

L.A. Confidential

By DAVID THOMSON

BLACK DAHLIA AVENGER A
Genius for Murder. By
Steve Hodel.

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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