

Reality bites

From newspaper crime reporter to author and TV writer, David Simon has produced a compelling cache of true and fictional stories, including cult phenomenon *The Wire*, once described as “the greatest dramatic series ever produced for television”. Simon continues to create cutting-edge TV, but part of him still thinks he’s a newspaper man. BY MATT NIPPERT

In hindsight, David Simon should be a contented man. Over the past 10 years, he’s become something of an auteur of gritty urban television, creating *Homicide: Life on the Street*, *The Corner* and, most lauded, *The Wire*. The latter show in particular, ostensibly about a Baltimore police investigation into drug trafficking, drew reviews that went way beyond rave. The *Los Angeles Times* turned over an entire editorial to gush, President Barack Obama declared it his favourite show, gangster rappers were beating down Simon’s door to audition and Senator John Kerry invited him to speak at tangentially related congressional hearings.

All in all, a pretty good run. But if you had told Simon 20 years ago that he’d end his career writing television fiction, he’d have been gutted. “Jesus, what did

I do wrong? How did I f--- up?” he says, on the phone from Baltimore. “I’d have thought my career had ended tragically, and that’s not hyperbole.”

Simon is calling from the office of Blown Deadlines, his production company, but back in the 1980s he was known for

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making deadlines. Inspired by the coverage of Watergate, he became a journalist, first with his high-school newspaper and later covering the saturated crime beat for the *Baltimore Sun*. A book and mini-series here, a newsroom strike there, and disenfranchisement began to set in. By

1995, he’d had enough. As he told Kerry’s Senate hearings on the future of newspapers in May: “I took a buy-out from the *Baltimore Sun* and left for the fleshpots of Hollywood.”

Yet despite now inventing his scenes, Simon is more able to comment on the issues that he covered daily for the *Sun*. Whether it’s drug decriminalisation, the parasitism of the internet, the folly of newspaper executives or economic and social meltdown, Simon has a platform to rant to a wide audience. And what high-quality ranting he is capable of: Simon calls his opus, *The Wire*, a “drama and a polemic”. In a 2007 speech, he described himself as “wholly pessimistic about American society” and *The Wire* as being “about the end of the American empire”.

And this lofty talk – he cites liberal critics Noam Chomsky, Arthur Toynbee

and Edward Gibbon during the course of our interview – isn't post-production self-justification. In his 2000 pitch to cable channel HBO to get the show made, he began by writing: "The Wire is a drama that offers multiple meanings and arguments. It will be, in the strictest sense, a police procedural set in the drug culture of an American rust-belt city, a cops-and-players story that exists within the same vernacular as other television fare. But as with the best HBO series, *The Wire* will be far more than a cop show, and to the extent that it breaks new ground, it will do so because of larger universal themes that have more to do with the human condition."

Perhaps because of these ideals – successfully fulfilled, according to numerous critics – the show was never a ratings success during the course of its five seasons, which ended in 2008. (A fact not helped in New Zealand by TV2 screening the show after midnight on weekdays.) "But we're okay with that – this is not me pissing and moaning," says Simon. And the show has gone on to be a cult phenomenon on DVD.

What sustained the show, beyond over-arching themes of institutional malady and street-smart dialogue that almost demanded subtitles and a glossary, were a cast of characters played by mostly unknown and black actors who were as oversized as anything in *The Sopranos* and as real as anything seen in documentaries.

There was cerebral drug lord Stringer Bell, who sought to take his business off the streets and into real estate, only to be blindsided by resource consents and corrupt politicians. In between university night classes in economics, Bell tried running his crime empire according to Robert's Rules of Order – but balked when his underlings appointed a secretary to take minutes that could later be used as evidence of criminal conspiracy. And there was Bunk Moreland, a cigar-chomping homicide detective, who once reconstructed a crime scene using only the F-word, with assorted prefixes and suffixes.

Most notable, there was Omar Little – Obama's self-professed favourite character – a shotgun-toting and scarred street barracuda with a moral code who made his living by robbing drug dealers. Little is wildly popular on and off the street, despite being openly gay. Little testified in court against a stone-cold killer early in the show, only for a slimy defence attorney to challenge him: "You are amoral, are you not? You are feeding off the violence and the despair of the drug trade.



Scenes from *The Wire*: David Simon says his creation is "about the end of the American empire".

You are stealing from those who themselves are stealing the lifeblood from our city. You are a parasite who leeches off the culture of drugs ..."

At this point, Little interjects, leaving the dirty lawyer gaping like a beached fish: "Just like you, man ... I got the shotgun, you got the briefcase. It's all in the game, though, right?"

And Simon refused to play by the rules of the television game. "The story moves at its own pace," he says, before adding that the pace may seem immobile compared with other television dramas. "It wasn't about car chases and gunfights or fist fights or shit blowing up really good or women with long legs and big tits: all

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Instead of working with television specialists, Simon made a conscious decision to introduce journalists and crime novelists into the writers' room. "I don't want to ghetto-ise all the people who are writ-

HOMICIDE: A YEAR ON THE KILLING STREETS, by David Simon (Canongate, \$40); THE CORNER: A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF AN INNER-CITY NEIGHBORHOOD, by David Simon and Edward Burns (Canongate, \$40).

ing television," he says, before doing just that: "But in Hollywood they're not really that interested in the real."

Simon recruited Denis Lehane (*Mystic River* and *Gone, Baby, Gone*), Richard Price (*Clockers*) and George Pelecanos (author of 15 crime novels). "It just seemed that it would be an interesting experiment to get some of the people who were breaking new narrative ground with genre, with urban genre stuff, and incorporate their voices into the dynamic," he says.

Journalists and former law enforcement officials were brought in to ensure realism. *The Wire* co-creator Edward Burns was a former schoolteacher and police detective with experience in long-running surveillance operations, while Simon's contribution to the show – beyond his background covering crime for the *Sun* – came from two immersive non-fiction books, each covering alternate sides of the drug-war coin, and each now reissued by publisher Canongate.

In 1987, Simon spent a year with the city's homicide department for *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* and learnt the inside trade and talk from men who deal daily with murder. The then 27-year-old had to conform to the department's dress code for his 12-month secondment: "I took out my earring and got a haircut," says Simon.

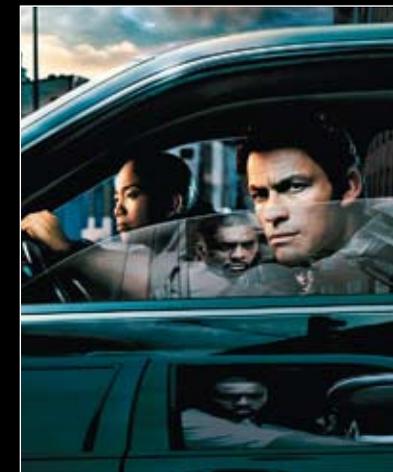
Baltimore had around 300 murders a year during this time (it's now down to a relatively sedate 260), a full third of which are unsolved. With such a busy homicide unit, Simon found more than

enough black humour and real-life case stories to inform his later foray into television scripts.

In *Homicide* there was Geraldine Parrish, a black widow who took out life insurance policies on members of her family and a rotating cast of husbands, who was later convicted of arranging three murders and suspected of many more. And a young man known as Snot Boogie – a character who features prominently in the pilot for *The Wire* – was murdered after stealing the pot from a street-side craps game one too many times. When asked why the repeat thief was allowed to keep playing, the criminal croupier replied: "Got to. This is America, man."

Simon followed up *Homicide* by looking at the other side of the criminal-authority ledger when he spent 12 months examining a community that lives, works and dies on one of Baltimore's open-air drug markets for *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood*. Co-written with Ed Burns, the book is a startling and grim insight into a world where 13-year-old mothers and gun-toting 14-year-olds raise no eyebrows. This, from a scene at the local swimming pool where a bunch of young boys are horsing around: "Tae dunks Dinky; Dinky splashes Brooks; Brooks threatens to go home and get a gun on anyone who puts their head under water."

It was during the course of writing *The Corner* that Simon began to find his voice for strident argument. *Homicide*, he says,



was a book with a black-and-white moral perspective. "Whatever else we feel about cops or the drug war or the guy who gave us a speeding ticket, we all want to see murders solved and solved properly."

But immersing himself with junkies and drug dealers was far more challenging, particularly when the books' central characters are – aside from problems with addiction – likeable. The social, economic and political conditions that lead to entire neighbourhoods degenerating into drug markets run by squatters provoked a strong response in Burns and Simon, who used large tracts of the book to argue angrily against the war on drugs. The vast resources spent on policing and prisons,

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disproportionately targeting one section of society, while drug use and related violence has simultaneously continued to grow, has created what Simon describes as "almost perfect systemic failure".

Simon goes so far as to say the law is an ass, and he won't have any part of enforcing it. "The writers from *The Wire* wrote a piece for *Time* magazine, and we said if we were picked on a jury for a non-violent drug offence, we're going to vote to acquit regardless of the evidence."

Talk of drugs gets Simon talking of

broader politics, and his delight that *The Wire* has needed the far right with its message of drug legalisation and flawed capitalism. Simon describes himself as a "social democrat", and the drug trade as an almost perfect example of unregulated capitalism. "It is capitalism without mitigation and where profit is all." Libertarians love the argument made against drug laws, but find the depiction of flawed markets hard to take.

"*The Wire's* an argument against capitalism without a social framework. And that's equivocal enough to make libertarians crazy," says Simon with glee. "And it's fun to watch 'em squirm."

The most recent political arena Simon has found himself thrust into seems to complete his career circle. The one-time reporter has become a sort of poster boy for saving journalism. With so many newspapers in the US in dire financial straits, Simon was called on in May to testify at Kerry's hearings on the state of the industry. Flanked by newspaper executives on one side and representatives of "new media", such as blogs, on the other, Simon laid into all and sundry.

"Understand here that I am not making a Luddite argument against the internet and all that it offers," he began, before arguing that bloggers are unable to replicate the comprehensive coverage required for healthy democratic debate that newspapers deliver. New media, he said, "does not deliver much first-generation reporting. Instead, it leeches that reporting from mainstream news publications." The wholesale flocking of advertising revenue online from newspapers has led to the situation where "the parasite is killing the host".

But he didn't cut his former bosses any slack either. Simon notes that many cutbacks in the news industry – including his own redundancy – preceded the current panic over the internet and are partly to blame for falling circulation. "They were selling lemonade. And first they took out the sugar, then they took out the lemon juice, and then they took out the ice. And then they're wondering why no one wants to buy their water, it's embarrassing – they eviscerated their own product."

His relationship with newspapers is clearly conflicted. Speaking now, years after leaving the newsroom, Simon still has trouble reconciling the truth-seeking reporter he was with the producer of fiction he's become. "I still sort of can't believe it. There's a part of me that thinks I'm a newspaper man – I just don't happen to have a newspaper anymore." ■