

IN STEP WITH INDIANA AUTHORS...
THIS MONTH FEATURING AN INTERVIEW
WITH MICHAEL KORYTA

by Alberta Davis Comer



It is appropriate that the inaugural issue of this column features an author whose first book was published when he was 21. Michael Koryta's first novel, *Tonight I Said Goodbye*, published a mere two years ago, has won two prestigious awards, the St. Martin's Press/Private Eye Writers of America Best First Private Eye Novel award in 2003, before publication, and the Great Lakes Book Award for Mystery/Intrigue in September 2005. His book was also a finalist for the Edgar award for best first novel. His new book, *Sorrow's Anthem*, should be out in February and he is hard at work on a third novel.

For this interview, Michael and I met at the Encore Café in Bloomington late one afternoon. He exudes a confidence that belies his young age. Michael grew up in Bloomington, but his novels are set in Cleveland, Ohio, where he often visited family living in the area. He graduated this past December from Indiana University-Bloomington where he majored in criminal justice. Writing a novel is not the only thing that set Michael apart from the typical undergraduate. Until his graduation, he was a reporter for the *Bloomington Herald-Times* and he worked for a private investigator. Both jobs seem quite appropriate for an aspiring PI novelist.

When asked how he could have accomplished so much at such a young age, he explained that his high school, Bloomington High School North, offered independent study courses which encouraged students to pursue outside interests. His mentors for the independent study course were Don Johnson, the investigator for whom he works, and Bob Hammel, a retired sports editor at the *Herald-Times* who took a personal interest in the aspiring young writer. Michael attributed much of his success to the fact that people went out of their way to help him, and said he feels opportunities outside of the classroom are important. He maintained that the U.S. has a great educational system, but that students have a waiting game attitude. He said, "We go through college and *then* get started on life. Classroom education is great but encouragement of students to pursue interests outside of school is also critical."

When asked how working as a detective influences the way he delivers a story, Michael said that the work helps him add details and offers shades of realism to the detective work he describes in his stories. He asserted that PI stories are not realistic and are not intended to be portraits of the profession. He stated that, although PI stories are a popular genre, the market does not drive what he chooses to write and he is keeping his options open about writing other types of novels.

Michael's stories are written in the first person. He said that writing in the first person brings a natural intimacy between the protagonist and the reader. The disadvantage is that the writer is locked into showing the scenes through only one lens. Also, Michael does not believe that a surprise ending or a twist is imperative. Instead, he said, readers want a satisfying end, whether through a surprise or a well written resolution.

Michael's PI novels feature Lincoln Perry. "I'd like to think Lincoln is more genuine as a person than some other characters," Koryta said. "He's in the world of traditional PI novels, but he's not defined entirely by his work." His writing has been influenced by authors Dennis Lehane, Robert Crais, and Raymond Chandler. He feels that Lehane is "the best living author of crime fiction. He blends elements of great literature with the action and intrigue inherent to the genre novel better than anyone else." Michael has also been influenced by his Midwestern roots. He asserted that writers are usually influenced by their roots and pointed out that this is true of many Southern writers whose heritage so strongly influences their writing.

Although Michael is well into writing his third



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novel, he conceded that writing is not easy. He contended that, for him, writing cannot be compressed into a rigid schedule, and that writers often must be somewhat selfish with their time in order to produce at a high level - sometimes not the easiest thing for friends and family to understand. So although writing a novel may sound like a romantic and easy career, it is actually a demanding profession.

Moving away from the topic of writing to discussing the "millenials," I asked Michael why so many college students today do not enjoy reading and what can a library do about that. Michael stressed that many students do not read because they are not raised in a reading background and that people who do read as adults usually grew up in homes where reading was

important to parents. Furthermore, he stated that today's entertainment for children is watching TV and playing video games instead of reading. He said that even though he has never read Harry Potter books, he is a Harry Potter fan because children are reading and are excited about the books. As to what libraries can do to help, Michael responded, "Make outreach not steeped in academics. Make it clear to the community that the library is a place of education, but it is also a place for recreational and pleasure reading. Libraries need to get readers out of Wal-Mart and into the library. Once you get them in, you can do a lot with them."

To learn more about Michael Koryta's books or to learn more about him, visit his website at www.michaelkoryta.com.

