as having played a central role in his success as a crime writer.

“I knew I wanted to be a writer from a very early age and I felt as though having grown up in small country towns I had nothing to write about. But working for newspapers, being a journalist, I was going to meet so many people and learn so many things and gather material that would help me one day, as a writer,” he said.

“Every book I've written, every novel I've written has been, in some way, seeded in a real-life case that I either covered as a journalist or I read about – I still cut little newspaper stories out of the paper thinking, ‘Ooh, that's intriguing’. When I wrote *Life or Death*, that was based on two paragraphs about a man escaping from jail the day before he was due to be released that I cut out. It took me close to 20 years to think of a reason why someone would escape the day before they were due to be released and then I created a whole novel around that scenario, so, newspapers to me are vital.

“So much of my knowledge about capturing the voice of characters and making characters live and breathe on the page, I learnt that skill from ghost-writing autobiographies with people and having to write their story and capture their voice so perfectly that nobody could recognise my

## THE FESTIVAL

Tickets for all paid events including Robotham's Newcastle and Cessnock sessions are available now via the Newcastle Writers Festival website.

The festival will kick off with a special literary trivia night fundraiser on April 4 at Foghorn Brewhouse, with all proceeds to go towards planning the 2020 event.

A series of practical writing workshops and masterclasses will see the festival in full swing on Friday, April 5, followed by the official opening night event, with a heavyweight panel including award-winning artist Ben Quilty, past president of the Australian Human Rights Commission Gillian Triggs and former NRL player, champion boxer and mental health advocate Joe Williams discussing the people and experiences that have inspired them to speak out about various issues.

Saturday and Sunday's programs will cover everything from a behind the scenes tour of the Newcastle Regional Library archives to discussions around the ethics of artificial intelligence, the global refugee crisis and the world of online hate, with a packed schedule of events suitable for all interests.

To find out details about the entire three-day program visit [www.newcastlewritersfestival.org.au](http://www.newcastlewritersfestival.org.au)