

Connelly, Crais On Raymond Chandler, Place As Character

By George Cunningham

The successful heroes of crime fiction tend to know their place in the world. For Spenser it was Boston; for Mike Hammer, New York; for Travis McGee, Fort Lauderdale, and for Lt. Joe Leaphorn, the American Southwest.

For private eye Philip Marlowe it was Los Angeles. Author Raymond Chandler, who wrote seven novels and several short stories featuring the world-weary Marlowe, painted a picture of 1930s and 40s L.A. that has survived for several generations. Chandler was 45 when he started writing for the pulp magazine *Black Mask*. His first book, *The Big Sleep*, was published in 1939, when he was 51. He died in 1959.

Authors Michael Connelly and Robert Crais shared the stage last weekend at the Lincoln Middle School auditorium in Santa Monica to pay homage to author Chandler and to talk about his influence. In their books, Connelly and Crais each feature protagonists based in Los Angeles. For Connelly they are police detective Hieronymus "Harry" Bosch and defense attorney Mickey Haller. Crais' books follow the exploits of private eye Elvis Cole and ex-cop and former mercenary Joe Pike.

Both authors said that Chandler played a major role in their success as writers. In fact, Connelly said he changed majors in college and decided to become a writer after a two-week binge of reading Chandler's work.

The setting is not only as important as the characters in crime novels it is in effect one of the characters, they said.

For Chandler, plot was secondary, Crais said. He wanted to tell a story step by step.

Crais read an passage from Chandler's novel, *The Long Goodbye*, that described the Los Angeles of his day and probably today as well. It went like this:

When I got home I mixed a stiff one and stood by the open window in the living room and sipped it and listened to the groundswell of traffic on Laurel Canyon Boulevard and looked at the glare of the big angry city hanging over the shoulder of the hills through which the boulevard had been cut. Far off the banshee wail of police or fire sirens rose and fell, never for very long completely silent. Twenty four hours a day somebody is running, somebody else is trying to catch him. Out there in the night of a thousand crimes, people were dying, being maimed, cut by flying glass, crushed against steering wheels or under heavy tires. People were being beaten, robbed, strangled, raped, and murdered. People were hungry, sick, bored, desperate with loneliness or remorse or fear, angry, cruel, feverish, shaken by sobs. A city no worse than others, a city rich and vigorous and full of pride, a city lost and beaten and full of emptiness. It all depends on where you sit and what your own private score is. I didn't have one. I didn't care. I finished the drink and went to bed.

You don't have to be a writer to recognize the beauty of that passage.

Both Bosch and Cole live in the Hollywood Hills. Connelly's police detective lives on Woodrow Wilson Drive, with a panorama of the flatland below. Crais' private eye makes his home in an A-frame just off Woodrow Wilson, also with a view. It's not clear whether choosing to place their characters in homes overlooking the city was inspired by the Chandler passage.

Crais, who grew up in Louisiana and didn't come to Los Angeles until he was 30, said he was fascinated by the hills and mountains. And he had never seen an A-frame until he arrived in L.A. He just thought it was cool.

Connelly, a former Los Angeles Times reporter, was up on Woodrow Wilson drive covering a murder when he spotted the remains of a burned out house with a great view. He placed Harry Bosch's home there. Although there was an attempt at one time by the owners of the property to rebuild on the site, it remains vacant except for the foundation to this day.

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