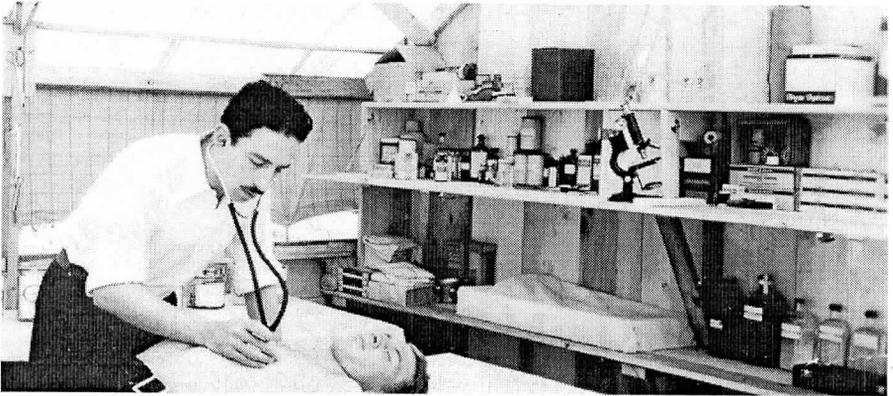


Fall Books Special: My Dad Did It

Steve Hodel, the retired LA cop who pinned the Black Dahlia murder on his pop, believes he was also Chicago's Lipstick Killer.

By Michael Lenehan



Dr. George Hodel, circa 1937

COURTESY OF STEVE HODEL

Most Evil: Avenger, Zodiac, and the Further Serial Murders of Dr. George Hill Hodel Steve Hodel (Dutton)

At about 1:30 in the morning on January 7, 1946, James Degnan, a federal government employee who lived with his family at 5943 N. Kenmore, heard his six-year-old daughter Suzanne say, "I'm too sleepy. I don't want to get up." He thought she was talking in her sleep. When he went to awaken her at 7:30, she was gone. About 12 hours later her head was found in a sewer and the city was in a panic.

The police, of course, were eager to make an arrest. They focused first on Hector Verburch, a 65-year-old janitor who lived in the neighborhood and worked in the building where the girl's body was dismembered. He was released after two days and promptly told a

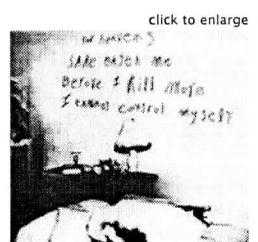
story that's become familiar to Chicagoans, charging that police tried to force a confession by blindfolding him, cuffing his hands behind his back, and raising his body by the arms into a position that tortured him and left him unable to work. He sued, and the city eventually settled for \$20,000.

Also questioned in the case, among many others, were several men called Sherman, a handkerchief bearing that surname having been left near the crime scene. After seizing one wrong Sherman in Toledo, police finally traced the hankie to army sergeant Seymour Sherman, who was on a troop transport ship at the time of the slaying. They then questioned an army buddy of Sherman's in Dunkirk, New York. And another man who was overheard saying "It ought to be worth \$20,000," the amount specified in a ransom note found in the girl's bedroom. And another who was overheard in a rooming house on South Clark Street, muttering in his sleep about "cutting arms off." He said he knew nothing about the murder but confessed to being drunk.

This went on for six months, with every twist covered in breathless detail by the city's five competing newspapers. Finally, in late June, police found the man they needed, or rather the boy: William Heirens, a 17-year-old University of Chicago student with a bad habit of committing petty burglaries. They held and grilled him for nearly a week before allowing him contact with the defense attorneys his parents had hired. They gave him Sodium Pentothal—"truth serum"—without his permission or the knowledge of his lawyers. They administered a lie detector test and dismissed the result as "futile"—though experts who examined the test years later said it showed Heirens answered truthfully that he didn't kill Suzanne Degnan.

The prosecutors openly admitted that they didn't have enough admissible evidence to win a trial, so they pressed Heirens to accept a plea deal: no death penalty and concurrent rather than consecutive life sentences if he would confess to the Degnan killing and two others that had come to be associated with it, known collectively as the "Lipstick Murders" because of a note scrawled in red lipstick on one victim's living room wall: "For heavens sake catch me before I kill more I cannot control myself."

Heirens's parents urged him to accept the deal, and so did his lawyers, brothers John and Malachy Coghlan. Indeed, the Coghlan's were so helpful making the deal that the prosecutors thanked them later in open court. The final blow was probably dealt by Tribune reporter George Wright, who on July 16 published a page-one blockbuster with the banner headline "How Heirens Slew 3." Citing unnamed "unimpeachable sources," the story recounted the three murders in vivid detail. "He took from his pocket a pad of letter paper. Carefully tearing out the last sheet in the pad, to be sure it would bear no impression from previous sheets, he tore the sheet in half



The Lipstick Killer's message

COURTESY OF STEVE HODEL

lengthwise and wrote the ransom note on one of the halves. . . ."

Though the article contained explicit denials from both prosecutors and defense lawyers that there had been a confession, Wright made the story sound like it had come straight out of Heirens's mouth. In hindsight, it appears to have been the confession that prosecutors were concocting as part of the plea deal. In any case, it was picked up and amplified by the other papers in the city and beyond, contributing to pressure that Heirens was finally unable to resist. The deal seemed to be the only way to stay alive. In September 1946, Heirens signed a confession and was led off to prison, where he has remained for the last 63 years. (For a detailed account of the case, and especially the media frenzy, see Robert McClory's "Kill-Crazed Animal?" which ran in the Reader August 24, 1989.)

Heirens has been protesting his innocence ever since. And thanks in part to the help of supporters on the outside, including the Center on Wrongful Convictions at Northwestern University's law school, his case has come up for review in various venues over the years—but to no avail.

Now Heirens's case is being revisited in a book by Steve Hodel, a retired Los Angeles homicide detective who has a new theory on who killed little Suzanne Degnan.

Hodel's first book, *Black Dahlia Avenger*, published in 2003, pretty much solved the famous "Black Dahlia" murder, a gruesome Hollywood crime that's inspired numerous books and screenplays and decades of detective work and speculation. In his new book, *Most Evil*, he and coauthor Ralph Pezzullo claim to have solved not only the murders for which Heirens is imprisoned but also the 1967 "Jigsaw Murder" of a 29-year-old woman in Manila and the "Zodiac" murders in the Bay Area in the late 1960s. Hodel thinks all these murders, a total of at least 18, were committed by the same man who killed Elizabeth Short, aka the Black Dahlia:

His father.

In his detailed, well-documented books, Hodel describes his father, Dr. George Hill Hodel, as an evil genius right out of central casting. A musical prodigy with an IQ of 186, he entered Cal Tech at age 15 and left shortly thereafter, Steve Hodel says, having impregnated the wife of a faculty member. He drove a cab and reported crime stories for the *Los Angeles Record*. He hung with the young John Huston and started a literary magazine, *Fantasia*, dedicated to the "portrayal of bizarre beauty in the arts" and to such "beauty as we may find in a poem, a sketch . . . a temple or a brothel or a gaol; in prayer or perversity or sin." With a girlfriend he opened a bookstore, then got a job as a radio host, then moved to the Bay Area, where he took a premed degree at Berkeley and enrolled in medical school at UCSF. He and the girlfriend, now parents of a young boy, wrote a travel-at-home column for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Somewhere in there, he and another woman produced his

third child, a girl named Tamar.

After graduating from med school, the doctor accepted a public health job that took him to Indian reservations in the southwest. Eventually he returned to Los Angeles, where he became the county's chief VD control officer and ran a private VD clinic on the side—a specialty that gave him access to the secrets of Hollywood's rich and naughty.

When Huston divorced his wife Dorothy, George took up with her. They wed and had four sons, including Steve, who remembers the mid-1940s as a glamorous time of parties and important people—Huston, Henry Miller, Man Ray.

The fun ended abruptly in 1949, when Dorothy packed up her boys and fled. Steve later learned that his father had been accused of having sex with Tamar at one of the parties—with three guests looking on. Tamar became pregnant and had an abortion. She was 14. At his arrest George allowed as how he and Tamar had been "exploring the mysteries of sex." Despite this admission, he was miraculously acquitted in a very public trial. A short time later he moved to Hawaii (which was not yet a state), where he took a degree in psychiatry. For the next 40 years he lived in Manila, where he married wife number three, had four more children, and embarked on a new career in international marketing. He returned to the San Francisco area with a fourth wife in 1990.

By that time Steve had retired after 24 years in the LA police department, most of them as a homicide detective. When his father died in 1999, he found himself working the case of his old man's life.

It started with a small album that seemed to contain photos of the most important people in the doctor's life: his father, his children, his wives . . . and Elizabeth Short, the Black Dahlia. Wondering what the connection might be, Steve started poking around; three years later he published *Black Dahlia Avenger*, accusing his father of Short's murder. As a result of his work, the LA district attorney's office unearthed a secret file on the 55-year-old case—a file buried right around the time George lit out for Hawaii. It confirmed that the doctor had dated Short and revealed that he'd been a prime suspect in the murder before the investigation was mysteriously shut down. It also contained notes that led to Chicago: an LA detective reported that in 1946, about six months before she was murdered, Short had spent a few weeks here, sleeping around with cops and reporters and asking a lot of questions about the Lipstick Murders.

Steve Hodel believes that Short had an inkling her doctor friend was connected to the murders in Chicago, and that he learned of her suspicion and killed her. This, Steve posits, was after he'd killed at least seven other women in and around Los Angeles, including oil heiress Georgette Bauerdorf and actress Jean Spangler. He also believes his father killed Cheri Jo Bates in Riverside, California, in 1966 before going on to the Jigsaw and Zodiac murders.

Although Hodel cannot definitively place his father at the scene of every crime, he does establish that the doctor was quite capable of the necessary globe-hopping. He says George traveled east from LA multiple times between 1944 and '46, trips that in those days were likely to include a stop in Chicago. In 1946, having taken a UN job in China (from which he was discharged after only seven months for unspecified "personal reasons"), he took a crash course in Chinese and traveled at least once to Washington, D.C. During the war years, Hodel says, the military's top language school was headquartered at the University of Chicago. By the time of the Zodiac murders, George Hodel was an international businessman who traveled frequently to the U.S. from his base in Manila.

Hodel ties the far-flung murders together with several strands of modus operandi. In three of the murders—Degnan in Chicago, Short in Los Angeles, and Lucila Lalu y Tolentino in Manila—the victims were dismembered by a person who had clear expertise in surgery or butchering. In both Chicago and LA, lipstick was used to write messages. In the Black Dahlia and Zodiac cases, the killer sent taunting notes to the press and police, often littered with what appeared to be deliberate misspellings meant to make the writer seem cruder than he really was. Many of the mailings were posted with two stamps where one would have sufficed. Several of the victims were posed after having been murdered. Handwriting analysis shows connections between George Hodel's known handwriting and notes written by the Lipstick killer, the Black Dahlia killer, and Zodiac killer.

Perhaps more interesting than the physical evidence is the psychological profile Hodel constructs to make sense of his father's crimes. He believes they constitute an oeuvre of surrealist art, with allusions to works as diverse as Man Ray's photograph *The Minotaur*, Salvador Dali's painting *The Persistence of Memory*, the movie *Charlie Chan at Treasure Island*, and the 1932 film adaptation of Richard Connell's story "The Most Dangerous Game." The killings also allude to one another, in Hodel's view. Suzanne Degnan's arms were found, for instance, in a sewer just off Hollywood Avenue. Hodel interprets this placement as a pointer west to the Los Angeles area, where Elizabeth Short's body was found in a field on a road that forks off Degnan Boulevard. In Manila, the severed torso of the Jigsaw victim was found in a vacant lot on or near Zodiac Street.

There's plenty more of that in *Most Evil*, and it gets weirder and more complicated. If the whole thing sounds preposterous in summary, it's much less so in his clear, patient, and detailed prose. Sure it strains credulity, but so does having a few friends over to watch you explore the mysteries of sex with your 14-year-old daughter.

None of this is likely to do Bill Heirens any good. Dolores Kennedy, his longtime advocate and author of *William Heirens: His Day in Court* (1991), provided information to Hodel and finds his argument generally persuasive. But she is focused less on who did the crimes than on who didn't. Over the years, she says, "There have

been lots of indications that Bill Heirens didn't commit these murders, but none of them have opened any doors."

By all accounts, Heirens has been a perfect prisoner. He was the first person in Illinois to earn a four-year college degree from prison; he learned and taught TV repair, advised other inmates on their legal matters, and played an important role in improving and expanding prison education and library programs. Parole boards long ago conceded that he is completely rehabilitated. But every time he comes up for parole—more than 30 times to date—relatives of Suzanne Degnan come forward to protest, and the system defers to them.

The politics seem insurmountable. When Heirens came close to winning his freedom in 1983, the current Mayor Daley—then the Cook County state's attorney—called him a "bloodthirsty killer" who "deserves as little mercy as he showed his innocent and helpless victims." Attorney General Neil Hartigan tagged him a "kill-crazed animal." Before a 2007 parole hearing, the Sun-Times intoned, "[W]hether he is a threat or not, his crime was too terrible to forgive." This summer Heirens was denied parole again, by a vote of 12–2. He is 81 and requires expensive care. His best hope now, Kennedy thinks, is the desperate condition of the Illinois budget. Maybe the state will finally release him to save money.

But even if Heirens is never freed, he could be exonerated. One of the virtues of Most Evil is that Hodel explicitly invites further investigation by pointing out bits of evidence that might prove or disprove his case. After our interview he dug from his files an FBI receipt number for "two black hair follicles" taken as evidence in the Degnan case. According to a Tribune story from January 1946, police found "two black, curly hairs" on the murdered child's torso that "probably fell from the slayer's head as he was dismembering the body." Hodel also has objects that could produce samples of his father's DNA. If the FBI still has the black hairs, testing could prove once and for all that Chicago prosecutors got the right man. Or the wrong one.

The receipt number is PC 16339 AO Q21. Somebody should look it up.