John Sandford's
RULES OF PREY (1989)

Shane Gericke

Fittingly for a master of intrigue, John Sandford (1944–) really isn't John Sandford. He's John Camp, the Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaper reporter who created one of the most memorable cops in fiction: Lucas Davenport of the long-running Prey series. (Dual-name fun fact: Camp debuted two thriller series—Prey and Kidd—for two different publishers in 1989. Prey's publisher asked for the pseudonym so Kidd's publisher couldn't benefit from Prey advertising.) Sandford was trained as a reporter by the U.S. Army, which sent him to Korea to work for the base newspaper. When he got out in 1968, he became a reporter for a small newspaper in Missouri, then jumped to the *Miami Herald*, where he worked with legendary crime reporter Edna Buchanan, and the *St. Paul Pioneer Press,* where he covered crime among other beats and won the 1986 Pulitzer for a series on the Midwest farm crisis. His first Prey thriller, *Rules of Prey*, catapulted Sandford onto the national stage. He never looked back, writing numerous Preys, the Kidd and Flowers series, nonfiction books, a series of articles about his journey to the combat zones of Iraq, and underwriting a multiyear archeological dig in Israel. But Lucas Davenport, the Minnesota police investigator who is by turns intelligent, zealous, dark, funny, woman adoring, happy, and cynical, remains Sandford's iconic character.

I'm a son of Joe Friday.

My dad was a police sergeant cut from *Dragnet* cloth—honest, forthright, and plainspoken, with a towering sense of right, wrong, and duty. He wore a buzz cut and a dark, plain suit. So naturally, I saw him in every episode of Jack Webb's legendary cop drama, and still smile at such cheesily classic *Dragnet* lines as, "In pot-smoking circles, if you're not flying you're a square."

That led to my love of cop novels—which, in the 1970s and '80s when I was growing up, meant police procedurals. They were more modern

than *Dragnet*, and certainly more stylish, even as they relied on the same realism to explain how cops chased robbers. The cops were everyday, and toiled for police departments full of rules and regulations. The dialogue was curt and crisp. Descriptions of victims and crime scenes were exacting, trending toward dry. Poetry was avoided because your average working cop did not truck with poems—he snapped cuffs on wrists and tossed perps behind bars. The procedurals were well written, but like the thin blue line they strove so earnestly to depict with accuracy, for me they became familiar, just another of the eight million stories in the naked city.

So imagine my joy at finding a new kind of cop novelist, one who blew away the *Dragnet* heritage with .45-caliber dialogue. Like this gem, when a cop is ordered onto the graveyard shift to help catch a serial killer:

> "My husband's going to love this," one of the women cops muttered.
>
> "Fuck your husband," said the chief.
>
> "I'd like to," said the cop, "but people keep putting me on nights."

And crime-scene descriptions like:

> The house looked oddly like a skull, with its glassless windows gaping out at the snowscape. Pink fiberglass insulation was everywhere, sticking out of the house, blowing across the snow, hung up in the bare birch branches like obscene fleshy hair.

I'd run into a fiction-writing powerhouse named John Sandford, and I never got over it.

He started the series in 1989 with *Rules of Prey* and is still going strong (his twentieth Prey book appeared in 2010). I consider him our finest cop novelist, living or dead, and in fact, one of our finest novelists. Here are three reasons why:

Lucas Davenport is a movie star. Your house could burn down while you read, and Lucas would still command your attention. Sandford created him as a blend of two beings: the real working cops he met over hundred of stories and thousands of hours covering crime in Miami and the Twin Cities; and the movie stars that so fever America's imagination. Lucas is tall, dark, and handsome, with a splash of Native American to leaven his

whiteness, blue eyes that spark, and a wicked facial scar. His smile is not pleasant; it resembles a wolf's. He owns a Porsche, and he drives it fast. He has a cabin on a lake. He hunts. He dresses in the finest suits and cares about his appearance. He has a *lot* of money—in addition to being a high-ranking police investigator, he's a video game designer. It brought him enough dough to let him not worry about paying the bills, as an ordinary flatfoot must. He stays within the law when he can, but freely jumps the fence when justice demands—Lucas so badly beats a pimp who cut a hooker to ribbons that the wrath of the department falls on his head. He doesn't care, and he'd do it again. He reads Emily Dickenson, he fights till he's bloody, and he battles depression. He loves—*loves*—women. His need for them is like oxygen, and they almost always wind up in his bed. But it's not the least bit sexist or cheesy. Sandford's women aren't helpless eye candy—they're smart, tough, and fiery with personality. In *Rules*, his lover, a television reporter, becomes pregnant. Rather than walk away, he stands by her and his child. She winds up doing the walking. (Later in the series, Lucas marries and has children with a surgeon he met in an early Prey. After his myriad conquests—doctor, lawyer, reporter, coworker, visiting New York cop—Sandford worried that readers might start to view Lucas as a sexual predator, rather than a man who simply adores women and craves to be with them.) In short, Lucas writes his own rules, seeks justice however he can, falls for smart and pretty women, likes his cop pals, drives fast, fights hard, and cracks dark, funny cop jokes. He's truly a movie star in print.

The bad guy could be your neighbor. Sandford doesn't create brilliant evil geniuses like Hannibal Lecter, or faceless killbots like Jack the Ripper. His antagonists are sensational in their sheer ordinariness, which heightens the creepiness factor because they could be your neighbor, your boss, or your sister-in-law. In Rules of Prey, the serial killer is Louis Vullion, a low-key, ill-dressed, self-conscious young attorney who, under the camouflage of humdrum normalcy, researches, stalks, and brutally kills women. He calls himself "the maddog" and kills his chosen through a set of rules based on his lawyerly examination of cases: Never kill anyone you know. Never have a motive. Never follow a discernible pattern. Never carry a weapon after it has been used. Beware of leaving physical evidence. And more. An interesting twist is that Sandford names Vullion as a killer early in the book. Most thriller and mystery writers keep the bad guy hidden as

long as possible, as another way to ratchet the tension, but Sandford is a good enough storyteller to let readers know up front and let us come along for the ride.

The descriptions are locomotives. They're so powerful you're convinced that you're personally inside each scene, smelling the corpses, firing the guns, or hearing the drip of blood on snow. That's the gift of a great reporter—painting a scene so exquisitely you see it in your mind's eye. Sandford brings that to the world of thrillers. A victim description from *Rules of Prey:*

> A look of inexpressible agony held her face, her mouth locked open by the Kotex pad stuffed between her jaws, her eyes rolled so far back that nothing but the whites could be seen beneath the half-closed lids. Her back was arched from the pressure of the bonds, the nipples of her small breasts pointing left and right, nearly white in death.

Impressive characters. Meticulous research. Vivid writing. Stunning narratives. These are rules that can't be beat.

Shane Gericke started his writing career in high school, where he was the $30-a-month sports reporter for the weekly *Frankfort Herald* in Illinois. At the time, he figured that's all the money he'd ever need. He came to his senses and spent the next twenty-five years in the daily newspaper business, the most prominent of which was the *Chicago Sun-Times*, where he was a senior financial editor and head of the reporters' union. Fascinated with thrillers since Frank and Joe Hardy unearthed the Tower Treasure, Shane left newspapers to write *Blown Away*, the debut of his serial-killer series. It became a national best seller and was named Debut Mystery of the Year by *Romantic Times*. He followed that with *Cut to the Bone* and, in July 2010, *Torn Apart*. Shane is a founding member of ITW and chairman of ThrillerFest. He lives in the Chicago suburb of Naperville, where his series is set. Visit him at www.shanegericke.com or the award-winning blog, www.7criminal minds.com, where he writes about life and books with six other crime novelists.