

# MURDER, MAYHEM AND MYSTERY IN SILICON VALLEY

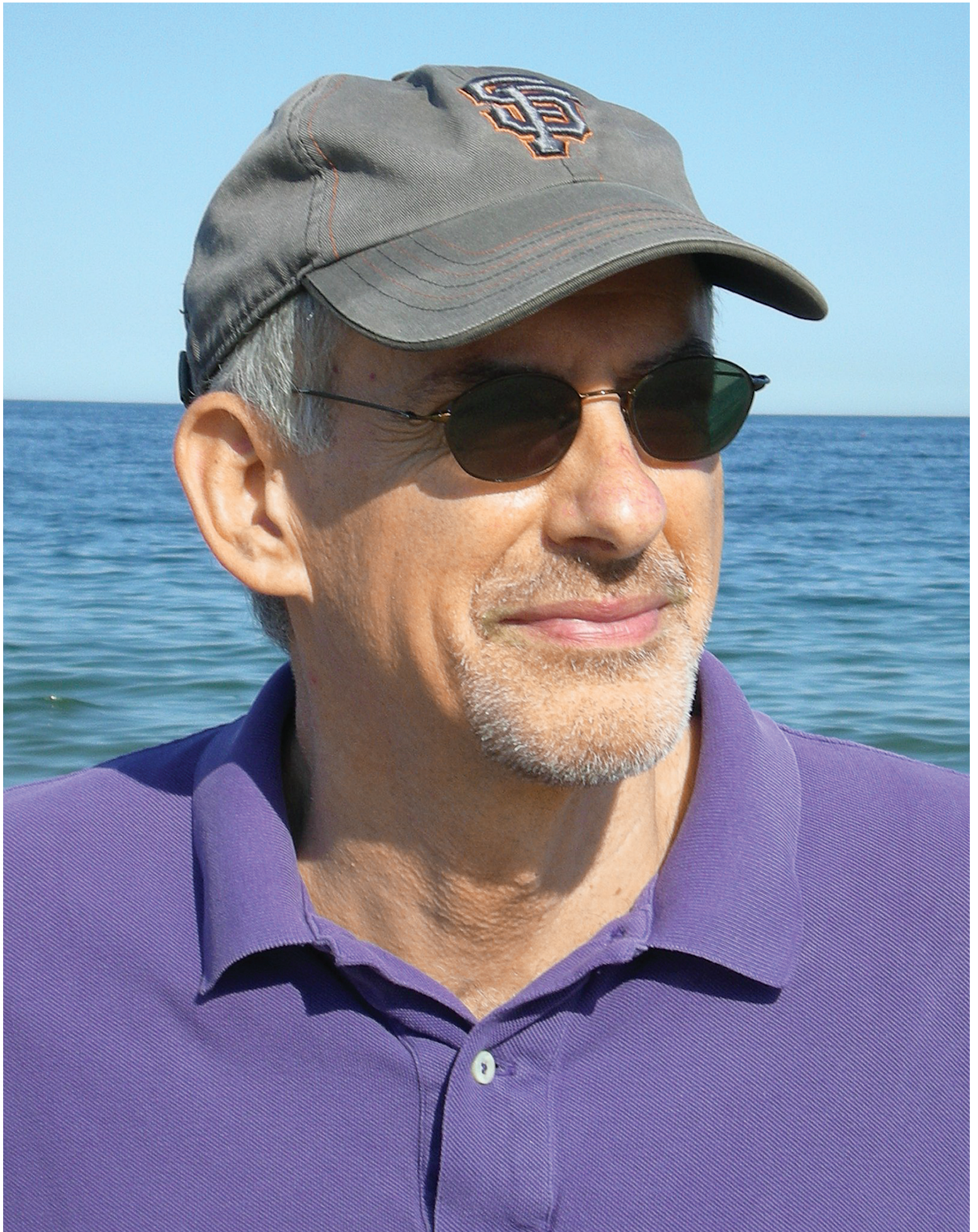
PALO ALTO WRITER  
**KEITH RAFFEL**  
CAPTURES THE DRAMA  
AND INTRIGUE OF  
THE REGION IN HIS  
POPULAR THRILLERS.

BY JULIE VALLONE

When it comes to writing novels, most authors need to rely pretty heavily on outside sources and imagination. Keith Raffel, however, can draw quite a bit from personal experience.

For example, when his main character is a hotshot executive or successful software entrepreneur navigating the business terrain of Palo Alto, Raffel knows exactly what he's talking about because he was both. When he describes what it's like hobnobbing with Washington insiders, that too is familiar ground to Raffel, who was counsel to the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in the late 1970s and early '80s. And when he talks about a middle-age entrepreneur in Silicon Valley who sells his company and goes to Jerusalem to uncover an ancient mystery, he has spent time in that role and in those places. In many cases, Raffel doesn't need to walk in his characters' shoes because they walk in his. »







# THE WORLDS OF KEITH RAFFEL

**FACT AND FICTION** Here's a sampling of what readers can expect when entering the fictional worlds of Keith Raffel, where the settings have the ring of familiarity.



## **Dot Dead (2006)**

A rising tech star at a Silicon Valley software company, Ian Michaels, comes home one day to find his young, beautiful maid, Gwendolyn, stabbed to death on his bed. Although he doesn't recall ever meeting the victim in person—they had only communicated by phone—he suddenly finds himself a suspect in her murder. With the help of Gwendolyn's sister, Rowena, who doesn't think the evidence adds up, he sets off on a quest to clear his name and uncover the identity of the real murderer, who seems a little too close to Michaels' for comfort.

## **Smasher (2009)**

Ian Michaels is back, now fighting a ruthless billionaire who is threatening to steal his company. To make things worse, his new wife is hit by a car, and the incident doesn't look like an accident. As she fights for her life, Michaels races against time to identify her assailant. He also takes on another mission: honoring what may be her last wish, to solve a mystery involving a female Stanford

physicist who may have been cheated out of a Nobel prize.

## **Drop By Drop: A Thriller (2011)**

Stanford professor Sam Rockman has just lost his wife in a bombing at a San Francisco Airport. Looking for revenge, he accepts a new job in Washington, working for the Senate Intelligence Committee. But the nation's capital is full of danger and intrigue, ranging from secret documents that show up on Rockman's doorstep to attempts by the Russians to poison him. Follow Sam as he makes his way through the corruption, terrorism and other mayhem in the nation's capital.

## **A Fine and Dangerous Season (2012)**

On October 24, Woodside businessman Nate Michaels gets a predawn call from Washington. One hour later, he's on an Air Force jet en route to the nation's capital to meet up with President Kennedy, whom he hasn't seen since they both attended Stanford in the fall of 1940. JFK is faced with the threat

posed by Soviet missiles in Cuba and is asking for Michaels' help. Against a backdrop of Washington politics, espionage, love and betrayal, Michaels takes action to help prevent what could be a nuclear holocaust.

## **Temple Mount (2014)**

Woodside entrepreneur Alex Kalman has just sold his company, sent his daughter off to college and agreed to divorce his wife. At a crossroads in his life, he receives a call from a rabbi who tells him his grandfather, thought to be dead, is alive and wants to see him. When Kalman travels across the country to meet his grandfather, he is sent on a religious quest to Jerusalem. His mission: to recover the Ark of the Covenant, the ancient gold chest said to hold the tablets of the Ten Commandments. The only problem is its location: in a tunnel under Temple Mount, a site of religious importance to Jews, Muslims and Christians alike. He accepts the dangerous quest, even though it could set off an international incident causing further unrest in an already volatile Middle East.

Of course, that's not to say the Palo Alto mystery writer has ever been accused of a murder or lost a loved one in a bombing or was called in by the president to help prevent a nuclear crisis—as have some of his main characters. But in real life, Raffel has worn quite a few hats and lived in many different worlds.

In addition to executive, entrepreneur and Washington attorney, he has also been a political candidate for U.S. Congress, a carpenter, a writing instructor and a professional gambler. Today, Raffel is an author with a loyal and growing fan base for his smart and suspenseful mystery-thrillers.

It's all part of what Raffel calls his "career ADD."

"I love trying different things. If I haven't tried any one of them, I think I'd have a huge regret," he explains. "For example, running for Congress did not exactly work out as I intended, but if I hadn't run, I'd be sorry about it. I loved talking about the issues, even if I hated losing."

Raffel is happily working on his writing full time, an endeavor that he says gives him the luxury of escaping reality for a while.

"I don't want to make it sound like I'm running away, but I think, to a certain extent, I am," he says. "And why not? Look at what's happening in this world we're living in. I'm reading about rising student debt, about the horrific bloodshed in the Middle East, about madmen getting nuclear weapons. Although I love my family, friends and fans dearly, why not escape to a world where you have a little more control?"

#### FALLING INTO WRITING

But Raffel's career story doesn't follow that familiar trajectory of the famous writer who began penning prose when barely out of diapers. He grew up reading mysteries but never really pictured himself writing them. It just happened.

"When I read interviews with writers, they always say things like, 'Oh, I was selling stories when I was 5 years old,' or 'I always knew I would be a writer.' Not me. I've always enjoyed writing, and it was an important part of every job I've ever had, but I just kind of fell into it," he explains.

Here's how: Raffel had been working at a company and found himself with a little spare time. He saw a writing course at UC Berkeley Extension, and on a lark, he signed up for it. About six months after writing about a third of a mystery, he ended up putting it on the back burner, leaving the company he worked for and starting his own company. It was five or six years later when he pulled the book out again, finished it up and started figuring out how to get it published.

"So really, the whole thing was kind of a fluke to me," he says.

Raffel has since published four books and just finished writing his fifth, titled "Temple Mount" and due out in October. In this latest work, the central character is a Woodside entrepreneur who has just sold his company and finds himself at a crossroads in life. A surprising phone call sends him on a quest to Jerusalem, where he pursues a dangerous, ancient mystery.

Back in the real world, the Palo Alto resident can usually be found writing in his favorite local café, where just about everybody knows his name. "When I go in there, I feel like Norm from 'Cheers,'" he says. "Right away, they bring me my favorite kind of tea and turn down the music where I am. I put on my noise-canceling headphones, and five minutes later, I'm in that other world."

Although the café offers free guest Internet access, he intentionally blocks it using a program called Freedom. That, he says, is



# TODAY, THE PALO ALTO RESIDENT CAN USUALLY BE FOUND WRITING IN HIS FAVORITE LOCAL CAFE, WHERE JUST ABOUT EVERYBODY KNOWS HIS NAME.

the only way he can get work done. "With the program, you just set a time, like ... say, two hours, that I don't want to get on the Internet." That kind of diversion, he says, can lead a writer down all sorts of rabbit holes.

"You say, 'OK, my protagonist is going down Channing Street in Palo Alto. I remember it runs one way. Is it one-way east or one-way west? Let me look.' And about 20 minutes later, you're reading about the 13th dynasty of Ancient Egypt."

So Raffel marks all the areas where he has questions with an "XX," and sets a time later that he'll devote to his research at home, getting the facts down and fixing any problems. When it comes to getting the work done, he follows the mantra of James Thurber: "Don't get it right; get it written."

#### NOTHING COMES EASY

His approach to writing—tightly focused research and hard work—is similar to the way he has taken on his other roles. Before becoming an attorney to the Senate Intelligence Committee, he went to Harvard, then Harvard Law School. As a successful professional gambler, he painstakingly studied the racing forms and figured out how to get the best odds. And as a full-time writer, he puts in about five uninterrupted hours a day completely absorbed in his work—which is not so easy to do with writing.

Even when he's not working, Raffel keeps his mind open for new ideas and directions for his novels. In addition to what he's gleaned from personal experience, he has found many ideas through casual conversations with friends or discussions he's participated in at writing events.

When he's not working on his writing, he's often thinking about, or actively pursuing, new business ventures that interest him.

"There was a great sign on Highway 101; I think it was put up by eTrade," he recalls. "It said, 'Someone will win the lottery; it just won't be you.' And I think that's just *(continued on pg. 104)*



## BEST BITES

**Old Port Lobster Shack**, 3130 Alpine Road, Portola Valley, 650/561-9500; 851 Veterans Blvd., Redwood City, 650/366-2400. Fresh lobster dishes and other seafood selections served in a New England-style lobster shack. \$\$

**Pacific Catch Fresh Fish Grill** (The Pruneyard), Campbell, 408/879-9091; Mountain View, 650/941-1810. Fresh fish prepared with a combination of local ingredients and spices and sauces of Southeast Asia, Japan and Latin America. \$\$

**Sawa**, 1042 E. El Camino Real, Sunnyvale, 408/241-7292. Fresh fish and seafood, including delightful prix fixe sushi-focused entrees. \$\$\$

**Scott's Seafood**, San Jose, 408/971-1700; Palo Alto, 650/323-1555. Fine American cuisine featuring fresh seafood, prime dry-aged steaks as well as enticing chicken and pasta dishes. \$\$

**Steamer's Grillhouse** (in Old Town), 31 University Ave., Los Gatos, 408/395-CRAB. Steamer's features a variety of steaks, chops, seafood and Mediterranean-inspired dishes and more. \$\$\$

**The Sea by Alexander's Steakhouse**, 4269 El Camino Real, Palo Alto, 650/213-1111. Blend of contemporary cuisine and Japanese sensibility. \$\$\$

### SINGAPOREAN

**Merlion Restaurant and Wine Bar**, 19628 Stevens Creek Blvd., Cupertino, 408/777-8228. Sophisticated spot that serves a blend of Singaporean, Thai, Indian and Chinese cuisine. \$\$\$

**Shiok! Singapore Kitchen**, 1137 Chestnut St., Menlo Park, 650/838-9448. An exciting fusion of Malay, Chinese and Indian cuisine. \$

**Straits**, 333 Santana Row, Suite 1110, San Jose, 408/246-6320. Serving up fine Singaporean cuisine, this sleek and sophisticated spot is well-suited to its posh Santana Row locale. \$\$\$

### SOUTHEAST ASIAN

**Ginger Café**, Sunnyvale, 408/736-2828. Gilroy, 408/847-2625. Comfortable, family-run restaurants feature a fusion of Chinese favorites with Southeast Asian influences. \$

**Mint Leaf Cuisine**, 14420 Big Basin Way, Saratoga, 408/872-3763. Eatery features fusion cuisine including soft-shell crabs with peanut sauce and curry scallops. \$\$

### SPANISH

**Cascal**, 400 Castro St., Mountain View, 650/940-9500. Spanning the globe with spectacular dishes from Spain and South America, Cascal serves up a menu of "spirited Latin cuisine." With over 25

tapas—small plates and tastes—divided into "old world" and "new world" choices, there's something for everyone. Try the classic Spanish chorizo in rioja wine or minted lamb meatballs in a saffron and almond sauce. For a full dinner, start with one of several ceviches and move on to an exquisite, traditional paella (including one for vegetarians). The casually elegant interior, with its bright, bold colors was created by renowned designer/architect Chuck Thompson. \$\$

**Donostia**, 424 N. Santa Cruz Ave., Los Gatos, 408/797-8688. Traditional Spanish-Basque experience featuring fresh local ingredients transformed into vivid flavors. \$\$

**Joya**, 339 University Ave., Palo Alto, 650/853-9800. The hip modern décor mixes well with the contemporary Spanish and Latin tapas and the tasty variety of new age cocktails. \$\$\$

**La Catalana**, 3720 N. First St., San Jose, 408/324-1321. Unique Spanish dishes are prepared from family recipes in an ideal setting for business, social or romance. \$\$

**Picasso's**, 62 W. Santa Clara St., San Jose, 408/298-4400. Authentic Spanish cuisine made from the freshest ingredients and served in a relaxed, at-home atmosphere. \$\$

**Tapa Ole**, 18818 Cox Ave., Saratoga, 408/379-1677. A unique take on traditional Spanish cuisine—served tapas style in a family-friendly setting. \$

**Zambra Tapas Bar**, 250 Lorton Ave., Burlingame, 650/344-5655. Variety of Spanish-influenced dishes anchored with seafood, steak, chicken or pork. \$\$

### THAI

**Amarin**, Mountain View, 650/988-9323; San Jose, 408/253-8424; Santa Clara, 408/988-2982. Fresh, contemporary Thai menu with traditional accents and vegetarian dishes. \$

**Bangkok Cuisine**, 407 Lytton Ave., Palo Alto, 650/322-6533. Very charming ambience with lovely patio dining. And the curries are especially tasty. \$

**Siam Orchid**, 496 Hamilton Ave., Palo Alto, 650/325-1994. A menu that mixes traditional Thai dishes with more modern cuisine, all infused with the finest quality organic ingredients. \$\$

**Thaiphon Restaurant**, 543 Emerson St., Palo Alto, 650/323-7700. Well-appointed restaurant with a mix of traditional and contemporary Thai dishes and a tropical themed outdoor patio. \$

### VIETNAMESE

**Bleu Ginger**, 90 S. Abel St., Milpitas, 408/719-9998. Eatery specializes in Asian fusion, with enticing Vietnamese overtones. \$-\$\$

**Fuel Restaurant**, 385 S. Winchester Blvd., San Jose, 408/248-0018. Stylish dining room sets the stage for tasty, contemporary Vietnamese fare. \$-\$\$

**Vung Tau**, San Jose, 408/288-9055; Milpitas, 408/934-9327. This authentic Vietnamese cuisine has a distinct focus on fish preparations. Be sure to try the shrimp cupcakes! \$

**Xanh**, 110 Castro St., Mountain View, 650/964-1888. Trendy, upscale restaurant featuring Vietnamese cuisine that pleases both the eye and palate with creative combinations. \$-\$\$ ■



La Viga



Kyoto Palace

## KEITH RAFFEL

(continued from pg. 69)

good advice.

"Nothing comes easy, at least for most people," he adds. "I think that here in the valley, there's all this money around, and yeah, someone is going to write a piece of code that ends up being part of Facebook or something, but that's not you or me. We're going to get what we want just by working hard for it. If it came easy, it wouldn't be worth having."

Raffel compares writing a novel to climbing up the side of El Capitan.

"Think of some poor woman or man climbing up that mountain, hammering in the pins, sweating as she lifts herself up arm over arm. If you were to stick a microphone under her nose and say, 'Are you having a good time?', she would probably swear at you. But then once she made it to the top and looked down at what she'd done, she would say, 'There's nothing I would rather have been doing.' That's what writing is like for me," Raffel explains.

The author sets many of his works, either fully or partially, right in Silicon Valley. He knows the place well, having grown up in Palo Alto. But naturally, it has changed quite a bit since his youth several decades earlier. "When I was 17 years old, all I wanted to do was get out of this stupid town," he recalls. "It just seemed small."

He went to school back East, worked in Washington, D.C., sampled life in a few other places and returned. Not only had the Bay Area changed quite a bit, but so had he. He saw his home from a different perspective.

"Ten years after college, I came back and realized it was the best place in the world. I love it here now," he says. The father of four children, ages 15 to 25, lives in Palo Alto with his wife and youngest son.

He says the Silicon Valley area offers him prime fodder for his work and points out that most best-selling writers seem to be based in big cities like Washington, D.C., New York and Los Angeles. He doesn't understand why more of them aren't using Silicon Valley as a backdrop, but he's doing his best to change that.

"We certainly have as much greed, as much money and as much ambition as those other places," he says. "Why aren't there more stories set here? It's a great place for drama!" ■