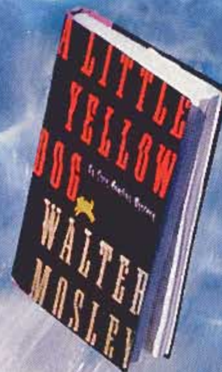
WHO KILLED HAING NGOR? BY PETER MANSO & ELLEN HAWKES

Los Angeles



PALOS VERDES SURF WARS

BY MICHAEL GOODMAN

MICROBREWS: GETTIN' HAMMERED WITH DREW CAREY

TIMES CEO MARK WILLES

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L.A.'S HOTTEST MYSTERY WRITERS

BY DAVID CHUTE

Mindless SUMMER FUN!

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PLUS

AN EXCERPT FROM WALTER MOSLEY'S NEW WHODUNIT

June 1996

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AN EXCELLENT PLACE TO DIE

By David Chute

Get ready for some killer summer reading. Great L.A. mystery writers are back with a vengeance, and our town is noir town again

Photographs by Michael Llewellyn

The woman's arm hit the floor with a thump. Her hair was black. Her skin was dark. Bright pink lipstick was smeared across her full lips and chin. An old thin scar above one eyebrow cut almost to her scalp. Her eyes looked as if dying had surprised her and it had hurt. A lot. Her black dress with white polka dots was caught up around her waist, and her torn black bikini underpants dangled uselessly from one hip.

Except for the bikini panties, that could be Raymond Chandler writing in 1939. The author is actually Mercedes Lambert, whose first Los Angeles mystery novel, *Dogtown*, was published in 1991. She may share some aspects of Chandler's hard-boiled style, but the creator of Philip Marlowe never set his novels in Pico-Union or Koreatown, and he never tried using a female heroine or a Chicana sidekick.

Lambert is part of a new generation of L.A. authors who are changing the face of American mystery writing. "Los Angeles is the greatest city for crime fiction because of all the conflicts and potential for conflict," says Lambert, who writes under a pseudonym. (By day she is an attorney, who still punches in during the week at an office in East L.A.) "We start out on a precarious footing, trembling on the brink of natural disaster," she says fondly of her hometown. "Then we take hundreds of thousands of people who didn't get along in their countries of origin, add that to an entrenched, angry and frightened group of people who don't want them here, throw in a Santa Ana, a few random insane murderers and pedophiles and then turn the whole thing over to studio executives and the LAPD. It's like a woman with bad skin piling on a lot of makeup. Things are going to get ugly before the night is over."

When Raymond Chandler and Ross Macdonald passed from the scene, the soul went out of L.A. mystery writing. Private-eye fiction became just another cottage industry for nostalgia and pastiche—yearly updates of the familiar Chandler formula in which only the car models changed. By the '70s, the classic Hollywood P.I. had become quainter than Miss Marple—and half as interesting.

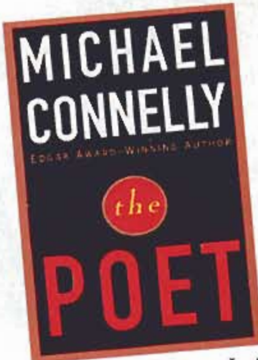
But in a slew of recent mystery novels, L.A. has again become an excellent place to die. A new group of talented locals are turning out sharp-edged genre work of authentic literary power. It all started with James Ellroy's *The Black Dahlia* (1987) and Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), which rediscovered L.A.'s darker past as fertile turf for explorations of the city's contemporary psyche. Following their lead have been talents like Lambert, Michael Connelly, Robert Crais and Gary Phillips, who once again have the nation reading its way down L.A.'s mean streets.

"What we're seeing now," says Shelley McArthur, manager of L.A.'s indispensable Mysterious Bookshop, "is a whole group of younger writers who haven't learned to think of mystery fiction as second class by definition. They are simply novelists—serious novelists—who have decided that the conventions of this genre are the right vehicle for the things they have to say."

Walter Mosley hasn't lived in L.A., the city of his birth, for more than 20 years. But nearly everything he has written is set here. "Los Angeles made me," says Mosley, who will publish his fifth Easy Rawlins mystery, *A Little Yellow Dog*, next month. (*See excerpt.*) The series takes place in South-Central, starting in the '40s and concluding—if Mosley ever writes

all the novels he plans to—in the present day.

A large, dapper man, Mosley still spends a lot of time here, not only to meet with Hollywood producers and do book signings and readings at Esowon Books in Inglewood but to visit his proud Jewish mother, who still lives near Fairfax and Pico. He labored for years as a computer programmer before publishing his first novel at 38.



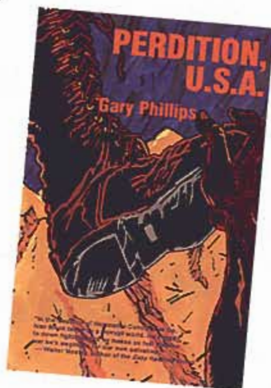
By following Easy's career as aerospace worker, homeowner, school janitor and, throughout it all, informal private investigator, Mosley has been able to look at many traditional noir issues (racist cops, a rigid class system) from the fresh perspective of black Angelenos. His books have been wildly successful. President Clinton reads them, and, last year, Easy was portrayed by Denzel Washington in Carl Franklin's impressive film interpretation of *Devil in a Blue Dress*, the first in the series.

Mosley manages to make social history central to his stories, as each installment jumps forward several years, from the immediate postwar boom, through the paranoia-tinged '50s in *A Red Death* and *White Butterfly*, to the '60s in *Black Betty* and *A Little Yellow Dog*. He isn't rushing to edge the character toward the volatile post-uprising South-Central of today, a place that younger black mystery writers like Gar Anthony Haywood and Gary Phillips are already exploring. "Easy's gonna spend some time in the '60s," says Mosley. "It's just such an explosive and interesting period." (He has, however, been writing a series of nongenre stories set in contemporary L.A., to be collected in book form next year.)

"The kind of crime L.A. has is less predictable," says Walter Mosley. "The people who come here are loose cannons."

Both the flaws and gradual changes in Mosley's Easy Rawlins reflect his dim view of the way the human dimension is handled in most crime fiction: "Usually you get characters who are already completely developed," he complains, "and who never change."

Though Mosley doesn't do any special research for his novels, he acknowledges that many of Easy's attitudes and adventures are based on tales told by his late father. In the new book, Easy takes a job as the beleaguered head custodian at an L.A. public school, a position similar to one Mosley's father held. It shouldn't be much of a surprise that the author plans to slow the chronological pace a bit: After all, Easy Rawlins is now the same age as Mosley, so the author is probably in no hurry to see his hero grow older. His increasing identification with his protagonist may account, in part, for the intimate tone of these stories. Mosley is especially subtle in his depictions of the characters' relations, the mostly unspoken messages and personal negotiations that are conducted in racially charged code.



Mosley admits that, even now, decades away from his father's and Easy's world, he still reflexively plays his own life very close to the vest: "If someone asks me, 'Did you see that fellow walking down the street?' I might say no just to be on the safe side, even if I did see him and don't have any good reason to lie. Why take chances? What you learn is that everything someone knows, they can use against you. For any survival skill to stay sharp, you have to stay in practice."

"No matter how smart you think you are," Raymond Chandler wrote in *The Long Goodbye*, "you have to have a place to start from: a name, an address, a neighborhood, a background, a point of reference of some sort." Critics have long slammed L.A. for its "incoherence," but this motley urban landscape, Mosely feels, is the city's single greatest gift to writers.

"A lot of people identify with the situation of this city," Mosley says. "L.A. is very transient, always in the process of changing into something else." Its turmoil and social fluidity make it a fertile field for mystery writers. "Other cities are very structured," he continues. "The kind of crime L.A. has is less predictable. The people who come here are loose cannons. L.A. is a wild card."

James Ellroy is a slender, handsome man in his late forties, as quiveringly alert as his English bull terrier, a longtime companion who can be seen glowering alongside his master on the back covers of many of Ellroy's twelve books.

The author grew up in east Hollywood, where he has lived most of his life. But recently, he surprised friends by trading in his hot-tempered, volatile past for a more placid present in the Midwest with his wife, former *L.A. Weekly* staffer Helen Knode. The move seems to have mellowed Ellroy, though his vision of Los Angeles remains red-hot.

The four novels of Ellroy's recently completed magnum opus, *The L.A. Quartet*, portray tormented cops inextricably implicated in the corruption of the postwar decades and driven half mad by racism and homophobia. The books bring the hopheads, hoodlums and tabloid shit-heels of the period twitchingly to life.

In *The Black Dahlia*, *The Big Nowhere*, *L.A. Confidential* (currently being filmed, with Danny DeVito as star) and *White Jazz*, historical figures—from Bugsy Siegel to Walt Disney—rub elbows with fictitious sleazeballs. In *The Big Nowhere*, Howard Hughes connives with the driving forces of the Hollywood Red Scare to smash the motion-picture labor unions. Hughes's nemesis is a high-minded cop, whose dawning consciousness of his repressed homosexuality thickens the already smoggy atmosphere of panic and paranoia.

Ellroy doesn't see period fiction as an easy way to indulge in escapist nostalgia. Instead, like Mosley, he views the past as the true locus of our contemporary angst. "History is a nightmare," says James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, "from which I am trying to awake." For Mosley, that nightmare is racism. For Ellroy, it's something more cruelly specific.

"The murder of my mother when I was a boy was

the beginning of my interest in crime and the dark side of life," he says. To this day, his mother's murderer has never been identified, and Ellroy's next book will be a nonfiction account of his own attempt, accompanied by an L.A. private eye, to solve the mystery of the crime that shaped his life. He makes no attempt to conceal the fact that his personal investigation was not, in the most obvious sense, successful. "I learned a lot of other things," he says, "but not that."

Writers like Ellroy always extrapolate daringly from their experiences. Despite its genre roots, all of his work conveys a sensation of corruption, seeping like La Brea tar into every nook and cranny of public and private America. His latest novel, *American Tabloid*, gives us a black cloud of paranoia and conspiracy that envelops the FBI of J. Edgar Hoover, the Kennedy assassination, the disappearance of Jimmy Hoffa . . . and a whole lot more.

Ellroy insists his work has recently been evolving beyond the crime genre and that unlike conventional mystery authors, he is "not interested in making people feel good." That is certainly true, and there is no doubt that *The L.A. Quartet*'s unflinching pessimism is his clearest legacy to the younger writers of L.A.'s hard-boiled new wave.

Mosley and Ellroy were born and "made" here; in that sense, the city chose them. But Michael Connelly is an adopted son who grew up in Florida. "Los Angeles is one of the best places to write about," he says, "because it's still partly unformed and evolving. Economically, socially—even tectonically, if you will—its shape is still uncertain."

As a college student during the '70s, still stumped for a career choice, Connelly saw Robert Altman's version of Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*, which led him to the book. The book, he says, changed his life. "From that point on, I knew that what I wanted was to be able to write like that."

Connelly worked out a career strategy to make it happen. He switched his major to journalism, then steered his professional life toward the crime beat, finally leaving Florida for a job with the San Fernando Valley bureau of the *Los Angeles Times*. He treated his years covering L.A. cops and their investigations as fieldwork for his true calling as an L.A. crime novelist.

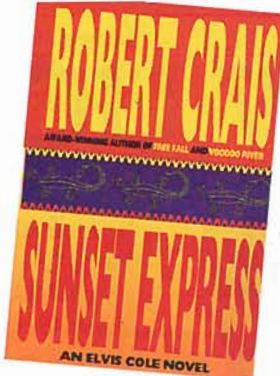
When his first book, *The Black Echo*, appeared in 1992, Connelly was dismissed in some quarters as "James Ellroy Lite." But as his own style grew more distinctive, the invidious comparisons stopped. At 39, he is America's most praised younger mystery writer of the moment. Even First Mystery Fan Clinton, whose endorsement gave an early boost to Mosley's career, was recently seen holding a copy of Connelly's bestseller, *The Poet*, while disembarking from Air Force One.

In addition to *The Poet*, a serial-killer thriller, the serious, neatly bearded former reporter has written four novels about L.A. police detective Harry (short for Hieronymus) Bosch. They chronicle a troubled urban life that works itself out in the nuts-and-bolts context of closely observed police work.

Connelly has made every effort to make the series as realistic as possible, and many of the twists and turns, not surprisingly, are drawn from cases he covered as a reporter. Like the late Charles Willeford in the landmark Hoke Moseley series set in Miami, Connelly understands how the Chandler-esque myth of a romantic, lone-wolf private investigator just doesn't cut it any-

more. "I thought it was much more likely," he says, "that the guy Chandler wrote about—if he was in contemporary L.A.—would be stuck inside the system."

The police department of Connelly's stories is only partly dedicated to carrying out its official mandate. The rest of the time, its bureaucrats work to preserve their own existence. A cop like Harry Bosch—idealistic to the point of monomania, fixated only on solving cases—is bound to get knocked around a bit. Connelly readily admits that Bosch's frustration with the LAPD owes a lot to his own experience working for the *Times*—especially, he says, when he was "stuck in the Valley bureau and felt locked out by the closed system of the downtown office."



Connelly evinces a healthy distaste for the conventional constraints of the crime genre; he has bigger fish to fry. It's partly the tension between the narrow rules of the mystery school and the author's restless desire to stretch the rules just about as far as they will go that makes the Harry Bosch books so exciting. Bosch doesn't just go through changes over the course of the series, he's practically beaten to his knees: He's accused of using excessive force, demoted and sent to a psychiatrist.

Eventually, he faces the task of rebuilding himself almost from the ground up. By the end of Bosch's most recent outing, *The Last Coyote*, the LAPD detective's life lies literally in ruins, his beloved home in the hills condemned and demolished after sustaining terminal earthquake damage. Not that Bosch isn't capable of a few moments of hard-won optimism. "It makes you forgive a lot, forget a lot," he says in *The Last Coyote*. "That's the thing about Los Angeles. It's got a lot of broken pieces to it. But the ones that still work, really do work."

There is nothing the least bit "lite" about the writer Connelly has become. Referring to one of his favorite pulp novelists, he says, "The message of Jim Thompson's books is that nothing is ever what it seems. L.A. is the place where you feel that anxiety, that paranoia, about the levels of reality probably more than anywhere else."

In his pastel, well-cut casual clothes, Robert Crais looks every inch like what he used to be: a successful television writer whose cop-show credits range from *Baretta* to *Miami Vice*. Asked to pick an "atmospheric" spot for a lunchtime interview, the author of the increasingly popular Elvis Cole series selects Thunder Roadhouse on the Sunset Strip. Appropriately, the sixth book in the series, published in April, is titled *Sunset Express*.

Like Connelly, Crais came from somewhere else—in his case, Louisiana. "All new things either start here or come here," Crais says of his adopted city, "so there's a continual freshening of the environment. Maybe it's because there is no freshening in older cities like New York—it is what it is, and it's been that way for a long time. But Los Angeles is the evolutionary edge. That's what keeps writers alert. There's always some new moment to explore."

Where Connelly's stories are emotionally tumultuous, Crais's novels are all unruffled, cool control. His hero, Elvis Cole, is an authentic postmodern private eye, a self-consciously ironic shamus who relishes the anachronistic absurdity of his role. Cole's second adventure, *Stalking the Angel*, begins: "I was standing on my head in my office, when the best-looking woman I had seen in three weeks walked in"—a laid-back spin on the classic tough-guy opening that owes as much to Bill Murray as it does to Raymond Chandler. Facing down an obnoxious Hollywood phony in an ice-cream store in *The Monkey's Raincoat*, Cole asks the man, "Do you dance?" Then he pulls the surprised jerk into a close embrace and says, "Try the double chocolate banana."

Crais's books have a dark side, too, complete with psychodrama and wrenching family violence—and the comedy doesn't undercut any of it. Cole uses humor as a protective barrier to keep himself from succumbing to the horror. The "solution" to the puzzle in a top-drawer Crais novel like *Lullaby Town* reveals itself in layers. Just when you think the root cause has finally become clear, Crais goes further, exposing deeper, more fundamental secrets.

The Elvis Cole stories are among the most playful and entertaining of current detective novels, but they are also among the most adult—not least in their implication that most of the answers we come up with in this life lead only to more questions. "I'm writing novels," Crais says. "My hero happens to be a private eye, and they happen to be crime stories, but that's just the metaphor I'm using."

Like Ellroy, Crais is exploring more than the limits of a given genre. Adopted as a child, he recently spent several intense years searching for his birth parents. "It's possible that it has something to do with the sort of writing I'm doing now," he says. "Every detective is finally investigating himself."

For the long term, the most promising trend in L.A. mystery fiction is what might be dubbed the multicultural school, as exemplified by Mercedes Lambert, whose second novel, *Soultown*, will be published this summer, and Gary Phillips, whose first Ivan Monk story, *Violent Spring*, appeared in 1994.

The ranks of the multiculturalists could be expanded to include *continued on page 140*

MYSTERY WRITERS

continued from page 68

black author Gar Anthony Haywood (*You Can Die Trying*), as well as Thomas Perry (*Dance for the Dead*) and T. Jefferson Parker (*The Triggerman's Dance*). Several others have also embraced the city's ethnic multiplicity—a treasure trove of fresh stories waiting to be plundered. One of the most intriguing exponents of this school is certainly the pseudonymous Lambert. Her two highly regarded crime novels feature an Anglo do-gooder attorney, Whitney Logan, and her Chicana ex-hooker friend, Lupe, whose first assignment is to show her middle-class partner how little she really knows about the "disadvantaged."

The detail work in Lambert's first book, *Dogtown*—awash in the bright colors and sharp textures of the Central American immigrant areas near Pico-Union and downtown—enlivens every page. *Soultown* takes place largely in Koreatown. All three are districts scarcely dealt with in fiction of any kind, much less in detective novels. Besides their value as mysteries, they are thrilling group portraits of the city's new classes.

"The sun never sets on local color in L.A.," says Lambert, a fiery redhead whose only apparent vice is an addiction to Starbucks Frappuccinos. "Sometimes, I'll be staring at the blank page and realize that 40 minutes south down the 405, a Vietnamese poet is staring at the blank page, too; to the east, a Jamaican girl makes up a song and the black girls dance; north, an Iranian family prays; and somewhere near Hoover, a very elegant Peruvian gentleman cuts a deck of cards. We will never hear of one another, but together our words are creating the myth that is Los Angeles."

In *Dogtown*, Lambert wrote one of the sharpest descriptions of her favorite city: "Monica Fullbright was not who she said she was. Nobody in this town is. The guy who cleans your pool is an actor. The girl at the hamburger stand is a musician. Everyone else is writing a screenplay. Twenty percent of L.A. is illegal and pretending they're not here. The entire city is a Greyhound bus station."

GARY PHILLIPS HAS JUST PUBLISHED HIS SECond Ivan Monk novel, *Perdition, U.S.A.* "Los Angeles is the great experiment," he says. "The things we are going through

now, the whole country will be going through in a few years. If we can't make it work here—in terms of dealing with our social inequalities and the new multicultural landscape—that will not be a good sign for the rest of the country."

Phillips works for the nonprofit activist organization MultiCultural Collaborative in an isolated downtown building encircled by empty parking lots. He is an imposing fellow, tall and broad-shouldered enough to be a pro linebacker. Leading the way through a suitably gray drizzle to the Original Pantry, which Phillips calls "Dick's Cafe" (a backhanded tribute to the current owner, Mayor Richard Riordan), he cites Census Bureau statistics: Whites will be an ethnic minority in California by the year 2040, but Los Angeles will cross that threshold before the end of this century. He thinks L.A. is unique because of its attempt to come to terms with its fragmentation into disparate ethnic neighborhoods, "often competing with one another for the same limited resources and business opportunities," he says. "The private eye is an appealing character partly because he functions as an emissary between groups and creates new connections." Phillips, who took a UCLA Extension writing class from Robert Crais before attempting his first novel, clearly thinks writers do the same thing.

He decries the "creeping balkanization" of the city, with demagogues like Louis Farrakhan and Pat Buchanan ("the white Farrakhan") and their local equivalents fanning the nationalistic flames. In *Violent Spring*, which takes place a year after the 1992 riots, a black detective finds himself investigating the murder of a Korean grocer, whose body is unearthed during a groundbreaking ceremony at the corner of Florence and Normandie. At one point, he stands between a black and a Korean activist, holding them at arm's length until they can cool down enough to talk sense.

Not everyone is as optimistic about the writer's role—or the detective's—as Phillips is. Michael Connelly watches the confusion of the city around him and often despairs of ever making credible sense of it in a novel. "The detective's function is to bring order to disorder," he says, "but in real life, that's very hard to do, especially in Los Angeles. We need the detective now more than ever, but he's getting harder and harder to write." ■