

Mystery writer John Shannon prowls L.A.'s dark streets

His novels try to capture L.A. 'as it is now.' He's earned acclaim, not fame.

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Photo by Genaro Molina, Times Staff Photographer

Imagine a noir thriller where a cynical cop turns to a private eye and says: "Jake, it's Koreatown." Picture a Southern California mystery series where the hero chases intrigue not in Hollywood but in Glendale, in the Armenian community; in Orange County, among the Vietnamese; among satanic cults in Bakersfield; and surfers in Palos Verdes.

In John Shannon's literary world, the neo-noir thriller is more than a lazy weekend read. He charges into Los Angeles neighborhoods where few mystery writers venture, shining a light on the city's sprawling, multicultural enclaves. And unlike many of his brethren, he has a political chip on his shoulder, telling taut, fast-paced stories about underdogs and big shots through the eyes of an aging, disillusioned '60s lefty.



The result is a body of work that has earned Shannon rich critical praise. But he may be one of the best L.A. mystery writers you've never heard of. After 35 years in the literary trenches, he's still struggling for a visibility that other writers take for granted.

"I've tried to capture Los Angeles as it is now instead of the white-on-white world from noir novels of the '40s and '50s," Shannon said, gazing through a hotel window at the downtown skyline. "When you write about the totality of this city, when you get down to the grit, you're blown away by the possibilities."

Although a growing number of local writers have traced one thread in L.A.'s intricate tapestry — the African American community, perhaps, or the world of Japanese American gardeners — Shannon has improbably set out to trace them all, one novel at a time. His main character, Jack Liffey, is a lovably flawed, laid-off aerospace worker who has become a private investigator,

hunting for missing children. As in eight previous installments, Shannon's newest book, "The Dark Streets," takes readers into places that many only speed by on the freeway.

In the latest episode, Liffey is searching for a Koreatown girl who belongs to a shadowy, left-wing group. As a parallel story, his own daughter disappears into East L.A., pursuing a doomed affair with a gangbanger. The fast-moving, almost cinematic prose wraps in larger themes, including the tragedy of Korean "comfort women" during World War II, corrupt Southern California real estate deals and secret "torture prisons" in the desert.

"John's goal, among other things, has been to write an alternative history of Los Angeles from the standpoint of groups and people who are excluded from the established discourse," said social historian Mike Davis, who wrote "City of Quartz" and "Planet of Slums." "This fits uneasily into people's stereotypes of modern Los Angeles, and it's what makes him so distinctive."

At a time when noir fiction is thriving, it's tempting to believe Shannon's moment has arrived. Yet in one review after another, critics lament that he has not found his true audience. Booklist, for example, said Shannon's series, "despite earning more than its share of critical raves, has yet to achieve the popular acclaim it deserves." Kevin Burton Smith, who runs the Thrilling Detective website, wrote in January magazine: "What does John Shannon have to do to get some love from book buyers? Sing on 'American Idol'? Punch Oprah in the nose? Start dating Paris Hilton?"

The problem begins and ends in your local bookstore. Although the paperback aisles are jammed with mysteries by Grisham, Connelly, Ludlum and other brand names, good luck finding Shannon's previous titles in the Liffey series. Most never appeared in softcover, which is how books survive after hardcover editions go out of print. (There are similar pitfalls for those writers whose books are published as paperback originals; without proper marketing and distribution, they too can die.)

So it has been with Shannon. A graying, restless man in his 60s, he's had inordinately bad luck: A few of his early novels appeared as paperback originals but went out of print. His next books were published in hardcover at Carroll & Graf, under the highly regarded Otto Penzler imprint. But the novels never came out in paperback and the house shut down. Shannon's new publisher, Pegasus Books, plans to reissue the Liffey series in softcover; his second novel, "The Cracked Earth," will be out in August. Yet some worry that too much time has been lost.

"It's been a struggle," said Shannon, who lives in Topanga Canyon. "If all my novels were in paperback, there would be this critical mass on the shelf. And I think that I'd be comfortable today instead of broke," he added ruefully, his voice trailing off. "You know, I probably need to win an award or sell a movie. But I'm not stopping my writing. I've always had stories to tell."

His political roots

Born in Detroit, Shannon's family moved to San Pedro after World War II, when he was 5. His father, a lifelong pacifist, became a journalist. Both influences rubbed off on his son. He fondly recalls San Pedro as an ethnic, blue-collar town with its own history of left-wing journalism that continues to this day.

Shannon attended UCLA's film school and began to write screenplays; he also penned an "I Spy" TV script. But he was also drawn to the Peace Corps, where he taught for two years in Africa. As the Vietnam War raged, he received a military deferment; to this day, he does not understand how and why he got it. In later years Shannon worked in a Los Angeles-area rubber factory. Meanwhile, his political activism intensified; he spent a good chunk of the 1970s involved with the New Left in California as well as the anti-Vietnam War movement.

"But the main thing I wanted to do was write novels," he said, recalling his drift away from Hollywood writing. "I wanted control."

Shannon wrote four early novels, all heavily political; publishers were less than enthusiastic. Even his agent spurned him, he cracked. These career setbacks led him to explore mysteries as a literary genre that incorporated politics and was also commercial. Yet even here he went against the grain.

Unlike many crime-fighting heroes, Jack Liffey is not particularly attractive or sexy. He doesn't rub shoulders with the rich and powerful, and there are no hot blonds waiting for him on Saturday night. He falls for a series of blunt, no-nonsense women who give him a hard time. By the end of each novel, Liffey may have found a missing girl. But there are ambiguities galore, plus a lingering existential message.

"If there's one thing Jack Liffey tries to convey, it's that you shouldn't try to find great meaning in any of the events that take place," Shannon said. "He tells this to other people, and himself. Some may find this off-putting, but it's what gives him his honesty."

The stories wouldn't work if they didn't ring true, and Shannon hits the bricks like any good reporter when it comes time to researching his books. He speaks to kids on the streets of the communities he chronicles; he does prodigious research into the quirks and customs of different neighborhoods. For "The Dark Streets," he tested Mexican recipes to make sure the ingredients he listed at a key point in the narrative tasted right.

He also strives for realism in his literary politics. Liffey is deeply skeptical about American society, but he also has doubts about his own odyssey, as does Shannon: "I've tried to write about what happens to the new left, with all these people who had revolutionary ideas back then, when there's nothing left to connect with anymore," the author said. "How do you justify yourself when you can't link up again with a movement?"

Shannon leaves this question unanswered, along with other mysteries. Those looking for Hollywood endings are out of luck.

"John shouldn't be a hard sell in bookstores," said Michele Slung, his longtime editor. "People say that he's so dark, but I think he's quirky, and very original." Liffey's personality, she added, has much in common with the complex characters seen on "Monk," "House" and other TV shows: "There's always more than a 'mystery' or a 'crime' going on, and its roots are in the hero's psychological makeup. Mightn't his natural audience lie with fans of those shows, if they knew about him?"

Shannon is eager for such recognition. Yet he knows it might not be around the corner. For now, standing in a hotel parking lot, he's happy to give copies of his out-of-print books to a visitor, fishing them one at a time from boxes in the trunk of his car.

"I hope you enjoy 'em," he said. "There's more on the way."