TV special that was praised by The Globe and Mail as "first-class shocker journalism." Dubro came to realize that his scholarly research skills could be married to journalistic reporting and the power of TV to create national headlines.

Still, nothing quite prepared him for the stir created by his next project, "Connections." Before it was aired on CBC-TV (the original two-part series in 1977 and a three-part sequel in 1979), there was great public scepticism about whether organized crime even existed in Canada. Dubro himself initially shared the doubts. When it finally appeared, "Connections" was a shattering corrective. It named names, detailed complicated links between Mafia families in Canada and the U.S., and served up unforgettable images of mobsters working in their loan-sharking offices, attending eerie and elaborate mob funerals, and even appearing in interviews, their faces disguised by scarves or ominous hoods.

Dubro, as research director of the series co-produced by Bill Macadam and Martyn Burke, played a critical role in creating a basic research file on mob characters and family ties that totalled some 28,000 file-card entries. He began his work on the show still intending to finish his Ph.D. thesis. However, by the end of his five years on the series, Dubro had acquired a unique expertise in mob matters and was something of a celebrity. He was hooked.

On a bright blue summer afternoon, Jim Dubro is escorting a visitor on a tour of mob spots in his local neighbourhood. It is just the kind of stunt he dismisses as hokey — then carries out anyway with engaging energy. There's the hotel where one mobster used to lunch regularly. Parked out front on the street is a panel truck belonging to a company with mob links. "It's hard to walk around Toronto," says Dubro, "and not run into someone associated with the mob."

Dubro is often asked about the personal risk inherent in his work. He usually answers: "I'm low on the list of priorities." Police and other crime journalists endorse that judgment. "The only thing that organized crime has got is fear," says Macadam. "And if you're not scared of them, they can't do much. They can't do anything but bump you off. And the heat that would bring is so enormous that the chances of it happening to a journalist just doing his job are very low."

In the decade since the second "Connections" series aired, Dubro's main professional challenge has been to sustain a career rooted in his expertise without falling prey to several occupational hazards. Reporting on organized crime is grinding, often boring and frustrating, work — and easily leads to burnout. To combat that, Dubro has always taken on some work in other areas. It's also tough to make reasonable money at investigative crime reporting — most publishers can't really afford to finance the extraordinary amount of time Dubro is inclined to spend on research. To keep the money flowing he is always looking for ways to recycle material: his second book, King of the Mob, co-authored with Robin Rowland, originated in his discovery of historic Hamilton bootleg king Rocco Perri while doing research on Mob Rule.

The Perri story has appeared as an appendix in the first book, a magazine article, a full-length book, and a five-part radio play, and a treatment is being worked up for a feature-film.

Some critics think Dubro's book writing has allowed him to indulge in excessive detail, stretching out thin material. "I think his work is deteriorating, I'm sad to say," says veteran Globe and Mail reporter Peter Moon, whose beat includes organized crime. Moon views Mob Rule as an outstanding, groundbreaking work, but was disappointed that King of the Mob, in his view, strained too much to depict Rocco Perri as a great rogue of history comparable to Al Capone. Another critic sniped that the book was made of material "overmined and underrefined."

Mob Mistress, Dubro's third book, is an odd bit of business, and it is perhaps the Dubro work that most suggests the complexity of his motivations and the contradictions they sometimes lead him into. He decided to write a book on Shirley Ryce, he says, for a high-minded reason: to help her out financially. She can certainly use her forty-per-cent cut of all proceeds in trying to build a new life.

In his execution of Ryce's story, however, Dubro indulged himself in some rather less than high-minded description of mob sex habits, taking the same kind of naughty interest in them as he admittedly does in the sexual escapades of the great authors of the eighteenth century. Of the editing of Mob Mistress, he laments: "They cut out all the sexy stuff." He wanted to include details about Shirley's relationship with her dildo, an object she affectionately named Jeffrey. His editor did not. "I didn't think it was necessary," says Patricia Kennedy, who coincidentally first met Dubro in the early seventies when she was at U of T. "I see the same thing in Jim as I see in myself — when you come from an academic background, you're always pushing yourself too hard not to be too academic." Dubro himself was slightly appalled at the sleazy treatment Ryce's story was given when she eventually appeared on the American flash-and-trash talk show "Geraldo." But he also looks forward to seeing how well Mob Mistress will sell in paperback, in the nation's finer supermarkets.

If Jim Dubro's work ever gives him pause, it is at those moments when he is viscerally reminded of the role the mob played in his childhood trauma. "There was a time in Detroit," he says, "when I was going around with a mobster on his loan-shark collections. We went from bar to bar and various people came in with bags and kissed his hands and gave him money. It wasn't scary but it was emotionally difficult."

On the other hand, Dubro is aware that his line of work may have a deleterious effect on the career prospects or life spans of its subjects. "Connections," for example, included a segment in which powerful Toronto mobster Paul Volpe was lured to appear on camera in a mock transaction intended to expose mob involvement in money-laundering. The broadcast was a humiliation for Volpe; and conceivably it was the catalyst for his downward spiral in mob circles, culminating in his death by contract killing in 1983. Dubro subsequently documented the life and death of Volpe in a cover story in Toronto Life magazine, and in his first book, Mob Rule, in which it was a principal thread. He had an awkward moment a short time later in a Toronto restaurant when a source innocently introduced him to a man who turned out to be one of Volpe's bereaved brothers. "He was quite annoyed, and kept mumbling..." recalls Dubro, "What was the term he used? Not a grave robber... but a ghoul! He called me a ghoul!"

Does Dubro ever feel pangs of guilt over mob bloodshed that might result from his work? He responds quietly but firmly. "When you realize what these guys do for a living," he says, "you don't have too many sleepless nights over it."