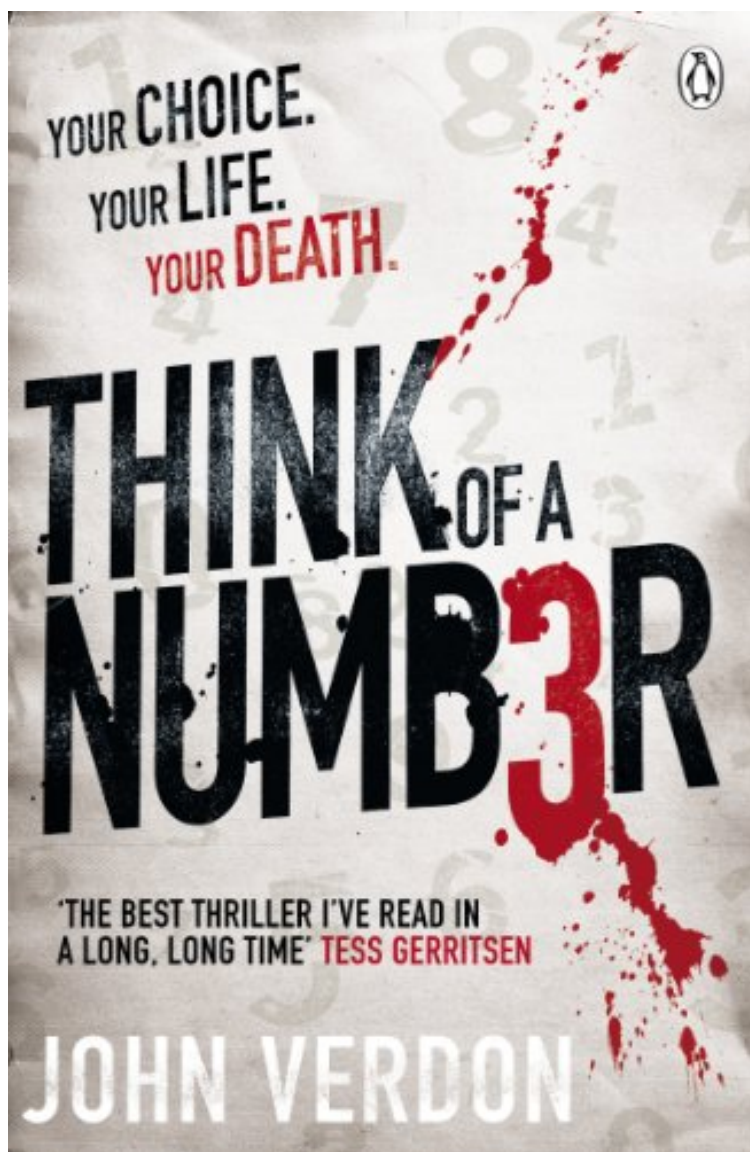


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## Think of a Number



Par John Verdon  
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### Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThink of a Number is the chilling debut from John Verdon.It begins with a letter . . . The letter contains a request - think of a number, any number - and a sealed envelope. Inside the envelope is that number.When Dave Gurney, retired NYPD homicide detective, is contacted by an old college acquaintance about some startling letters he's been receiving, it is at first little more than a diverting but sinister puzzle. Until the acquaintance is brutally killed.Suddenly Gurney finds himself in the middle of a murder investigation that makes no sense. The killer seems to have known his victim intimately. How else was he able to predict his victim's thoughts, even his actions? How did he know his darkest secrets? The killer is smart and he is playing with the police. Gurney needs to be smarter if he's going to catch him, but

this seems only to be the beginning. And the killer alone knows where it will end. Think of a Number is the debut from John Verdon and is the first in a series starring the retired detective Dave Gurney. In the tradition of Harlan Coben and Linwood Barclay, John Verdon's unique high-concept plot and memorable cast of series characters will be a major hit with thriller fans. Subsequent titles include *Let the Devil Sleep* and *Shut Your Eyes Tight*. Praise for John Verdon: 'The best thriller I've read in a long, long time' Tess Gerritsen 'Wow! Totally absorbing, brilliantly written. The best book I've read this year' The Sun

John Verdon, a former Manhattan advertising executive, lives with his wife on a small hilltop in upstate New York. His first two Dave Gurney novels are *Think of a Number* and *Shut Your Eyes Tight*.

Chapter 1 Cop art Jason Strunk was by all accounts an inconsequential fellow, a bland thirty-something, nearly invisible to his neighbors--and apparently inaudible as well, since none could recall a single specific thing he'd ever said. They couldn't even be certain that he'd ever spoken. Perhaps he'd nodded, perhaps said hello, perhaps muttered a word or two. It was hard to say. All expressed a conventional initial amazement, even a temporary disbelief, at the revelation of Mr. Strunk's obsessive devotion to killing middle-aged men with mustaches and his uniquely disturbing way of disposing of the bodies: cutting them into manageable segments, wrapping them colorfully, and mailing them to local police officers as Christmas presents. Dave Gurney gazed intently at the colorless, placid face of Jason Strunk--actually, the original Central Booking mug shot of Jason Strunk--that stared back at him from his computer screen. The mug shot had been enlarged to make the face life-size, and it was surrounded at the borders of the screen by the tool icons of a creative photo-retouching program that Gurney was just starting to get the hang of. He moved one of the brightness-control tools on the screen to the iris of Strunk's right eye, clicked his mouse, and then examined the small highlight he'd created. Better, but still not right. The eyes were always the hardest--the eyes and the mouth--but they were the key. Sometimes he had to experiment with the position and intensity of one tiny highlight for hours, and even then he'd end up with something not quite what it should be, not good enough to show to Sonya, and definitely not Madeleine. The thing about the eyes was that they, more than anything else, captured the tension, the contradiction--the uncommunicative blandness spiked with a hint of cruelty that Gurney had often discerned in the faces of murderers with whom he'd had the opportunity to spend quality time. He'd gotten the look right with his patient manipulation of the mug shot of Jorge Kunzman (the Walmart stock clerk who always kept the head of his last date in his refrigerator until he could replace it with one more recent). He'd been pleased with the result, which conveyed with disturbing immediacy the deep black emptiness lurking in Mr. Kunzman's bored expression, and Sonya's excited reaction, her gush of praise, had solidified his opinion. It was that reception, plus the unexpected sale of the piece to one of Sonya's collector friends, that motivated him to produce the series of creatively doctored photographs now being featured in a show headlined *Portraits of Murderers by the Man Who Caught Them*, in Sonya's small but pricey gallery in Ithaca. How a recently retired NYPD homicide detective with a yawning uninterest in art in general and trendy art in particular, and a deep distaste for personal notoriety, could have ended up as the focus of a chic university-town art show described by local critics as "a cutting-edge blend of brutally raw photographs, unflinching psychological insights, and masterful graphic manipulations" was a question with two very different answers: his own and his wife's. As far as he was concerned, it all began with Madeleine's cajoling him into taking an art-appreciation course with her at the museum in Cooperstown. She was forever trying to get him out--out of his den, out of the house, out of himself, just out. He'd learned that the best way to stay in control of his own time was through the strategy of periodic capitulations. The art-appreciation course was one of these strategic moves, and although he dreaded the prospect of sitting through it, he expected it to immunize him against further pressures for at least a month or two. It wasn't that he was a couch potato--far from it. At the age of forty-seven, he could still do fifty push-ups, fifty chin-ups, and fifty sit-ups. He just wasn't very fond of going places. The course, however, turned out to be a surprise--in fact, three surprises. First, despite his pre-course assumption that his greatest challenge would be staying awake, he found the instructor, Sonya Reynolds, a gallery owner and artist of regional renown, riveting. She was not conventionally beautiful, not in the archetypal Northern European Catherine Deneuve mode. Her mouth was too pouty, her cheekbones overly prominent, her nose too strong. But somehow the imperfect parts were unified into a uniquely striking whole by large eyes of a deep smoky green and by a manner that was completely relaxed and naturally sensual. There were not many men in the class, just six of the twenty-six attendees, but she had the absolute attention of all six. The second surprise was his positive reaction to the subject matter. Because it was a special interest of hers, Sonya devoted considerable time to art derived from photography--photography that had been manipulated to create images that were more powerful or

communicative than the originals. The third surprise came three weeks into the twelve-week course, on the night that she was commenting enthusiastically on a contemporary artist's silk-screen prints derived from solarized photographic portraits. As Gurney gazed at the prints, the idea came to him that he could take advantage of an unusual resource to which he had special access and to which he could bring a special perspective. The notion was strangely exciting. The last thing he'd expected from an art-appreciation course was excitement. Once this occurred to him--the concept of enhancing, clarifying, intensifying criminal mug shots, particularly the mug shots of murderers, in ways that would capture and convey the nature of the beast he had spent his career studying, pursuing, and outwitting--it took hold, and he thought about it more often than he would have been comfortable admitting. He was, after all, a cautious man who could see both sides of every question, the flaw in every conviction, the naivete in every enthusiasm. As Gurney worked at the desk in his den that bright October morning on the mug shot of Jason Strunk, the pleasant challenge of the process was interrupted by the sound of something being dropped on the floor behind him. "I'm leaving these here," said Madeleine Gurney in a voice that to anyone else might have sounded casual but to her husband was fraught. He looked over his shoulder, his eyes narrowing at the sight of the small burlap sack leaning against the door. "Leaving what?" he asked, knowing the answer. "Tulips," said Madeleine in the same even tone. "You mean bulbs?" It was a silly correction, and they both knew it. It was just a way of expressing his irritation at Madeleine's wanting him to do something he didn't feel like doing. "What do you want me to do with them in here?" "Bring them out to the garden. Help me plant them." He considered pointing out the illogic of her bringing into the den something for him to bring back out to the garden but thought better of it. "As soon as I finish with this," he said a little resentfully. He realized that planting tulip bulbs on a glorious Indian-summer day in a hilltop garden overlooking a rolling panorama of crimson autumn woods and emerald pastures under a cobalt sky was not a particularly onerous assignment. He just hated being interrupted. And this reaction to interruption, he told himself, was a by-product of his greatest strength: the linear, logical mind that had made him such a successful detective--the mind that was jarred by the slightest discontinuity in a suspect's story, that could sense a fissure too tiny for most eyes to see. Madeleine peered over his shoulder at the computer screen. "How can you work on something so ugly on a day like this?" she asked.

Chapter 2A perfect victim David and Madeleine Gurney lived in a sturdy nineteenth-century farmhouse, nestled in the corner of a secluded pasture at the end of a dead-end road in the Delaware County hills five miles outside the village of Walnut Crossing. The ten-acre pasture was surrounded by woods of cherry, maple, and oak. The house retained its original architectural simplicity. During the year they'd owned it, the Gurneys had restored to a more appropriate appearance the previous owner's unfortunate updates--replacing, for example, bleak aluminum windows with wood-framed versions that possessed the divided-light style of an earlier century. They did it not out of a mania for historical authenticity but in recognition that the original aesthetics had somehow been right. This matter of how one's home should look and feel was one of the subjects on which Madeleine and David were in complete harmony--a list that, it seemed to him, had lately been shrinking. This thought had been eating like acid at his mood most of the day, activated by his wife's comment about the ugliness of the portrait he was working on. It was still at the edge of his consciousness that afternoon when, dozing in his favorite Adirondack chair after the tulip-planting activity, he became aware of Madeleine's footsteps brushing toward him through the ankle-high grass. When the footsteps stopped in front of his chair, he opened one eye. "Do you think," she said in her calm, light way, "it's too late to take the canoe out?" Her voice positioned the words deftly between a question and a challenge. Madeleine was a slim, athletic forty-five-year-old who could easily be mistaken for thirty-five. Her eyes were frank, steady, appraising. Her long brown hair, with the exception of a few errant strands, was pulled up under her broad-brimmed straw gardening hat. He responded with a question from his own train of thought. "Do you really think it's ugly?" "Of course it's ugly," she said without hesitation. "Isn't it supposed to be?" He frowned as he considered her comment. "You mean the subject matter?" he asked. "What else would I mean?" "I don't know." He shrugged. "You sounded a bit contemptuous of the whole thing--the execution as well as the subject matter..."

Revue de presse Written with pace, style, intelligence, teasing puzzles and lots of tension. The number I'm thinking of is 1! (Reginald Hill) Addictive and thoroughly engrossing . . . this tale will grab hold of you like a steel jaw trap (Joseph Funder) Spectacular and mind-bending . . . the best thriller I've read in a long, long time. John Verdon's writing is so polished, so nuanced, it makes me envious that I didn't write this terrific novel (Tess Gerritsen) John Verdon has written a flawless novel about flawed people and he's written it beautifully (Nelson DeMille) With its edge-of-the-chair suspense, memorable characters that jump off the pages, and elegant and deft writing, John Verdon's Think

of a Number is a stunning debut (Faye Kellerman)One of the finest thrillers I've read in years. I devoured it. In a genre frequently and sadly known for delivering more of the same old familiar stuff, Think of a Number stands out as original and exciting (John Katzenbach)Simply one of the best thrillers I've read in a lifetime of thriller reading - eloquent, heart-rending, deeply suspenseful on many levels, and relentlessly intelligent. Absolutely not to be missed! (John Lescroart)