

Writing the wrongs

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CRIME has paid for Mark Timlin - or at least writing about it has. But after 20 years chronicling private eye Nick Sharman's fortunes on the mean streets of South London, Mark returns to his old manor with a blockbuster underworld saga.

CEDRIC PORTER investigates...

"I HAVE decided to quit crime," Mark Timlin announces.

But the one-time bad boy of British detective fiction has planned his exit in spectacular fashion.

He is best known for creating private eye Nick Sharman, memorably portrayed on the small screen by Clive Owen, who like the writer hailed from Tulse Hill. Mark busts out of the genre with epic saga of southside villainy *Answers From The Grave*.

Weighing in at nearly 500 pages, it's a white-knuckle ride through South London, detailing 40 years of life on the wrong side of the tracks, from protection rackets to drug dealing.

Mark, 60, says: "I always wanted to write a big novel about South London.

"And there were a lot of people trying to write about the 60s who didn't live through it.

"It's a book about geezers running around South London like I used to when I was a lad. I didn't go that deep into criminality but I knew a lot of people who did."

Although Sharman puts in an appearance in the novel at an earlier stage of his life when he was a bent cop, Mark emphasises: "This time I just wanted to write what I wanted - I didn't want to have a private eye and everyone knows whodunit.

"Sharman was a wise-cracking geezer with a joke forever on his lips. [In this novel] there might be two jokes in the whole thing. It's a lot grimmer."

But what it lacks in quips *Answers From The Grave* more than makes up for in brilliant detail, starting with a vivid evocation of the heyday of Mod music and fashion.

It was a time when you ate pizzas standing up in Brixton Market while today's McDonald's around the corner was still a bank. The Bali Hai dancehall was in full swing next to Streatham ice rink and "PC still meant police constable".

Mark says: "It wasn't anything like today. You wore a pink shirt and people would throw things

at you.

"Dads were sitting around reading the Daily Mirror and saying, 'You are all poofs'. But we had the girls."

A key scene in the book is the first London gig by The Animals, that Mark attended.

He later ran the 101 Club in St John's Hill, Clapham Junction from 1979 to 1980 which featured the likes of UB40's capital debut, Bad Manners with Buster Bloodvessel, Paul Young when he was in the Q Tips and mod revival bands The Lambrettas and the Merton Parkas.

But Mark admits: "I couldn't play an instrument - I haven't got a musical bone in my body."

And although he was working in the music business for famous names like The Who drummer Keith Moon and Marc Bolan, before turning to writing, Mark was forced into a series of dead-end jobs to make things meet.

He says: "I still dream about driving minicabs in South London and wake up in a cold sweat."

In the author's own words, the core of Answers From The Grave is as follows.

"The copper's boy becomes a villain and the villain's son became a copper. And the boy whose father was killed falls in love with the daughter of the killer. It's like Romeo And Juliet really.

"He disappoints her all the time, which is not really his fault. He is always having to leave her because of the villainy.

"Sometimes wrong decisions are taken."

As the novel's title suggests, Mark says: "There are a lot of ghosts in this book."

And there is a typically Timlin blend of the poignant and macabre in the cancer-stricken gang boss still cosseting the cat left by his dead wife. Although the timescale alone in Answers From The Grave may rule out any screen version, Timlin will be making up a double act with JJ Connelly (author of Layer Cake on which the current movie was based) when they give a reading from their novels next month.

And while he may have drawn a line under crime fiction, Mark has not given writing the elbow.

He says: "My next novel will be a vampire novel.

"The vampires came over from Transylvania in the 16th century and settled in South London when there were little villages around like Streatham, Balham. Since then they have managed to find how to go out in the daylight.."

*** Answers from the Grave is published by The Do-Not Press at £6.99.