



The Big Nowhere

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James Ellroy's highly successful *THE BLACK DAHLIA*, published in 1987, dealt with fictitious Los Angeles policemen investigating the actual torture-murder of an attractive young woman. He uses a similar approach in his new book, which is more complicated and includes two famous real-life personages: mobster Mickey Cohen and billionaire aviator-industrialist Howard Hughes. The three fictitious investigators start out on different assignments but gradually become entangled in one another's personal and professional lives, illustrating Ellroy's thesis that crime and corruption are all part of one big Gordian knot.

There are two main plots. One has to do with serial killings of young male homosexuals by an unknown fiend who mutilates them and chews on their bodies like a wild animal. Ellroy likes to shock, and no reader can complain of getting shortchanged in that department. The other plot involves underhanded machinations by the police and district attorney to break a strike being staged by a supposedly Communist-dominated union of lower-echelon film-studio employees.

The language in Ellroy's book reflects the dominant white majority's attitudes of the 1950's; both dialogue and narrative are full of references to "queers," "niggers," "spics," "pinkos," and so on. The putative heroes use brutality, extortion, breaking-and-entering, terrorism, robbery, and even murder to accomplish their ends. Joseph Wambaugh's Los Angeles policemen really do look like "choirboys" compared to Ellroy's renegade lawmen.

THE BIG NOWHERE is an unusually large book for the crime genre and the passive reader trained on escapist entertainment will find it difficult to keep the huge cast of characters straight. Material that should have been dramatized is often presented in long passages of dry exposition. There is a nagging suspicion that the two main story lines originally graced separate manuscripts which were shuffled together in order to capitalize on the commercial success of *THE BLACK DAHLIA*. James Ellroy is a good writer with a promising future, but *THE BIG NOWHERE* does not display his talents to their fullest advantage.

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