

Well read

Bruce Cook's P.I. Chico Cervantes is street smart as well as book smart

By John Blades
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For a private eye, Chico Cervantes has an uncommonly high brow, which befits a man named for the author of "Don Quixote." In Chico's latest mystery, "The Sidewalk Hilton" (St. Martin's), literary references fly faster than fists or bullets. While he's quick with a wisecrack or a four-letter word, Chico also quotes poetry by Yeats and Lorca and casually drops names of the Grand Inquisitor and Miguel de Unamuno.

"I hope he's not too literate," said Bruce Cook, author of the four mysteries featuring Chico Cervantes, a P.I. operating out of Los Angeles. "The references should come naturally from him. I didn't want him showing off, like Nero Wolfe. He's just a guy who reads."

In that regard, he's also a guy who bears a passing resemblance to the author. Long before he careered into crime fiction, six years ago, Cook had an honorable record as a book critic (for newspapers in Detroit, Washington and Los Angeles) and as the author of biographies (of Bertolt Brecht and Dalton Trumbo) and social histories ("The Beat Generation").

"I stacked the cards in Chico's favor," Cook said of his decision to make his fictional detective a cere-

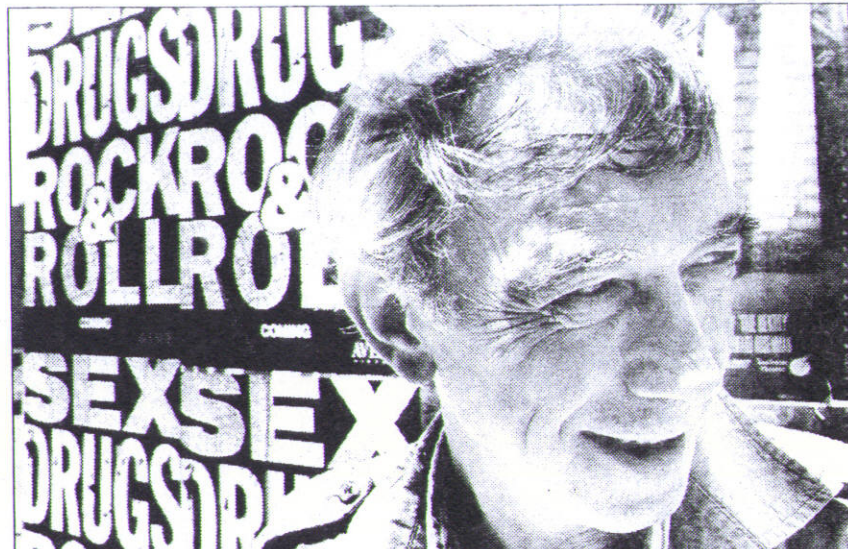
bral type, a UCLA graduate with an English degree whose knowledge of literature frequently makes such enlightened colleagues as Philip Marlowe and Spenser look like dim bulbs.

Other than a high literary I.Q. and a college education, however, Chico has little in common with Cook. Born in Chicago 62 years ago, Cook was raised in Uptown, near the corner of Foster and Glenwood, and graduated from Senn High and Loyola University. On his return from the Army, he worked in public relations and wrote free-lance book reviews, until being summoned to Washington as book critic for the National Observer.

After the Observer folded, Cook moved on to book editing jobs in Detroit and then to Los Angeles, a city that has been the scene of at least half the crimes committed in detective fiction. All the while he was reviewing books, Cook was writing them.

One of these was a novel, "Sex Life," published in 1979. Set mostly on the North Side of Chicago, "Sex Life" was not a mystery but the story of a man with fatal sexual obsessions. In researching and writing the book, Cook said, he acquired a

Books/authors



Author Bruce Cook came home to Chicago to research locations for private eye Chico Cervantes' latest adventure.

taste for detective fiction, which would lead to "Mexican Standoff," Chico's debut novel, in 1988.

Despite the population explosion of fictional private eyes in Southern California, most of them illegitimate offspring of Raymond Chandler's Marlowe and Ross Macdonald's Lew Archer, Cook claims that Chico Cervantes is an original. He's the one and only Mexican-American detective, the author insisted, and a necessary addition to the scene because "L.A. is a Latino city."

A veteran of 10 years with the LAPD, Chico is street smart as well as book smart. His latest caper has the obligatory high body count, which gets Chico involved not only with the usual suspects in L.A. detective fiction—distressed damsels, homicidal gangsters, illiterate movie producers—but also with refugees from the city's homeless population.

Chico's new case also takes him to Chicago, a plot detour that brought the author home to research such locations as the Board of Trade, Uptown and 26th and California. In addition, the novel includes a grisly crime in a North Shore suburb.

"The Sidewalk Hilton" is the first of three books by Cook due in stores this year. Next up is a paperback reissue of his 1971 chronicle, "The Beat Generation," with a "catchup" chapter tracing the transformation of '50s beats into '60s hippies and beyond.

Cook's lips were sealed about the third book, for legal reasons. Apparently, it's the first in a series of historical mysteries that will be published under another name. But alert mystery buffs shouldn't have any trouble finding the book, the author said. "There's a big clue in my pseudonym."