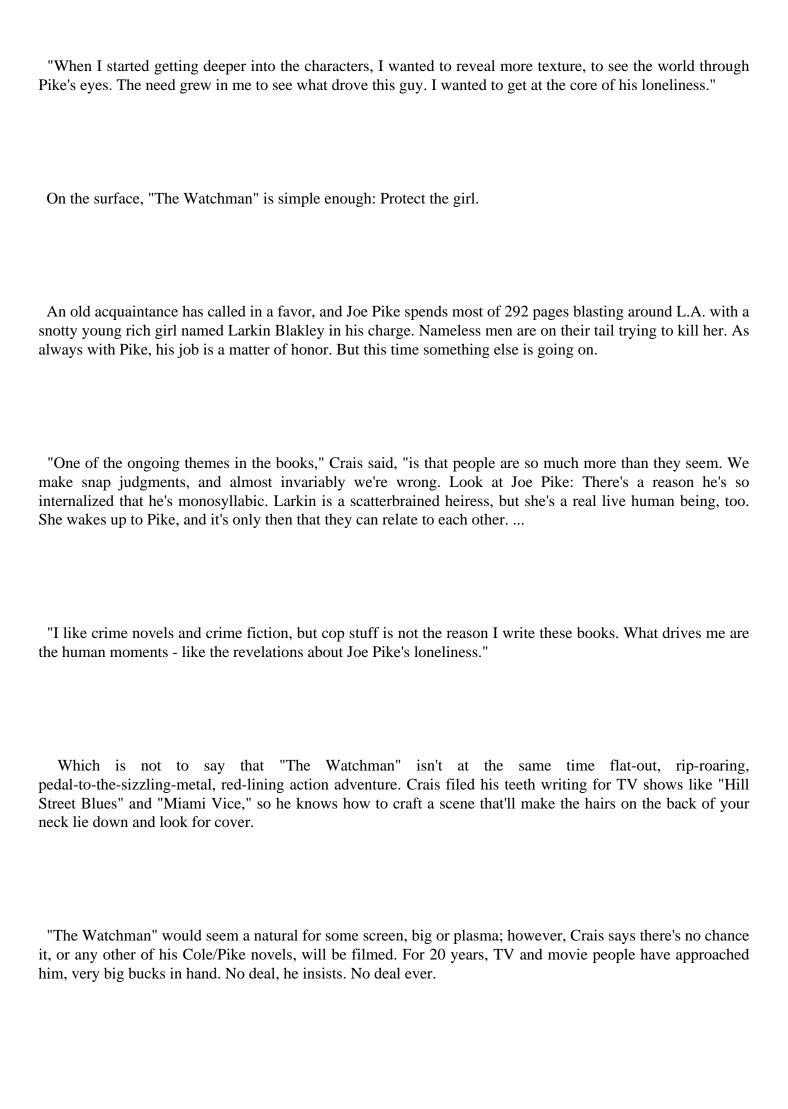


Triumph of the Thriller: How Cops, Crooks, and Cannibals Captured Popular Fiction" (Random House, \$25), mysteries - broadly defined - have come to dominate the best-seller lists. Take a look this week, or any week. James Patterson (see "schlock," above) writes four books a year, for example, that now 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.



"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."
Arts and Leisure: The sidekick steps out by Arthur Salm