

THE ORIGINS OF NICK SHARMAN

By

Mark Timlin

One of the first things people ask, who've read the Sharman books is:

Who is he really?

Well, let's get that one out of the way right off.

He's part me. A lot in fact. But he's braver than I am, he's not as tall, not as old, and not so stupid as to take up full time writing at the age of almost forty to earn a living.

He's got my love of vintage R&B, soul and jazz, and an inkling for flashy, overpowered cars, particularly those that came out of Detroit in the late fifties, early sixties.

But apart from me, he's a mixture of just about every childhood and adolescent hero I ever had: Sir Lancelot: The Lone Ranger: Biggles: The Saint: Hopalong Cassidy: Tim Holt: Batman: Lash LaRue: Alfie: Kawolski from Vanishing Point, James Bond: Shane:

Dick Barton: PC49. You name them. Add to the mix, the only decent Pt ever to come out of a British writer's imagination or should I say two British writers. Gordon Williams and Terry Venables, who invented Hazell back in the seventies whose influence on Sharman is immense. Thanks guys I Then there's a bunch of my own favourite transatlantic detective heroes who I've plundered mercilessly and with no guilt whatsoever: Philip Marlowe: Spenser: Matt Scudder: Lew Archer: Harry Stoner: Milo Milodnigovitch: Steve Carena: Frank Furillo: Dave Robicheaux, and dozens more. Plus Ted Lewiss Carter, several of Jim Thompson's main characters, aid a good dash of my favourite anti-hero, Parker. And maybe someone could explain to me why Donald Westlake stopped writing that wonderful series, but continues to plague us with comedy capers that aren't funny.

And now, thanks to the TV adaptation of The Turnaround that's going to hit the screen on ITV on 26th April. subject to Network Centre approval, a co-production between World Productions and Carlton TV Sharman is Clive Owen.

Now. I've seen other crime writers flog off the family jewels to TV companies and end up richer but sadder people, but I've got to tell you, what I've seen of Sharman on the box is a serious runner.

There have only been two serious Brit PI shows that I can remember that worked, and I nicked great lumps of those too. One was the aforementioned Hazell, and the other was a little gem from the late sixties called Public Eye that featured the lugubrious Alfred Burke as Frank Marker. It's all grist to the mill girls, aid its all legit. At least I hope it is.

It's been a long, hard slog convincing the powers that be that Sharman could get on the screen, aid many a Jack Daniel's flavoured tear has rolled down my cheek at the various knockbacks I've taken. But finally it's happened.

The next question is, how did it all start?

Easy. The last Saturday in September 1985 at about three in the afternoon, I was sitting in my room watching back to back British war movies on Channel 4, when I decided I'd had enough of being on the dole. So what was there to do? I couldn't act, sing, play bass guitar, and I was too old to learn.

What could I do that took minimum outlay and didn't involve going out to work?

Simple: Write a book.

But what kind?

Simple again. During my years on the DSS and as a rock and roll gypsy I'd read a million books. My favourite genre: Crime.

My least favourite genre: British Crime, except for Ted Lewis and P.B. Yuill.

My favourite sub genre: Private eye novels.

Ted Lewis was dead, half of P.B. Yuill was busy earning a fortune in Spain as El Tel, the other half, whereabouts unknown.

Conclusion: Write a novel with a setting I knew, that was dirt cheap to research, featuring a serial hero who could go on and on, with plenty of sex, drugs and violence, and absolutely no scenes on village greens or in country house drawing rooms.

Further conclusion: The hero should be a private detective, south London was to be the obvious setting, and the characters were all based on people I'd met in pubs and clubs and strip joints, or out on the road with the bands, or who'd been my passengers during my stint as a mini cab driver based at London Bridge.

Thus Nick Sharman was born with a stub of pencil and the remains of a 75 pence writing pad. The plot: The oldest one in the PI book: The missing daughter.

Simple.

Bollocks.

You try it.

At first I couldn't get a handle on what I was doing. Believe me, it's a lot harder to write a novel than to read one. And don't forget I'd written hardly anything since I'd left school almost twenty years before. But I knew that I could do it, if I could only get my mind right. At the time I was reading an early Elmore Leonard and couldn't get a handle on that either, until a few pages in, the hero was sitting in a Miami bar, and Leonard mentioned that Machine Gun by The Commodores came on the juke box, and with that simple statement, all of a sudden it was as if I was sitting in the bar next to him. A light bulb lit over my head. That was it. Fill the book I was writing with hooks to drag the reader in. I went back to the paper and pencil.

Three weeks later I had 70 pages of foolscap covered in large, almost unintelligible handwriting.

No one knew what I was doing.

I needed mechanical help, and hired a Remington Quietriter of early sixties vintage that looked like the front end of a Chevrolet, and whose ribbon wouldn't stay level and changed from black to clear to red at annoyingly regular intervals.

Cost: £2.50 per week, but I could buy it for a score.

I'm ashamed to admit I couldn't afford the twenty quid.

Sorry too, because I'd love to have it as a souvenir, but unfortunately the shop closed down long ago.

Six months later I had the first draft of *A Good Year For The Roses*. Maybe 200 scruffily typed pages. The title came from a song by Dino Lee, the king of West Texas psychobilly. Subsequently, all the Sharman novels bar one have had song titles as their title.

Three months after that I had draft two. 275 pages.

Next job: Get a publisher.

Who did I know in the biz?

No one.

I met a bloke from Penguin who gave me the names of some agents.

I also found some other agents and publishers in the Yellow Pages. The first one I tried was a children's book agent.

How green was I?

One editor returned the manuscript with a terse note that it was too much like a British James Cruinley. Too much dope, and everyone knows there are no guns in London. I was elated. To be compared to Lord Jim. One of my favourite writers. And for the comparison to be used as an insult. What superb irony. And what a dick that editor was. I wonder where he is now?

It only made me more determined to be published.

Subsequently the book was sent to London Management where Heather Jeeves was in charge of fiction. I started off getting postcards from her, then short letters, then longer letters about the book. Finally I was invited in for a meeting.

Happy days.

That afternoon Heather offered me a handshake deal for LM to handle the manuscript, and three months later she got me a deal with Corgi for two paperback originals. I was in heaven.

I had also been slung off the dole and took a community project job at Croydon Council.

The afternoon Heather phoned me about the deal, I walked out.

So in late 1987 I finally had my first real book in my hand. AMAZING FEELING!

I expected to be feted as the next great white hope, to be reviewed in all the papers, and rushed to Hollywood.

The actual result: Sweet FA.

But I was not downhearted.

Not much.

It didn't work out at Corgi for various reasons, and LM shut down their literary side, but Heather asked if I wanted to continue with her as my agent. She said we could do well together. Of course I did. And she was right.

She also told me that it would be five years minimum before I started to earn any halfway decent money.

She was right about that too.

Then. Richard Evans. the editor that Corgi had brought in to work on my second novel as a freelance, went to Headline full time. He took it. and the first with him, and convinced them to publish both.

Back on the chain gang.

I stayed with Headline for eight Sharman paperbacks until I was offered a hardback deal with Gollancz.

And then came the TV, which is where we came in.

I also write pulp fiction for anyone with money under another four names at least. It's the only way to earn a crust these days, and it's a wonderful tradition that stretches back to the golden years of the 1930's. So that's the story so far. It's taken almost ten years and twenty novels. I've had a great laugh, got my name in the papers a few times, been on TV and radio, earned enough to pay the booze bill and buy a Chevy pick-up. Made some great friends, and sadly lost a few.

C'est la vie.

And I owe it all to Nick Sharman.