

MARK TIMLIN -NICK SHARMAN:

THE RISE, FALL AND ULTIMATE TRIUMPH OF A PULP LEGEND

Peter Walker

How to start these things: I recently read *Rodinsky's Room* (by Rachel Lichtenstein and Iain Sinclair) and, of course, to write about someone *is*, ultimately, to write about yourself. You cannot escape from your relationship with the subject, but 'knowing' an author (or his writing) is a fairly flimsy hook to hang 5,000 words on. Or even: I recently read Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf* and was stuck by the continuity it represented in the English storytelling tradition which used violence and its aftermath as a backdrop to exploring issues around the individual and society. In many ways Timlin's Sharman books belong to the same tradition... As you can see beginnings are not my strong point.

So I opted for this: Mark Timlin's reputation certainly goes before him especially in crime writing circles. Walking down Manchester's Deansgate on my way to interview Mr Timlin thinking about what I was going to ask him, I reflected on the various pieces of information I'd gleaned over the years. It occurred to me that, in many ways I'd been circling around him, getting closer and closer without actually realising it. So when he dedicated his latest book to me, I thought well at least we've got something to talk about, but little did I know where it would all end up...

How it all began

"Mark Timlin"

To: prnw@themail.co.uk

Subject: Kings of controversy

Date: Sun, 7 Nov 1999

Hi Pete.

I saw your note and the idea for the article sounds good. Surely it should be rise and fall and rise and fall again. Glad you got the book and hope your mum liked the dedication.

All the best.

Mark

"It's about a hundred pages too long" Mark Timlin on *A Good Year For The Roses*

I first met Mark Timlin at (of all places) the Ilkley Literature Festival in 1994. I'd planned to see Derek Raymond, an author I greatly admired, but his death meant Mark was appearing with Maxim Jakubowski - neither of whom I knew. I drove over from Liverpool anyway and immediately took to the big man. He was very funny in the way he talked about the up and coming TV adaptation of his books - how they got big slabs of meat to blast with shotguns to get a real effect and on the subject of just how bad he thought *Reservoir Dogs* really was. I remember him saying "Violence! - Tarantino doesn't what it is!" and recounted getting smacked in the gob and how it really hurt. He also talked, with great feeling, about the death of his friend Robin Cook (aka Derek Raymond). Mark recounted how one Saturday afternoon, watching the racing on Grandstand, he sat down and started to write ***A Good Year For The Roses***. He was sleeping on a friend's couch and signing on at the time but immediately knew he was finally doing what he wanted to do. Later on, when I asked him why use a private eye (apart from the fact he loved American hardboiled crime) he said: "No-one had written a South London private eye at the time to my knowledge. Also I couldn't afford to research somewhere warmer." I asked him which was the first Sharman and set about the task of collecting and reading them in order.

Sharman, like Timlin, was born and bred in South London: Tulse Hill is the hub of a wheel that is Brixton, Herne Hill, Dulwich, Norwood, Streatham. "Now you're none the wiser, but if you have a London map..." I am none the wiser and Sharman's stamping grounds are like a foreign country to me. And that first book might have been a hundred pages too long but not only does it wear well, it also sets the tone for the whole series. Sharman has been invalided out of the Met after being shot in the foot — which is fortunate because otherwise he would have been subject to an investigation into some missing evidence from a drugs haul. The book begins with him opening up his new shop front office in order to undertake some 'discreet investigations'. But since this was as likely as Mark liking a Dire Straits record, it all goes pearshaped, naturally, and the body count goes through the roof.

"I pulled the trigger until all six chambers of the Colt contained only empty cartridge cases—I fucking loved it".

The King of Controversy

Our paths crossed again - briefly - at *that* Bouchercon in 1995. By a weird coincidence I was living on the same street as a Turnaround rep who knew Ion Mills well. I'd been on to Ion a few times because by this time I was a No Exit Press fan having discovered Eddie Bunker et al. My mate Tom and I would chew the fat outside our house as we shared an almost identical taste in crime writing. So we went to Bouchercon together and, apart from anything else, I met Ion Mills and became a reviewer for the fledgling Crime Time. Ion recounted Mark's delight at the comments made by Derek Raymond appearing posthumously in Crime Time when he rubbished the cosies and how he felt that "It's like he's getting at them from beyond the grave". There was some sort of stupid comment from arch cosy P D James to spice things up. The details are still a bit hazy to me - there was something about Minette Walters, rhyming slang, being banned from the whole of the BBC. If you can track it down, the front cover of Crime Time 2 gives Mark's version of events.

Much later on we were at Dead Oh Deansgate. A panel discussion on 'Crime Writing - the new sex and drugs and rock and roll' degenerated into a free-for-all when someone lowered the general debate and asked a question about something along the lines of "How do you balance grabbing the dosh with having a social conscience?". It all went pear-shaped from then on and one writer got so upset she stormed out. I was there and would be inclined to blame Mark, even though he said nothing and did nothing at all - apart from actually being there, that is. And even though I was there, I still don't know what happened (and who was that beautiful blond woman who said it was all my fault???)

Mark felt that the whole blow up was down to me and wrote in my copy of ***Quick Before They Catch Us***: "To the King of Controversy". For some reason that isn't immediately apparent, controversy seemed to dog Mark during the 1990s to such an extent that I heard a rumour in Manchester that certain elements in the CWA were trying to get him barred from "Dead...".

The Rise of Nick Sharman

From: Self

To: "Mark Timlin"

Subject: Re: kings of controversy

Date: 8 Nov 1999

Mark.

Alright me old mucker.

>I saw your note and the idea for the article sounds good. Surely it should be rise and fall and rise and fall again.

Rough draft but I think I got the order down wrong or something but you knew what I meant. The idea was that you were up there - took a dive - and are now back on form -or something. You were certainly in good humour at -Deansgate!

I'll need some info — I spent a fruitless hour surfing the net looking for stuff on the TV thing but found nowt!

>Glad you got the book

Yep. Good one! Had a laugh at your note and have shown everyone and am in the process of trying to show them all again in case they missed it the first time.

>and hope your mum liked the dedication

She *did*!! I had a funny time trying to explain your note — from one king of controversy to another!!!

Pete.

After ***Gun Street Girl*** came the five books in the series — from ***Take The A-Train*** to ***Falls The Shadow*** - which are amongst the best. They certainly established the series and put it on a solid base. Having read these you want to go on and read the rest. If you were to plot the rise and rise of Sharman/Timlin on some sort of graph it would be steadily on its way up.

And of course by this time the books were beginning to get noticed.

Sharman TV

"A National Disgrace"

The pilot episode was supposed to be ***Falls Of The Shadow***.

Having looked at the books and decided this was a good one to start with, a lot of work and several hundreds of thousands of pounds went in to filming it. After Mark had sat down to watch it he asked, "Where's the Radio Station?" They'd got the wrong book and had filmed ***The Turnaround*** instead.

The first episode of *Sharman* went out on 5th April 1995 at 8.30pm. The series was supposed to go out at 8.30-10.00pm on four Mondays beginning 4th November 96. However it became embroiled in a post Dunblaine controversy as the press looked for scapegoats and easy targets to blame for something that had gone wrong in society. ITV acted quickly. They stuck *Mr Bean* front of *Sharman* from the third one on and put back the times of screenings. ***The Turnaround*** was repeated in summer 1996 but the series never has been - you have to wonder why.

"Between you me and the gatepost, I was a fan of the cheques. Previously I was scratching a living - 200 quid articles, a book, maybe ten grand a year - and suddenly the money was coming in. We're talking a different level. The thing is I've never been able to sell books. In the libraries my PLR is fantastic - 70,000 loans. The people who like my books don't buy them. They like to borrow them, steal them I guess, but not to buy the bloody things. But with Sharman on telly, well... Don't get me wrong, I loved the whole thing, but we were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Dunblaine happened and they pulled Shaman off. Six months earlier nobody would have blinked an eye but suddenly we were public enemy number one. The Daily Mail said we should be banned. Said it was a national disgrace.

Looking back at it all now - how I thought, "Great, one of our guys is on the TV at last" - you have to agree that compared to the rest of the dross then and now it had something. There was one moment - it's the only one from the series that I remember now - when Owen/Sharman clocks the Natalie Hooper character done up to the nines in her wheelchair as she comes down the lift. The look on Owen/Sharman's face of

'Oh my God will you look at her...' as she makes her entrance was pure Sharman. Brilliant.

There's a possibility of Sharman being on the screen - *big* or little - in the near future: "There's a guy called Dave Robinson - used to co-run Stiff Records - who's looking to go into film production because Brit films are doing really well and the technology now means it's easy to get good quality. You don't have to have half a dozen articulated lorries. So there's stuff in the pipeline."

From: Self <pw>

To: "Mark Timlin"

Subject: Re: Q&A

Date: 30 Dec 1999

Mark!!

All the best me old mucker — if I sober up long enough for the Millennium I'll get down to the article!!!!

Have a good one!!

Pete.

From: "Mark Timlin"

To: pmw@themail.co.uk

Subject: Re: Q&A

Date: hi, 31 Dec 1999

Nutty scouser stabs Beetle George

I love a happy holiday story

New Year's greetings

Mark.

From: "Mark Timlin"

To: pmw@themail.co.uk

Subject: Re: Moi

Date: Fri, 28 Jan 2000

10, 11 & 12 July 1 think. Don't quote me. Didn't I tell you, I rejoined CWM

Regards

Mark.

Songs

"The two big guys reminded me of someone I had once known" ***Zip Gun Boogie***

Jerry Sykes from Do Not Press told me a story about Mark, complete with a Zapata moustache, stripping Keith Moon's hotel room bare. Jerry also reported that legend has it that a photo exists in one of the music magazine's of the early 1970's of Mark with said moustache. ***Romeo's Tune, Zip Gun Boogie, Pretend We're Dead*** - Mark's background and his taste in music feature heavily in the books.

From: "Mark Timlin"

To: "Pete Walker" pmw@themail.co.uk

Subject: Many & various

Date: Tue, 9 Nov 1999

Hi Pete,

The magazine referred to is Mojo May 1996- I'm on the inside back page. It's out of print now, but I bet one of your mates round Merseyside has got a copy. I'd scan it to you, but ran out of budget on this machine b4 I could afford one. I opted for the 5 speaker surround sound system with big bass bin that shakes the block instead to watch DVDs.

Mark.

From: Self

To: "Mark Timlin"

Subject: Some more questions and stuff

Date: Mon 2 Feb 2000

Mark....

Did I mention the CD idea to you! Perhaps a tape compilation of the songs to be given away free with CT when the article is in it - do you think Barry will go for it?

Peter.

I'm often asked (well actually I've only been asked once but, what the hell, *it's* a good idea anyway) about the songs contained in the book titles. After extensive research I can reveal the following:

A Good Year For The Roses: never predictable, this is not Elvis Costello as everyone always thinks. Mark heard the song on John Peel when he was working on the book late one night and loved it. It was by a bloke called Dino Lee - The King of Texas Rockabilly on New Rose Records, a French label named after the tune by The Damned. The album apparently was rubbish and Mark binned it but he tells me that Dino does a wonderful Elvis (Presley not Costello) impersonation halfway through the track.

Romeo's Tune: Steve Forbett, on an album called *Jack Rabbit Slim*. Apparently he was going to be the new Dylan but didn't make it and managed Cyndi Lauper instead. He was actually in the *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun* video.

Gun Street Girl: Tom Waits. One of the Island albums.

Take The A Train: Duke Ellington and Ella Fitzgerald. There's a bit of a story here to this one: "Once upon a time", Mark says, "I had a girlfriend/lover/best friend/soulmate called Hazel. She stuck with me through thick and thin and I treated her very badly. I'm not proud. We sort of lived together in Waterloo and after shopping on Saturday always ended up in this little bar on Gabriel's Wharf called Studio Six. We got to know the barman who always played that track for us. She died soon after my first book was published so this title was a sort of homage if that's not too poncey a word. We were always stoney broke, and by the time I could treat her in the way she deserved, it was too late. One of the (many) great sorrows of my life. If you look for her name in the dedications she's there a lot; HMG were her initials."

The Turnaround: 'Big' John Patton on Blue Note. I always thought that sounded like an Elmore Leonard type of title.

Zip Gun Boogie: Bolan, who else!

Hearts Of Stone: Rolling Stones.

Falls of the Shadow: not a song this but a quote from T S Eliot *The Hollow Men*:

Between the idea

And the reality

Between the motion

And the act

Falls the shadow"

Ashes By Now: Rodney Crowell.

Pretend We're Dead: L7 (the band where the lead singer (female) dropped her keks on *The Word*).

Paint It Black: Stones again.

Find My Way Home: Jon & Vangelis. "Listen to the lyrics and put 2+2 together.

A Street That Rhymed at 3am: Norma Tanega. Mark again: "When I worked in a record shop in the mid sixties she had a hit with *Walking My Cat Named Dog* This was the follow up. Did nothing, but I always loved the title."

Dead Flowers. Stones again.

Quick Before They Catch Us: Paddy, Klaus and Gibson. Klaus designed the sleeve for *Revolver* or *Rubber Soul*. He was from Hamburg. It was a TV series, also mid 1960s, of which Mark was fond.

Apart from this Mark spent a lot of time in and around the music industry but that will have to wait for another time.

The Violence Question

"Machine Gun Sharman" **Zip Gun Boogie**

I started to add up the Sharman arsenal - a daunting task. **Good Year** has a Franchi Spar 12 Bore and a Colt Cobra .38 whilst **Romeo's Tune** sports a .44 Magnum, Uzis, Winchester 12 Gauge, an Ithaca Bear Stopper (!?!) and various other odds and sods. It went on and on. I gave up after a while but noted that several of the books list an arms consultant in their acknowledgements. Machine Gun Sharman indeed.

"This sort of thing never happened to Mike Hammer" **The Street That Rhymed At 3am**

"The last time I'd stuck a Smith and Weston in someone's face they'd pissed themselves. At least I think it was the last time. In my exciting world one loses count" **Take The A Train**

From: Self To: "Mark Tirnin"

Subject: Some more questions and stuff

Date: Sun, 9 Feb 2000

I'm going to do a 'Favourite Top Ten' moments from the books - the 'cooked breakfast' scene in *Take the A Train* (noticed that didn't make it onto the telly), the helicopter chase in *Romeo*, the ending to *Falls of the Shadow* and so on - I'm dipping into the books again to refresh the memory.

Pete.

From: "Mark Timlin"

To: "Pete Walker" pmw@themail.co.uk

Subject: Marks & Bunker

Date: Mon, 10 Feb 2000

Hi Pete.

I like the idea of top ten Sharman moments. My favorite is in *The Street That Rhymed* when he shoots the three kids who want to steal his watch.

Mark.

I read somewhere, it was Woody Hault I think, that within the first five Mickey Spillane books forty-eight people die violently - thirty-four of whom had Mike Hammer to thank for their untimely demise. There's some idea that Timlin is a sort of 'Brit Spillane' and I started to add up the body count to do some sort of comparison. Sharman doesn't come close. For my money the better comparison is with James Bond. Sharman is too British and has a sense of humour to boot. The books are meant to be read in one or two sittings and, like the best pulps, will only be taken seriously long after the series has ended or Timlin has stopped writing.

Of course I'd prefer to take a more responsible approach to the whole 'violence question' and put it in some sort of context for you but, fuck it, where's the fun in that? Instead I've compiled my favourite Top Ten Moment from the books — you'll have to draw your own conclusions...

10: The severed head on the toilet seat in ***Good Year...*** nice little shocker to ease us in to the series.

9: The end of *Hearts of Stone* when the broken shards of glass skewer the bad guy.

8: When Mr Freeze gets his at the end of ***Dead Flowers***.

7: 'Catherine' crashing through the conservatory window in ***Gun Street Girl***.

6: The demise of Diva after that helicopter chase in ***Romeo's Tune***.

5: The bit where the biker is shot skyward after his petrol tank explodes in *Find My Way Home*.

4: The shoot out at the end of ***Quick Before They Catch Us***. It's so *Straw Dogs*.

3: The shoot out at the end of ***Paint It Black***. Wonderful. It would have made great TV/cinema. And it's all a mistake.

2: I'm with Mark on the scene from ***The Street That Rhymed At 3am*** when those lads try to take Sharman's watch and he blows them away. He was having a bad day.

1: The 'cooked breakfast' scene from died in 1995, the year the book was ***Take the A Train***. "As dead as dead could be and over cooked as well."

"You're quite the fucking comedian, aren't you!" ***The Turnaround***

The Sharman Family Tree

"If there is some kind of hell, we're in it" Quote at the start of ***Falls of The Shadow***

From: Self <pw>

To: "Mark Tirnlin"

Subject: Re: O&A

Date: Thur, 13 Feb 2000

Mark!

>what do you mean 'down tum'? Are you suggesting my books got worse ?

Not at all!!! I mean in the tone - they get very bleak for a while - wife and kids killed etc.

Peter.

The life and times of Nick Sharman: sixteen years old "at the fag end of the sixties" (***Zip Gun Boogie***), a promising young DC in his twenties and an ex-copper with an estranged wife and eight-year-old daughter at the start of *Good Year* (she's a grown woman by *Dead Flowers*). Laura et al blown away in *The Street*, Charlie the mechanic, Wanda the Cat Woman (hell of a piss up at her funeral), the wonderfully named DI Robber, various girlfriends, all lost or blown away. And then there was Tracy. Married, pregnant and killed by drug dealers looking for revenge. The tide of the book says it all: ***Paint It Black***. It's dedicated to Mark's wife Robyn who died in 1995, the year the book was published. At the end of it Mark almost killed off Sharman.

Up to this point the books had had some kind of continuity, but after this they become almost stand alone books. Loss had become a regular theme for both Mark and Sharman. At roughly the same time Mark's friends Robin Cook and Richard Evans at Gollancz died, both of which took their toll. I remember Timlin talking with feeling about Robin Cook/Derek Raymond at Ilkley and in particular his death (by a wild

coincidence Robin Cook turns up in *Rodinsky's Room* in a chapter on East End villainy where Iain Sinclair describes Cook as "possessed by visible emotion... [he] stood against a wet window and conjured up the presence of death, the 'general contract'").

The Sharman books lost none of their edge when Mark moved to Gollancz. The six books, from *Ashes By Now* to *Find My Way Home* (including a collection of shorts, *Sharman and Other Filth*) carried on where the Headline books left off. But there were problems. As Mark put it, "The days when someone like Victor Gollancz would give Orwell 500 quid to go and write *The Road To Wigan Pier* are gone. If he knew what his company was doing now he'd be spinning in his grave." Gollancz had said that, "Timlin would adorn any crime list", and two years later dropped him (see Crime Time 2.4 for a fuller account of this).

Another Happy Ending

From: "Mark Timlin"

To: "Pete Walker" pmw@themail.co.uk

Subject: Bits & bobs

Date: Fri, 1 March 2000

Hello Pietro my friend

I've been invited to Mo Hayder's launch party. na-na-na-na-na!!!

Ed Gorman reckons he can get me a pbk deal in the US. Good news.

Mail me soon

Mark.

Its hard to think that Mark didn't have a publisher and for a while the series was on the rocks - it's even harder to think I didn't realise it at the time either. Fortunately No Exit Press stepped in. It was 1998 and Ion Mills had asked me to read ***Quick Before They Catch Us***. I delivered a two page criticism of the whole thing and the rest is history.

Mark put it like this: "You need an editor. Someone to sit down and say "love the book - hate the book - beef that up - take that down". I've got to hear that. I read your comments and thought, "Yep, he's sussed me". I went through every fucking page and re-did the parts that needed it. You gave me loads of ideas - the scene where he smashed the window with the chair in the restaurant for example. It all need re-doing."

And if you didn't already know, No Exit are the best: "Ion [Mills, No Exit supremo] actually sells books 'cos he's got to. A one and a half person band. There are only two decent crime lists in this country — No Exit and Orion. The rest do the occasional good book but that's no guarantee. When I see No Exit, ninety times out of a hundred I know I'm going to enjoy it. Ion dragged me out of the gutter and pulled me up again. And I can look him in the eye — which is a change for me 'cos he's roughly the same height! He's a big crime freak and something of an oxymoron — an honest publisher and an honorable publisher. There aren't a lot of them. Bastards on the whole. I'll tell you what. I never forget a friend and I never forget an enemy. He turned out to be a really good friend. Pam, his publicist, said, "You don't have to creep up to him", and she's dead right".

Meeting Mark Timlin

It was great finally meeting the big guy. The whole thing - including a photo of the two of us surrounded by beer bottles - is posted at Tangled Web. Somewhere in the middle of it Mark suggested I did a Sharman 'retro'.



I'd also just got to read the very latest Sharman called ***All The Empty Places***. It is probably one of the best and not only shows there is life in the series but cocks a snook at the 'they're all the same' mob. And just to whet the palette, I'll give you some kind of sneak preview, a lot of the action takes place underground. Mark has this to say about it: "I've always wanted to write an underground story. It's an interest of mine. Did you know that at Waterloo there was a station to take dead bodies to Kent in the nineteenth century? It was called 'London Necropolis'. I'm going to use that somehow".

The End

From: "Mark Timlin"

To: "Pete Walker" pmw@themail.co.uk

Subject: Culcher

Date: Sat, 3 March 2000

Hello mate, long time no hear.

I thought of you when I heard that Liverpool is to be the international city of Culture in 2008. Who's going to lead the parade - Ron Dixon!

Regards

Mark.

From: Self <pw>

To: "Mark Tirnlin"

Subject: Re: culcher

Date: Sun, 4 March 2000

Alright me old mucker, how's it going?

Don't knock Ron — he could be mayor for all we know — better than the bollix you've got down there.

I - or is that we - will have to press on with the Timlin retro - how about running for mayor as a publicity stunt? You could be the legalise anything candidate.

Listen, if you want to pop up to the 'pool in 2008 for a bit of culture let us know.

Pete.

How do you end something like this? I typed the following late at night conscious of a deadline: "It's hard to put the Sharman books into any accepted category of crime writing in the UK, or anywhere else for that matter, but who cares? Sharman occupies his own niche - no noir homage or pastiche here. They have much in common with 'pulp' writing. The 'accepted' PI conventions are there and, however implausibly, Sharman always gets his man — or, at the very least, blows him away." But, essentially, this is a load of bollocks and I think I nicked it from someone anyway. Thumbing through my notes I came across this quote from Peter Mann in a review which sums it up much better: "Sharman novels tend to divide people between those who think they're violent, gun happy, fast action reads and those who don't like them."

Possibly Mark has had the last laugh. Back on his feet with No Exit with two cracking new books and a third on the way, deals in the offing, a new sci-fi series with a possible sequel, rejoining the CWA (and the 'Mark for Prez' movement is gathering momentum), new book deals in the US a possibility, writing for broadsheets... where will it end?

As to whether or not the 'real Mark Timlin' is apparent in any of this... well, ultimately what does it matter? He obviously enjoys writing the Sharman books as much as I enjoy reading them. I would suggest that therein lies one of his most enduring qualities as a writer.

From: Self <pw>

To: "Mark Timlin"

Subject: Fame

Date: Wed 22 March 2000

Mark,

Is there any chance, do you think, now you've become respectable and famous and part of the establishment that I could bask in some reflected glory on account of this article?

Pete.

From: "Mark Timlin~

To: "Pete Walkers pmw@themail.co.uk

Subject: Fame

Date: Thur, 23 March 2000

No.