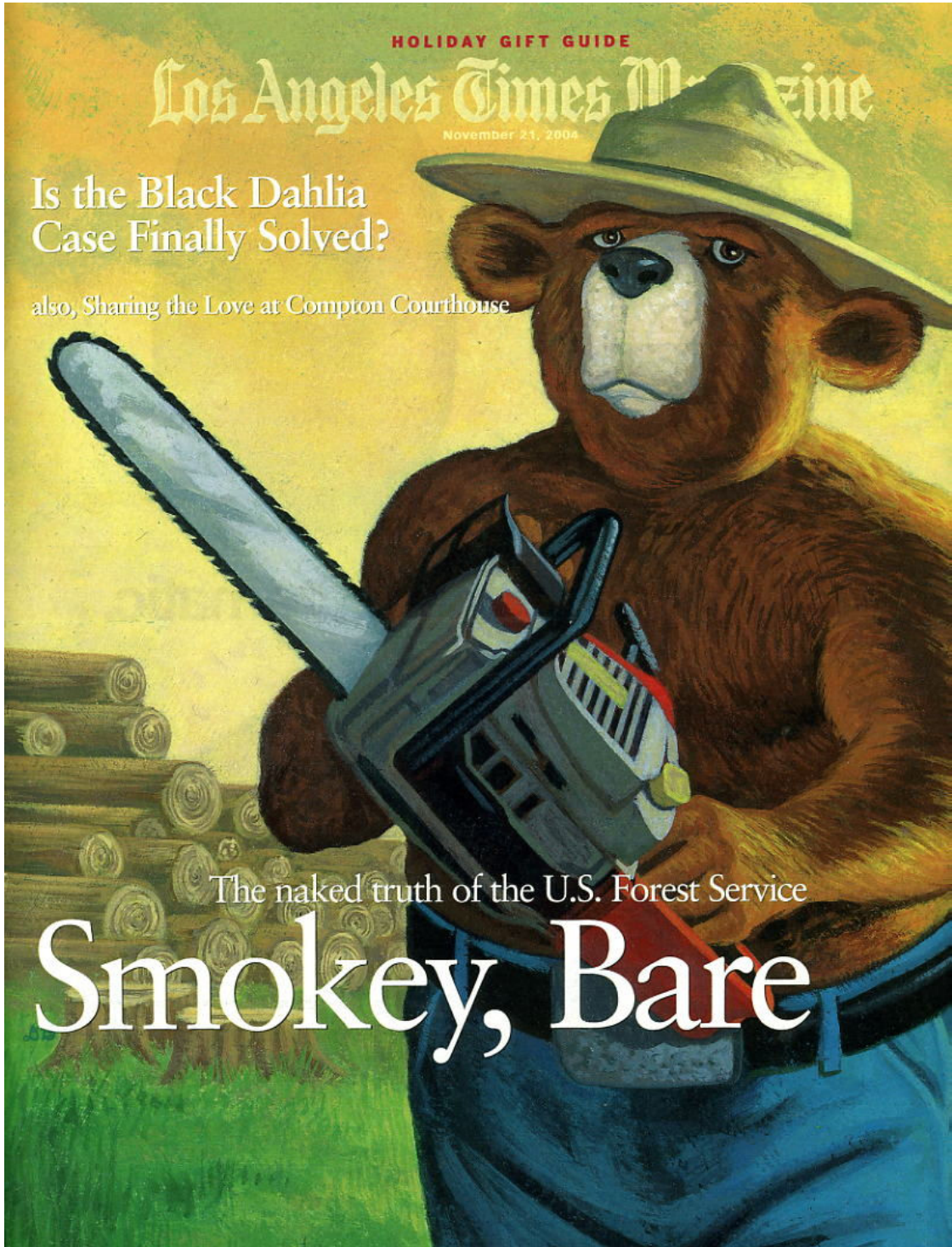


Los Angeles Times Magazine November 21, 2004



HOLIDAY GIFT GUIDE

Los Angeles Times Magazine

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Is the Black Dahlia  
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# The Most Credible Story Ever Told?

Former LAPD Detective Steve Hodel wants to convince the world that his father was L.A.'s fabled Black Dahlia killer. Slowly, surely, the converts are lining up behind him. By Paul Teetor

PHOTOGRAPH BY LARRY LETTERS

STEVE HODEL IS FACING THE ULTIMATE CRIME WRITER'S CHALLENGE: a room full of retired cops who have read his national bestseller "Black Dahlia Avenger: A Genius for Murder." As Hodel gets out of his Ford Crown Victoria, host Garland Brown, a 62-year-old former Gardena cop with 35 years in law enforcement, introduces himself. "A lot of the guys have some serious questions," he says. "They've all read the hardcover, and the paperback with the new chapter. They know what they're talking about."

Hodel, who at 6 feet, 2 inches and 260 pounds has a cherubic face frame, white hair and a trimmed white beard, does not flinch as he steps into the wary lion's den. After all, he's already made more than 75 appearances on a 20-month post-publication book tour and answered every possible question about his 481-page opus, a true-life chronicle of crime, corruption and conspiracy in which he does his best to prove that his father is the most fabled and notorious murderer in Los Angeles history.

"I'm sure they've got lots of questions," Hodel says. "Everybody does." Brown, who organized the Oct. 23 book discussion at his wine country ranch inside Temecula, escorts Hodel into his home, where the retired cops and their wives—like Brown, all strangers to Hodel—are waiting. The rec room is wallpapered with pictures of 22-year-old Elizabeth Short, nicknamed the Black Dahlia, and reproductions of Hodel's paperback cover, which features a picture of Short and a screaming tabloid tease promising "a new chapter revealing secret D.A. documents and photos." On the far wall is a detailed map of the Leimert Park crime scene at the corner of 39th Street and Norton Avenue, where Short's naked body was left in two parts early on the morning of Jan. 15, 1947. She had been surgically bisected at the waist, drained of blood, shed clean and left 18 inches from the sidewalk. Her face was slashed into a deous death grin, and she was posed in a bizarre style that no one—until Hodel—has been able to explain credibly.

As he enters the room, Hodel is surrounded by people who offer books for his signature and ask questions about the murder that gripped postwar Los Angeles in a media frenzy of fear, frustration and finger-pointing when the case went unsolved despite the most intense manhunt in city history. "If you aren't around back then, you don't understand what a sensation it was," Brown says while Hodel mingles. "People couldn't believe the killer got away."

Hodel steps to a microphone with his stack of enlarged photos and old newspaper headlines, then gives a short overview of the book. Three hours of probing questions and detailed discussion later, a poll of the nearly 50 people in the room reveals only one who has any doubt that Hodel's father, George Hodel—a tall, charismatic, domineering, sex-obsessed doctor with connections to Hollywood, City Hall and a ring of corrupt cops—had killed Short and several other young women in the 1940s. And they have no doubt that he got away with it because of his political connections to the city's powerful and the leverage he had on them because of the detailed files he kept at his downtown venereal disease clinic. He also gleaned information, and thereby power, from his knowledge of an illegal abortion ring that catered to the city's elite and that paid off corrupt cops.

"Steve Hodel has convinced me," Patti Brown, Garland Brown's wife, says afterward. "The only question left is why the LAPD hasn't closed the Black Dahlia case."

The lone dissenter in the room is a woman with lingering questions about photographs from the collection of Hodel's father. Steve Hodel believes they are pictures of Short. Others are skeptical, including this woman, who adds that she believes the rest of Hodel's richly detailed, undeniably complex and occasionally convoluted indictment of his father as a compassionate healer by day, a misogynistic stalker by night and perhaps the most diabolically clever killer in L.A. history.

GEORGE HODEL KEPT TWO SMALL PICTURES OF A WOMAN HIS SON BELIEVES TO BE Short for the last 55 years of a life that included three wives, 11 children, several careers and dozens of girlfriends. They have become a catalyst-turned-uruse for Steve Hodel. The pictures, which he found in his father's private photo album, opened the door into a looking-glass world in which Hodel is cast as the avenging son trying to bring his father to justice after more than half a century.

Hodel was living in Bellingham, Wash., happily retired after 23 years as an LAPD detective, when he discovered the pictures in 1999 shortly after his 91-year-old father died in San Francisco. They became the clues that, for him, linked his father to Short. Hodel, never dreaming his dad was her killer, says he just followed his curiosity about his father's unexpected connection to L.A.'s noir past. Over the years, the mystifying case has produced plenty of suspects put forth by authors and amateur sleuths. The alleged killers included doctors (police focused immediately on medical people because of the surgical bisection), an alcoholic drifter and even Orson Welles, who did a magic act in which he cut a woman in half. Then there were the more than 50 so-called Confessing Sams who came forward claiming credit for the lurid crime. But nothing stuck, and ultimately it became one of the most notorious unsolved cases in modern American history.

"I had to follow this story," Hodel says. "Any good detective would have done the same."

Within 12 months, he had concluded that his father was probably the Black Dahlia killer. Within 24 months, he had moved back to L.A. so he could focus exclusively on the investigation.

*Paul Teeter's last story for the magazine was about a mentally ill woman charged with a hate-crime murder.*

"That's just the way Steve is," says Stephen R. Kay, head deputy for L.A. County's district attorney office in Compton. "Once something gets his attention, he can't help checking it out until he gets to the bottom of it." Kay says he was impressed by Hodel's professionalism when he worked with him in the 1970s and 1980s, but hadn't seen him for nearly 15 years until, in 2001, Hodel approached him with his case and asked for an evaluation.

But the two pictures of an alluring young woman with her eyes closed—one apparently in an erotic moment or, perhaps, freshly killed—also are Exhibit



George Hodel's album with photos his son believes are of Elizabeth Short.

A for critics who dismiss Hodel and his case. If the pictures are not of Short, their reasoning goes, then Hodel's investigation falls apart. In his book, Hodel is certain the pictures are of Short. Today, after months of hearing from readers who disagree, he says he is 99% certain the photos are of Short.

Despite Hodel's near-certainty, neither photo is an indisputable match to the few known photos of Short, an emotionally troubled young Massachusetts woman who told friends she came West in 1943 seeking relief for her respiratory problems and romance with someone in uniform, preferably a military officer. As Hodel documents in his book, Short was not a drug addict, prostitute or petty criminal, descriptions that have entered the media echo chamber over the years. She became another of the thousands of pretty people with vague dreams of being "discovered" like Lana Turner at Schwab's Pharmacy.

When the subject of the pictures comes up in the Temecula rec room, Hodel quickly, defensively, points out the similarities: Both women have Short's high forehead; thick, full black hair; and diamond-shaped face. He also points out that Short was chameleon-like, with strikingly different looks in her few known pictures. He shows her as a dark, exotic beauty in a 1943 Santa Barbara police mug shot—she'd been arrested for being underage in a bar—and displays several Florida beach pictures in which she looks like an all-American high schooler or prom night. But just as quickly, Hodel says the pictures are moot because of evidence that has surfaced since April 2003, when his book was published. That new evidence includes previously unreleased district attorney files that point to George Hodel as a primary suspect more than 50 years ago. "It's like pulling someone over for a busted taillight and finding stolen stuff in the backseat," Hodel says as heads nod throughout the room. "You charge them with burglary, no with the traffic stop. At that point it no longer matters."

THE NEW YORK TIMES, NEWSWEEK, "DATELINE NBC," COURT TV, PEOPLE magazine and other national media have all run stories hailing Hodel—to one degree or another—as finally solving the quintessential L.A. murder which was the inspiration for many films and books, from 1981's "True Confessions" to James Ellroy's fictionalized 1987 account, "The Black Dahlia." CBS' "48 Hours" is scheduled to run a segment on "Black Dahlia Avenger" on Saturday. But Hodel has run into trouble in his hometown. First, and most important to him, the Los Angeles Police Department has given little attention to his theory since August 2003, when he was invited to brief the police brass. "Ninety percent of the room was supportive and seemed to get it, but the detective in charge of the case was defensive," says Hodel, who retired as detective supervisor in 1986 with high praise from then-Chief Daryl Gates.

"As an ex-cop, I know cops are territorial about their cases, and I fear that's what's happening here."

In a two-hour media briefing last month, two LAPD robbery-homicide detectives poked holes in Hodel's case and delivered the department's bottom line: Yes, Dr. Hodel was a suspect and, yes, he could have done it. But because almost all the physical evidence has disappeared from its files—evidence that included the 13 taunting notes the killer sent police and the media and which, through careful analysis, could prove or disprove Hodel's conclusion, the case will never be closed.

Chief William J. Bratton seconded that opinion: "I'm not interested in a 50-year-old case, and we're not going to spend any more time or money on it."

The LAPD wasn't the first to set aside Hodel's findings. He woke up one Sunday in May 2003 to a scornful Los Angeles Times book review by novelist Gary Indiana, who concluded: "It is, finally, and not at all sympathetically, appalling that a homicide detective would sell out his professional integrity to produce this piece of meretricious, revolting twaddle, which amounts to evidence manufacturing, litigation-proof slander and chicanery on a fabulous scale and does absolutely nothing to answer the question: Who killed Elizabeth Short?"

Hodel doesn't like to talk about that review because he knows it sounds like sour grapes. "It's his right to say anything he wants about the book," Hodel says. "But when he attacks my professional integrity and accuses me of manufacturing evidence, I think that goes over the line. How can a book reviewer just slander you and make crazy accusations like that?"

Hodel's friends and family say Indiana's review was traumatic for him. "Steve is a sensitive guy. That was tough for him because he's a man of immense integrity," says Bellingham attorney Dennis Murphy. "Integrity is the foundation of his professional success both in L.A. and here in Washington [as a private investigator]."

Murphy was one of only three people Hodel confided in when he was investigating his father and slowly, reluctantly coming to his horrific conclusions. Indiana's scathing review triggered criticism on the Internet from Dahlia cultists who derided Hodel and his Daddy-did-it theory, which echoed a little-noted 1995 book by Janice Knowlton, based on supposedly repressed memories, called "Daddy Was the Black Dahlia Killer."

"There's a lot of vitriolic stuff about Steve and his book on the Ne Murphy says. "Some people are trying to assassinate him, but Steve I met it professionally each step of the way and just methodically go about proving his case."

Hodel was particularly stunned by the local response to his book because he is retired LAPD, and because of advance publicity his book received from Times columnist Steve Lopez, who shortly before the release of "Black Dahlia Avenger" persuaded Dist. Atty. Steve Cooley to let him look at his office's previously unreleased Black Dahlia files. (Hodel didn't realize that the D.A.'s office had reinvestigated the case until his book was finished.) In 1950, in a complicated bureaucratic maneuver that Hodel claims was part of a large cover-up, the D.A.'s office formally closed its reinvestigation of the Black Dahlia case and turned over copies of its files to the LAPD. To this day, the department has refused to open its files. But as soon as Lopez opened the D.A.'s original file, he wrote, a picture of George Hodel fell out. Other documents revealed that Hodel was indeed a suspect and that the police had bugged house at 5121 Franklin Ave., a magnificent re-creation of a Mayan temple where Hodel believes Short was tortured and killed before being taken to Leimert Park. Lopez even found transcripts of conversations recorded inside that house, including one from Feb. 18, 1950, in which Dr. Hodel says: "Su posin' I did kill the Black Dahlia. They couldn't prove it now. They can't talk my secretary anymore because she's dead."

The hidden microphones also recorded, on Feb. 19, 1950, a woman crying she tried to call the operator. Later, there are what seem to be sounds of digging and of a shovel hitting a pipe. Five minutes later, the microphones recorded woman's scream, and then two minutes later a second scream. Steve Hodel says he has no idea who the screaming woman was, although it was not his father's secretary, Ruth Spaulding, who was listed as an overdose suicide in 1945 despite police suspicions that George Hodel may have killed her. That same day, he was recorded alluding to his connections in local law enforcement agencies and saying "I'd like to get a connection made in the D.A.'s office."

Lopez wrote two columns about Hodel and his book, as well as the supporting evidence he uncovered at the district attorney's office. His verdict: Hodel's case was intriguing but not yet 100% convincing. *Continued on Page*



Two-year-old Steve Hodel with his father George.

## Why an L.A. County Prosecutor Believes Steve Hodel's Case

Stephen R. Kay, head deputy for L.A. County's district attorney office in Compton, has prosecuted murder cases for more than 35 years, and he says Steve Hodel has enough facts to convict his father, the late Dr. George Hodel, for at least two murders.

But it wasn't easy for Kay—speaking for himself and not the D.A.'s office—to write a six-page letter to Hodel endorsing his case. He concluded that the evidence was strong enough to indict George Hodel for the Elizabeth Short murder and the mutilation-murder three weeks later of Jeanne French, a case known as the Red Lipstick Murder because the killer wrote an obscenity and the initials BD in lipstick on French's body.

It was difficult for Kay because part of Hodel's case explains how George Hodel evaded the biggest dragnet in city history and continued to live and allegedly kill in Los Angeles for three years until he fled the country in 1950. The explanation involves police corruption that reaches all the way to two now-dead LAPD legends, William Parker, who served as chief from 1950 to 1966, and former chief of detectives Thad Brown, who became interim chief when Parker died.

But Kay has been able to separate the facts of Hodel's case from the broader theory about why the case went unsolved. "I don't have to deal with the police cover-up," Kay says. "The evidence Steve Hodel has uncovered is compelling enough for me without having to confront the issue of the cover-up."

Among dozens of pieces of evidence, Kay cites four key parts of an intricate circumstantial case:

- The handwriting on the 13 taunting notes and letters the apparent killer sent to the police and press in the first few weeks after the murders, as well

as the writing on French's body: "Steve identified it as his father's [handwriting], and then he did the right thing. He got an independent evaluation from a court-certified handwriting expert without telling her anything about the person or the case involved. That expert said it is highly probable—the highest you can go without having the original document—that the writing is the same as Dr. Hodel's, and I agree. His block printing is very distinctive."

- The similarities between the Short and French murders: "Short was killed on Jan. 15 and French on Feb. 10," Kay says. "Both were stomped, both suffered blunt-force trauma to the head and both were posed in vacant lots early in the morning. There were so many similarities that it jumped out at me." The most obvious link, he says, is that the killer took the time to write on French's body. "It's clear the killer still had the Black Dahlia on his mind and that he still had a lot of anger toward her even as he was doing this new killing." And, again, the handwriting. Both Hodel and the handwriting expert, Hannah McFarland of Seattle, identified the lipstick printing on French's body as likely being George Hodel's.

- The killer could only be a surgeon, which dramatically shrinks the suspect pool for the Short murder: "It had to be a skilled surgeon because the body was so neatly cut in half with no trauma to the organs and no serrated bones," Kay says. "Anyone else, even someone who worked at a coroner's office, wouldn't be able to do it with that kind of precision. There is no other credible explanation."

- The two photos of Short found by Hodel in his father's album: "The photos prove a physical link between Dr. Hodel and Short," Kay says. He thinks at least one of the pictures—showing a woman naked with her eyes closed—is definitely Short. He also agrees with Hodel that even if one or both turn out not to be Short, it doesn't negate the supporting evidence that has surfaced since Hodel undertook his investigation. "Steve has taken the case way beyond the pictures," Kay says. "It no longer depends on the pictures."—P.T.

## ack Dahlia

*continued from Page 38*

month later came Indiana's devastating book review, followed by several dismissive columns in the L.A. Weekly. One Weekly headline cap-

tured the general tone of the criticism: "Urban Myths: Busting the Black Dahlia Avenger." After that came media and police silence until this May, when Lopez wrote another column explaining why author James Ellroy, whose fictionalized

"The Black Dahlia" was a 1987 best-seller, now endorsed Hodel's theory after initially expressing disbelief.

"We can only glimpse who Betty Short was—but now we know who killed her, and why," Ellroy wrote in the foreword to the paperback edi-

tion of Hodel's "Black Dahlia Avenger," which was issued earlier this year with a new chapter about the previously undiscovered material from the D.A.'s files.

HODEL'S BOOK PAINTS A CHILLING, detailed, week-by-week, year-by-year portrait of his father as an intellectual giant driven to serial killing by his arrested emotional development, his hatred of women and his obsessions with money, power and sex. George Hodel was born in 1907 in L.A.'s Clara Barton Hospital, quickly developed into a musical prodigy with a 186 IQ, and entered Caltech in Pasadena at age 15. As a freshman, he fathered a child with a faculty member's wife, triggering his expulsion.

In rapid succession he became a crime reporter for the Los Angeles Record, a cabdriver, a magazine publisher, a radio announcer, a medical student, a doctor and the head venereal disease control officer for Los Angeles County. During the 1920s and '30s he started drinking and using hashish, opium and possibly stronger drugs. Along with a running buddy, photographer Man Ray, George Hodel adopted the surrealist philosophy that there is no difference between the dream and waking states. In many photos taken of the surrealists, they pose with their eyes closed to signify their reverence for the dream state—just as Short has her eyes closed in the disputed photos. George Hodel also considered himself a dadaist, someone who rejects accepted conventions.

In the early 1940s, Steve Hodel says, his father began a series of late-night abductions during which he murdered several women, some of them strangers, some of them women he knew romantically. He speculates that drugs and alcohol brought out the misogynistic traits that his father kept under control during the day. According to the D.A.'s files, Short was one of George Hodel's many girlfriends and was identified by at least one witness, Lillian Lenorak, a former girlfriend of Hodel, as having been at the Franklin House several times.

Hodel says that uncovering all this information about his father has been the most painful experience of his life, and friends and family agree. "He's gone through hell with this," says his 25-year-old son, Matthew Hodel. "But he had to pursue it, no matter where it led. I'm proud of him."

But critics portray Hodel as committing a form of patricide, a posthumous vendetta against a

father who abandoned his family after being tried for—and acquitted of—molesting Steve's 14-year-old half-sister in late 1949. That criticism may have been triggered, in part, by the word "avenger" in the title of his book. It suggests that Hodel is proclaiming himself the Black Dahlia avenger, going after his father. In reality, the name came from one of the taunting postcards apparently sent by the killer to the police and press in the first weeks after the murder. The

writer signed one note as "Black Dahlia Avenger," and in another he declared "Dahlia killing was justified."

George Hodel fled the state in 1950, his son says, after Dist. Atty. William E. Simpson's staff took over the Black Dahlia investigation from the LAPD. He sold his mansion, moved to Hawaii and became a psychiatrist counseling the incarcerated criminally insane for a year. He then moved to Manila, where he established himself as a successful market

## Deciphering the Dahlia Killer?

Steve Hodel's personalized license plate reads THTPRNT. Careful readers of his book might recognize the word as a shortened version of "thought-print," another controversial aspect of his case against his father.

In addition to the pictures of Short and the handwriting on copies of the killer's taunting notes, which both Hodel and an independent expert have identified as his father's distinctive block printing, Hodel reveals many thoughtprints that, taken together like strands of a rope, he says help prove what is largely a circumstantial case.



"Minotaur" by Man Ray

Hodel coined the term, and the concept, as a distillation of the lessons he learned solving more than 200 homicides for the LAPD. He defines thoughtprints as "the arches, loops, whorls and ridges of the mind, the aims and motives hidden within our thoughts that, like the points in a fingerprint, contain the *potential* to identify and connect us to a specific action, object, event or crime."

In explaining his use of the term, Hodel cites two examples of thoughtprints from his book, one large, one small. The small: A few days after the Black Dahlia murder, the killer began sending cryptic messages to the press and police that were written in journalistic style. One example came when the killer was proposing to turn himself in: "Dahlia's Killer Cracking, Wants Terms."

The headline quality of that message "reveals a journalistic background," says veteran L.A. County prosecutor Stephen R. Kay, and that suggestion is backed by assertions that crime writer Joseph Wambaugh made in a documentary on the case produced before Hodel's book was published. Wambaugh, also a former LAPD cop, speculated that the notes were written by tabloid reporters to keep the story alive and make sure there was a fresh angle every day. But Hodel believes the style came easily to his father because he had been a crime reporter for the Los Angeles Record.

The more significant thoughtprint attempts to answer an enduring question: Why was Elizabeth Short so bizarrely mutilated and posed with her arms raised above her head and bent at the elbows?

Hodel devotes a chapter to his father's long friendship with fellow surrealist Man Ray, the famous photographer who dabbled in sadism and attended many of the wild sex and drug parties at the Franklin house from 1946 to 1950. The parties were only distant memories of nighttime laughter and drunken sounds for Hodel, who was born in 1941, but they were described in detail to Hodel by his mother, Dorothy, and by young artist Joe Barrett, who rented a room in the house.

Hodel zeroes in on one of Ray's most famous works, "Minotaur," and suggests that George Hodel was engaged in a macabre competition with Ray in which he used his scalpel to re-create the image that Ray created with his camera.

"Dad worshiped Man Ray. But there was also a competition," Hodel says. "Dad thought of himself as an artist. The Black Dahlia was his masterpiece, using his scalpel as a paintbrush and her body as his canvas."—P.T.

researcher with a new family and four kids. He didn't return to the United States for 40 years, but finally moved to San Francisco in 1990 with his third wife, who was 40 years younger.

Hodel says he had re-established his bond with his father during the nine years before the elderly man died, and he provides the personal correspondence between the two to prove it. Most telling is a note he wrote to his father on May 9, 1999, eight days before he died: "I want you to know how much I love you. You are a truly great man, and I am very proud that you are my father."

Jill Bernstein, a Bellingham attorney who has known and worked with Hodel for more than a decade, says the patricide charge is absurd and compounds Hodel's pain. "There's no doubt his father was a towering figure in Steve's life, and writing this book has brought Steve nothing but grief," Bernstein says. "They had found a real way to reach each other as men in the decade before Dr. Hodel died. They found the humanity in each other. Steve was sad when his dad died."

Bernstein has practiced law for more than 20 years and is a former president of the Washington Assn. of Defense Attorneys. Like Murphy, she employed Hodel as a private investigator. "He was the best P.I. in this area ever," she says. "The thing I really liked about him was, if he couldn't make a case, he would say so. He was always all about finding the truth."

Others swear to the same quality in Hodel. "He's like a bulldog with a bone," says head Deputy D.A. Kay, who is convinced by Hodel's case against his father. "He'll just keep working a case and working it till he's gotten to the truth, whatever it is. If he can't make the case, he'll tell you."

James McMurray, who recently retired as the LAPD's chief of detectives, says he supervised Hodel from 1980 through 1983. "He was one

of the top detectives in robbery-homicide," McMurray says. "He is careful, thorough and persistent. He would never pursue a case if the facts didn't justify it."

McMurray says Hodel's hardcover book was "pretty compelling" to him. "Then, when all the transcripts and stuff came out from the D.A.'s office, that took it over the top for me. That would have been enough for me to bring a case against Dr. Hodel."

Kay says he's baffled that the LAPD is unable to either prove or disprove Hodel's case. "I find it shocking that the key physical evidence in the biggest unsolved murder case in L.A. history has disappeared from the LAPD. It's a black mark for the LAPD that they haven't solved the Black Dahlia case. I would think they would do everything they can to solve it. With Steve Hodel's research, it's been handed to them on a silver platter."

NEAR THE END OF THE DISCUSSION IN Temecula, during which Hodel never expresses any anger about his father, one of the women in the room asks Hodel how he could be detached from a story that has had

such a huge impact on him and his family. Hodel says he is just doing his job.

"I didn't want to write this book," he says. "I was retired for 13 years when the case came to me. I didn't create this path. I'm just walking it because it's in front of me."

A few weeks earlier, working at his crowded desk in his Studio City apartment, Hodel was asked about his ultimate goal: to have the case closed by the LAPD. Did he really think that goal was possible after all these years, with his father dead and the Black Dahlia case so much a part of L.A.'s noir mystique?

Hodel's old detective badge No. 336 sits on the desk. Nearby, taped to a bookcase, a large-type computer printout serves as a kind of serenity road map. It's a quote he has attributed to German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer on the nature of truth: "All truth passes through three stages: first it is ridiculed, second it is violently opposed, and third it is accepted as self-evident."

"I figure I'm somewhere in transition between stage two and stage three," he says, exhaling slowly. "Stage three is taking a little longer than I expected." ■