Sleuths in Love
Screenwriter turned novelist Eric Lerner finds his voice.

by CRAIG LAMBERT

Flattened by a cold in 1998, Eric Lerner ’71, then a Hollywood screenwriter, picked up a biography of Allan Pinkerton, founder of the first detective agency in the United States. Three men were already working for Pinkerton in Chicago in 1856 when he hired Kate Warne as perhaps the first-ever female private eye. “The biographer dismissed rumors of a romantic relationship between Warne and Pinkerton,” says Lerner. “I literally dropped the book and laughed out loud—are you kidding me? She spends two years with him in Washington, D.C., while he is away from his family. He is at her bedside when she dies, and she is buried next to him. Rumors?”

Within two days, Lerner was proposing a movie about Pinkerton and Warne to a studio. “They bought it on a phone pitch,” he says. He got paid to write the screenplay, but, in one of Hollywood’s familiar patterns, “Before I finished the first draft, everyone was fired. It sat in a drawer for seven years before the rights reverted to me. By that time I didn’t want to write a screenplay ever again.”

Screenplays, he reports, “are enormously confining: the story is there, but there is no voice in a movie. As a writer, I missed my own voice. I always loved the voice in a novel, the storyteller.”

So Lerner decided to “clear the decks, close the blinds, and start writing a novel.” He took the Pinkerton material, did prodigious historical research—ranging from Warne’s logbooks to details of Abraham Lincoln’s childhood—and wrote Pinkerton’s Secret, his first novel, published by Henry Holt this spring. It’s styled as a memoir by Pinkerton, set in the period...
A memoir can break your heart. An exquisitely detailed new example of the genre, *The Crowd Sounds Happy: A Story of Love, Madness, and Baseball* (Pantheon, $24.95), by Nicholas Dawidoff ’85, describes a childhood of privation shadowed by his parents’ divorce and his father’s mental illness. The spare opening chapter sets the scene.

Dawidoff grew up in a city of dying elms called the Elm City, on a street with no willows named Willow Street. Uncelebrated trees shaded our part of the road, sturdy oaks and mature maples, their branches so thick with leaves that they created a blind curve just before the intersection where the street straightened past our house and made its hard line for the highway. Cars traveled at a clip down Willow Street, especially at night, and because of the curve it was impossible to see them until they’d nearly reached the streetlight glowing out beyond my bedroom window. Yet lying awake under the covers I could hear those cars coming, and never more distinctly than on rainy fall evenings when the wind had blown a scatter of acorns across the pavement. I’d be tense against my pillow, listening to the whoosh of tires closing fast over wet asphalt, and then, an instant later, a brief, vivid flurry of noise, the rapid, popping eruptions of a dozen flattened acorns, before the whoosh receded into traceless silence as someone else hurried out of town. Long before I knew that I came from a place people wanted to leave, I saw how eager they were to get away.

Every so often a car wouldn’t make it to the highway. From my bed I’d hear the familiar swelling murmur of onrushing rubber—it was like nearing a riverbank through parted woods—and...the night detonated in a cry of brakes and tremendous thudding impact...I’d tug the blankets over my face as my bedroom filled with the hiss of punctured radiators and revolving flashes of hot red light...My room felt remote, bigger than usual, and every shadow playing along the ceiling terrified me. By morning, when I went outside for a look, all remnants of the accident would have been swept away so that I might have doubted that anything had truly happened were it not for the chips of headlight glass or the lacelined chunk of engine grille that I’d find in the gutter with the acorns.

But before any of those investigations, there were hours of the night still to go, and as I tried to calm myself with less upsetting thoughts, invariably my mind veered to my favorite baseball team, the Boston Red Sox. There in the dark I evaluated the feats and virtues of the players I liked best. This was the early and mid-1970s....We had no television, did not subscribe to the newspaper, and my bedtime was not long after the evening broadcasts of games began on the radio, so I knew very little about the Red Sox....Yet my desire for familiarity with them was intense, and I arrived at strong impressions, most of which placed peculiar emphasis on the players’ own boyhoods.
monasteries in Asia and America: his 1976 book, Journey of Insight Meditation, describes these experiences.

In 1978, he moved to the Mount Baldy Zen Center, located 8,000 feet above sea level on Mount San Antonio in the San Gabriel Mountains outside Los Angeles. “It was as rigorous as you could get in the United States, like a nineteenth-century monastery, a real boot camp,” he recalls. “But I’m a writer, I’m used to austere conditions.” And he never stopped writing; in L.A., he edited the Buddhist journal Zen. One afternoon, after meeting a prospective contributor, Lerner bumped into a high-school friend, Linda Obst, who had become a Hollywood producer. “I discovered that I was in possession of the key piece of currency for a Hollywood screenwriter: the ability to quickly imagine a full-blown story with a beginning, middle, and end,” he says. “I went to Southern California to live in a Zen monastery and stayed to write screenplays.”

By 1983, Lerner had begun a career as a screenwriter that kept him continuously employed for the next two decades. His biggest hit was the 1990 romantic comedy Bird on a Wire, starring Goldie Hawn and Mel Gibson. Yet, as Lerner notes, “I spent the next decade trying to explain to people what I wrote, and what was dumped on top of what I wrote. Maybe my time in the monastery helped me develop the cast-iron stomach to deal with working conditions in Hollywood. Walking barefoot through snow at three in the morning was nothing compared to a story meeting at Paramount.”

Today, Lerner says he’s quite content with the semi-solitary working routine of “an old-fashioned novelist.” At his Boston home, he starts writing each day at 5 a.m. The voice of his second novel is that of Livia, wife of Augustus Caesar, who seeks after 2,000 years to clear her name of the charges—from Tacitus to Robert Graves—that she was a scheming poisoner. “I’ve finally embarked on the life in fiction I was looking for at age 19,” he says, “when I walked into a bookstore on Mount Auburn Street and bought my copy of Ulysses.”

Two Centuries of Sound
Celebrating a fabled orchestra’s origins
by RICHARD DYER

On March 6, 1808, six men of Harvard formed the Pierian Sodality: the direct ancestor of the Harvard-Radcliffe Orchestra, which this season celebrates its two-hundredth anniversary.

Whether this makes the HRO the oldest orchestra in America, as it proudly claims, may be subject to debate, because that 1808 fellowship of admirers of the Muses wasn’t an orchestra—it was a convivial association built around liquor, cigars, “performing music for the enjoyment of others,” and “serenading young women in the square.”

The sodality went through good years and bad patches. In 1832, Henry Gassett was its first president, after which the Harvard-Radcliffe Sodality was referred to as the Harvard-Radcliffe Orchestra.

Its alumni have included doctors, lawyers, academics, a Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, the new music director of the New York Philharmonic, and many players active in major orchestras.

Certainly the sodality was the first university symphony orchestra in America, and for a long time the largest. It began to tour in 1908 and, starting in the 1960s, traveled to Europe, South America, or Asia at least once in every student generation. In 1936, women from Radcliffe College were invited to participate as guest performers, and in 1942 the ensemble formally became the Harvard-Radcliffe Orchestra.

This early 1970s poster for an HRO concert advertises a guest appearance by a young cellist named Yo-Yo Ma.