

Edited by Stephen McCarty stephen.mccarty@scmp.comMichael Connelly is sending Bosch our way, writes **Alister McMillan**

Trouble with Harry

Hieronymous ("Harry") Bosch is one of the best-selling characters in contemporary fiction, a detective with the street sense to handle vicious criminals – yet his creator Michael Connelly is terrified of allowing the tortured tough guy to ride the Star Ferry.

Bosch has waited five years to spend an entire novel in Hong Kong with his daughter.

Connelly has known since 2004 that Harry needed time in Hong Kong, but he would rather keep his character in Los Angeles. The Bosch brand has gone around the world, in millions of copies of his 14 novels (translated into 35 languages) without leaving the city Connelly – and many of the top crime writers of the last century – knows best.

But Connelly realised from the first book that a literary franchise could leave home for one novel, if only on a tightly restricted visa. China seemed the perfect fit.

The *Sunday Morning Post* last spoke to Connelly in 2004, shortly after he decided Hong Kong would be the setting for Harry's "fish out of water" tale. He was staking out Kowloon for the details of his novel: stealing the names of taxi drivers to create characters, writing down the fashionable colours of umbrellas, checking out Chungking Mansions, making notes on the smell and pattern of incense on the roof of Tin Hau Temple.

He returned to his home in Florida hoping to release it in 2006. It stalled when he realised Harry's daughter was too young for dramatic conversations. Connelly insists on moving Harry in close to real time. The Hong Kong novel had to wait until late this year, when the daughter would have the right teenage tension to unbalance her distant father.

Connelly denies holding any

doubts about the suitability of Hong Kong for Harry's big trip abroad.

Beyond the title, *Nine Dragons*, not a word of the book has been written. That will have to be squeezed between publicity tours for his 19th novel, *The Brass Verdict*, a legal thriller released last October, and *The Scarecrow*, which stars journalist Jack McEvoy and is now on the shelves.

However, 20 novels, millions of sales, critical acclaim and film adaptations directed by Clint Eastwood allow Connelly to back his instincts in taking Harry to the Far East. "Something about the cultural differences in Hong Kong inspired me in a way I can't describe," Connelly says from the Sebel Hotel in Sydney, a day before he heads to Hong Kong and Macau for his last research trip for the novel.

"I've been to a lot of cities and I've always had my eye out for where I could take Harry. Paris, Cape Town, none of them thrilled me the way I experienced when I looked out the window of the InterContinental Hotel across the harbour at Hong Kong [Island].

"I have to capture that thrill in a book for a reader who's not looking at a visual image. That's the challenge of writing. The skill is in recognising instantly whether that moment is a book or a shorter story or an anecdote in a bigger story. It's going to be tough for me. I think I write about Los Angeles with authority, having lived there, being a newspaper reporter there. A reporter gets a quick study of a place. It takes you where people who are natives never even go. I certainly don't have that with Hong Kong," he admits.

"What I'm hoping to do is turn my deficiencies into an asset: I'll be like Harry Bosch. To me it's about what's being seen through the eyes of your protagonist. If it's Los Angeles I'm at home and feel



Photo: Ricky Chung

anchored and confident. I guess confidence is the 800-pound gorilla in the room. Am I going to be confident in Hong Kong, a place I will have spent less than 10 whole days in by the end of this trip? That's the challenge.

"What evens that off a little bit is that I'm writing about a guy who hasn't spent a lot of time there. If I get stuff wrong, it's just Harry Bosch getting it wrong. I have a wider degree of freedom to make mistakes than I have when I'm writing about Harry Bosch in Los Angeles."

Connelly has let Bosch change to a career as a private eye for entire novels. That inspired a switch from a third-person perspective to the first-person, the classic voice of the private-dick genre. He created a character who shared the name of a 15th-century Dutch painter. He gives Bosch more literary baggage than most crime novels dare fly with. Connelly novels are full of well-crafted twists – near postmodern use of real people, genre switches that never look like gimmicks and journalistic research.

But a trip beyond California poses more danger for Bosch than a killer in a dark alley. "Harry's ... synonymous with Los Angeles," Connelly says. "Los Angeles has a certain interest for readers. You can play around with that. It's not a big gamble. I'm well within my rights to do something like this. I just want to do it right. That's one of the reasons it has taken longer than I thought."

Connelly has failed to complete

only one novel since *The Black Echo* came out in 1992. He understands his process well enough to know that only an unwillingness to get out of bed is all that will stop him completing *Nine Dragons*.

"I backed out that one time because of a character problem. I needed an alarm clock to go to work. I normally do not need an alarm clock. I get into a story and I'm so excited about writing I wake up at dawn, in darkness, ready to write. If I need an alarm clock to get me up

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there's something wrong with what I'm writing.

"That's essentially what happened on that story. I was about three months into it when I decided to pull the plug. That last month was when I hit the difficult point where I realised, not only do I have to abandon this project, but I don't have anything on standby to jump into. I knew it was going to be a big setback. It took me about a month to acknowledge that."

On good days he is writing by 6am, after reading over his work from the day before. Connelly's

collection of improvisational jazz is often spinning as he writes. His taste is broad but the music must have no lyrics to distract him. A flurry of spontaneous musical ideas fires a writer's mind better than coffee, he says. "I don't have a strict outline for my books. I just sit down and I write. I'm not a creative genius. I'm a reporter. I'm not a musician. I've never tried to play an instrument. But writing must be like Keith Jarrett sitting down at a piano."

One literary ritual is reserved for the start of a Bosch novel. Harry stays in the Connelly imagination until his author has re-read chapter 11 of Raymond Chandler's novel *The Little Sister*.

"That chapter is a good reminder of what I'm trying to do," Connelly says. "It just has [Chandler's central character] Philip Marlowe getting home and being frustrated by the day's events. He decides to take a drive around Los Angeles. It's a nine-page description of Los Angeles. It's very cynical and it's full of all his famous metaphors. It's just wonderful writing and it has nothing to do with plot. It sets the stage for character and it holds up. It was written in 1949 and it still is a very apt description of the city."

The chapter will have extra weight when Connelly wakes to match his grasp of Hong Kong with Chandler's handle on Los Angeles.

"This time it's for real. *Nine Dragons* is going into the publishers' catalogues. Now the bad part is I have to write it."

Writer's notes

Name: Michael Connelly

Age: 53

Born: Philadelphia

Lives: Florida

Family: wife Linda, daughter Callie

Other jobs: journalist

Latest book: *The Scarecrow*,

featuring journalist Jack McEvoy

Next project: *Nine Dragons*, a Harry Bosch novel set in Hong Kong

Other works: Harry Bosch novels – *The Black Echo* (1992), *The Black Ice* (1993), *The Concrete Blonde* (1994), *The Last Coyote* (1995), *Trunk Music* (1997), *Angels Flight* (1999),

A Darkness More Than Night (2001),

City of Bones (2002), *Lost Light*

(2003), *The Narrows* (2004), also featuring Rachel Walling and Terry

McCaleb, *The Closers* (2005), *Echo*

Park (2006), *The Overlook* (2007),

The Brass Verdict (2008)

Other novels: *The Poet* (1996),

Blood Work (1998), *Void Moon*

(2000), *Chasing the Dime* (2002),

The Lincoln Lawyer (2005)

Non-fiction: *Crime Beat* (2006),

collected journalism

What the papers say: "If Bosch is [Los Angeles'] detective, Connelly is our laureate, proving again that popular fiction at its best ... is also literature." *Los Angeles Times*

"Connelly ... can take the everyday details of police work and bake them up into a tasty product better than anyone else in the field."

Chicago Tribune on *The Closers*