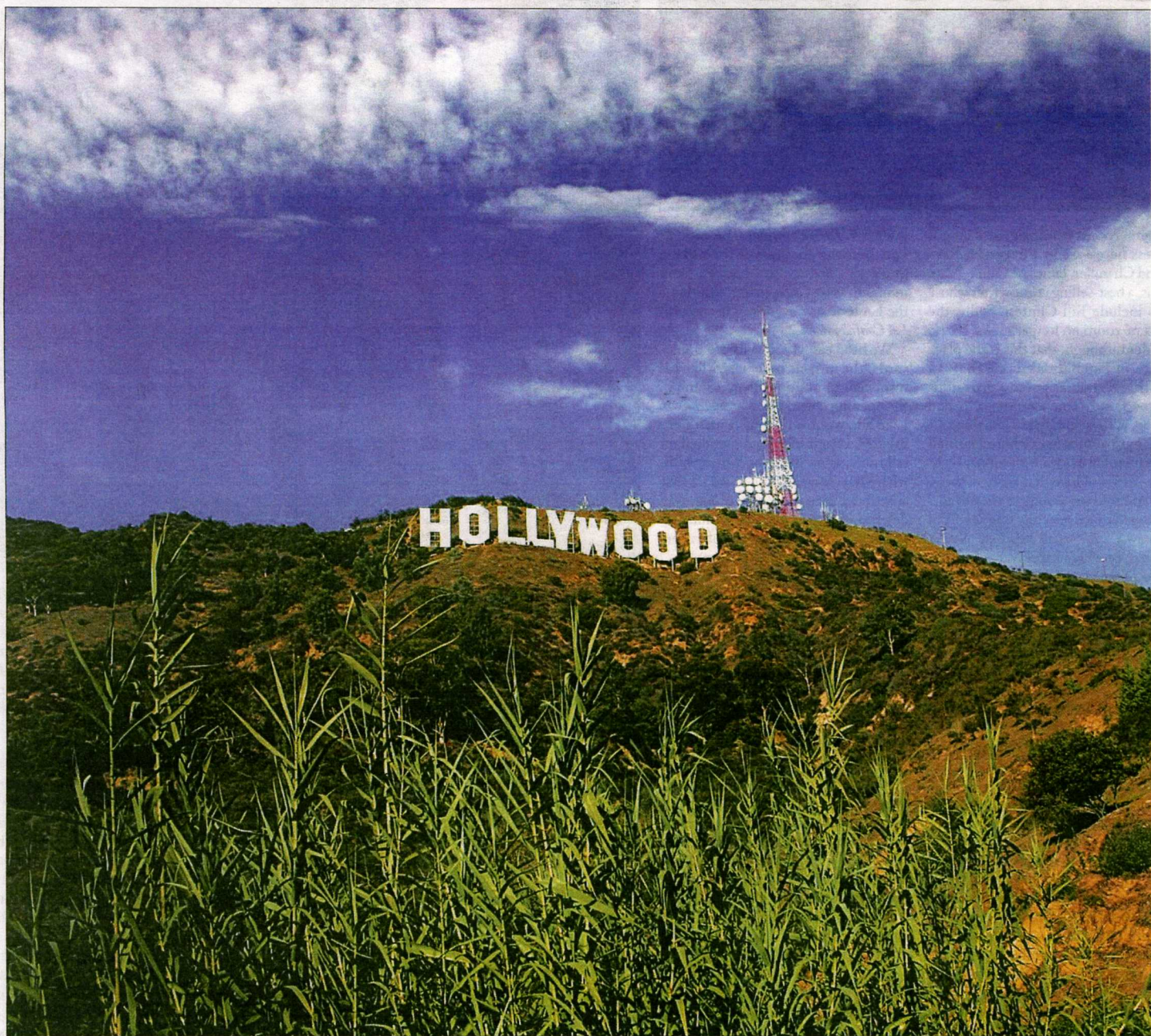


Travel & Outdoors



LA confidential

Take a walk on the noirish side of the City of Angels, with best-selling crime writer Robert Crais as your guide

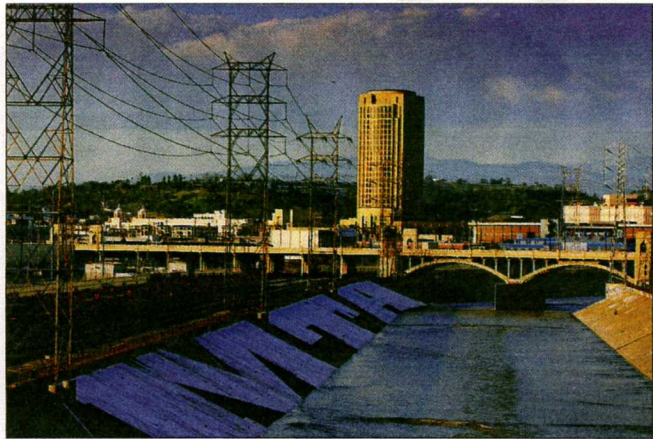
BY JACKIE McGLONE

ROBERT CRAIS AND I ARE sitting in his sleek black car in a parking lot off Hollywood Boulevard. We're inspecting the dingy grey backside of a restaurant that has seen better days.

For it was at Los Angeles' Musso & Frank Grill that writers, actors and studio bosses would meet (and still do, occasionally – strikes permitting) to slap backs, broker deals, and become legends in their own lunchtimes.

"This is perhaps the only restaurant in the world ever to have a dedicated

The iconic Hollywood sign on Mount Lee



writers' room. Just imagine who got legless here – Scott Fitzgerald, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain...," says Crais, a best-selling crime writer whose fans include Bill Clinton. Sadly, the writers' room no longer exists. It's no accident, though, that this is the place where, in Tim Burton's movie *Ed Wood*, the title character goes to drown his sorrows, only to encounter a loaded Orson Welles doing the same thing.

"That room is also where Dashiell Hammett fell in love with Lillian Hellman – it was a love that changed lives, and endured for as long as they lived," Crais adds, inadvertently quoting from his own cinematic thriller, *Sunset Express*, in which his private eye Elvis Cole promises the love of his life a romantic dinner at Musso & Frank.

For reasons too complicated to go into, they dine on a Domino's pizza at Elvis's Laurel Canyon home instead. But, hey, the thought was there, grins Crais, his eyes unfathomable behind black mirrored shades – *de rigueur* in the great basin city where the sun is always shining; even on this winter's day it's 78F in the shade of a sky-scraping palm tree.

Perhaps Crais also wears them in homage to Elvis's strong, silent, shade-wearing sidekick Joe Pike, whose new action-packed adventure, *The Watchman*, "makes 24 look like a walk in the park," according to his publishers.

It's thanks to Joe and Elvis that we're currently birling around the City of Angels, or if you prefer it, Hell A, because Crais is giving me a gumshoe's tour of the city that's as potent a character in his best-selling thrillers as Edinburgh is in Ian Rankin's *Rebus oeuvre*.

Indeed, driving around La-La Land with the tall, dark and handsome writer is rather like falling into one of his noirish novels, with their compelling pictures of present-day LA – which, despite its spurious glitz and glamour, has more gang members than any other city in America, some 700 gangs and about 40,000 members, mostly black and Latino. Apart from the gangs, Crais is fascinated by corporate corruption and political chicanery.

"The geography of the city is limitless. The LA River, for example, is an ugly concrete channel lined by industry and railroad tracks. I've used it and its

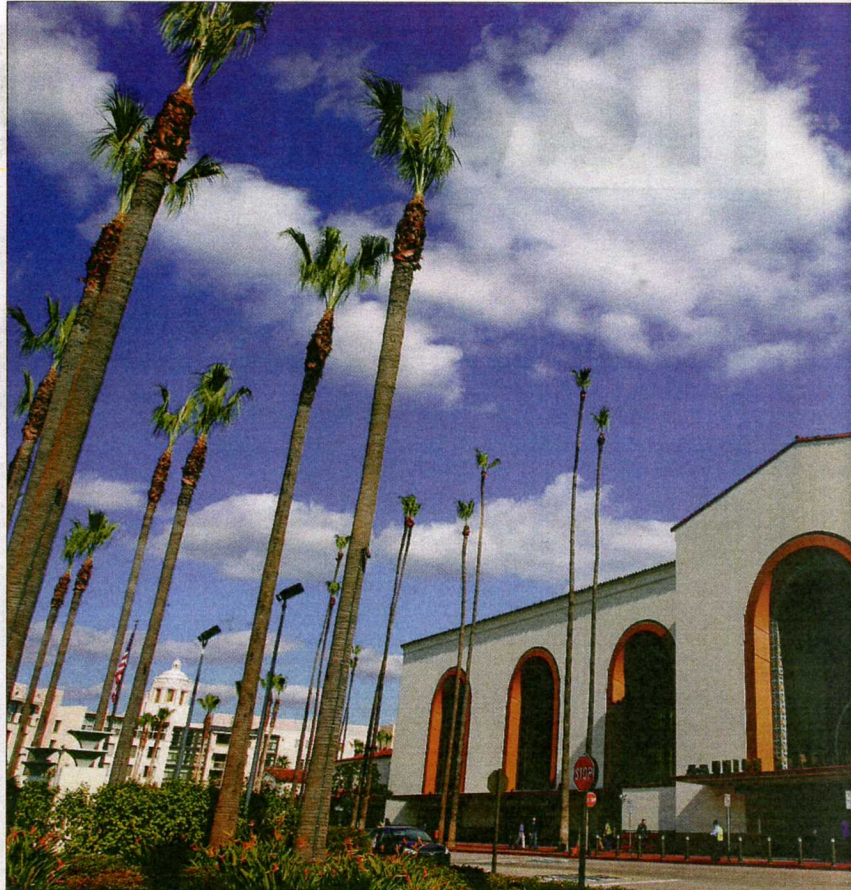
bridges in *The Two-Minute Rule* and *The Last Detective*, because it feels like a murder's about to happen any moment," says Crais, joking that this is the LA tourists never see – his take on *LA Confidential*.

We head east along Wilshire Boulevard ("the miracle mile"), just like his insouciant, but imperilled heroine in the opening chapter of *The Watchman*. Like her, we're enjoying "a cashmere breeze", imagining angels perched on tall roofs, as we head for Bunker Hill, where Raymond Chandler had his first apartment, into the tangle of one-way downtown streets made so familiar by film noir, as well as the words of writers such as John Fante (*Ask the Dust*).

The 53-year-old novelist and all those who've inspired him – Chandler and, of course, Ross Macdonald – have discovered a surreal city hiding out of plain sight under an impossibly big sky. "Reality constantly shifts here, literally and metaphorically. With fires and earthquakes the very ground beneath your feet is not stable," he says.

We park in Chinatown. Surprisingly small and disappointingly hemmed in by wide boulevards, it's set amid a maze of ersatz Chinese architecture and narrow alleyways. But we had to stop off here, Crais says, because Roman Polanski's movie masterpiece takes its name from the area, as well as making great use of other locations, from Echo Park to the San Fernando Valley, as Jack Nicholson's Jake Gittes delves into the city's heart of darkness.

Since we're not going to catch a glimpse of either Jake or Chandler's existentialist detective, Philip Marlowe,



Clockwise from above: Union Station in downtown LA; Musso & Frank Grill; the LA River

we hotfoot it to the mission-style Union Station.

A monument to the golden age of railways, it's replete with grand arches, high clock tower, Spanish-tiled roof and Art Deco motifs. It marks the confluence of Amtrak, the subway system and commuter lines and is the occasional shooting location for all kinds of TV series – 24 recently – and Hollywood movies, from *To Live and Die in LA* to *Blade Runner*, in which it doubles as the gloomy police station where Harrison Ford's Deckard is given his mission to kill all four alien replicants.

For Louisiana-born and bred Crais, who's set a nail-biting scene in *The Watchman* here, it's also the confluence of fragile hopes and dreams.

"LA is pure fantasyland, rather like being permanently on location, and I guess my novels are my Disneyland," he says. "The station's a metaphor, too, because all the people who travel here are looking for change, to reinvent themselves. Certainly, I had to be here to be me."

Indeed, later in the afternoon, as we negotiate Mulholland Drive's serpentine curves, after gazing up at the Hollywood sign and visiting Griffith Observatory, it's as if we're still on a movie set. The switchback that is Mulholland – as twisted as David Lynch's psychological thriller of the same name – is also a leitmotif in Crais's work, particularly in his best novel, *LA Requiem*.

He's used the Hollywood sign in *The Two-Minute Rule*, and as for the Observatory, well, we have to go there because it's iconic – the magnificently domed backdrop for James Dean's *Rebel Without a Cause* knife fight and Demi Moore's fight scene in *Charlie's Angels 2* – as well as featuring in half a dozen of Crais's books.

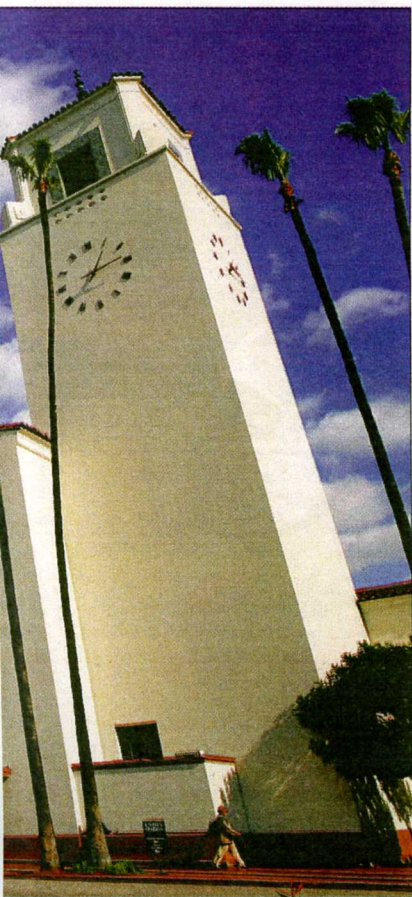
As we drive, he talks about the city he moved to 30 years ago, burning with ambition. He has written 13 international bestsellers after scripting hit TV shows, such as *Cagney and Lacey* and *LA Law*; his novel *Hostage* was made into a film starring Bruce Willis and *Demolition Angel* is currently in development with Columbia/Tristar.

Along with his psychotherapist wife, Pat, and their 26-year-old daughter, Lauren, he can't imagine living elsewhere. "I love LA – it's dark and sexy, seedy and cheesy. It's a sprawling, spread-to-hell city: 465 square miles and 11 million beating hearts in Los Angeles County," he says.

The everyday here is rarely less than fantastic, since its economic reality is based largely on unreality, on illusion and the marketing thereof. The business of illusion, the film industry, he says, means that LA is also a city of writers.

Its dramatically charged shadows, its seedy side, its mean streets, its restless people with murky pasts, its cultural diversity and its emotionally tense neighbourhoods occupied by Hitch-

"I love LA – it's dark and sexy, seedy and cheesy"



– the Short Stop – which features in *The Watchman* and LAPD lore and legend. Once a cop hangout, popular with crime writers such as Joseph Wambaugh, its doors and walls bear the scars of the bullet holes of a notorious killing. A trench-coated guy, using a comb in his pocket to simulate a gun, attempted a stick-up. He didn't know he was in an off-duty police dive. He was peppered with bullets – a sign went up shortly afterwards, "Use a comb, go to Heaven."

Once ghettoised and the centre of a brutal gang culture, Silver Lake is rapidly becoming gentrified, invaded by the young and arty, especially musicians, says Crais, pointing out the strip mall on Sunset Boulevard where *Demolition Angel* opens. "There are some great hole-in-the-wall restaurants hereabouts," he says, buying me lunch in one such – Madame Matisse's, where the beet salad and chicken curry with black rice is indeed to die for, as Elvis Cole testifies in *The Forgotten Man*: "I stopped for an outstanding turkey burger at Madame Matisse in Silver Lake..."

My unique six-hour private eye tour also takes in opulent Beverly Hills, Coldwater Canyon, Benedict Canyon, Melrose Avenue, Westwood and Brentwood – home of O J Simpson. It's a world of multi-million-dollar homes and Mercedes convertibles. From the dizzyingly high Hollywood hills we look down on the mirrored towers of the city rising like an island from the sea.

Our day ends on Ocean Boulevard, where the enigmatic Joe Pike runs obsessively always in darkness, with only coyotes for company. Facing the shimmering, heavenly blue Pacific, Crais murmurs: "You see why this place is such a treasure chest of hopes and dreams, especially at night. All you need is magic."

Or, as Elvis Cole muses in *LA Requiem*: "LA isn't the end; it's the beginning." **SM**

■ *The Watchman*, by Robert Crais, is published by Orion on 21 February, priced £6.99.

cock, Welles and Chandler drew Crais here like a magnet. "It's the most filmed, photographed, storied and advertised city in the world," he says.

"Myth and real estate are at its heart," he continues, as we drive to Silver Lake, after the cheapest cup of coffee ever (20 cents) at Philippe's, home of the original French dip sandwich since 1908, on North Alameda Street. There's sawdust on the floors and hard wooden benches, where LAPD cops congregate – it's also where Elvis Cole meets up with hard-boiled LAPD criminal conspiracy detective Carol Starkey, heroine of *Demolition Angel*.

We pull up outside a black-painted bar

FACTFILE LOS ANGELES

HOW TO GET THERE

■ Virgin Atlantic (tel: 0870 574 7747, www.virgin-atlantic.com) and British Airways (tel: 0870 850 9850, www.ba.com) fly to LA from Heathrow from around £300.

WHERE TO STAY

■ Rooms at the Beverly Hilton, at the corner of Wilshire and Santa Monica boulevards, start at £70 (tel: 001 310 247 7777, www.hilton.com).

AND THERE'S MORE

■ Hollywood Skies helicopter tours of downtown, the coastline, canyons and other areas of interest cost from £100–£750 per person (www.hollywoodskies.com).



■ For further information about LA visit www.discoverlosangeles.com

■ Scotsman Reader Holidays run escorted tours to California and the Golden West from March to November from £1,099pp. Tel: 0131-620 8400 or visit www.holidays.scotsman.com