

INSIDE: A FEW GOOD GOOGLERS, THE PERFECT NERD, PUZZLING FUTURE

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A photograph of a man with a full white beard and glasses, wearing an orange shirt, looking through a window. The window frame is rusted and the glass is broken in several places. The background is a dark, industrial-looking interior.

THE NOIR THRILLERS OF
JOHN SHANNON '65
COULD BE THE BEST
LOS ANGELES MYSTERIES
YOU'VE **NEVER** READ...

SPECIAL ISSUE:

SEARCH

IN HIS CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED DETECTIVE SERIES, **JOHN SHANNON** '65 DELVES INTO THE COMPLICATED LIFE OF LOS ANGELES P.I. JACK LIFFEY AND THE CITY HE LIVES IN. SHANNON HAS HAD HIS OWN UPS AND DOWNS AS WELL. NOW IF MORE PEOPLE WOULD JUST BUY HIS BOOKS...

Mystery Man

STORY BY SCOTT MARTELLE
PHOTOS BY JOHN LUCAS

A thick haze

muffles the morning sky as author John Shannon '65 pulls his battered Toyota pickup truck—odometer: 266,982 miles and counting—into an illegal parking spot in San Pedro, and hops out. “Nobody will give us a ticket here,” he says, more a question than a statement, as he leads the way to a cyclone fence at the edge of the world.

This is the “sunken city” section of San Pedro, the Los Angeles district overlooking one of the busiest ports on Earth. Once home to a neighborhood with a spectacular ocean view, the land here began collapsing more than 80 years ago and now slumps into the sea, leaving behind surreal ocean-edge mesas that seem to float in the thick morning haze. Old macadam rests like geographic strata beneath mats of wild grass, and elsewhere graffiti covers old sidewalks that cant awkwardly, as though in a Salvador Dali painting.



Shannon, who grew up in San Pedro, regularly includes this location on tours he leads because it's one of the places where Jack Nicholson, as private eye Jake Gittes, pokes around in the noir classic *Chinatown*. Today the site forms an illicit adventure spot for folks willing to skirt the fence and "no trespassing" signs. On tours, Shannon stays on the safe side of the chain-link. But in his noir-tinged detective tales, Shannon is a fence-cutter, taking readers into L.A.'s often-ignored ethnic neighborhoods and subcultures.

In fact, Shannon's Jack Liffey series of noir thrillers could be the best Los Angeles mysteries you've never read, mixing progressive political messages and literary references into the lives of all strata of Angelenos, from idly rich surfer kids to homeless Latino laborers to the vestiges of old Hollywood.

The books are a key part of neo-noir revival in Los Angeles-focused mysteries and can trace their genetic trail back to Raymond Chandler, James Cain, Jim Thompson and, more recently, Walter Mosley, writers who were able to say a lot about life in L.A. by exploring the gray areas of morality, love and violence.

"He's certainly in that lineage," says Gary Phillips, another noir writer who has known Shannon for more than a decade. "Unlike, say, Jim Thompson, who gets discovered after he's gone, let's hope John gets discovered before he's gone so he can see some of the fruits of his labors."

Shannon's detective is both a familiar and unusual character. A one-time tech writer in the aerospace industry, he lost his job as part of the 1990s "peace dividend" meltdown in Southern California's military-industrial complex. Booze and cocaine then cost Liffey his marriage, but a knack for being able to find runaway teens has developed into a new career—though not a very well-paying one. Quick to anger and a little loose on impulse control, Liffey's always months behind in child support for his teen-age daughter, Maeve, who is always anxious to help him with his cases. And Liffey has the requisite jaundiced view of the world, marbled with a romantic sense that things might not be quite as dark as he thinks.

If Liffey is an unlikely detective, Shannon is his unlikely creator. Born in Detroit in 1943, Shannon moved with his family during the postwar boom to San Pedro, where his father began a newspaper career at the nearby *Long Beach Press-Telegram*. Shannon contemplated journalism himself—he'd always been a writer—but found that asking people questions they didn't want to answer, and having to hew to the facts, didn't suit him. He studied literature at Pomona and earned a master's degree in film writing at UCLA, was married for a blink of an eye, then lit out for Malawi through the Peace Corps, lucky enough to escape being drafted and ordered to Vietnam—orders he says he would have refused.

Shannon fell in love a couple of times with English women and moved to Great Britain twice in the 1970s, but neither romance worked. One woman, he discovered when he arrived, neglected to tell him she was in love with someone else, an international case of crossed signals. (He lives now in Topanga Canyon with Charlotte Riley, a psychoanalyst). He became a

political activist, pushing socialism and anti-war and anti-nuke messages into the 1980s, and even worked a couple of years making basketballs at the old Voit factory in Costa Mesa, Calif., as part of a union-organizing drive. He was a member of the Communist Party for a bit, thinking maybe Karl Marx's followers might have the antidote to the excesses of capitalism (they didn't).

Through it all, Shannon wrote. As his books became increasingly political, publishers became increasingly resistant. He couldn't sell the manuscripts. After a while, even his agent stopped answering his calls. "Eventually I got a letter that she'd moved to another address without telling me," he said. "I think she'd given up on any possibility" of selling his books.

And then came Jack Liffey. It hasn't exactly put Shannon on the top of the mystery-writing heap—one mystery-watcher says his books lack the "bigness" to join the ranks of Michael Connelly or Dennis Lehane. But the books have received consistently strong critical acclaim, with positive reviews from *The New York Times* and elsewhere, as Shannon renders Los Angeles in all of its quirky splendor.

There's a scene in Shannon's *Palos Verde Blue* from 2009 in which Liffey meets Sheriff's Deputy Dennis Ross at Utro's, a bar "at the tip of the diagonal slip where the San Pedro fishing boats now tied up. ... He loved the tarry, salty smells, the fishing boat masts swaying gently, and the piles of nets up on the docks being mended by old Croatians and Sicilians, even though tuna fishing had been dead for thirty years now, done in by the Japanese long-line boats and low-wage canneries in American Samoa."

The bar really exists. Shannon, at the end of the San Pedro tour, pulls into a parking space—a legal one this time—and leads the way inside. It's vintage working class, down to the pen-and-ink drawing of Harry Bridges, the Australian-born labor hero who in the mid-20th century built the International Longshore and Warehouse Union into a powerhouse while fighting off U.S. government attempts to deport him as a suspected Communist. At the bar, Shannon checks his watch to verify it's past noon, orders a beer, then carries it outside where he slides onto the bench seat of a picnic table.

Shannon landed at Pomona College by happenstance. "I was a working-class kid and I was going to go to UCLA, because that was all I had ever heard of." A teacher urged him, as a straight-A student, to raise his horizons. "I had been going at night to a philosophy class at Harbor College and the philosophy text had been written by W. T. Jones of Pomona College. And I say, 'Well, that must be a good place.'" In some ways, though, he thinks he missed out on a key part of college—finding a mentor. However, "I finally found an English teacher that I liked," Professor Frederick Mulhauser, who was the first to put literature within a social context for him.

But Shannon didn't catch fire as a writing student until he hit UCLA's film school, where he learned the intricacies of plot structure from former screenwriter Marvin Borowsky. "Unlike most writing teachers who fuss with your prose and give you a few hints, he really was big on structure," Shannon says.



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—from *Palos Verde Blue*

A Partial Timeline of Jack Liffey

1946—Born in San Pedro, California, father a longshoreman, later a rightist ideologue and racist. Jack tells all that he has died.

1964-65—Pomona College, kicked out for marijuana use.

1966-67—Long Beach State College, B.A. in English Literature.

1968—Drafted, army radio school. A year in Thailand monitoring radar.

1970—Travels around the world, spends time in Southern Africa.

1971-72—Long Beach State, masters in English literature.

1973—Takes work as technical writer at aerospace companies.

1982—Marries Redondo Beach schoolteacher Kathy McDonough.

1987—Daughter Maeve Mary born.

1995—Aerospace subsidiary goes bust, laying him off without benefits.

1996—A lost year of drinking and drugs; Kathy leaves him.

1997—Discovers a talent for finding missing children. Finds out what happened to the missing Senora Beltran in *The Concrete River*.

1999—Falls in love with aging movie star Lori Bright before the great 1999 earthquake, in *The Cracked Earth*.

2000—Rescues missing boy from the great Burbank chemical gas spill, much like Bhopal, in *The Poison Sky*. Moves in with Marlena Cruz. Searches for a missing Vietnamese girl and runs afoul of a tormented serial killer in *The Orange Curtain*.

2001—Nearly killed in new rioting in South Central L.A. in *Streets on Fire*.

2002—Hunts for a missing Iranian boy in *City of Strangers* and is nearly killed stopping a terror bombing. Revisits San Pedro to help an old friend in *Terminal Island*. Meets his significant other, a Native American cop, Gloria Ramirez.

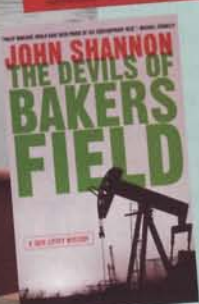
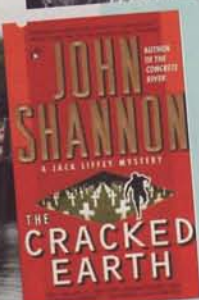
2003—Jack and Gloria seek a missing Native American girl and get caught up in a dangerous brushfire in Malibu, in *Dangerous Games*.

2004—Looking for a missing Korean girl, he gets picked up by Homeland Security and sent to a private military contractor for waterboarding in *The Dark Streets*.

2005—Travels to Bakersfield to rescue Maeve from a whipped up fundamentalist devil-worship hysteria in *Devils of Bakersfield*.

2006—Tries to stop a feud between turf-conscious surfers and Mexican day laborers in L.A.'s horsy southern suburb in *Palos Verdes Blue*.

2007—Temporarily disabled, Jack has to go into L.A.'s skid row to stop a gentrifiers vs. homeless fight in *On the Nickel*.



"He was one of those old story editors out of Hollywood in the '30s. And he knew how to take a script that wasn't working and" fix it. "Shannon also got his first agent from Borowsky, which led to some TV writing gigs, including a 1968 *I Spy* episode, before he went to Malawi for two years.

When Shannon returned, he slowly started piecing together a career. His debut book, *The Orphan*, in 1972, was a "standard first novel ... a bildungsroman about growing up in the '60s." Then came *Courage* in 1975, about Malawi and "an old Communist who kind of has seen the movement collapse in the U.S. and goes to Africa as a last chance to overthrow Kamuzu Banda," Malawi's president for life. Shannon says the book landed him on Malawi's unwanted-visitors list until Banda was ousted in 1994.

By then, Shannon had become deeply politicized. "I spent a lot of time in the movement, and I wasn't writing" outside of political tracts, including a history of the left, before he moved to England. He began to broaden his writing horizon. "I published a spy novel in which everybody's bad guys," he said. "The C.I.A.'s as bad as the Russians. That one I only published in England. Then I wrote a book that I really, really, really cared about. It's a three-generation saga of the American left and what was done to destroy it. Socialist, communist and the New Left. Also about the water wars. And the middle third is based straight on the Flint sit-down" strikes in Michigan that led to the formation of the United Auto Workers. The novel was called *The Taking of the Waters*, and it effectively drowned Shannon's writing career. "I couldn't sell it."

So around 1990 Shannon and some others, including Phillips, formed a small press—West Coast Crime, and its John Brown Books imprint—to publish their own works. Mysteries, Shannon realized, were the way to get back into publishing. "You can deal with social history in mysteries, and that's what I care about," Shannon says. They published a few books, including the first Liffey novel, *The Concrete River*, but had trouble, as a small independent press, getting distributed to stores.

"I wanted to write about a guy who was kind of lost and in-between, laid off from his job and found out he had this talent for finding missing kids," Shannon says. "I said I'll write one, I'll see if I can do it. But then when I started writing, it just fell into place. I really enjoyed it." All this came as a surprise to him. "I hate to admit this, but I'm really not a big mystery reader. I read a few these days because they're my friends and we go to mystery conferences. But there's a lot of stuff to read out there. I'll read a couple of novels and then I'll read a mystery."

Shannon eventually signed with Berkley Prime Crime, which republished the first Liffey book and the next two before changing focus in 2000 and cutting all their *noir* writers, Shannon says. He landed at Carroll & Graf, which published the next five books before it was shuttered as part of some corporate maneuvering. The most recent Liffey novel, *On the Nickel*, was published by the British-based Severn House in July 2010, which also will publish the next book (the date and title are still being hashed out). All of which means Shannon has had to endure the

kinds of unanticipated derailments that Liffey faces as he tries to track down missing kids.

Shannon's books aren't classic mysteries, in which the author drops clues in the early chapters and the reader, in effect, races the detective to try to figure out who did the deed. They are closer to police procedurals, like Michael Connelly's books centering on Los Angeles Police Det. Hieronymus Bosch, himself a bit of a rogue cop in the *Dirty Harry* mold. But in Shannon's treatment, the cops aren't often the good guys.

He notes that in the crime and noir genres, "police procedurals are about reasserting the status quo, and mysteries are really about turning over rocks and finding the ugly stuff underneath," Shannon says. And Liffey, he says, "came out of me. Except that he's braver than me. And I don't have a daughter."

In Shannon's books, the reader follows Liffey as he tries to figure out what's happened to the person he's been hired to find, though in truth, the plot is little more than an excuse for Shannon to explore characters—and Southern California. So far, he's set books in the Hollywood Hills, San Pedro, Orange County and Bakersfield (the only outlier), among others. And with each novel Shannon tries to break as many caveats as he can—which he recognizes could well be the key reason he hasn't catapulted to higher sales.

"I think I could probably mimic the kind of writing that mystery writers do, that have a hook at the end of each chapter, and follow all these guidelines," Shannon says. "I'm only interested in character. There's very little mystery. They're family dramas and character studies."

They're also subtle examinations of the effects of socio-political forces, the kinds of issues that have been the focus of Shannon's own political life—living conditions for undocumented workers just trying to stay alive; urban poverty and the people who devote their lives to trying to alleviate it; the racism and neo-nazism that occasionally break out like small brushfires; the worship of money, and the decisions some people make to get it.

"I try not to shout in people's faces because probably half of mystery readers are Republicans," Shannon says. "I don't want to beat them over the head with it. But I like to have a social issue in each of the books. ... Every one of them has an ethnic issue and hopefully a political issue."

But the books aren't polemics. Shannon's Liffey is just as jaded about political philosophy as he is about the motives of others, as in this scene from *The Cracked Earth* as Lilley makes his way through a quake-destroyed neighborhood in Hollywood Hills:

"They started by scrambling up the pile and hurling the sofa off to the cliff side. Under the sofa he saw piles and piles of plain brown books, some of which showed a fierce bearded face in silhouette. It was the collected works of Lenin, and mixed in were other works of politics and social history. If you really like symbolism, he thought, you could probably find something in that. He kicked again and again, sending volumes of Lenin flying." ♦