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Barclay sires suburban thriller

Stay-at-home dad the hero of Star columnist's tale
It was good move that he sought out a U.S. publisher

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ENTERTAINMENT REPORTER

Linwood Barclay usually makes us laugh, but these days, he's the one with the smile on his face.

The Star's popular columnist has turned mystery writer and his debut novel, *Bad Move*, is being published today in both the U.S. and Canada by Bantam Books.

And *Publisher's Weekly*, the bible of the North American book business, gave it a starred review, which is the literary equivalent of being told "You rock!" by Simon Cowell.

They hailed it as "riotously funny and irreverent ... a rollicking good read."

Those words won't come as a surprise to Star readers, who have been chortling over Barclay's struggles with suburbia, family life and the Ontario political scene three times a week for almost 11 years now. Before his current job, he worked at the Star since 1981 in a variety of editorial positions. "Twenty three years," he quips. "I guess I'm going to pass my probation."

His humorous pieces have been collected in books with typically Barclay-esque titles like *Mike Harris Made Me Eat My Dog* and he also wrote a moving memoir of growing up in the Kawarthas called *Last Resort*.

But, chowing down at Allen's on the Danforth, the genial Barclay admits that "from the time I was 17 what I really wanted to be was a mystery writer." He raises a 49-year-old eyebrow. "Okay, so it takes me a while to get around to stuff."

Bad Move is about Zack Walker, a stay-at-home suburban dad with an understanding wife and two bright, feisty kids. If it sounds a lot like the Barclay brood (wife Neetha, son Spencer and daughter Paige) whom we've come to know and love, then so be it.

Zack is a safety nut and born meddler. ("Okay, he's me unchecked," admits Barclay sheepishly.) His penchant for getting in other people's way puts him smack dab in the middle of murder, mayhem and blackmail — all of this in one of those sterile new housing developments.

There's a guy with a major marijuana grow house down the street and a handy-dandy dominatrix next door ... all taken from recent real-life suburban events, even though Barclay claims no personal knowledge of such individuals.

He puts down his burger to explain where the book began. "The whole genesis of it was shopping with my wife one night and seeing how she left her purse unattended in the grocery cart. I thought 'I could just take that and teach her a lesson,' but I didn't."

He grins. "But that night, after we were home, I wondered what would have happened if I actually had taken her purse and it had set off a chain of events that was really catastrophic."

Excited by his idea, Barclay started writing and when he had a few chapters, he placed a call to literary agent Helen Heller.

"I told her I was writing a comedy thriller and you could hear her sigh as she said 'Oh, those are very hard to do, but send me the first chapter if you want to.'"

"So I e-mailed it to her and the next day she phoned me up and said 'Send me the next chapter.' We were on our way."

When the book was finished, Heller sent it out to Canadian publishers without a nibble, but the big American player, Bantam, snatched it up immediately.



CHARLA JONES/TORONTO STAR

Star columnist Linwood Barclay has written a new comedy-thriller novel which has been published by Bantam Books in the States. The novel draws from his own life in suburbia.

"It was sort of a good news, bad news thing," says Barclay wryly. "The bad news was you didn't get a Canadian publisher; the good news was you didn't get a Canadian publisher. In terms of distribution and potential audience, what Bantam is doing is terrific."

With good advance reviews and a lot of positive buzz, it's only natural to ask who might wind up playing Barclay's alter ego on our movie screens before too long.

He volunteers that "when Bantam first read it, they said it sounded like a Steve Martin movie, but I have more of a picture of Ray Romano playing me." He snorts. "Hey, they could bring back Morey Amsterdam, if they pay me enough. It could be Charo and I wouldn't care. Just hand me the cheque."

Confident of *Bad Move*'s success, Bantam signed him to a two-book contract and the second Zack Walker mystery, *Bad Deal*, is already finished and will come out a year from now.

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