

Hardcover: US

Hard-boiled cop, Hong Kong triads collide

Hot on the heels of Chinese gangs, Detective Harry Bosch finds himself on the other side of the world and out of his depth

BY LAURIE MUCHNICK
BLOOMBERG

Harry Bosch is a tunnel rat. He spent his army years exploring the dangerous maze beneath the Vietnam jungle. When he got out, he burrowed into Los Angeles, learning every inch of the city as a police detective.

Now, in *Nine Dragons*, the 15th hard-boiled Bosch novel, Michael Connelly sends his hero halfway around the world, to Hong Kong, and doesn't give him any time to dig below the surface while he tries to save the only person in the world he loves.

It's nerve-wracking — in a good way — to see Bosch out of his element. He makes seemingly small mistakes that lead to life-changing consequences. That would never happen in L.A.

It starts, of course, with a murder in the City of Angels. A Chinese liquor store owner is killed, and his death may be connected to the triads, Chinese organized-crime groups. Bosch is on unfamiliar turf in his hometown, before he even boards a plane for the Far East. He's forced to collaborate with Detective Chu from the Asian Gang Unit, who will translate both language and culture for him.

Like his predecessor Philip Marlowe, Bosch is a loner, both personally and professionally. It isn't easy to earn his trust, and Chu hasn't done it.

Harry arrests a triad member, and soon gets a threatening phone call telling him to back off. Then he receives a video e-mail showing his 13-year-old daughter, Maddie, who lives with his ex-wife in Hong Kong, strapped to a chair in a nondescript room.

(Compare this to the first Bosch novel, *The Black Echo*, in which the cops were constantly using payphones to check in with the office. That was 1992, but it feels like the Middle Ages.)

How did the triads in Hong Kong react to an arrest in Los Angeles so quickly? Could Detective Chu, or someone else in the Asian Gang Unit, have tipped them off? Bosch isn't taking any chances with his daughter's life, so he hops on a

PUBLICATION NOTES

AT NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MICHAEL CONNELLY

9

DRAGONS

"CONNELLY IS A MASTER." — NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

NINE DRAGONS

BY MICHAEL CONNELLY

374 PAGES

LITTLE, BROWN

plane for a day that turns out, with the time difference, to last 39 hours.

There's plenty of awesome detective work here; maybe too awesome. Zip: Watch Bosch pinpoint the one building in all of Hong Kong where that video was made. Zip zip: Watch him find Maddie's discarded mobile phone. Despite Bosch's blunders, everything moves along remarkably quickly.

Connelly has succumbed to the publishing-industry imperative that best-selling writers must crank out not just one book a year, but two or even three. Five months ago, he produced *The Scarecrow*, about former *Los Angeles Times* reporter Jack McEvoy.

While there's pleasure to be had in *Nine Dragons*, it has less depth and complexity than Connelly's earlier books. I'm sure I speak for many fans when I say I'd rather read one terrific Connelly novel a year than two pretty good ones.

STRAUSS

ELEKTRA

RYSANEK · VARNAY
FISCHER-DIESKAU · LIGENDZA
WIENER PHILHARMONIKER
KARL BÖHM

DIRECTED BY
GÖTZ FRIEDRICH

ELEKTRA
Richard Strauss
A film by Gotz Friedrich
DGM 00440 073 4095

CHOPIN
THE PIANO CONCERTOS

RAFAL BLECHACZ
ROYAL CONCERTGEBOUW ORCHESTRA
JERZY SEMKOW

CHOPIN: THE PIANO CONCERTOS
Rafal Blechacz
Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra
DGM CD 00289 477 8088

Classical DVD and CD

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

A startling new CD and an extraordinary old film now on DVD are the objects of scrutiny this month.

Is it possible for music to be over-recorded? You're certainly tempted to think so when listening to the new CD from Deutsche Grammophon containing Chopin's two piano concertos played by Rafal Blechacz. Whatever its other merits, it would be the ideal vehicle with which to demonstrate the quality of your sound system.

The orchestra's instruments are rendered more vividly than any live audience could possibly hear. Whether this is an adverse criticism or simply yet another advantage of the hi-tech world is for the listener to decide. But the performances themselves, with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra under Jerzy Semkow, are almost as dazzling as the recording technique.

Next year is the 200th anniversary of Chopin's birth and this CD is clearly only going to be one of many issued for the occasion. Chopin wrote these concertos before he was 20 and they express a youthful happiness and optimism that Blechacz catches wonderfully. The "velvet" sound sometimes attributed to this particular orchestra may be one of the reasons why the technicians opted to highlight it so dramatically, especially in the studio-recorded F Minor concerto.

Blechacz was the popular local winner of Warsaw's five-yearly International Chopin Piano Competition in 2005. A DVD of the event was reviewed in this column on April 5, 2007.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of Richard Strauss' devastating, ear-splitting, but also magnificent opera *Elektra*, a study in hysteria and sexual obsession if ever there was one. To celebrate the occasion, I want to consider a film made long ago, but which in many ways remains unsurpassed even today.

Historically, *Elektra* marked the convergence of two trends. One was a change in the view of the ancient Greeks. Victorian writers such as Matthew Arnold had seen them as representing sweetness and light, a sane, rational people from whom his moralizing, hypocritical contemporaries could learn much. The new view, strongly influencing Strauss and his librettist Hofmannsthal, was that they were also often irrational, brutal, and routinely addicted to superstition and blood feuds.

The second new trend concerned 20th century artists. In all media they began to reject gentle feeling and nostalgia, and to embrace instead the primitive and the savage. Painters like Picasso eagerly copied African masks and relished bullfights, while in music Stravinsky shocked his audiences with *The Rite of Spring* (1913, but being worked on from 1910, a year after *Elektra*).

Strauss, today sometimes seen as representing voluptuous and domestic bourgeois taste, was in his youth an enfant terrible, and *Elektra* and *Salome* (1905) marked the high points of his raw modernism in opera. The Strauss of these operas is like Picasso in his cubist period — all jagged edges, with the aesthetics of shattered glass.

It's usual to recommend the 1980 version of *Elektra* from New York's Metropolitan Opera, with Birgitt Nilsson as Elektra and Leonie Rysanek as her sister Chrysothemis, as first choice for this opera on DVD (DGM 073-4111). But the film version made in 1982, released on DVD in 2005 and widely available in Taiwan, is staggeringly impressive. It appropriately focuses on the work's brutality and blood-soaked eroticism, with an effectiveness that would be hard to match in a recording of a stage performance. One writer dubbed it "Fear and loathing in Mycenae."

Leonie Rysanek here finally graduates to the role of Elektra, and the only possible reaction is, "Why did she have to wait so long?" She is utterly superb, and as fine an actor as she is a singer. Even more over-the-top is Astrid Varnay as her murderous mother Klytemnestra. Her first appearance, with her face grotesquely filling the whole frame, is one of the visual high points of this visually explosive rendition.

Musically the entire enterprise is flawless. It was the final achievement of veteran conductor Karl Bohm (who was friends with Strauss), and he chose to bring out more of the music's sonorous richness, and even lyricism, than he had in his abrasive CD recording, with Inge Borkh as Elektra, 20 years earlier (DGM 431 739-2).

A 90-minute bonus DVD accompanies the film. You see the frail Bohm, accompanied by a nurse, being driven through Vienna to the recording studio. You watch the preparations for the filming in a disused factory, and hear the film's director, Gotz Friedrich, discuss a fascinating idea. This is that Klytemnestra perhaps represents an ancient matriarchy, seizing control back from the men by murdering her former husband Agamemnon. Thus when Oreste kills her (and her lover Aegisth) in revenge he is in fact clawing back male supremacy, and this is confirmed by his neglect at the end of the opera of his sister Elektra. She will be put in a "tower" (in other words a psychiatric clinic, says Friedrich), and her final death is at least in part because she has no viable role in the new order.

With the Vienna Philharmonic, Rysanek, Varnay, Catarina Ligendza as Chrysothemis and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau as Oreste, this is an almost unimprovable version of one of the greatest masterworks of the modern era, before that era became submerged in unartistic mathematics and a cacophony that had very few admirers.

Hardcover: US

Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner's sophomore slump

In trying to match the success of their first book, the economist and magazine writer who co-authored 'Freakonomics' have come a cropper

BY DAVID RUNCIMAN
THE OBSERVER, LONDON

If ever two writers were likely to suffer from "difficult second book" syndrome, it's Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner, authors of the smash hit *Freakonomics*, which made them the rock stars of the economics world. The reason rock stars find the second album so difficult is that the first one is usually the product of years of hard graft, in bedrooms or garages, and then in dingy clubs in front of a handful of people, trying to discover which songs really work. When the record comes out and it's a hit, the record company immediately starts wanting a follow-up, so the band has to dust off a few numbers that weren't quite good enough for the original, plus a few more that they have managed to squeeze out in whatever time is left to them between gigs and groupies. Then the record company has to hype this new collection to death, in the hope that the fans won't notice.

For Levitt, the professional economist of the *Freakonomics* duo (Dubner is a magazine writer), the equivalent of the dingy clubs were the academic economic journals in which he tried out his theories in the decade or more before the first book came out. That book was already a selection of his greatest hits and the quality control was assured. Aware that

people might wonder if they have been pressured into a follow-up before they were ready, Levitt and Dubner reassure readers in the preface to *Superfreakonomics* that they deliberately waited four years until they were sure they had enough high-quality material.

Unfortunately, though, those four years have not only seen various imitators start to crowd the field with X-ray economics books of their own, but it also seems to have given Levitt and Dubner time to forget what made their original book so fresh and exciting. The great appeal of *Freakonomics* lay in Levitt's ability to mine the data for totally unexpected insights into otherwise baffling problems and Dubner's skill in turning these discoveries into stories as exciting as detective fiction.

Their ultimate tale of the unexpected was Levitt's find that crime fell in the US in the early 1990s because abortion had been legalized around 20 years earlier, cutting off a significant supply of potential criminals at source. He only reaches this conclusion after dismantling all the other, potentially more plausible theories (including the "broken windows" theory made famous by Malcolm Gladwell in *The Tipping Point*). *Superfreakonomics* contains nothing as painstaking or as revelatory as this. Instead, it too

often tells us things we might have been expected to work out for ourselves.

For example, one of its five chapters is devoted to the economics of prostitution. Here, the discovery is that prostitutes and their clients are rational beings and the whole business operates according to the laws of supply and demand. But why should anyone be surprised by this? We are told that the price prostitutes in Chicago can charge for oral sex has plummeted over the past 100 years. The explanation is that as oral sex has become more available and acceptable in the wider culture, so prostitutes have been unable to charge a premium for performing a service people can get elsewhere (Levitt and Dubner call this the demise of the "taboo tax"). The trouble is that this is exactly what you would expect if you thought about it for more than a few seconds — more oral sex equals cheaper oral sex. Levitt and Dubner don't bother to dismantle the competing theories, because there aren't any.

They also seem to have fallen into the trap of spending too much time with their fans. A significant chunk of this chapter is spent telling us about "Allie," a nice, intelligent, well-paid prostitute who also happens to be a fan of the original book (which is how

PUBLICATION NOTES

THE EXPLOSIVE FOLLOW-UP TO FREAKONOMICS

SUPER FREAKONOMICS

GLOBAL COOLING, PATRIOTIC PROSTITUTES AND WHY SUICIDE BOMBERS SHOULD BUY LIFE INSURANCE

STEVEN D. LEVITT & STEPHEN J. DUBNER

SUPERFREAKONOMICS: GLOBAL COOLING, PATRIOTIC PROSTITUTES AND WHY SUICIDE BOMBERS SHOULD BUY LIFE INSURANCE

BY STEVEN D. LEVITT AND STEPHEN J. DUBNER

288 PAGES

ALLEN LANE

Levitt and Dubner got to know her). It turns out that Allie is quite a shrewd businesswoman, who does quite well out of her business. This is only surprising

if you think that prostitutes are incapable of behaving intelligently. It's also just one person's story. The genius of the original book lay in its ability to turn hard data into stories as interesting as the best anecdotes. This book treats mildly interesting anecdotes as though they were substitutes for hard data.

The real problem is that there is too much of people like Allie and too little of Levitt. We hear something of his latest research — about how drink-walking is more dangerous than drink-driving, or why children's car seats may be no safer than seatbelts. But we don't hear nearly enough and too many questions are left unanswered; for instance, whether more people die walking home drunk because they are simply so much drunker than people who still think they can drive.

When the car-seat evidence proves inconclusive, Levitt and Dubner take a seat to a safety lab to see what happens under crash conditions. But why should economists be any better at understanding what actually happens in a simulated car crash than scientists or engineers? They aren't and Levitt and Dubner more or less admit as much before moving on.

So, instead, most of the book is taken up with stories about what other economists have been up to.

This means it's essentially Dubner's book and it reads like a series of magazine articles. The last chapter is not even about an economist — it's devoted to the story of Nathan Myhrvold, who thinks that global warming can be solved by pumping sulphur dioxide into the atmosphere to replicate the cooling effects of volcano eruptions. The interesting economic questions here, and the ones you'd expect to engage Levitt, are to do with the unintended side effects of such a proposal and how it may skew incentives. But, instead, we just get a breathless account of what a ballsy, quirky, out-of-the-box sort of guy Myhrvold is.

If the Freakonomics brand has been reduced to telling stories about people like this, it's hard to escape the conclusion that Malcolm Gladwell does it better (for one thing, he might have been a bit more skeptical). Earlier on, Levitt and Dubner are reduced to telling a story that Gladwell already has told far better in his recent book, *Outliers*, about why people born early in the year are more likely to succeed at sports. In a footnote, they admit they had planned a whole chapter on this, until Gladwell and others got there first. But the fact they still include a few pages rather than cutting it altogether suggests they didn't really have enough fresh material for a second book after all.

Superfreakonomics is not a bad book, but it's not a patch on the first — it has very little of the charm or the originality. Yet in their rather smug preface, the authors say that they believe the second book "is easily better than the first." Can they really think this? Maybe not; after all, as economists they tell us they are fully attuned to the difference between declared preferences (what people say they think) and revealed preferences (what it turns out they really think).

But it's possible that the success of the first book has gone to their heads. That book was the product of creative tension; they admit they first encountered each other in a mood of mutual suspicion, each wondering what the other had to offer. This one seems to have been more of a love-in (in the acknowledgments, Levitt calls Dubner "a brilliant writer and creative genius" and Dubner calls Levitt "a great collaborator and wonderful economics teacher"). A bit more suspicion would not have gone amiss.

It says something that the real puzzle this book leaves you with is wondering about the skewed incentives that led two such talented people to write a book that does so little justice to those talents. Maybe that should be a subject for a third book, if there is one.