

When crime does pay...

Best-selling author Michael Robotham enjoyed a globetrotting journalism career before settling on his dream 'job' – and settling in his dream location...

Story by Rosamund Burton

When Michael Robotham was a 24-year-old journalist with Fairfax's *The Sun* newspaper he came up to Pittwater to stay in a house that his then girlfriend, Vivien, was housesitting. The house had a view in one direction over Pittwater and in the other over the ocean. He said to Vivien, "If I ever achieve my dreams of being a full-time writer I want to live in a place like this."

Fast forward 30-odd years and Michael Robotham is a renowned international crime writer. His 12th novel, *The Secrets She Keeps*, was released in July. His books have been translated into 23 languages, and made into films. Michael and Vivien Robotham have three daughters, Alex, Charlotte and Bella, and live in a large, open plan sandstone house in Avalon.

But, despite the dream life, this couple are very down-to-earth. When I arrive Vivien is unloading the dishwasher, and putting a pile of obviously much-loved plates, on which are faded images of African animals, into a drawer.

"We bought them when we lived in Harare for a year," she explains, "while Michael was ghostwriting a book there."

Beyond the swimming pool is what their daughters call the "Cabana of Cruelty" where Michael pens his novels. He seats himself on a worn red swivel chair in front of his desk, on which is a large

Apple iMac, and I sit on a sofa.

He was born in Casino. His father was a school teacher, and Michael was one of four children. The family moved to Gundagai when he was four, and Coff's Harbour when he was 13. He describes his upbringing as "idyllic and poor, but we didn't want for anything".

When he left school Michael was one of 6,000 applicants to apply for 16 cadetships with Fairfax.

"The newspaper said it would send me a telegraph by the following Monday if I'd got a position (my folks didn't have a telephone)," he recalled. "Monday and Tuesday went. I gave up hoping. That Friday I was at cricket practice when I looked up and saw my mother running down the road, waving a telegram. She had run more than a mile from home."

Vivien and he moved to London in 1986. Michael was a senior features writer for the UK's *Mail on Sunday*, until in 1993 he left the newspaper with the idea of ghostwriting.

"Vivien was pregnant with our first child. We were living in Shepherd's Bush and our house was in negative equity. It was a scary time. I was freelancing and hoping to pick up ghostwriting work. That first year I earned a tenth of what I had been making as a journalist."

The first book he ghostwrote was *Empty*

Cradles about the Nottingham social worker, Margaret Humphreys, who uncovered the child migrant scandal, the British Government's program of forcibly sending children from unwed mothers and orphanages to Commonwealth countries such as Australia and New Zealand. Over the next 10 years he was ghostwriter for 15 books including the life of the singer, Lulu, and Geri Halliwell of the Spice Girls.

The Robothams came back from London in 1997 when Vivien was pregnant with their second daughter, Charlotte. "A week after arriving home we drove up to Pittwater, round the Bilgola Bends, and I had to pull over because Vivien was morning sick. Afterwards, we sat in a café in Avalon and decided this is where we wanted to live."

It was while ghostwriting for Paul Britton, the forensic psychologist whose work inspired the BBC series *Cracker*, that Michael became intrigued by criminal psychology. In between ghostwriting projects, he started writing a crime novel.

He had written 117 pages of the novel when he had lunch with the publisher to discuss a ghostwriting project. She demanded to see the partial novel, and afterwards "made an offer that I couldn't refuse" for the UK and Commonwealth rights. Several months later word leaked out and a bidding war broke out at the London Book Fair.

“The phone rang at three in the morning. There were six American publishers bidding, and five German publishers bidding, and the French had offered this and the Italians that. In the space of three hours every dream I’d ever had of being a full-time writer came true.”

“By 7.30 in the morning Viv and I had spent the money, by 8 o’clock we’d cast the Hollywood film, and by 8.30 the terror set in. It was a part-finished manuscript and I had no idea how it ended. It was like being backed into favouritism for the Melbourne Cup never having run the two miles before.”

That first book, *The Suspect*, which was published in 2004, sold more than a million copies. His latest page-turner, *The Secret She Keeps*, a story told through the voices of two pregnant women, has been endorsed by crime writer, Stephen King, and highly acclaimed by the *New York Times*.

However, despite his phenomenal international success as a writer Michael admits he suffers from what is known as ‘imposter syndrome’.

“Every time I deliver a new book I believe that this will be the book that exposes me for being a complete fraud. And no matter how many I’ve written when I start a new one I feel like I’ve never done it before, and I’m learning all over again how to do it.”

The Robothams moved to their current house five years ago. It was a home that Vivien had admired years earlier. Michael saw it was for sale two hours after it was meant to have gone to auction. Vivien rang the agent and was told it hadn’t been auctioned, but there were three interested parties. At four o’clock they were looking around the house, and the following day Michael put in an offer.

“When I bought it, my girls thought I was having a mid-life crisis. They were

embarrassed to bring their friends here, because they considered it to be ostentatious, but they love it now.”

Michael Robotham is not a surfer, fisherman or sailor, and admits he doesn’t even get to the beach much. But as he writes all his books in longhand, he is often found sitting scribbling away in various Avalon cafes. It’s at those times that he might write a paragraph portrait of a fellow coffee drinker for a character in a book.

“At the end of the day I’ve been very fortunate to be one of the few people who can make a living out of what I do,” concludes this unassuming, hard-working author. But when I walk down to Avalon Village and into Bookoccino, its owner Margaret Hutchings gives credit where it’s due. “Michael Robotham is one of the best crime writers in the world,” she says. “His books keep getting better and better, and he’s one of the most undervalued Australian authors.”



CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE: Leafy surrounds outside the ‘Cabana of Cruelty’ where Michael Robotham pens his novels; autumn in the UK with Vivien in 1986; ‘Indiana’ Robotham in Africa in 1994; on holiday in Amsterdam last year with Bella, Alex, wife Vivien and Charlotte; sharing an adventure with Vivien in the 1990s; celebrating the birth of first daughter Alex in 1993.

