

Marlborough Public Library Adult Book Club

September 10 or 12, 2024

Small Mercies by Dennis Lehane

Conversation with the author abridged from:

<https://www.boston.com/community/book-club/7-takeaways-from-book-clubs-author-talk-with-dennis-lehane/>

Lehane's real-life experience with a racist mob in Boston partially inspired him to write "Small Mercies."

Lehane was nine years old when the busing crisis reached a boiling point in Boston and experienced the racist violence firsthand. He and his father got stuck on the Broadway Bridge as a crowd of protestors hung effigies, threw rocks, and chanted racist slurs. Decades later, he recalled the moment when his own daughter turned nine.

"I was nine and it was medieval and terrifying," he said. "I started to really identify with what it must have been like for me to look at that world to a nine-year-old's eyes. And that's probably what inspired the book."

Earlier drafts of the novel were more intense.

Lehane wanted to keep the characters in this novel true to the people he grew up around in 1970s Boston, and that meant being honest about the racism he witnessed. One scene in which the protagonist, Mary Pat, lists all of the derogatory names she knows for Black people was cut by his editor for being too intense, but Lehane made sure to keep much of the language in the book. Otherwise, it would have "allowed people to pretend it wasn't that way."

"I dialed back the language in the second and third drafts. It was worse at one point...because you have to understand that that is what I heard around me all the time. This was not the exception. This is how people referred to Black people where I grew up," he said.

Lehane loves writing about "flawed, complicated" people.

Lehane used to say he didn't judge anybody in a book unless they were a racist until he wrote a book where the central character is a racist. The book's protagonist, Mary Pat, is both a loving mother whose personal relationships have been ruined by her hatred. Lehane said he knew many women like Mary Pat and wanted to do the character justice.

"I'm writing about a woman who's going to have to confront the legacy of her own racism because racism is something that's passed down like a disease," he said. "I knew a lot of people who were virulent racists. And they were simultaneously funny. They loved their kids. They would help you shovel your walk. They would give money to charities...The hardest thing to understand is not just that there's bad in good people, but there's good and bad people."