# Q&A with Walter Levis, author of
# THE MEANING OF THE MURDER
# (Anaphora Literary Press; August 5, 2025)

1. **You used to be a crime reporter. What made you decide to start writing short stories and novels?**

My first novel, published 20 years ago, came from my first career—I was a tennis pro. When I transitioned to journalism after earning a Master's Degree from the Medill School at Northwestern University in Chicago, my professors encouraged me to pursue sports writing. But I was drawn to crime reporting instead. The tennis world and the police world are vastly different. The contrast fascinated me.

Covering the crime beat, first in Binghamton, NY, and then back in my hometown of Chicago, I developed a deep respect for investigative journalists who dig beneath the surface. But what I found myself most drawn to wasn't just the facts—it was the inner life of the people involved. Journalism could expose corruption, but fiction could get at the emotions, the unconscious, the moral dilemmas that shape people's choices.

I remember interviewing Richard M. Daley, then Mayor of Chicago, about his approach to crime. The entire time, he was compulsively chewing gum—one piece after another, discarding each after only a minute or two. He went through an entire pack during our conversation. I never asked him about it because it wasn't relevant to the article. But I couldn't stop wondering—was this gum-chewing a nervous habit? A coping mechanism? Something entirely mundane like a bad taste in your mouth? That's the kind of question journalism doesn't always have room for, but fiction does.

That's why I turned to stories and novels. With **THE MEANING OF THE MURDER**, I wanted to explore not just crime itself, but the moral complexities behind it—the blurred lines between justice and vengeance, order and chaos, duty and conscience. Journalists, of course, can explore these questions, and good journalists do. But, for me, I can explore more deeply as a novelist.

2. **What inspired you to write THE MEANING OF THE MURDER?**

The inspiration for **THE MEANING OF THE MURDER** stems from one of the most pivotal and haunting moments of my life: 9/11. I was in the Bronx with my three-year-old daughter, far enough from Ground Zero to be physically safe, yet close enough to feel the weight of what was happening. The eerie silence, the faint scent of something unnatural in the air, and the fighter jets streaking across the sky, all of it made me realize how vulnerable we really were. Perhaps I was one of the so-called "naïve Americans," but for the first time in my life, I felt the threat of war. We are under attack, I thought, and acknowledging this gave me a deep, unsettling helplessness. There was nothing I could do except protect my daughter and shield her from the images on television. Meanwhile, I knew that men and women in uniform—first responders—were rushing toward danger.

That moment made me think of my father. During World War II, he volunteered as a paratrooper—not for the combat pay, but because he wanted to confront evil directly. He didn't want to sit on the sidelines. On 9/11, I understood that urge. I wanted to take action. But how? That question stayed with me, and over time, it evolved into the driving force behind my novel.

3. **What is The Meaning of the Murder about?**

At its core, **THE MEANING OF THE MURDER** is about what happens when ordinary people are thrust into extraordinary circumstances—when a family suddenly finds itself caught in the vast, unrelenting machinery of the global war on terror. The story delves into the uneasy boundary between criminal acts we recognize—murder, corruption, betrayal—and the far more complex, often invisible forces of political violence. Though I didn't write this novel as a direct response to recent events, the questions it wrestles with have only grown more urgent, especially in the wake of October 7th. This is a story about a Jewish family that unknowingly becomes entangled in a battle far larger than themselves, and in many ways, it feels as though every Jew is now involved in that struggle.

In the end, **THE MEANING OF THE MURDER** is about courage, about the struggle to protect what matters most, and about the moral and personal toll of standing at the edge of violence—whether as a cop, a soldier, or an ordinary person caught in the crossfire of history.

4. **What about crime fiction as a genre appeals to you as a writer?**

The notion that violence stains not just the perpetrator but the whole of society resonates deeply with me. A crime is never just an isolated act; it ripples outward, changing all who come into contact with it.

Many crime novels focus on the procedural—the forensics, the clues, the pursuit of justice as a linear path. But for me, crime fiction is not merely about solving a mystery; it is about reckoning with what violence does to the human soul. A crime is a rupture, a wound in the moral order. What interests me most is not only the pursuit of justice but the transformation that takes place in its wake. What does it mean to confront the worst in human nature? And what possibilities for redemption exist when we do?

In that sense, I see crime fiction as a genre not just of suspense, but of moral inquiry. I want to push its boundaries, to tell stories where crime is not only a puzzle to be solved, but a crucible that reshapes those who encounter it. Rather than focusing primarily on solving crimes, I want to confront the psychological and moral consequences of those crimes. To me, crime fiction is not only about bringing wrongdoers to justice but about understanding the cost of justice itself and the ways it changes those who seek it.

5. **You volunteer as an Auxiliary Police Officer in the NYPD. What made you decide to do this and how does this experience impact your fiction writing?**

I became an Auxiliary Police Officer for a mix of reasons—some lighthearted, some deeply meaningful. Let's start with the lighthearted: I thought it would be cool. I already knew cops from my time as a crime reporter, many of them were good friends. They were funny, adventurous, and full of great stories. I figured spending time in a police precinct would be a kick.

Then there's the uniform. In New York City, Auxiliary Officers wear nearly identical uniforms to regular officers, with only small distinctions in our patch and badge. We don't carry firearms, but we do wear duty belts with radios and handcuffs, and we wear ballistic vests just like the regular police. Most civilians don't notice the difference. The way people interact with you when they think you're a cop is fascinating. I've had people thank me for being present at a bank or subway entrance purely because they see the uniform. Once, while stationed outside a synagogue, a longtime neighbor looked

me right in the face and didn't recognize me. She simply saw "a cop" and said, thank you for being here. She wasn't thanking me she was thanking the uniform.

That moment connects to the deeper reason I became an Auxiliary: to help. The role expands the NYPD's presence, serving as the "eyes and ears" of regular officers. While we don't investigate crimes, our training covers penal law, police science, defensive tactics, first aid, and arrest procedures. We can only make an arrest for a crime that occurs in our presence. But for me, the most meaningful part is bridging the gap between law enforcement and civilians. Many people only encounter police in tense or negative situations: a traffic ticket, a crime scene. But as an Auxiliary, I interact with people in everyday moments—walking to work, shopping, attending a parade. When I put on the uniform, I create an opportunity for someone to experience a police officer as polite, approachable, and respectful.

In **THE MEANING OF THE MURDER**, I took this idea of "bridging two worlds" to another level. The novel explores what happens when an ordinary, law-abiding family finds itself caught in the global war on terror. My experience in uniform gave me a firsthand understanding of how people perceive authority, how trust is built—or broken—and how quickly the line between safety and fear can blur. Those themes run through my novel, shaping its characters and moral dilemmas.

6. **What was the best advice you received about being a writer?**

When I was a young writer in my twenties, hungry for advice, I read every issue of *The Paris Review*'s Writers at Work interviews. It was like visiting the Baseball Hall of Fame—Faulkner, Hemingway, Eliot, Pound, Beckett, Joan Didion, Toni Morrison, Margaret Atwood. The wisdom of the greats, right there on the page.

So whose advice did I take? A little from everyone, I suppose. But mostly from Saul Bellow. He once said, "To be a writer one learns to live like one... The main business is to find the most appropriate and stimulating equilibrium."

For me, that equilibrium has involved a version of the biblical passage: "…pay unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and unto God that which is God's…" Hence, I've written for hire—journalism, PR, advertising. And I've graded thousands of student papers as a teacher. But beneath all that, I've held onto another of Bellow's insights: "You are engaged, as a writer should be, in transforming yourself... There's nothing that counts really except this transforming action of the soul." This is a more mysterious bit of advice, but equally important to me.

What I think Bellow means by a "transforming action of the soul" is that writing seriously and steadily cultivates certain human qualities—a sensitivity to life, a capacity to wonder, an appreciation for complexity and paradox. I think Bellow's point is that this part of the creative process counts perhaps even more than the success or failure of the finished product.

Committing deeply to the process of writing has meant, for me, finding ways to write regardless of what else I have going on in my life. I take the "stimulating equilibrium" idea of Bellow's to mean that writing should never be more important than "living." The two have to coexist. So, for example, I learned to write in short spurts: fifteen minutes before bed, 30 minutes in a doctor's office, or, one of my favorites, forty minutes on a bus from the Bronx to Manhattan.

But I don't want to romanticize this too much. Finding the balance is not easy, and I've struggled. There are times when I've binge-written, sitting at my desk for twelve-hour stretches straight through the night, barely registering the passage of time. And, to be totally honest, I've struggled with the role of alcohol in all this.

Overall, I think it's a fair analogy to compare writing with physical exercise. If you exercise carefully and consistently, your body will get stronger. On the other hand, if you do it carelessly, there will be little benefit—and you might hurt yourself. Writing, when done with the right "equilibrium," changes you—not just as a writer, but as a person. Bellow's advice has helped me to keep my eye on that part of the process: the "transforming action of the soul."