Crime doesn’t pay, supposedly — but Peter Corris is disproving the rule. The Sydney crime writer has just signed a deal with JNP Films, producers of A Country Practice, to turn his Cliff Hardy series into 20 one-hour episodes for television. Rumour has it that the contract is worth $600,000.

Corris has gained a following among the left by writing sharp-edged thrillers which confront urgent social and political issues. But the TV deal reflects the increasingly commercial orientation of his recent ventures.

Corris tried his hand at script-writing when The Empty Beach became a film in 1985. Now he’ll be adapting two more of his books for JNP. His latest book, The Man in the Shadows, due for release in mid-August, is a collection of stories — three of which have already appeared in Australian Penthouse (which may account for the all-too-many titillating descriptions). The Hardy series is beginning to sell in the US, with print runs of 60,000. Translations are selling elsewhere in Spanish and French; there will be Russian editions in the near future.

All this is a long way from the days when Corris had a pile of rejection slips for his first Hardy story, The Dying Trade, and used to search through the car upholstery for spare coins. He’d just given up lecturing in history: “I was washed up as an academic; I’d run out of ideas and enthusiasm. I was on the way to being one of those who wait out their time.”

“Australia’s answer to Raymond Chandler”, as he’s been called, was born in working-class Melbourne in 1942. His parents encouraged him to study but became concerned at how long he kept at it. He graduated with a PhD from ANU, finally, on Solomon Islands Labour Migration, 1870-1914. It’s remote from Cliff Hardy’s world (or underworld), but then Corris insists that he’s remote from Hardy’s world: “I get my material mainly from other books. And unlike Hardy, I’m not into physical courage.”

Corris feels that lately his reputation has been too narrowly based on the Hardy series. Ask him about the series and he’ll emphatically remind you he’s also written books on boxing (The Winning Side, a novel, and a critical study, Lords of the Ring), espionage stories featuring secret agent Ray Crawley, and his latest baby, the Richard Browning series.

Browning is “an outrageous bludger”, a genial soundrel, a swashbuckling coward with “a dash of Errol Flynn”. He deserts during World War I and, in the recently published ‘Beverley Hills’ Browning, he escapes Sydney for Hollywood in the ’20s — only to find himself involved with a secret Mexican army, a corrupt movie business, bootlegging and drug running.

Maybe Corris’ eye is too much on the American market, or maybe he’s just churning out too much — but the Browning books lack the bite of the Hardy ones. ‘Beverley Hills’ is often directionless, unexciting and flat. You wonder what’s happened to the Corris who created the Hardy plots which short-circuit and explode, where the comments on present-day Sydney are incisive and there is a sharply-drawn cast of shady entrepreneurs, drug addicts, politicians, hit-men, sociopaths, prostitutes, psycho-surgeons and more.

Peter Corris confesses to being surprised at the interest the left has taken in his writing. “I see my books as entertainment and that’s all. I regard myself as a pulp writer.” He describes Hardy as “a wishy-washy socialist, middle-of-the-road Labor with sympathies closer to Hayden than Hawke”. Corris wrote in the National Times in 1986 that “the private investigator, the hard-boiled private eye, is a bourgeois individualist. He’s not interested in collective solutions to problems and he tends to be sceptical about social redemption”.

Corris’ stories are male-oriented and the genre is not exactly “ideologically sound” per se, but perhaps it’s the ambivalence, the awareness of tensions (both narrative and political) that make them interesting. In The January Zone Hardy expresses a dislike for leftwing politicians and unions — yet he’s opposed to US bases as well.

Corris himself seems to occupy an ambivalent ground. The historian and social theorist in him remains preoccupied with wider issues, while the entertainer exploits popular literary forms with commercial success.

Critics have complained recently that the Hardy stories are losing their edge, that the subversiveness is receding. The Baltic Business, the second in the Crawley series, raises issues of the ethnic right in Melbourne. But the resolution is conventional and unsatisfying. Corris has said: “to write book after book, you have to write out of something, out of some need, some tension”. Perhaps increasing financial security and commercial success have slackened this tension. But who knows? Reworking the Hardy books for TV might provide the stimulus he needs.

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