



The Black Dahlia

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On January 15, 1947, the body of a young woman was found in a vacant lot in Los Angeles. It had been cut in half, and the victim had obviously undergone horrible torture for days. A police reporter christened her “The Black Dahlia” after a 1946 Alan Ladd noir film called THE BLUE DAHLIA. The murder, which has never been solved, made front-page news in Southern California for more than six weeks because of the victim’s beauty and the fact that a Jack the Ripper-type psychopath was at large.

In James Ellroy’s extrapolation from the facts, two young policemen become involved in the investigation. They are not unlike many cop teams in recent films: rowdy, insubordinate, reckless, competitive, but loyal to each other. Eventually they become emotionally involved with the same woman, which further complicates their own relationship. She is not overly troubled by having two virile young men in love with her, but she is jealous of the Black Dahlia, who has become an obsession with both of them.

Their unorthodox and largely unsanctioned investigation uncovers skeletons in many cupboards. Some policemen had shameful connections with the Black Dahlia. Not all the suspects who had been sexually involved with her were men. Eventually the trail leads to the upper echelon of Southern California society, which appears to be as tainted with crime and perversion as the lower depths.

James Ellroy is a talented professional who has written a number of successful crime novels, including CLANDESTINE, a nominee for the Mystery Writers of America’s prestigious Edgar Allan Poe Award. Although THE BLACK DAHLIA is full of excitement, some readers may object to Ellroy’s scrambling of genres. Truman Capote claimed to have invented a new genre with the publication of IN COLD BLOOD in 1966, but he simply dramatized known facts. TRUE CONFESIONS, the novel by John Gregory Dunne, was suggested by the Black Dahlia murder, but all the characters and events were imaginary. Ellroy’s new book is a unique blend of true crime and fictional police procedural. The reader is never sure when he is reading about real people, when they are purely imaginary, or when they are a combination of fact and fiction.

Ellroy has hinted that his solution to the 1947 crime is “in keeping with certain whispers as to the victim’s lifestyle.” Pinning a real crime on a fictitious character, however, leads to a frustrating conclusion, especially when the whole story has been built on discovering whodunit.

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