Crime pays: Chicago's the city that works for novelist Robert Campbell

Engleman, Paul

Chicago Tribune (1963-1996); Nov 27, 1992; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune
pg. C1

Crime pays

Chicago's the city that works for novelist Robert Campbell

By Paul Engleman

An almost certainly apocryphal tale has it that upon seeing Chicago for the first time, a visitor from New Jersey dismissed the city as "two Newarks."

That quip conceivably could have originated on the nimble tongue of novelist Robert Campbell, a Newark native who now makes his home in Carmel, Calif., but makes his living largely from writing books set in Chicago.

It did not. Although the 65-year-old Campbell has a penchant for wry comment and sees similarities between sections of Chicago and the neighborhood where he grew up, he is inclined to view the city with a sense of awe, not derision.

Chicago, Campbell said during a recent visit, is "the quintessential American city. New York looks to Europe, always has. Miami looks to Cuba and Puerto Rico. Los Angeles and San Francisco have always looked to the Pacific Rim, even before it was called that.

"You have New Orleans, which is French. Kansas City, which is in the heart of the country, yes, but is basically a cow town. Then you have Chicago, which for many years was the cultural center of the country."

As Campbell stood on the corner of 37th and Halsted, gazing at Schaller's Pump, a Bridgeport bar used as a setting for a scene in his powerful new novel "Boneyards," there also was a glint of gratitude in his flinty eyes.

That's understandable. Chicago played a role in launching Campbell's third incarnation in a writing career that has spanned 40 years. And with the publication of "Boneyards," which chronicles the fall of a corrupt Irish cop, the city has helped to establish Campbell as one of the best, if not the best, crime writer working today.

Although he has published 22 novels, Campbell did not begin writing them until he was 48. Before that he worked as a screenwriter for 22 years.

He arrived in Hollywood in 1952, "when the place was like small-town America," helping his older brother drive a Chevrolet across country. Aside from a stint in the army during the Korean War, he didn't leave until 1975.

By that time, he had earned an Oscar nomination for best screenplay for "The Man of a Thousand Faces" and cultivat-

See Campbell, pg. 2

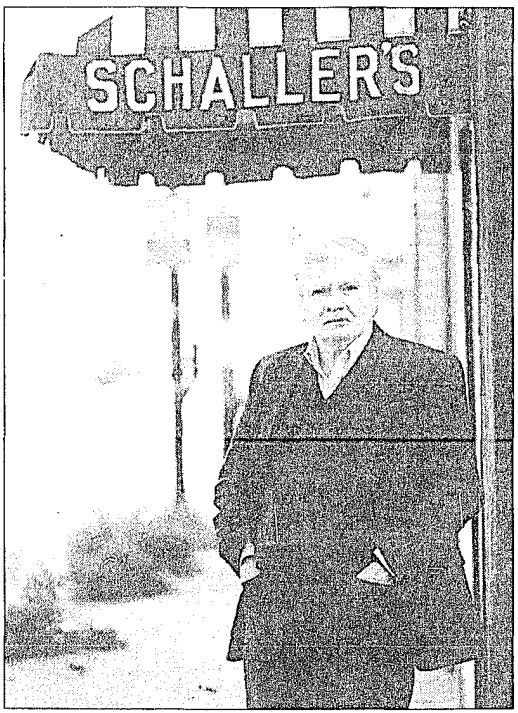

Photo for the Tribune by Brian Schoeni

Writer Robert Campbell outside a Bridgeport bar used as a setting for a scene in his new novel, "Boneyards."

Campbell

Continued from page 1

ed and kicked a drinking problem and a four-pack-a-day smoking habit. He also developed an aversion to the movie business.

Like many writers who have worked in Hollywood, Campbell has a ready anecdote that sums up his frustration with screenwriting.

During a story meeting, an executive demanded to know why Campbell hadn't changed a script to indicate that a certain female character was pregnant, as they had agreed.

"I turned to the page and showed him right where it said, 'Sally, obviously pregnant, enters the room.' He missed it, so I had to change it. To 'Sally, big with child.' "

Begins second career

Campbell rented a house in Carmel and began a second career as a novelist. Although he had little trouble getting published and his books were generally well-received by the critics, he found that it was hard "to make a dime at it."

"One morning eight years ago, I woke up and confronted the fact that my previous two novels, 'Fat Tuesday' and 'Malloy's Subway,' hadn't sold well enough in hardcover to get released in paperback. I was 57 years old and flat broke. I figured I had two choices: return to Hollywood and try to restore my career there, which would almost certainly mean working in TV; or get a job in a hotel as a night clerk and try to break the jinx."

He was leaning toward the latter when a friend, mystery writer Bob Irvine, suggested he try a mystery novel for the paperback original market.

Campbell, who had only written character-driven mainstream novels, was dubious that he could handle the nuts and bolts of plotting and planting clues. But he spent three months at it and the result was "Junkyard Dog," a whimsical novel featuring the likable Jimmy Flannery, the son of a Chicago fireman who is a Chicago sewer inspector, precinct captain and raconteur extraordinaire.

Campbell says he chose Chicago as a setting because "it was to me the last city that seemed to be actively involved in machine politics as I knew them back in Newark, N.J."

Listens to stories

He also wrote the story in first-person present tense to recreate the flavor of stories he remembered working men tell during his childhood when his father would take him to a neighborhood tavern on Friday night and he'd sit on a bar stool sipping fresh root beer.

"The effect I wanted was for the reader to come away feeling like he'd spent an evening in a tavern having a beer listening to a good storyteller."

The approach worked to refreshing novelistic effect, and it also had a refreshing effect on Campbell's career. "Junkyard Dog" earned him an Edgar Allan Poe award, given by the Mystery Writers of America for best paperback original. It also started his agent's phone ringing with inquiries from editors wanting to know what else Campbell was working on.

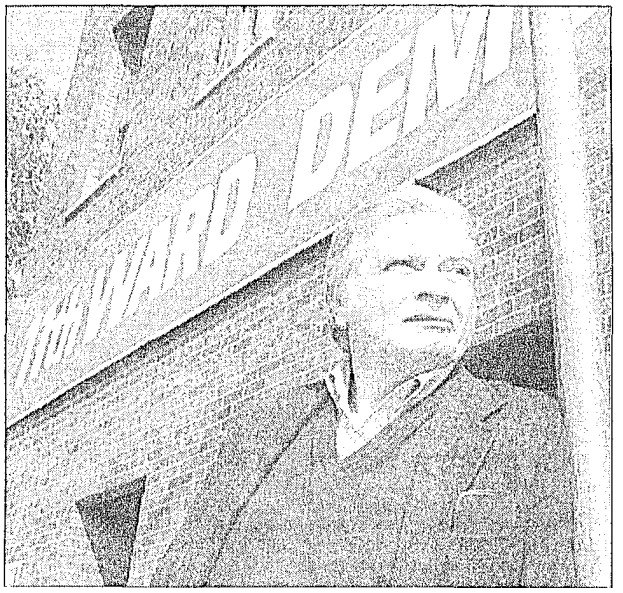

Photo for the Tribune by Brian Schoeni

Although he writes about Chicago, Robert Campbell acknowledges that his grasp of the city's geography isn't as firm as it could be.

The answer came the following year with "In La-La Land We Trust," a brooding novel featuring a private detective named Whistler who investigates child pornography in Hollywood. The book was as dark as "Junkyard Dog" was light. Both books led to contracts for series, which he has been publishing ever since.

Campbell says his "La-La Land" books "are fueled by my sense of outrage that our society allows 8- and 9-year-olds to peddle their bodies in Hollywood." The Flannery novels "are fueled by nostalgia for my past. My father," who worked for the water department in Newark, "was in many ways Jimmy Flannery."

Possibly because of that, Campbell questions the reflexive disdain many people have for machine politics. "Say you're a community ombudsman, and people will think that's marvelous. Say you're a precinct captain and they think 'ward heeler.' "

One of the criticisms that has been leveled against Campbell is that his Jimmy Flannery novels do not provide a realistic view of Chicago. For one thing, Flannery, who is as honest and thoughtful as an Election Day is long, is himself an anachronism in Chicago ward politics.

Campbell readily acknowledges that his grasp of local geography and customs is not as firm as it could be. He wrote the first three Flannery yarns before coming to Chicago to do first-hand research, relying instead on newspapers and books. He has received letters from readers pointing out errors, from his use of the word "flat" for apartment to locating Flannery in the predominantly black and poor 27th Ward on the West Side.

"When I researched the first Flannery book, the 27th Ward seemed like a decaying neighborhood where an old family would have hung in." In future books, he intends to relocate Flannery, probably in the Southwest Side 14th Ward. But accuracy may not be a major concern of most readers. After the flooding in the freight tunnels that shut down the Loop last April, Campbell says he got three letters saying that the incident wouldn't have occurred if Jimmy Flannery had been on duty.

'Simply good fiction'

In addition to writing the Flannery and "La-La Land" series—which account for 10 of the books Campbell has published since he turned to a career of crime—he writes non-series novels as a change of pace.

These are notable for laser sharp dialogue, precision of language and depth of character rarely found in genre novels. The Washington Post called Campbell's 1989 book, "Juice," "one of those rare crime novels that deserves to transcend its genre and be called, simply, good fiction." With the publication of "Boneyards," Campbell has taken another step forward.

In Ray Sharkey, the central character in "Boneyards," Campbell has created the apotheosis of the corrupt cop. A veteran sergeant from an Irish Catholic Bridgeport family, Sharkey started on the take years before in an effort to cover the medical bills of his mentally ill daughter.

By the time period in which most of the novel is set—1977, during the election campaign that followed the death of Mayor Daley—Sharkey has developed a reputation as "the City Hall pimp," so called because he can be counted on to procure prostitutes for Democratic Party political smokers.

Although much of the plot of "Boneyards" follows Sharkey's efforts to elude being set up by a mayoral candidate who wants to use him as a political football, the driving force of the novel is not politics. It is the inner torture Sharkey experiences while fighting off his incestuous urges for his younger sister.

Along the way, Campbell addresses the complexities of morality, aging and racism in an approach that prompts as many questions as answers.

Discipline pays off

As someone who now qualifies for senior citizen discounts at movie theaters, Campbell, who has never been married, says his greatest source of pride about his writing is that he's been making a living at it for four decades. He faithfully follows a workmanlike routine.

"I write five pages a day. Some days that takes two hours, some days it takes five." Over the years he's become wise, if not hardened, to the business side of writing.

"Writing a book is an art and craft until it's finished. From that moment on it becomes 'product.' Acquisitions editors are, by nature, or maybe by circumstance, insecure people. They spend more time looking for reasons not to publish something than to publish it."

While he intends to continue writing crime novels and increase his involvement in a new theater company in Carmel, Campbell is itching to write a novel that would be a departure from anything else he has done. The title would be "A Year of Doing Nothing."

Although he didn't elaborate on the subject matter, he was quick to point out that, despite the obvious inference, the book would not be about a city patronage worker.

Paul Engleman is a Chicago mystery writer.