

TV hard case

The scene is set for a ground-breaking adaptation of Mark Timlin's Streatham-based private dick

WHETHER BRITISH TV REALLY needs a new detective series is a moot point. The runaway success of *Inspector Morse* gave birth to an awful feeding frenzy among TV companies, provoking them to pick up the rights to each and every detective novel with a rugged middle-aged protagonist that David Jason or John Thaw might take a fancy to playing. The resultant TV has mostly been duller than ditchwater - and as for the one attempt to offer something fresh, Canton's *Anna_Lee*, there can rarely have been a more apt illustration of how to screw up some perfectly respectable novels. So why does Mark Timlin, author of the critically-lauded-but-not-widely-bought Nick Sharman novels (hard-boiled tales of a Streatham based PI), reckon that his TV adaptation has something fresh to offer?

"Well," says the six-and-a-half-foot former T Rex roadie, hunched over his second beer of the morning, "we've had Morse and Wexford and Wycliffe and the rest of them, all middle-aged gentlemen with sexual problems of one sort or another, and I find them tedious to watch. This time we've got a young hero, it's rough and tough — buff bang bosh —and I hope it's going to break the mould. If anything it's getting back to *The Sweeney* — that was the high point of British crime TV. I think people have got more timid since then, more worried about being politically correct."

I met up with Timlin on the set of *The Turnaround*, the pilot programme for the *Sharman* series, on a clear winter's day in Norwood cemetery. Up at the top, by the mausoleum, you can see clear across the scrub lands of Peckham, all the way over to Canary Wharf. On the far side of the mausoleum, the mourners are replaced by busy people clutching walkie-talkies and cameras. In the foreground there's the star, Clive Owen (of *Chancer* et al), the man whom, it is envisaged, *Sharman* will turn into a household name.

If there's one thing everyone involved in making *Sharman* is agreed upon, it's the need for authenticity; getting the south London territory right. After the cemetery we're off to the next location, Timlin's local bar, a place that crops up regularly in his novels under the *nom duguerre* of *The Twist & Shout*. The weird thing this time is that the TV crew are busily changing it into a Peckham nightclub, for a scene in which Timlin himself will make an appearance. As a dodgy geezer. Which is not exactly typecasting, but doesn't necessitate a giant leap of the imagination either: Timlin has had a rather more, er, chequered past than your average novelist.

After doing "practically everything in the rock 'n' roll business and getting nothing but the clap for my pains", and then failing to make a mint as proprietor of a skateboard company, he found himself on the dole in the mid-Eighties, reading American crime fiction, and wondering if he could transpose its excitement to his own mean streets.

Ten years later, sitting at the bar watching the set dressers work their magic, I wonder what Timlin makes of seeing his fantasies take shape:

"It's very strange; what started out with just me, a pencil and a piece of paper in my bedroom in Tulse Hill, is now... I just saw one of the production schedules for this, and they're catering for 90 people, all on the back of what I've written. It gives me the shivers.

"I've always thought *Sharman* was a natural for TV, but because of all the sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll, and violence, it took a bit of time to convince people. I've known quite a few writers who've had stuff adapted for TV, and without exception they've ended up richer but unhappier people. But I don't think that's going to happen here. I've been really lucky, everyone's been superb from Clive Owen on through."

Finally, I wondered whether this quest for authenticity mean that *Sharman* would be digging deep into the nation's psyche, *Cracker* fashion. "No, no, this is pure escapism. We're going back to the style of the early episodes of *Minder*, it's a bit of a romp. With *Cracker*, I got tired of Fitz giving us his world view; I'd be thinking: 'Come on, cut to the chase!' With *Sharrnan* it's all chase!" **JOHN WILLIAMS**