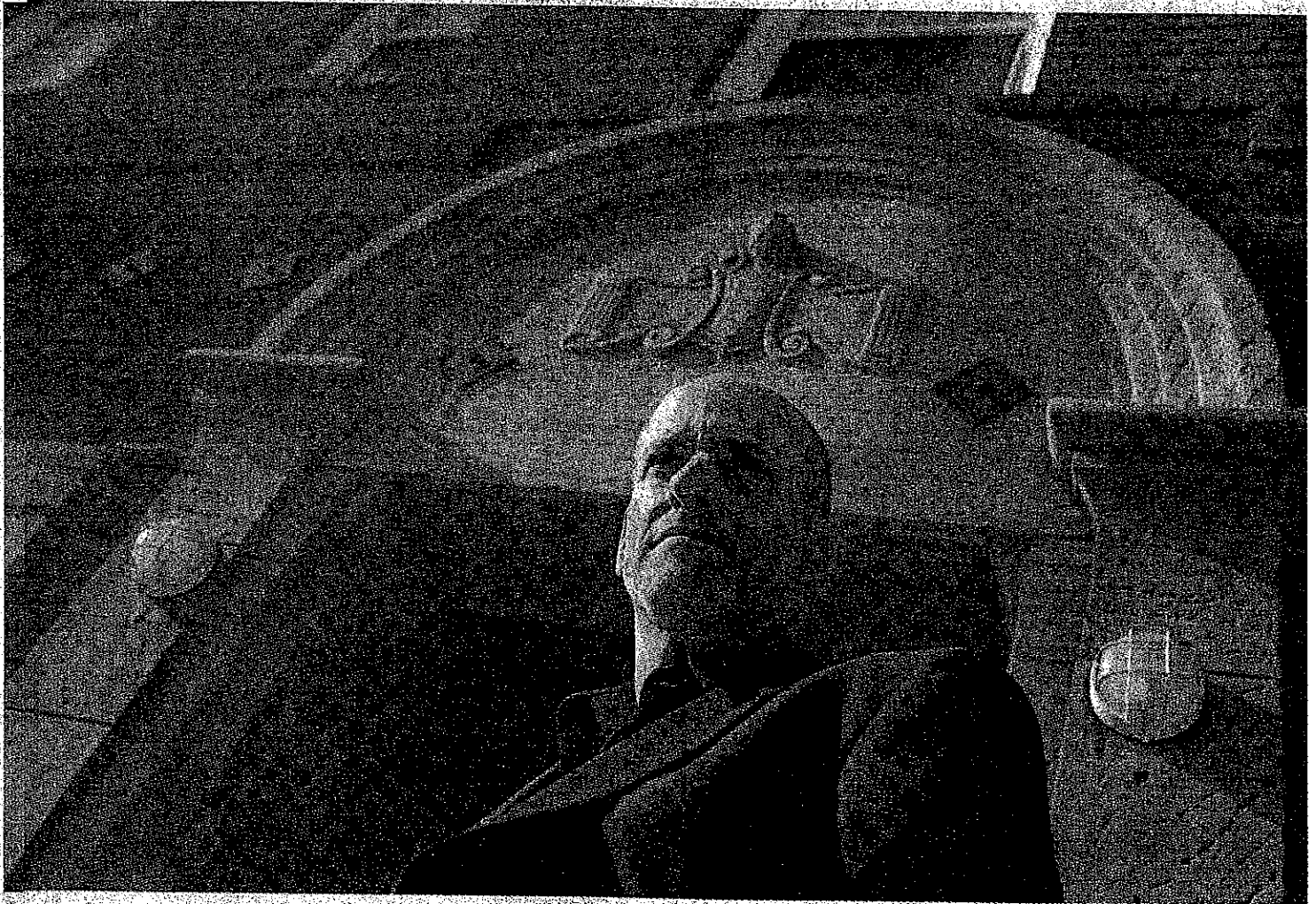


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NOVEL APPROACH: *Andrew Klavan says his father gave him "the impression that I could be a writer or an artist and that would just be my job."* ANNE CUSACK Los Angeles Times

He dunnit, copper

Characters in Andrew Klavan's "Dynamite Road" smoke, drink and cuss. Deal with it.

By MIMI AVINS
Times Staff Writer

Political correctness may not be the worst plague to infect contemporary culture, but it's at the top of Andrew Klavan's list. In a conversation about his latest novel, "Dynamite Road" (Forge, 2003), the Santa Barbara-based author returns to his pet scourge repeatedly, bemoaning how excessively proper groupthink has emasculated detective stories.

"I despise the idea that every character in every story has to be a sermon on what a small group of intellectuals thinks we should be like," he says. "It's really as if all American culture has become this big finger, wagging at you. Don't smoke. Be nice. Don't be macho. That's unbearable. What I want when I read a book or go to the movies is to recognize things I really feel, that I know other men feel. You always hear people say that art should shock. But they don't mean it should shock *them*."

"Dynamite Road" is the first of a series of mysteries set in a San Francisco detective agency run by two unshockable anti-heroes who smoke, drink, cuss and get the job done. Klavan describes Jim Bishop and Scott Weiss as "men who had touched evil and seen death and were wise to the wheelwork of the world." Such terse descriptions are one of the pleasures of the frequently brutal, fast-moving yarn, which aspires to the tradition of Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain and Dashiell Hammett. The *femme fatale* of "Dynamite Road" has a beauty as powerful and destructive as Helen of Troy's. Klavan writes, "Guys fell in love with her. Older guys especially. She had that look, you know: like she just wafted down from Heaven."

He has that look, you know: like he could handle a fight if he had to. Deep-voiced and wiry, he'd look meaner if his head were shaved clean. The salt and pepper stubble on his skull and cheeks has a softening effect, dusting him with a layer of fuzz. He smiles way too much to be convincing as the bad boy artist he'd like to be. Maybe the smile belongs to the salesman he dredges up when his publisher arranges a book tour. The salesman makes Klavan sick. He can't stop him from smiling, but he'll be damned if he'll let him talk pretty.

Successful novelists work in two modes: There's the solitary phase, when they sequester themselves, and write. Then there's the more public stage, when they go out to promote their creation. Klavan loves the first phase. "It's not that I'm antisocial," he says, "but doing radio and TV is a sales pitch. In a short interview, you might as well be Alka-Seltzer."

In a longer interview, he can explain why resurrecting the hard-boiled private eye is satisfying and important. He can admit that he once denied crime fiction the way a man hides a homely date from his buddies. And he bites the hand that fed his 1998 thriller "True Crime" to Hollywood.

"I always think about what James M. Cain said about what Hollywood had done to his books. He said, 'They haven't done anything to my books. They're right over there on the shelf.' My experiences in Hollywood have been positive. I was thrilled, in a way, to have Clint Eastwood do 'True Crime,' because he's represented the kinds of heroes that I like. It was a good script and there are great moments in it, but Eastwood made a mistake

playing the character, who was a 35-year-old womanizer. A 70-year-old womanizer is not as exciting."

The other Klavan novel to get major studio treatment, 10 years after it was published, was "Don't Say a Word." Fans of Keith Peterson didn't know it was written by one of their favorite authors, because for a long time, Klavan was so loath to be labeled a mystery writer that he used a number of pseudonyms. Four of his books were written as Peterson, including "The Rain," which won the Mystery Writers of America's 1991 Edgar Award for best paperback. "Mrs. White," given the best paperback Edgar in 1982, is credited to Margaret Tracy, but was written by Klavan and his brother Laurence. "It was fun when the award was announced and these two big, bearded guys stood up," he says.

Klavan and his three brothers were raised in New York, where their father, Gene, was a popular radio personality, a precursor of Don Imus and Howard Stern. Klavan says, "My father kept the same job for 25 years, which in radio is unheard of. He went to work every day, or in the middle of the night, actually, so I saw him as just like an insurance salesman. His major influence on me, for which I've never forgiven him, was to give me the impression that I could be a writer or an artist and that would just be my job. If I had known how hard it is to do what a writer does, and to make a living at it, I probably would have done it anyway, but maybe I would have felt forewarned."

Now 49, Klavan has worked as a newspaper reporter, a radio news writer and a reader for Columbia Pictures, but he always wanted to be a novelist. "I started out as a mystery writer," he says, "but I felt I had more depth than that and I should write other things. I had the idea that literary fiction wins the prizes, gets the reviews, gets the respect. I'm only human. I wanted all those things. Mysteries were kind of a throwaway while I was writing very artistic, radical small press books at the same time. And then I realized that under my own name I was writing books I wouldn't read, and under my

pseudonyms I was writing books I love.

"The story of American art is about critics declaring that the center is one place, when it's somewhere else. In music, critics declare that what's important is Philip Glass, when it's really Louis Armstrong. Who remembers who won the Pulitzer Prize the year 'The Maltese Falcon' was written? The center in American literature and art has always been in the genres and the popular forms. High culture is a matter not of height, but of depth — it's how deeply into you a work of art strikes. There was no question in my mind that the kind of books I loved serve the rich, deep purposes of literature. So eventually I started writing under my own name. I reached the point where I seriously ceased to care [about acclaim]. I just wanted to do great stuff."

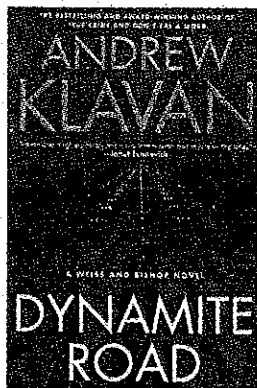
Once he came out as a crime writer, Klavan was free to create a series that paid homage to the conventions of noir fiction. He has completed the second Weiss and Bishop novel, and is at work on a third. "Dynamite Road" comes complete with hardened-gumshoes, ruthless villains, mysterious women and a worldview lurking under the action. The story is located in California, of course, because, Klavan says, "This is a place where the rules aren't set in stone."

"Things are not what they seem" is a nearly-universal subtext of noir. The philosophy that justifies all that is unexplainable in Robert Towne's 1974 film noir revival "Chinatown" is "Forget it, Jake. It's Chinatown," meaning that place where even bright sunlight can't illuminate dark secrets. The theme of "Dynamite Road" is defined by the narrator's comment about the villain: "The Shadowman was real whether he was real or not."

"The mystery is a good place to explore the imagination and the way it affects reality," Klavan says. The elaborate plot of "Dynamite Road" revolves around love and, in a way, honor and pathology, not money. "You can solve every Agatha Christie mystery by know-

ing one thing: She believed that no one ever killed anyone except over money. I disagree," Klavan says. "When people kill over money it's because of what they imagine it does for them. Money is an imaginary thing anyway. The entire motive of 'Dynamite Road' lives in the imaginations of the characters. At no point are they fighting over something which has a concrete value. That was my beginning concept — that it not hinge on a computer disc or \$11 million, but on people's perceptions of what's valuable."

That's the sort of idea a macho man could contemplate at the end of a hard day of dogging sleazebags. He'd think about it over a bottle of scotch and a cigar, even if it wasn't worth discussing with the simple-minded broad sitting in his lap.



NOIR: "Dynamite Road" is set in San Francisco.