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## 'Ice Harvest' author knows shady characters well

By Calvin Wilson  
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**Scott Phillips**  
(Matt Carmichael/Getty Images)

Scott Phillips enjoys hanging out with dangerous characters, as long as they're in his imagination.

Among crime novelists, Phillips - who lives in Webster Groves with wife Anne and daughter Claire - ranks high. Although that's no secret to aficionados of the genre, his readership is likely to increase now that his novel "The Ice Harvest" has been made into a movie. And not just some art-house flick, either, but a major holiday release.

Directed by Harold Ramis ("Groundhog Day"), it's the story of shady lawyer Charlie Arglist (John Cusack), his even shadier accomplice Vic Cavanaugh (Billy Bob Thornton) and their scheme to rip off a mobster. Set on Christmas Eve in an icy Wichita, Kan., the film (written by Robert Benton and Richard Russo) is in the neo-noir tradition of "Fargo," "One False Move" and "A Simple Plan."

The subtly sinister presence of Thornton, who also appeared in the latter two films, is in keeping with the darkly comic tone of both the film and the book. Not that everyone shares Phillips' sense of humor.

"I've had people read the book and not understand that it's supposed to be funny," the writer says recently as a jukebox blares classic rock in a Delmar Loop eatery. But his storytelling skills are not in question.

"I was one of those people who always wrote stories in school," says Phillips, a Wichita native who has also lived in France and Los Angeles. "I was always encouraged to do so by my teachers. And I kept on doing it while I was doing other things."

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### He's an original

"The Ice Harvest" has been hailed not only as a first-rate crime novel, but as superior fiction regardless of genre.

"It's a good, short, sharp, tight little book," says Victor Gischler, whose novels include "Gun Monkeys" and "Suicide Squeeze."

"It's raw without pandering to shock value, and hardboiled without being cliched. It does everything right, without relying on conventions or gimmicks." Gischler says that Phillips' writing is so original that it's difficult to identify his influences.

"I've read a number of crime novels where you could just say, 'Oh, this guy thinks he's Raymond Chandler' or 'This guy thinks he's Elmore Leonard' or 'This guy thinks he's Jim Thompson.' But Scott Phillips has carved a space for himself."

"The Ice Harvest" was just the sort of project that Ramis - whose directorial reputation is based on such comedies as "Analyze This" and "Groundhog Day" and is perhaps best known for acting alongside Bill Murray in "Ghostbusters" - was looking for.

"It's a move sideways for him," Phillips says. "Something that's not within that realm of some of the other things that he's done."

Published in 2000, "The Ice Harvest" represented something of a segue for Phillips, who had been concentrating on a career as a screenwriter.

"I worked very hard at being a screenwriter, and with very, very little success," he says. "But I did get one movie made." Phillips is credited as co-writer of the 1996 action flick "Crosscut," which starred Costas Mandylor (of "Picket Fences" fame). According to the Internet Movie Database, the film went straight to video.

"When that was done," Phillips says, "I was sort of disgruntled with the collaborative process. My big problem with screenwriting was always that I was trying to second-guess the spec market, which is a terrible mistake. I was always trying to write something commercial and stupid. And I succeeded at 'stupid,' but not 'commercial.' "

### Studying strip clubs

So Phillips decided to write a novel. Although a previous effort had been "terrible and unpublishable," Phillips took comfort in the fact that he had at least finished it.

"So I wasn't too daunted when it came time to write another one. And that turned out to be 'The Ice Harvest.' "

The novel crystallized around experiences that Phillips had during his years as a student at Wichita State University in the late 1970s and early '80s.

"I had a friend who worked in a strip club as a bartender, and another friend who was studying strip



clubs," he says. Wait a minute - *studying* strip clubs?

"He really was doing research, and he ended up being one of the world's leading authorities on American burlesque. So, I used to go to these places, just to hang out with these guys, and I met some people. In those days, and I presume it hasn't changed, dancing naked for strangers was a pretty tough way to make a living."

Phillips had read a lot of crime novels, and it occurred to him that setting one in a Midwestern environment of strip clubs, massage parlors and bars might make for an intriguing read. Particularly if the protagonist was Charlie Arglist, "a guy who's kind of at loose ends."

"I thought it would be interesting to write a book about Christmas, from the point of view of somebody who's not participating in it," Phillips says. "It's a holiday - but not for him."

### Not quite enough brains

"The Ice Harvest," Phillips says, "probably has more cinematic than literary origins. It's the story of a guy who's trying to pull something off that he doesn't quite have the brains to pull off. And to me, that comes out of a *film noir* tradition more than it does a literary tradition."

Except, Phillips adds, for books that inspired *noir* films, such as James M. Cain's "Double Indemnity." A tale of deceit and betrayal, the 1944 film starred Barbara Stanwyck and Fred MacMurray and was directed by Billy Wilder. "If I hadn't ever seen 'Double Indemnity,'" he says, "I certainly wouldn't have been able to write 'The Ice Harvest.'"

Phillips is "operating in a similar type of storytelling to a lot of crime films, in addition to crime novels," says David Montgomery, editor of MysteryInkOnline.com, a book-review and author-interview Web site.

Indeed, Phillips - whose other novels are "The Walkaway" and "Cottonwood" - creates characters who seem to have emerged from the shadows of our collective movie memories. With no room, or need, for verisimilitude.

"In reality, I don't know what happens when the mob comes after you," Phillips says. "I've led a pretty sheltered life."

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