James Dubro
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"A friend of mine asked me for some topics for free work he was doing for the CBC. I said sure, and came up with the idea of the CIA operating in Canada—there were operations everywhere else, so why not in Canada? It was virgin territory then; I was surprised at how easy it was."

He enlisted to help as a researcher with the lure of some much-needed extra cash, and he recovered he had an angle for the work. Dubro recalls that once of his interviews for the piece, former CIA agent Victor Marchetti, told him he was a natural journalist. "That helped me rethink things: that, and the fact that the CIA documentary was so successful. Nine months' work and it was being debated in the House of Commons!" Peter Newman approached him for a Maclean's cover story based on his research, and then the CBC asked for more stories with a more serious idea.

"One of the ideas was an organized crime, which, of course, I knew nothing about. So they gave us a research contract. I spent months in the library, and we got some more research money. The resulting Consecrations series was the highest-rated current-affairs television ever seen on CBC, and generated front-page headlines in the Miami Herald and the New York Times—and nearly a dozen lawsuits. "We expected 100 of them," Dubro admits. One lawsuit was filed by then-Conservative MP John Reynolds, although the series had not accused him of any criminal activity. He dropped the suit years later.

Dubro, who will turn 45 in July, has been described as having the look of an academic, but that's probably just the effect his wire-rimmed glasses and knowledge of his scholastic background have on impressionable interviewers. His manner vacillates between dead seriousness and breezy good humour—more of the latter—and his face, capped with styled, youthful blond hair, will always declare him to be a decade younger than his actual age. Cited in casual summer pants, loafers, and a sweatshirt—often, only the dark glass obscuring his eyes suggests a link to the popular image of an undercover investigator. Even the romantic notion of an ever-present danger—that a flash of dangerous anticipation should shoot Dubro's spinal cord every time he turns his car key in the ignition—debunks to some extent what Dubro perceived.

For one thing, he doesn't own a car. "I'm not a paranoid person, but I take certain precautions," he says. "I don't drive a car, but if I did, I'd be quite concerned. It's a car bomb is the easiest way to kill someone. If you're concerned about that, you should change your routine. The last time I drove a car, I was 18. I hated driving." And although he notes that the only North American journalist killed in recent memory because of mob investigation was blown up with a car bomb, he points out that it was 15 years ago (Don Bolles, in Arizona in 1976). And he makes note that the only Canadian victim in recent memory, Jean-Pierre Charbonneau of Montreal's Le Devoir in 1973, was only nicked in the forehead by an angry hooligan shooting up the rear seat in an attempt to impress a local crime boss.

Dubro is single, and admits his life of work could be more of a problem if that status were to change. "I have friends who are mob reporters, and their wives get upset when certain calls come in. It's one of the hazards of the trade; of course you have to give a home number." What remains of his Boston accent comes through in his emphasis—"Of course!"

"I live in a condominium; I'm in the phone book, I encourage people to call me, and I ride my bicycle around and jog quite frequently," Dubro says. He believes mobsters would bring too much heat down on themselves by killing or threatening journalists, especially since they have enough to worry about already in the form of other mobsters and police. "I regard to say don't have a lot of horror stories about threats, but I have gotten some un statutory threats. Once, he received a call from a retired mobster who had testified about some information in one of Dubro's books. "He was about 70," Dubro chuckles. "He said, 'I'm not a rat.' It sounded like something right out of Damon Runyon. He threatened, but he was easily mollified. He has heard stories, however, about what regard he is held by no less than mob figures. "I've heard various things," he says with an enigmatic smile. "Some of them have a grudging respect, and some of them don't like me."

Back in his room at the Hotel Vancouver, Dubro allows how there were recalls, despairs. Sometimes, he says, he gets a healthy jolt of adrenaline even in the absence of real physical danger. "When I was chasing [Toronto Mafia leader] Rocco Corrado—he's a merry killer—it was kind of scary, because I didn't know what he would do. We were just trying to get some footage. But he just ran away."

Another time, while assigned to follow (since-murdered) U.S. Mafia boss Carmine Galante after he got out of jail in New York City, Dubro found himself face to face with four unsympathetic enforcer types in a dark tavern. He escaped unscathed, he says, but adds: "When you're trapped in a room with them, it's scary." And in Vancouver, while staking out mob associate Joe Roman's British Properties home, Dubro followed Roman's wife when she drove to a mall. "Suddenly, 20 police cars swooped down on our van with guns drawn," he says. "They thought we were going to rob the bank! An incident more surreal and sad than scary, he says, took place in the States. "I once went around with a lown shark on his rounds in Detroit. It was really strange; we were going to bars and people were giving him envelopes and kissing his ring."

For all the dramatic effect of television in telling a story, Dubro says, it's still a little disheartening to see it pared down to convenient size by a network. "Ninety percent of the material for the "The Five Dragons" segment of Connections didn't get on TV," he says. "Even in an hour documentary, you can't get into great detail. That's why, when I refer to investigative reporting that has the legs to go into more depth, it is in an issue but doesn't, he repeats his refrain about lazy reporters."

"I think one of the faults of today's journalist is that they don't spend any time in the library. They avoid the research room like it's the plague. They just plug in the computer and try to get stories back by the '80s. And many journalists think that all intelligence for the facts, he says, warming up to topic. "Intelligence is certainly no hard fact; it comes from a variety of sources. He then cites several Vancouver writers and a recent Maclean's article on Asian crime as examples of the malaise. "And I don't believe 'cheque-book journalism. It's no good, it's not healthy. There's a lot of it going on in the States right now."

Another beef of Dubro's newspaper and magazine awards, a though he doesn't hesitate to it in his résumé. "Well, there are a lot of them, aren't there," he says. "It doesn't mean a damn thing. It's typical newspaper or magazine to describe someone's award-winning author, but you and I know it doesn't mean a thing. Then, perhaps recondering he is to attend a magazine awards that every year he qualifies his remark. "It's all right harmless, though, isn't it? Someone gets to feel good for a while."

It comes as no real surprise that I Stone is one of his idols and source of inspiration, even after his death. "I.R. Stone said, 'Documents are only things,' Dubro recites. He's a lot of hot stories from documents and I've gotten leads from footnotes, acknowledgments, by studying up on the subject."

After the unexpected success of the third Connections series last year ("Basically, they didn't have enough money to do the whole thing"), Dubro is concentrating on his book on Asian crime and his own Toronto freelance business, Beacon Hill Productions.

And his plans after this fifth book? "That's very hard to say," the perpetually shadowy-Dubro says reflectively. "I don't think I'm trying to change the world. My real idea is to retire before I'm 50 and research some of those things I want to research in my abandoned Ph.D. dissertation."

"Yes," James Dubro sighs, "I've got some of my great unfinished projects."