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CHANDLERESQUE

CHICAGO LIT | Crime novelist Charlie Newton actually deserves the compliment



For Charlie Newton's debut novel features a character based on a real-life South-Side Chicago policewoman. | DOM NAJOLIA/SUN-TIMES

BY KEVIN NANCE

It's far from customary for book reviewers to acknowledge book-jacket blurbs, much less agree with them. In the case of Lee Child's statement on the cover of *Calumet City*, the debut novel of Chicago writer Charlie Newton, I'm going to make an exception. "The best cop noir in years," says Child (who ought to know, as he puts out the best thriller series — about the ex-MP Jack Reacher — currently going). I can't put it any better than that. So: What he said.

What is customary is for critics to anoint crime writers they admire as the second coming of Raymond Chandler. Some of these claims have been dubious at best. (I like you very much, Dennis Lehane, but you're no Raymond Chandler.) But in *Calumet City*, an atmospheric shocker about an outwardly stoic South Side beat cop whose secret nightmare past has come back to haunt her, Newton certainly has all the Chandler hallmarks: intricate plotting, an elegant structure laced with violence and corruption, and above all the classic noir tone — urban and nocturnal, stealthy and smoky, grim determination doing its two-step with gallows humor.

But he has more than that, bending the tradition of hard-boiled detective fiction in a more vulnerable, more human direction while retain-

The book opens with a first-person prologue in which the decorated Chicago police officer Patti Black sits alone "in a side-street restaurant with faded Chinese characters for an address and six tables for locals who should know better. It's dim in here, and that's unusual. The floor's dirty, and that isn't. Rice kettles and radiators steam the stale air humid. Back by the kitchen an old woman sits smoking unfiltered cigarettes down to her fingertips and has for as long as I can remember. We don't speak, her and I; we stare out the front window. Her eyes hide behind the smoke and that's probably a good thing—she hears what I hear: the echoes of a long, violent struggle between me and the devil."

Question: How did Newton achieve such an authoritative voice in his first novel? Answer: It's not his first. It's his

sixth. The first five just never got published. In 1999 he ended a run of real-estate and brokerage jobs and spent eight years writing full-time, "learning the craft and earning nothing," Newton says in an interview from the Cape of Good Hope in

novels (both set to be published over the next two years).

And yes, the Chandler connection to Newton's self-education is crucial. Pete Dexter, Thomas Harris and Hunter S. Thompson were in the mix, too, but in the key area of language, Chandler was the lodestar: "You couldn't always follow his

plots," Newton says, "but his sentences were so good that you didn't care."

Newton's other major influence came from real life. At some point during his novelistic apprenticeship, he was introduced to a real-life South Side policewoman named, of all things, Patti Black. After hearing her stories, Newton began to develop a fictional alter ego, a sexual abuse survivor who, in *Calumet City*, finds herself the reluctant pivot point of several seemingly unrelated events, including an assassination attempt on the mayor, a gangland drug bust gone bad, the discovery of a dead body entombed in a basement and the murder of a state attorney. In the end she discovers that the unfinished business of her troubled youth is just that: unfinished.

"She has a lot of baggage," says Newton, speaking of both the char-

acter and the woman. How can a woman walk through that hell every day, develop the tough-guy persona that's necessary to do it, and then come out the other side?"

He wrote the novel using Black's real name, thinking he'd change it in the end but realized that no other name would do, as long as she agreed. He brought her the manuscript and said, "Some of it's about you and some of it isn't."

She read the book. Shrugged.

"She's made out of concrete," Newton says. "She said, 'I don't care.'"

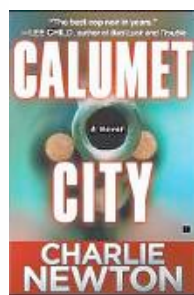
And maybe a South Side cop could see that Charlie Newton is a major new writer of crime fiction, and that *Calumet City* is — well, you know.

What Lee Child said.

Kevin Nance is the editor of Sunday Show.

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CHARLIE NEWTON



CALUMET CITY
By Charlie Newton
Simon and Schuster, 393 pages, \$14

