

Arts and Leisure: The sidekick steps out

by Arthur Salm

First, you have to know about Joe Pike.

Pike lives in Los Angeles. He wears a cutoff sweat shirt, jeans and sunglasses - summer and winter, rain or shine, day or night. His red Jeep Cherokee is always spotless and gleaming. He has a red arrow tattooed on the shredded deltoids of each shoulder. He's ex-LAPD and an expert on weaponry large, medium and small. He will speak when necessary, but he prefers silence.

He is a sleek master of Zen violence, and he may yet turn out to be novelist Robert Crais' greatest creation. That would surprise Crais' fans as well as Pike's partner Elvis Cole, if Elvis were hip to the fact - and Elvis is hip to pretty much everything - that he and Pike are fictional.

Elvis is the main character, as it happens, in Crais' offbeat, highly acclaimed series of L.A. crime novels. The latest, "The Watchman" (Simon & Schuster, \$26), came out Feb. 27. He's a wisecracking PI whose headquarters on Santa Monica Boulevard includes an empty room - Pike's office. When clients don't like Elvis' attitude and demand to deal with his partner instead, he sends them in to see Pike, who's never there.

"That Elvis," as Elvis would say.

SIDEKICK STEPS OUT - Mystery writer Robert Crais set much of the action in 'The Watchman' near downtown Los Angeles. CNS Photo by K.C. Alfred.

For the first handful of Elvis Cole novels, beginning with "The Monkey's Raincoat" in 1987, Joe Pike was seen only in searing flashes, a deadly presence Elvis would summon to do the heavy corpse-lifting.

"I don't use him too much," Crais said in a 1996 interview with the San Diego Union-Tribune. "I recognize

the value of that. He's very enigmatic, mysterious - a force of nature, and nature has to have its secrets. Were I to say too much, he'd be less intriguing. ...

"It's important to know what not to write."

At least, what not to write then. Over the years and 11 Elvis Cole novels, Cole, Pike and Crais have matured together. Elvis' wisecracking has tapered off, we've gradually learned more about Pike - we now know, for example, why he was kicked off the force and why every cop in the LAPD hates him - and Crais' themes have grown deeper and more profound.

So it's not all fun and bloodletting. For all the schlock in the mystery genre - and there's plenty - serious literary attention has been paid for three-quarters of a century.

Dashiell Hammett, then Raymond Chandler and James M. Cain dragged the bloodless little English murder mystery across the ocean, roughed it up and threw it in the gutter, where - in a famous essay called "The Simple Art of Murder" - Chandler said it belonged.

They and the more talented among their descendants - among them Ross Macdonald, Elmore Leonard, Michael Cunningham, T. Jefferson Parker and Crais - made it an American art form. Hammett's work, Dorothy Parker wrote, was "as American as a sawed-off shotgun."

Curiously, the very best of the contemporary British mysteries, which tend to be tense, chilling psychodramas, are by women: P.D. James and Ruth Rendell.

And in recent years, as the Washington Post's mystery reviewer Patrick Anderson notes in his new book "The

Triumph of the Thriller: How Cops, Crooks, and Cannibals Captured Popular Fiction" (Random House, \$25), mysteries - broadly defined - have come to dominate the best-seller lists. Take a look this week, or any week. James Patterson (see "schlock," above) writes four books a year, for example, that now have initial print runs in excess of 1 million. A few years ago Patricia Cornwell signed a multi-book deal for around \$25 million.

But quality stuff moves, too, and Crais, though not in the upper-upper tier in sales, does well - while getting the respect he deserves. Reviews are generally glowing, sometimes ecstatic; in "Triumph," Anderson writes that "The Last Detective," Crais' ninth novel, "builds to a remarkable 10-page showdown between two sets of killers, a stunningly choreographed ballet of violence."

"I take that part of the writing very seriously," Crais said in a recent interview near the rank Los Angeles river - hard by downtown L.A. - where some of the action in "The Watchman" takes place. "Every real-life story I've ever heard, that's what they all say: You don't know what's happening even as it's happening. If I were to film it, it'd be quick cuts, pop pop pop, shadows."

Crais has heard a lot of these real-life stories: Four generations of his family have been police officers in Louisiana. A year and a half ago his cousin was killed in an arrest attempt.

"These were experienced detectives," he said. "They'd done this many times. They went through the door and the guy was just standing there with a gun, and started firing."

"The Watchman" sports a new tag: "A Joe Pike Novel."

"I found I couldn't resist him any more," Crais said. "I know he's perceived as a sidekick, but I always perceived them as co-equals."

"When I started getting deeper into the characters, I wanted to reveal more texture, to see the world through Pike's eyes. The need grew in me to see what drove this guy. I wanted to get at the core of his loneliness."

On the surface, "The Watchman" is simple enough: Protect the girl.

An old acquaintance has called in a favor, and Joe Pike spends most of 292 pages blasting around L.A. with a snotty young rich girl named Larkin Blakley in his charge. Nameless men are on their tail trying to kill her. As always with Pike, his job is a matter of honor. But this time something else is going on.

"One of the ongoing themes in the books," Crais said, "is that people are so much more than they seem. We make snap judgments, and almost invariably we're wrong. Look at Joe Pike: There's a reason he's so internalized that he's monosyllabic. Larkin is a scatterbrained heiress, but she's a real live human being, too. She wakes up to Pike, and it's only then that they can relate to each other. ..."

"I like crime novels and crime fiction, but cop stuff is not the reason I write these books. What drives me are the human moments - like the revelations about Joe Pike's loneliness."

Which is not to say that "The Watchman" isn't at the same time flat-out, rip-roaring, pedal-to-the-sizzling-metal, red-lining action adventure. Crais filed his teeth writing for TV shows like "Hill Street Blues" and "Miami Vice," so he knows how to craft a scene that'll make the hairs on the back of your neck lie down and look for cover.

"The Watchman" would seem a natural for some screen, big or plasma; however, Crais says there's no chance it, or any other of his Cole/Pike novels, will be filmed. For 20 years, TV and movie people have approached him, very big bucks in hand. No deal, he insists. No deal ever.

"My father was right," he said. "I am insane. A stand-alone (novel), sure, I'll take their money. But Elvis and Joe exist for me and my readers. I have no wish to have Hollywood improve on my creations."

Crais isn't completely nuts; he did, in fact, sell the rights to "Hostage," a non-Elvis novel.

"Bruce Willis is Tally (in 'Hostage')," he said. "That's fine. But what is precious to me about books is that it's a collaborative medium. Whoever reads 'The Watchman' is going to envision Joe Pike, is going to contribute. I like to reach out to all those human beings. Once there's that actor up there, I'm worried that the collaboration with readers will be forever damaged."

Crais tapped a forefinger to his temple.

"It's all about the theater that happens here."