

A Den of Thieves

By Lori Myers

Jonathan Green is at ease mingling with people whom the rest of us would cross the street to avoid. Murderers, thieves, scam artists. Most of his writing career has involved getting inside the skin of those who are a bit off-kilter, who look at life upside down and inside out, who scoff at rules and regimen.

When I first hear his voice over the phone from New York, it is obvious that Green is not an American native. His accent is a mix of down-home cockney and genteel Londoner with a dash of urban American thrown in for good measure. After speaking with him a bit, I learn that I am not too far off in my assessment.

He was born in Suffolk, an area northeast of London, and later moved to London at age 19 to work for one of those notorious English tabloids known for putting public figures in their place. His working relationship with the publication's managers soon faltered because they found Green's writing style too literary and Green disliked the cutthroat way they did business. Later he got a job with

Angels and Banditos, two murderous motorcycle gangs in Scandinavia. He has experienced an "emotionally grueling" vigil with the family of a death-row inmate, been insulted by a Detroit gang member, and in a piece entitled "Grim Sweeper" for *FT Magazine*, assisted "clean-up technicians" who wipe away blood, brains, and skull fragments after murders and suicides. Green has shaken the hands and crawled inside the psyches of society's outcasts who have allowed him into their inner circle, albeit temporarily.

"I was able to win people's trust," says Green. "I did like them a lot, which is a problem. Nobody is really, really evil. There's good in everybody. They are extreme people; people who live fast. I wanted to write great stuff, and they can sense your enthusiasm. I would tell my friends what I was doing, and their jaws would drop. Journalism is the best job in the world."

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they found Green's writing style too literary and Green disliked the cutthroat way they did business. Later, he got a job with an avant-garde magazine that was, according to Green, ruled by office politics and a pencil-pushing editor. Despite this troubled working environment, Green began making a name for himself in investigative journalism when he wrote a piece about a group in Birmingham selling videos on how to make explosives.

But it was a scuffle in a north London back-street bar that resulted in Green losing his front teeth and finding his future writing career as a free-lance participatory journalist.

"I was just out having drinks and having fun when I was attacked by some skinheads," Green recalls. "I wrote about it for *Esquire* and then started getting calls from other magazines. I guess they figured if he could survive a bar fight, he could survive anything."

Since that fortuitous bar brawl, Green has gone undercover infiltrating the far right in the United Kingdom, gotten involved with cockfighting groups in America's South, and spent time with the Hell's

Despite delving into the dark recesses of life, Green has other achievements to his credit. Last year he broke the world high-altitude sky-diving record and wrote about it in *Men's Journal*. He admits he was terrified, but he is accustomed to risk-taking and would take the plunge again.

"I had never sky dived before," Green says. "We went up 30,000 feet—as high as Mt. Everest. When they opened the door it was freezing, and I thought, 'What a stupid way of dying.' You're falling 260 mph. It feels like you're being torn out of the sky."

During our second interview, Green mentions to me that he just spoke with an FBI agent for an upcoming writing project having to do with bogus war veterans. Once again, he is pricking the skin of society's sores and taking pleasure in exposing them on the page. His work has made him aware of "how easily you can be snuffed out." But that doesn't deter Green from exploring life's dark side.

"I've never backed out of a story," says Green. "Although there were times I thought I should. You just have to be careful."