

Press Reviews

Black Dahlia Avenger: A Genius for Murder

(NYT Bestseller, Edgar Nominee Best Fact Crime and a NYT Most Notable Book)

"The most haunting murder mystery in Los Angeles country during the 20th century has finally been solved in the 21st century."

—**Stephen R. Kay, L.A. County Head Deputy District Attorney (July 2001)**

"Los Angeles is the construct of its mythologies good and bad, fact and fiction. The legend of Elizabeth Short is one of the most enduring. Hodel's investigation is thoroughly and completely convincing. So too is this book. As far as I am concerned, this case is closed."

—Bestselling author of *The Lincoln Lawyer*, **Michael Connelly**

"Fascinating."

—**Johnny Depp**

"*Black Dahlia Avenger* is the best nonfiction book about L.A. crime I have ever read. Former LAPD detective Steve Hodel's journey into the heart of a brutal crime and into the dark places of his soul stayed with me after I read it. *Black Dahlia Avenger* has it all: suspense, intrigue, bizarre sex, moral ambiguity, all set against a backdrop of the L.A. of Mickey Cohen, Bill Parker, and Tony Cornero. the words 'compelling' and 'riveting,' though accurate, do not do justice to this nonfiction tour de force."

—**Gerald Petievich, author of *The Sentinel* and *To Live and Die in L.A.***

New York Times Book Review

by David Thomson, Bestselling author & film critic

One day in Bellingham, Wash., in 1999, at 1 o'clock in the morning, Steve Hodel's phone rings. At that hour, it has to be bad news. His father, Dr. George Hodel, has died in San Francisco. This is hardly surprising: the doctor is 91, the son is 57. But for decades the doctor has lived in Asia and the two have been estranged. Over the years, he has had four marriages, and ten children. But recently Steve and his father have started talking. Is this part of cruelty's trap?

The doctor's ashes are scattered under the Golden Gate Bridge. He has left orders that there be no funeral. But there is a small, palm-size photograph album, and the doctor's last wife thinks Steve should have it. There are pictures of inside: Steve as a little boy, on his father's knee, when they lived in Los Angeles; Steve's mother; the doctor's father. This is where we need tingling music. This is where the horror begins. For Steve turns the small page and sees two pictures of a young Eurasian woman. It is Steve's wife (divorced now), Kiyō -- yet it is Kiyō younger than Steve ever saw her. It can only be a Kiyō whom his own father had known, had possessed. Steve remembers his father's pale face when he once met his daughter-in-law.

A few pages further on there are two pictures of another young woman: Caucasian, with black hair. In both pictures her eyes are cast down. In one, she has two white flowers in her dark hair. In the other, she could be naked. Or asleep. She might be dead. Steve Hodel is stirred by this face. But he can't remember why. Until he realizes, hours later, that the flowers are dahlias. And the woman could be . . . Elizabeth Short.

You see, Steve Hodel is not long retired from nearly 24 years' service with the Los Angeles Police Department, an organization for which Elizabeth Short is a ghost who cannot rest. On the morning of Jan. 15, 1947, passers-by saw gaping white flesh on a vacant lot at 39th and Norton in Los Angeles. The young female body was cut in half, at the waist. The arms were raised above the head in a curious, arty pose. The mouth was extended in a

grotesque gash; a hysterectomy had been performed. But death had been caused by blows to the head. The corpse was Elizabeth Short, from the Boston area, who had been a few years in California in the attempt to get herself into classier pictures than morgue shots. It turned out that sailors in Long Beach had called her the Black Dahlia. Until this book, that case had never been solved.

And even that closure, I suppose, is something the L.A.P.D must rule on — and it may not be entirely relieved to have the case over. Steve Hodel speaks of himself as a good solid cop, and that's the way he writes. Don't pick up this book for the jazzy rage of James Ellroy or the melancholy atmospheric of Raymond Chandler. At the same time, you'll be too busy clinging to the narrative to complain about the prose. It's only at the end of the book, as you realize how thoroughly Steve Hodel has identified his father as the killer of the Black Dahlia — and the inspiration for an alphabet of other murders, including the mother Ellroy lost at the age of 10 — that you realize how detached he is from the creepy blood ties of tracking down his own father. Is that a lack of skill — or a protective numbness? Does he guess that the photograph album may have been meant to infect a steadfast son?

As for George Hodel, the best thing I can say for him is that someone like Kevin Spacey should buy the film rights to this book quickly. He was tall, dark and handsome in a rather mournful way; he was a precocious child, a first-class doctor, a dabbler in art, a man of the world; and a disdainful connoisseur of women. That he ever escaped being nailed as the Black Dahlia killer (leave the other killings aside) is a measure of that L.A.P.D we have come to know from the Ellroy thrillers.

If only Steve had been young enough to handle the case himself. As it is, he uncovers the sordid and seemingly secure evidence against his father for running orgies in the grand Lloyd Wright (son of Frank) house on Franklin Avenue, especially ones that involved the rape upon rape of Steve's older half sister, Tamar. George got away with that because a shameless lawyer created the idea of "Tamar the liar," and because the L.A.P.D wasn't as judiciously hostile to Dr. George as it might have been.

He was part of an abortionists' circle in Los Angeles, and he knew which cops you could lean on. So he never made it past the level of "prime suspect" in the Elizabeth Short case. But the sardonic doctor seems to have understood his hazardous liberty. He was a sophisticate, a man who mixed freely with Man Ray and John Huston; indeed, George's second wife, Steve's mother, Dorothy, had also been John Huston's first wife. Throw Fred Sexton, who Steve Hodel is convinced was a regular accomplice (and the killer of Ellroy's mother), and you have a sinister gang. (It was Sexton, a bit of a sculptor, who did the bird for Huston's film of "The Maltese Falcon.")

That doesn't mean that Man Ray or Huston was an accomplice, but neither does it exclude them from knowing damning stuff about the suave doctor and his hobby. And although Steve Hodel doesn't set himself up as a critic of film noir or social historian of Los Angeles, still it's in this background and atmosphere that his book is most intriguing.

Ray and Huston were alike in their simultaneous adoration of women and the gloomy certainty that they couldn't be trusted. For Ray, the crucial experience had been his love affair with the beautiful Lee Miller, their joint development of the solarized photograph had his discovery that he could no more hold or own Miller than he could light. It had left him strangely remote, a chilly observer of human vagary.

Huston had his own strains of cruelty and cynicism. He could do nearly anything he turned his hand to — it was inevitable that he became a hit in Hollywood. (He once said that the secret to direction was the sadism it required.) But he drank, he believed in very little except risk, and he was a victim of that boredom that so often fell upon talent in the mid-20th century. In the early 30's, driving drunk, he had killed a woman pedestrian. It took influence to hush the matter up without damaging his career.

They were not alone as brilliant men, naturally creative, yet hardly capable of believing in what they might do in the poisoned dawn of concentration camps and atom bombs. And George Hodel was their friend, their fellow partygoer, and someone eager to impress more famous men. As it turned out, murder was his art, especially the cut-up jobs on attractive young women, just the sort who hoped that Man Ray might photograph them, or John Huston give them a test. (In 1950, as it happens, one such woman had a striking cameo in Huston's "Asphalt Jungle"; her name was Marilyn Monroe.)

Crime was as rampant as musicals in Los Angeles in the postwar years — this is the age of Bugsy Siegel, the founding of Las Vegas, Mickey Cohen and gun battles on Sunset Boulevard loud enough to wake Norma Desmond herself. And it's the age of film noir, which is often assessed as the result of German Expressionism being crossed with American B pictures. But noir went deeper than that; it was also the mood of idle, affluent, talented guys après orgy mulling over dreams of actes gratuits, and worse. George Hodel, I think, is fit company for some of noir's most civilized villains — like Waldo Lydecker in "Laura," Harry Lime in "The Third Man" or even Noah Cross in "Chinatown," the man who (thanks to the screenwriter, Robert Towne) warned us, "Most people never have to face the fact that at the right time and right place, they're capable of anything." And what had Cross done? Raped his daughter, and his city, and lived into old age.

—David Thomson, **New York Times Book Review**

""BLACK DAHLIA" BOOK A MUST-READ . . . A BLOCKBUSTER.

"FOR MURDER, though it have no tongue, will speak with most miraculous organ," as Shakespeare said in "Hamlet."

Hitting bookstores any second is a work from Arcade sure to be snapped up by the many fans of famed unsolved homicide cases. Cover-up aficionados will have a field day as well. We're talking about "Black Dahlia Avenger: The True Story" written by a former LAPD detective. This book purports to solve the grisly 1947 murder of beautiful movie hopeful Elizabeth Short.

If you go to Amazon.com, you'll find the book title, but the author is listed as "Anonymous." He is not ready to be named until Friday, so we'll respect his cover, but he claims he knows the identity of Miss Short's killer. And the murderer can be linked to a series of kidnap-rape-murders before and after Short's death made a field day for the L.A. newspapers just after World War II. This was a man said to be "a highly respected member of society by day and a sadistic killer at night."

There is also a "Dahliagate"-type of cover-up by the LAPD suggested in the book as "obstruction of justice at the highest levels of police command." More on that as it comes to us.

The Black Dahlia case has fascinated crime buffs from the moment Ms. Short's dismembered and gruesomely "arranged" body was found in a vacant lot. Others claimed to have solved the case. But the current book's investigations look to be more thorough and detailed. And personal. The revelation here is a blockbuster. More we cannot say. "Dateline" on NBC will do a special on it this coming Sunday.

—Liz Smith, **New York Post**

One year ago, a retired LAPD homicide cop approached me and said in a whisper that he had a blockbuster story in the works, but he couldn't divulge the details at the time.

Last week, he got in touch again to deliver the goods.

Steve Hodel, 61, said he had cracked the most notorious unsolved murder in Los Angeles history — the case of the Black Dahlia.

But it gets even better. The killer, he said, was his father, a powerful and dashing doctor who threw racy parties at his exotic Lloyd Wright-designed home at Franklin and Normandie avenues in Los Feliz — parties attended by the likes of photographer Man Ray and film giant John Huston. . . .

And should you think "Black Dahlia Avenger" is too improbable to be anything but a son's poison-tipped arrow, aimed at the heart of a father who abandoned his family, consider this endorsement from the prosecutor who helped put the Manson family behind bars:

"He got his man," says Steve Kaye, who still works for the L.A. County district attorney's office.

Like all mysteries, this one leads you down dark alleys and through a maze of fact, myth and distortions.

—Steve Lopez, **Los Angeles Times**

"*Old Case, New Twist*: An ex-LAPD detective says he's finally solved the 1947 Black Dahlia murder. He probably wishes he hadn't . . . [Steve Hodel] gives us a fascinating family psychodrama; we watch his image of his father morph from flawed but lovable ladies' man to monster. And this theory of the case will intrigue Black Dahlia buffs."

—**Newsweek**

"The gruesome slaying transfixed postwar Los Angeles the way the double homicides of Nicole Simpson and Ron Goldman did a generation later. It was film noir come to life, a glimpse into a shadow world of macabre kink and psychosis and corruption that ripped up the sunny postcards of suburban idylls and Hollywood dreams. It was the Manson murders before the invention of television."

—**Washington Post**

"It's a story that's fascinated crime buffs for decades. There have been almost as many potential murderers put forward as fictionalized versions of the long-unsolved case. Now, a onetime Van Nuys cop has penned a book that names the latest suspect in 1947's grisly "Black Dahlia" mutilation slaying -- his own father."

—**Los Angeles Daily News**

"The Black Dahlia mystery is to Los Angeles what the Jack the Ripper saga is to the East End. Fictionalised in a novel of the same name by James Ellroy, the story boasts all the glamour and sinister mystique of film noir."

—**The Daily Telegraph (London)**

"What makes Steve Hodel's new book, *Black Dahlia Avenger*, a little different is that the man he believes responsible for slicing the aspiring actress Betty Short, 22, in half and dumping her in a vacant lot is his father."

—**Independent (London)**

"Hodel goes not for the splashy confession, but builds evidence painstakingly into what is an extremely plausible case. . . . This unsparing, chilling account of the actions of a perfect psychopath grips to the end."

—**Toronto Globe and Mail**

"Hodel tells the story well and with incredible objectivity. . . . a real-life tale of a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde."

—**Richmond Times-Dispatch**

"Black Dahlia Avenger: A Genius for Murder is stuffed with every kind of sensation you could ask for: sex, serial murder, star power, evil genius, corruption, family betrayal, and even some perversely arousing avant-garde art."

—*East Bay Express*, **East Bay Express**

"Former Los Angeles police detective Steve Hodel has written one of the most compelling true-crime books of all time in *Black Dahlia Avenger: The True Story*...the most noir of noir stories."

—*Seattle Weekly*, **Seattle Weekly**

"Steve Hodel, a private investigator who served in the Los Angeles Police Department for 24 years, reveals the chilling discovery in his gripping new book *Black Dahlia Avenger*."

—*Rob Gibson*, **Florida Globe**

"The book, a fascinating read regardless of which side you take, has been the subject of passionate debate in American newspapers from the New York Times to the L.A. Times, and on television programs like *Dateline NBC*."

—*Nick Miliokas*, **Leader-Post**

"This remarkable book will keep readers riveted from the first page to the very last."

—**Tucson Citizen**

"Black Dahlia Avenger" is a fascinating and horrifying tale of 1940s Los Angeles—as Steve Hodel says, a real-life "L.A. Confidential."

—**San Jose Mercury News**

"A fascinating and horrifying tale of 1940s Los Angeles."
—**The State, Columbia, SC**

"A noteworthy work . . . a certified page-turner. Hodel is quite the writer, as well."
—**Lake Arrowhead Mountain News**

"Fascinating for reasons the author never intended, "Black Dahlia Avenger" offers the opportunity to follow the extraordinary obsessions of a son who believes "nothing more than a hair trigger separates the heaven of Dr. Schweitzer from the hell of a Dr. Hodel."
—**Santa Barbara News-Press**

"This is an amazing story. . . . Readers that appreciate the mind and style of presentation of a seasoned professional will really enjoy this book. . . . This book is worth the read just for the incredible facts presented, the descriptions of L.A. in that era and the startling conclusion reached. . . . Perhaps *Black Dahlia Avenger* is most important for its psychological profiles of defiant behavior."
—**St. Augustine Record**

"This remarkable book solves one of California's most baffling murder cases. . . . It is must reading, especially for those who appreciate true-crime writing."
—**Tucson Citizen**