

LA

SEPTEMBER 13-19, 2024 | VOL. 40 / NO. 45 | LAWEEKLY.COM

A Taste of Italy

IS BACK

FIND OUT WHEN IN THIS WEEK'S

WHAT'S POPPING UP

WEEKLY



CULTURE

RICHARD LANGE'S NEW NOVEL GIVES THE LOSERS SOME LOVE

BY CHAD BYRNES

It's a sweltering Monday afternoon when Richard Lange walks into El Compadre, a cavernous, dimly lit Mexican restaurant decorated with Christmas lights, rustic paintings, and wrought-iron chandeliers. A Hollywood staple since 1975, El Compadre is located on a stretch of Sunset Boulevard where dingy motels and strip bars rub elbows with guitar shops and non-descript galleries. It's a perfect place to meet Lange, one of the best crime-fiction writers Los Angeles has seen since Jim Thompson or James Ellroy. With a slender frame, gray beard, and genial but slightly haunted expression, Lange scans the dining room before beaming. "I love this place!" Lange writes hardboiled fiction that ranges from gnarly to downright dark, but you would never know it by his benign and unruffled demeanor — and with the [recent release of his latest novel, *Joe Hustle*](#), Lange has a lot to smile about.

Since the 2007 publication of his debut short story collection, *Dead Boys*, which is like Denis Johnson's scabrous *Jesus' Son* but with guns and palm trees, the 61-year-old Lange's fascination with lost souls living on the fringes of society has only deepened. The lone outlier is *Rovers*, Lange's horror novel, which Stephen King called the best vampire novel he'd read since *Let the Right One In*. Lange admits he threw a curveball with *Rovers*: "My publishers called me and were like, 'Why did you write a horror book? You're going to lose your readership! You're going to ruin your career!' I was just happy to hear them say I have a career!" He laughs. "But I write what inspires me at the time. What can you do?"

Although he's known as a noir writer, Lange isn't interested in private eyes, cops, or the dirty deeds of the 1%. His taste veers toward hustlers, alcoholics, gang members,

ex-cons, and the everyman struggling with a criminal background. "Although I enjoy reading detective novels, particularly Ross MacDonald, I'm just not into writing procedural stories," Lange admits, as we take a red-leather booth. "I never set out to write crime fiction. I'm just fascinated with interesting characters."

With a combination of Robert Stone's grit and Elmore Leonard's humor, Lange's books are thrilling and propulsive, but also stark, introspective, and realistic. They take place in bars, motels, laundromats, highways, and the dark corners of Los Angeles, San Diego, and Mexico. A modernist at heart, his ability to slip into a character's consciousness is downright Joycean, and his interior monologues are like Virginia Woolf on whiskey and bad speed. As readers, we experience the streets on a textured and visceral level, viewing the contemporary world through a cracked and, at times, absurdist lens. And there's always an element of menace creeping underneath the narrative. By occupying that space between perception and reality, Lange also taps into a particular fear and paranoia only ex-cons or the truly alienated can grasp. Take the following excerpt from *Joe Hustle*, in which our titular protagonist moves through the city in the dead of night while carrying contraband:

He's fizzing with dread as he walks to the house, the gun in his waistband, the dope in his pocket. He's a felon in possession of heroin and a firearm, a fucking idiot with a one-way ticket back to prison. A squirrel chattering at the top of a palm tree nearly stops his heart, and he feels eyes on him everywhere.

At times, Lange's writing is so authentic



Lange and his interviewer
COURTESY CHAD BYRNES

you'll wonder if he spent time in prison himself. "No," he says, smiling, almost flattered. "But I'm glad you think so." And like any good writer, he knows his city intimately. Los Angeles isn't just home but an endless wellspring of inspiration — its smells, sounds, rhythms, and specific existential angst. In Lange's books, Los Angeles takes on different guises; sometimes it's amiable and welcoming, at other times, not so much. In this excerpt from "Bank of America," in *Dead Boys*, the hero plans a bank robbery with his friends but keeps getting interrupted by the vibrations of the city itself:

It must be a thousand degrees outside. Even with two fans whirring and all the windows open, the air just lies there, hot and thick as bacon grease. One story below, down on Hollywood, an old Armenian woman is crying. She sits on a bus bench, rocking back and forth, a black scarf wrapped around her head. Her sobs distract me from Moriarty's presentation. He asks a question, and I don't even hear him.

Born in Oakland, California, Lange's family moved around before settling in the coastal town of Morro Bay. Growing up, he devoured comics and movies, until he discovered Hemingway's *Nick Adams Stories* and John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*. "After that, I abandoned comic books and sci-fi novels for good," he says, chuckling, as we dig into our enchiladas and (literally) flaming margaritas. Lange was accepted to the University of Southern California's film school on a scholarship. "It was the early '80s. A crazy time in downtown L.A. I was always broke. When I wasn't in class, I worked 35 hours a week in a supermarket near the campus. That's where I met people from all different cultures and backgrounds, wonderful, interesting people I would've never met back home. I learned more about the world from working at that supermarket

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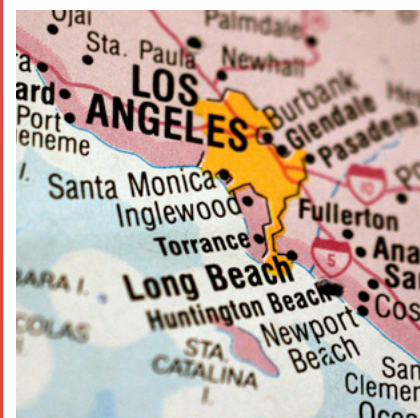
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LAURA E. WHITE FOR STREET MEDIA



than I ever did in school.”

After college, Lange worked at various bookstores in Los Angeles before being hired as a copyeditor at Larry Flynt Publications, the porn empire most famous for *Hustler* magazine, then eventually as managing editor for *RIP*, which was a popular heavy metal magazine at the time. “I was there for nearly eight years. Until the second Nirvana broke and murdered the heavy metal scene overnight,” he says. While working as an editor, Lange would go home each night and write stories. “I just thought I’d work a regular job for the rest of my life and occasionally get a story published,” Lange says, shrugging. “But things changed.”

When *Dead Boys* was published, Lange realized he might possibly become a full-time writer. “I remember I needed to follow up *Dead Boys* with a novel. I opened my drawer and realized I had given them everything I wrote,” he recalls with a heavy stare, shuddering at the memory. He quickly got to work, and over the next 17 years cranked out *This Wicked World*, *Angel Baby*, *Sweet Nothing*, *The Smack*, *Rovers*, and now, *Joe Hustle*. In doing so, Lange became one of the best crime writers Los Angeles has ever produced.

Joe Hustle isn’t just a return to the streets of *Echo Park* (where the author has lived with his wife for two decades), but a venture into something new: the love story. The protagonist earned his nickname by taking every two-bit gig he could scrounge while barely making rent at the flophouse he lives in with other luckless miscreants. Although he always tries to fly straight and keep his head down, his criminal past and severe PTSD, developed after fighting in the Iraq War, frequently threaten to break his resolve. Sometimes he’s forced to release what’s boiling inside him and punch someone in the face. Then one day he meets Emily, the intriguing daughter of a wealthy family, and his world splinters into a million pieces.

Although *Joe Hustle*’s story is simpler and more straightforward than in Lange’s previous novels, the characterization of Joe is more complex. “That was deliberate,” he says. “After my last few books, which were pretty reliant on plot, I wanted to go back to my short stories, which were more character-based. And I wanted to bring it all back to L.A., to my neighborhood, Echo Park.”

In tackling a love story, which was relatively new for someone usually fascinated with gang members, tattooed bartenders, traumatized war vets, and shattered women escaping abusive marriages (although *Joe Hustle* does feature similar characters and imagery), Lange says he was inspired

by filmmakers he loves. “Well, for the romance aspect of *Joe Hustle*, I thought a lot about Cassavetes,” he explains. “You know, *A Woman Under the Influence* or *Minnie and Moskowitz*, stories about people who get together that are nuts. The French call it ‘Amour Fou.’ Personally, I’ve never experienced anything like Joe and Emily’s whirlwind relationship. I’ve had some crazy love affairs, but I’ve been with the same woman for 30 years.” Lange looks off in the distance, as if weighing his characters’ troubled fates, before sighing, “Thank God.”

Lange obviously loves Joe Hustle, a scruffy vet who is ambitious but slightly paranoid, passionate but prone to bouts of drunkenness and self-pity. Joe is more than just an eccentric character, he’s also an evocation of the ravaged world we live in now. “He was based on a bartender I knew at the Short Stop, which is a bar near Dodger’s Stadium,” Lange recalls. “I called him ‘Joe Hustle.’ He hustled all the time. He painted houses, toured in bands. The book isn’t his life story or anything, he inspired it. The real guy passed away a couple years ago, but I think his spirit animates the book.”

Joe Hustle is one of Lange’s crowning achievements. The writing is engaging and

humanistic without treading into sentimentality, something Lange has never been accused of. In many ways, his prose is closer to the brusque and whimsical writing of L.A.’s proletariat author John Fante than to your average mystery scribe. Always humble, Lange shrugs and says, “Honestly, I would never call myself a ‘crime writer,’ I’m not

a reason he’s big in France.”

Walking out of the dark confines of El Compadre on a summer afternoon is like being slapped in the face with sunshine, smog, and noise. Cars pile up on Sunset while the sounds of construction sites, car horns, and blaring radios swell to a crescendo. Lange squints and puts on a pair

of sunglasses. Before parting ways, I ask him how he would describe his books to someone not familiar with his work. “That’s a tough one,”

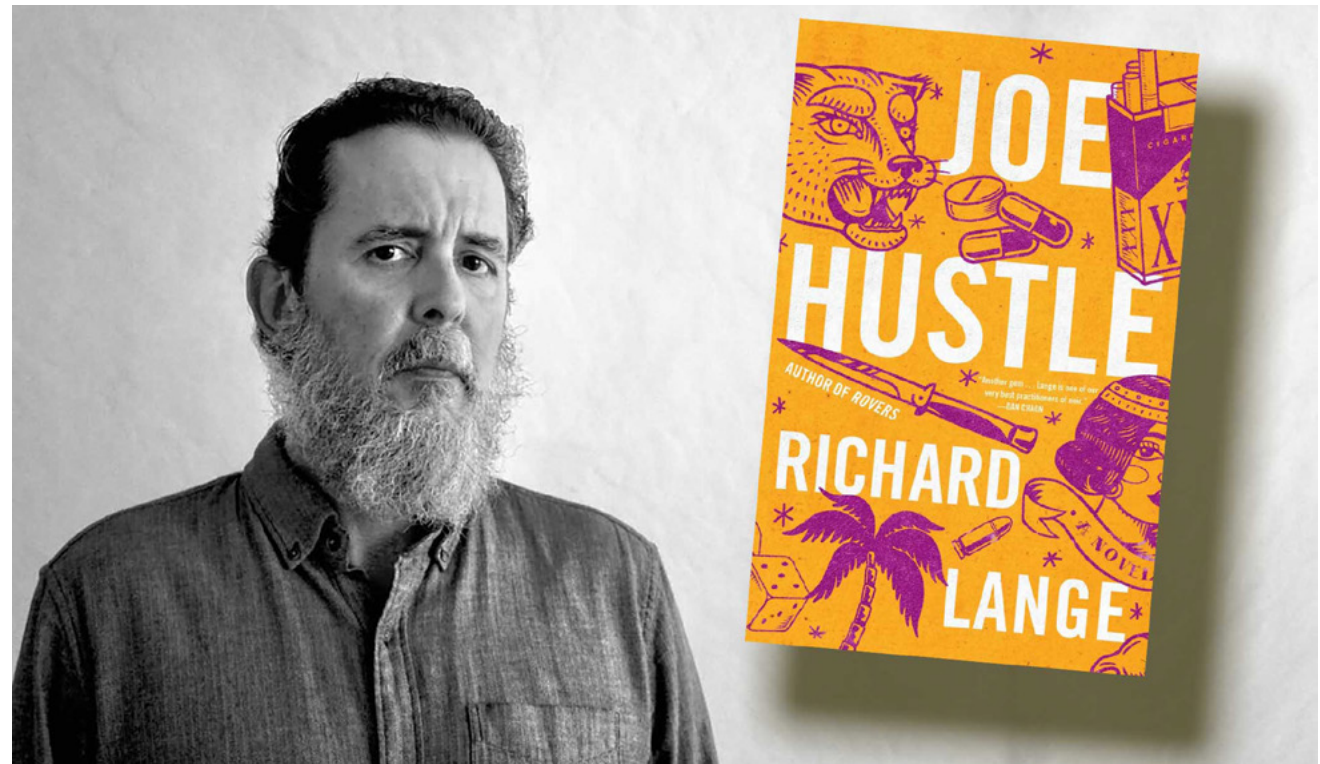
he says, pondering, rubbing his gray beard. “The important thing is to get people to relate to characters they normally wouldn’t be interested in. You know, people you might turn your nose up at in real life. My goal is for the reader to root for them by the end of the book. Anti-heroes. You’ll find a lot of them out here.”

And what about Los Angeles? Does he still derive inspiration from a city that has gone through innumerable changes? “Oh yeah,” Lange beams. “I wouldn’t live anywhere else. My wife and I still live near Sunset Boulevard, which can still get fucking crazy. I swear, if you go the wrong way, it’s bad luck,” he adds, with that same haunted look I caught earlier. “For me, Los Angeles has never lost its romance. It still works for me.” [E]

‘I’D RATHER WRITE A SCENE WHERE JOE CHANGES A THERMOCOUPLE ON A WATER HEATER THAN LIKE ... A DETECTIVE INTERVIEWING A SUSPECT.’

that good. There are so many good crime writers out there, it would be presumptuous for me to say that...” He trails off. “Like we talked about, I don’t care about plot that much. I’m much more into character. I’d rather write a scene where Joe changes a thermocouple on a water heater than like ... a detective interviewing a suspect.”

Ultimately, it doesn’t matter if you shelve Richard Lange in literature or noir — for my money, he’s a modern-day Jim Thompson, the renowned L.A. crime novelist from the ’50s and ’60s. Lange’s expression brightens when I mention Thompson. “Yeah? Great. I mean, Thompson is daaaarrk. I wouldn’t even put him in the noir section. He’s like Bukowski with a little crime mixed in. I’d call it ‘Grit Lit.’ Thompson gets under the surface of things,” Lange chortles. “There’s



Richard Lange

COURTESY CHRIS PELLEGRINO, MULHOLLAND BOOKS

WHAT'S POPPING UP

Wellness At The Butcher's Daughter and
Hispanic Heritage Month

BY MICHELE STUEVEN



Taste of Italy

COURTESY MICHELE STUEVEN

On Tuesday Sept. 17 there will be an exclusive dining experience at The Butcher's Daughter in West Hollywood, where two culinary visionaries, Executive Chef Richard Rea and Radhi Devlukia, nutritionist and the best-selling author of *JoyFull*, come together for a night of wellness and flavor.

Highlights of the event include **Interactive Moments**, where guests will learn the art of spice blending and learn how each spice contributes to both the taste and

health benefits of the dishes. The Exclusive Menu specially designed multi-course menu will be served, featuring ingredients chosen for their flavor and wellness properties, followed by Engaging Discussions. The chefs will share insights into the origins of their chosen spices and their impact on overall wellness. Get tickets [here](#).

Starting on Sunday Sept. 15 and continuing through Tuesday, Oct. 15 the traditions, customs, and cuisines of Central and South America will be celebrated at LA's **The Original Farmers Market**:



Holy Cow BBQ

COURTESY HOLY COW



Holy Cow Wings

COURTESY HOLY COW

BALAM THE JAGUAR COFFEE ROASTERS

Half of the husband-and-wife duo of one of the newest Market merchants, Gustavo Valdez, hails from Mexico. He and his wife Ning Hou offer organic coffee featuring beans from Valdez' native Chiapas, Mexico.

COFFEE CORNER

One of the Market's long-standing merchants, Coffee Corner has been in business for more than 70 years. Owner Lillian Sears once picked coffee as a youth in El Salvador before beginning her career at Coffee Corner as counter staff in 1984. She went on to buy the business in 1994 and has been pouring coffee, teas, fruit drinks, and serving freshly baked muffins and rolls ever since.

DU-PAR'S

Owned by Latina Frances Tario, of Honduran and Mexican descent, she offers a pancake mix to-go and started working for Du-par's in 2004 before buying the business in 2018.

SALAD BAR

Owner Maria Brown, of Mexican descent, began working at Salad Bar as an employee before she bought the business. Nearly 30 years later, Brown owns and operates Salad Bar alongside her three kids, who help with the day-to-day operations and can often be seen working behind the counter with Maria.



Jennifer Cervantes from the Salad Bar

COURTESY THE ORIGINAL FARMERS MARKET

Holy Cow BBQ is turning 10 this September and they will be celebrating their anniversary all month long with a different \$10 special each week at both their Santa Monica and Culver City locations:

- **September 9 – 15**
Original ½ BBQ Chicken
\$10 all week
- **September 16 – 22**
House Brisket Sandwich
\$10 all week
- **September 23 – 29**
10 Chicken Nuggs or Wings
\$10 all week

A Taste of Italy is back, hosted by IAMLA (Italian American Museum of Los Angeles), and will take place on Saturday, Sept. 28 at the historic Pico House in Downtown LA. The thirteenth annual Italian food and wine event features L.A.'s best Italian restaurants, authentic products, and world class wines, with live performances.

And in more festival news, the Family Style Food Festival, also returns on Saturday, Sept. 28 at The Los Angeles State Historic Park, joining forces with Complex. Hosted by Kerwin Frost and in partnership with The Pokémon Company International, Family Style will bring together the chefs, restaurants and brands to create limited, one-of-a-kind collaborative food and merchandise items. Tickets are on sale now at Family-StyleFest.com.

The inaugural California Crown at Santa Anita Park takes place on Saturday, Sept. 28. and will include luxury hospitality experiences curated by Delilah, Funke by Chef Evan Funke and Wally's.



The Original, popping up at Family Style Food Festival

COURTESY PHILIPPE



Antonello Zito returns to A Taste of Italy

COURTESY MICHELE STUEVEN

CULTURE

CAROLE COOK DIED FOR MY SINS COMES TO THE SKYLIGHT THEATER

BY MICHELE STUEVEN



The debut L.A. stage production of *Carole Cook Died For My Sins*, written by *Insecure* alum [Mason McCulley](#), and inspired by his longtime friendship with Lucille Ball protégé and close friend Carole Cook opens at the [Skylight Theater](#) on Sunday, Oct. 20, and will run through Sunday, Nov. 10. The solo show will be performed by McCulley and is directed by L.A. theater director and film writer Cameron Watson (*Break a Hip, Our Very Own*).

Carole Cook Died For My Sins explores the visceral and figurative downward spi-

ral McCulley faced following the death of his beloved mentor and longtime confidant, Cook, who passed away at the age of 98 in 2023. After losing his mother that same year he describes the experience as facing magic and mystery, eventually transforming grief into grace, while celebrating sex, sobriety, and salvation with humility and humor.

"I first met Carole in 2001 when I was 18 years old in Birmingham, Alabama," McCulley tells *L.A. Weekly* of the fiery southern redhead whose many featured roles included the lusty Naomi Yates in



Carole Cook and Mason McCulley

COURTESY MASON MCCULLEY

Palm Springs Weekend. “It was the only time she reprised the role of Dolly Levi in *HELLO, DOLLY!* since 1965. I was in the audience and was enraptured by her performance. We started as friends with a mutual admiration for one another but over the years it turned into a mutual love. She was a confidant, mentor, consort, and muse. She and her husband, actor Tom Troupe, treated me like family. I found a home in them.

“Carole and I grew even closer in 2015 when my mother was diagnosed with Frontotemporal Dementia,” says McCulley, who studied Theatre Arts at Pepperdine University in Malibu. “Carole saw my struggle and became a north

star in my life, a constant amidst internal darkness and chaos. When Carole passed, I lost my compass. The one thing I still believed in was gone. At the time of my mother’s diagnosis, my drinking game was already strong, I’m sure due to growing up closeted and queer in Alabama. It escalated after my mother’s diagnosis and rock bottom was hit after Carole’s passing. I had gone on a two-week West Hollywood bender of sorts that was certainly one for the books, or rather, the stage. I am currently sober from alcohol, and I truly believe Carole had a hand in this from the other side of the veil. With her passing my north star only got brighter.”

Tickets are on sale now [here](#). 🏳️



Mason McCulley

COURTESY ROWAN DALY

MUSIC

GETTING WITH THE SPIRIT WHEN BON IVER PLAYED BONNAROO

BY BRETT CALLWOOD



Rainbow Kitten Surprise

JIMMY FONTAINE

E la Melo of genre bending indie-rockers Rainbow Kitten Surprise had a life-changing experience at the Which Stage.

Ela Melo: The year is 2018, me and my friends are crossing Bonnaroo from the What Stage to the Which Stage, where Bon Iver is going to play. We're leaving Eminem's set and wading through people to go and see Bon Iver. When we get to the Which Stage, everybody is seated as though they're in an auditorium patiently waiting for Bon Iver to start playing.

When Bon Iver comes on, it's the quietest thing I've ever heard at Bonnaroo. Then they start playing and this incredible music comes out and at that moment, I'm like "Wow, I need to pay more attention to my life's sound." That being said, it was almost — not even almost — it was spiritual, and it changed my life. As soon as they started playing, everybody had to get up to see over top of each other. When the horns went, it was a whole thing. It was awesome. You had to be there.

Rainbow Kitten Surprise's Love Hate Music Box album is out now. 

LA WEEKLY Bulletin

Thank you Saint Jude, Saint of the Impossible, EC

LA WEEKLY CLASSIFIEDS

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