

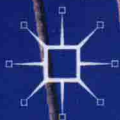
General Editor: Clive Bloom

**James Ellroy**

*Demon Dog of Crime Fiction*

**Steven Powell**

**CRIME  
FILES**

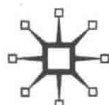


# **James Ellroy**

## **Demon Dog of Crime Fiction**

Steven Powell

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*For Diana,  
who started the journey*

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STEVEN POWELL

# Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1 Lee Earle Ellroy and the Avon Novels</b>	<b>8</b>
The last days of Lee Earle Ellroy	9
<i>Brown's Requiem</i> : death and rebirth	11
<i>Clandestine</i> : the anti-private detective phase	23
Stray dogs: 'The Confessions of Bugsy Siegel' and <i>Killer on the Road</i>	33
The Avon characters and new writing styles	46
<b>2 The Lloyd Hopkins Novels: Ellroy's Displaced Romantic</b>	<b>49</b>
'L.A. Death Trip': the genesis of Lloyd Hopkins	49
<i>Blood on the Moon</i>	54
<i>Because the Night</i>	69
<i>Suicide Hill</i>	78
The Lloyd Hopkins novels: the incomplete series	88
<b>3 James Ellroy, Jean Ellroy and Elizabeth Short: The Demon Dog and Transmogrification in The Black Dahlia</b>	<b>91</b>
'You are free to speculate': Ellroy and the Black Dahlia <i>The Black Dahlia</i>	93
'I wrote the last page and wept': Ellroy's Continuing Black Dahlia Narratives	100
'Now we know who killed her, and why': Ellroy and the Black Dahlia true-crime sub-genre	111
<i>Perfidia</i> : Ellroy's Black Dahlia legacy	114
<b>4 Developing Noir: The Los Angeles Quartet</b>	<b>122</b>
After <i>The Black Dahlia</i> : the evolution of Ellroy's writing process	129
<i>The Big Nowhere</i> and 'Man Camera'	134
<i>L.A. Confidential</i> and Ellrovian prose	139
<i>White Jazz</i> : apocalypse noir	147
The legacy and return of the LA Quartet	157
	164



<b>5 The Narrative of Secret Histories in the Underworld</b>	
<b>USA Trilogy</b>	<b>169</b>
<i>American Tabloid</i>	171
<i>The Cold Six Thousand</i>	190
<i>Blood's a Rover</i>	201
Conclusion: 'I have paid a dear and savage price to live history'	212
<i>Bibliography</i>	216
<i>Index</i>	223

# Introduction

James Ellroy was born in Los Angeles in 1948. He grew up in the epicentre of American noir at the height of the classic film noir period: 'I remember feeling that things were going on outside the frame of what I was seeing. The language I got partly from my father, who swore a lot. It was an older L.A., a man's L.A., where everybody smoked cigarettes and ate steak and went to fights' (Kihn 1992: 32). This experiential, inchoate knowledge of Los Angeles was to prove Ellroy's most valuable education. He absorbed what he saw at home and on the streets, and culturally he gravitated towards this world more than any other: 'My passion for movies does not extend beyond their depiction of crime. My filmic pantheon rarely goes past 1959 and the end of the film noir age' (Ellroy 1997a: xvii).

The city and the era had an enormous influence on his formative years and on his identity as a crime writer. One of Ellroy's main aims as a crime novelist has been to revisit and reimagine this noir era in the LA Quartet series. Noir presents a world where politics is a byword for corruption, individuals are morally compromised, and protagonists are resigned to their fate knowing there will be no happy endings. It is noir's darkness which makes it so attractive, and Ellroy's historical fiction has captured the essence of this noir paradox. Yet even though his writing style is nostalgically drawn to film noir and detective fiction in the era of the 1940s and 1950s, Ellroy's noir vision deconstructs both the perceived glamour and social conservatism of the era: his LA is a city riven with organized crime and LAPD corruption.

The history of Los Angeles and its cinematic identity was just one inspiration for Ellroy. He would also draw on biographical elements of his own life in his fiction, including, most notably, the unsolved murder of his mother Geneva Hilliker Ellroy in 1958. Ellroy would entwine LA

narratives with that of his mother's death to deepen, contextualize, spiritualize and fictionalize his mother's influence on his life. Ellroy's childhood discovery of the Black Dahlia case, the most famous unsolved murder in LA history, while reading Jack Webb's *The Badge* (1958), was also significant. Before he reached adolescence, Ellroy had discovered the two main obsessions of his literary career: his mother's murder and the Black Dahlia herself – Elizabeth Short.

Ellroy's path to becoming a writer, however, was to be an unconventional one. With his father's death in 1965, Ellroy lost all restraining influences. The next few years of his life were characterized by drug and alcohol abuse, homelessness, petty crime and several stints in the LA County Jail. It was a brush with death that finally persuaded Ellroy to reform and start writing. In 1975, Ellroy suffered a mental and physical breakdown, which he has described as 'post-alcoholic brain syndrome', but he did not stop substance abusing until he nearly died of pneumonia and a lung abscess (Kihn 1992: 25). In 1977, he joined Alcoholics Anonymous which became a turning point: employment followed sobriety. His first novel, *Brown's Requiem*, was published in 1981. Ellroy slowly and steadily built his reputation as a crime writer. His breakthrough came with his seventh novel, *The Black Dahlia* (1987), in which he created a fictional solution to the murder of Elizabeth Short and allusively explored his obsession with his mother's murder. Since then, Ellroy has become one of the most prominent of contemporary crime writers through the publication of a series of novels merging noir with historical revisionism in the LA Quartet and Underworld USA trilogy.

In parallel to his work as a novelist, Ellroy has developed a public persona as the self-styled Demon Dog of American Crime Fiction. Through interviews, Ellroy found an outlet for his literary persona, elevating standard publicity opportunities into a form of creative performance, building and deconstructing narratives which in turn play with the semi-biographical as well as the purely fictional narratives of the novels: 'As critical acclaim and response has built up, every interview I give is a chance to puncture the myth I've created about my work and refine it' (Hogan 1995: 60). The documentaries *James Ellroy: American Dog* (2006) and *Feast of Death* (2001) feature scenes with Ellroy at his favourite LA restaurant, the Pacific Dining Car, holding court with his contacts in the LAPD alongside fellow writers such as Bruce Wagner and Larry Harnisch and show-business friends Dana Delany and Nick Nolte, discussing unsolved cases and LA history. Few crime writers could match Ellroy in terms of clout and his ability to generate publicity, but

by his own admission much of what he says should be taken with a degree of scepticism. Ellroy is an author at ease with his own sense of celebrity, but, in one of the many contradictory sides of his character, he relishes his self-crafted image as an outsider – too edgy, unpredictable and maverick to ever truly belong to the Hollywood or publishing establishment. He can be an intimidating figure to some journalists, as Iain Johnston wrote during one interview: ‘The myopic stare of James Ellroy, too, reveals much about his character – his suppressed anxiety, resolute obsession, locked down concentration, fierce determination and wild, black humour, are all detectable there’ (Johnston 2014). In his public appearances, Ellroy cuts a striking figure, often dressed in garish Hawaiian shirts, spouting outrageous right-wing views and barking like a dog. This manic behaviour might seem to contradict his reputation as an acclaimed historical novelist, but in part Ellroy maintains his creativity and uniqueness by eschewing respectability.

At times, critics have found it difficult to distinguish James Ellroy the man from his Demon Dog persona. However, such a neat dividing line overlooks the subversive quality of his character: Hans Berten and Theo D’haen have commented, ‘Ellroy aims to be serious all the way. There is nothing funny or laid-back about his characters, most of whom show the same kind of assertiveness and tenseness Ellroy himself projects in his public appearances and in the photographs that his publicity agents distribute’ (Berten and D’haen 2001: 96). The Demon Dog persona preceded Ellroy’s literary celebrity rather than coming later as an adjunct to it, and as such, it is integral to an understanding of Ellroy as a writer. There may not have been one distinct moment when Ellroy invented the persona, but there are two events examined in this book which are evidence of its genesis: a meeting with editor Otto Penzler early in Ellroy’s writing career when the author declared himself the ‘Demon Dog of American Crime Fiction’ and Ellroy’s invention of ‘Dog’ humour with his friend Randy Rice.

Ellroy’s work has been examined in studies of crime fiction such as Lee Horsley’s *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction* (2005) and Andrew Pepper’s *The Contemporary American Crime Novel: Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Class* (2000). In *The Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction and Film Noir* (2002), Megan Abbott refers to ‘a project that has, in a large part, been taken up by James Ellroy’s novels’, which she describes as ‘A pointed demythologization ... made by targeting the misogyny, or racism or homophobia at the heart of the tough guy figure’ (Abbott 2002: 194). But this demythologization works two ways;

by reinventing the tough guy figure of the noir period and moving his less attractive features to the fore, Ellroy's portrayal becomes more nostalgic: 'he [the white tough guy] solidifies his status as a beloved nostalgia icon, a figure from an antiquated dream, a recurring white fantasy that persists still' (Abbott 2002: 189). No matter how antiquated it might seem, and despite his protestations to the contrary, Ellroy has never been able to turn his back on noir. As his reputation as a literary figure has improved, Ellroy has not rejected noir but placed the genre in a cycle of reinvention which has solidified the status of characters such as Dudley Smith and Pete Bondurant as 'beloved nostalgia icon(s)'. His LA, as Abbott states, is 'deglamourized', but on a different level it is romanticized. Ellroy says of his protagonists, 'they either are somewhat redeemed by love, or fully redeemed by love, or die looking for love. And that's why I love 'em' (Powell 2008b: 171). Equally, his Underworld novels are a celebration of America as much as an indictment: 'the bad things [about America] are tremendously exhilarating to me. It annoys me when people say that my books are depressing because they're not. I think they're exhilarating. I think they're easily the most passionate crime books ever written and I'm a relentlessly positive, hopeful, optimistic, almost utopian person' (Duncan 1996: 84). Ellroy's warped utopia, however, placed conspiracy at the heart of an outwardly democratic political process through his portrayal of American history from the 1940s to the 1970s.

Although there are still relatively few full-length studies of Ellroy's work, his contribution to the genre is frequently referenced in critical overviews of American crime fiction, which suggests he has been successful in establishing himself as a character within the history of the genre. Significantly, most of the scholarship on Ellroy focuses on his literary career from *The Black Dahlia* onwards: the LA Quartet and the Underworld USA trilogy have dominated critical discussions of Ellroy's body of work. Ellroy's first six novels have generated considerably less interest. Much has been written about how the details of his extraordinary life have influenced his fiction. In his study of Ellroy, *Like Hot Knives to the Brain: James Ellroy's Search for Himself* (2005), Peter Wolfe attempts to tie Ellroy's fiction to specific moments in his life, as though the novels are a form of memoir. Anna Flügge's full-length study, *James Ellroy and the Novel of Obsession* (2010), frames Ellroy's work in a genre or sub-genre of obsession narratives.

This study, the latest volume in the Crime Files series, however, is an examination of the diverse narrative styles Ellroy has embraced and experimented with over a significant period of his career. *James Ellroy:*

*Demon Dog of Crime Fiction* is divided into five chapters which examine different stages of Ellroy's career and trace the evolution of his prose style, novel structure and literary influences. Each stage of Ellroy's career has been fairly distinct. This is partially a consequence of Ellroy writing novels which are part of an ongoing series, but it can also be attributed to the author's penchant for being dismissive of his past work at the beginning of each new project. However, Ellroy has created complex and extensive links from novel to novel in his fictional worlds, and I explore both the stylistic and structural connections between the LA Quartet, the Underworld USA trilogy and the Second LA Quartet. In this study I have tried to redress the balance of critical work on Ellroy by devoting the first two chapters to the six novels which preceded *The Black Dahlia*. The anthology *James Ellroy: A Companion to the Mystery Fiction* by Jim Mancall (2014) is an invaluable guide in this regard, providing insight into early characters such as Fritz Brown and Lloyd Hopkins.

Another issue in critical discussion of Ellroy's work is how to disentangle Ellroy's labyrinthine plotting. In his review of *The Black Dahlia*, Peter Messent wrote, 'If my analysis focuses so much on the complexities of the plot, this is because it is plot that drives this novel, and it is through plot and what it reveals (not through character and authorial point of view) that the text's social critique becomes most apparent' (Messent 2013: 192). Although I agree with Messent that plot drives Ellroy's novels, I have tried as much as possible to avoid discussion of plotting so complex it could warrant multiple volumes in itself. Instead, I focus on the evolution of Ellroy's prose style from novel to novel.

Chapter 1 examines three novels Ellroy wrote early in his career. *Brown's Requiem*, *Clandestine* and *Killer on the Road* were not breakthrough works for Ellroy, and his professional relationship with Avon was not entirely to his liking, but his burning ambition is apparent in his exploration and reinvention of the Raymond Chandler-inspired private detective model in *Brown's Requiem*. The Chandler influence was quickly discarded in *Clandestine* as Ellroy adapted the unsolved murder of his mother into the narrative and capitalized on other themes close to his personal life, such as protagonist Freddy Underhill's longing for transcendent 'wonder'. *Killer on the Road* is more radical still: written from the perspective of a serial killer, it acts as the culmination of Ellroy's work for Avon. In the three Avon novels, Ellroy mixes high and low culture, from references to classical music to comic-book characters. Such a strange and potent mix indicates his desire to carve out a reputation as a literary, as well as genre author.

In Chapter 2, I examine the three novels of the Lloyd Hopkins series. Ellroy wrote the Hopkins novels under editorial pressure to write a popular, lucrative series character, but he struggled to adapt his writing style to the genre conventions that he had, after *Brown's Requiem*, determined to avoid. Lloyd Hopkins is Ellroy's displaced Romantic, a man out of place in a 1980s crime novel, who finds the consumerism of his era deadening. Yet Ellroy contrasts Hopkins' rejection of contemporary culture with criminals who, having abandoned contemporary society's morality and culture, are portrayed as Hopkins' mirror image. The Lloyd Hopkins novels reveal a division between Ellroy and his colleagues regarding the direction of his writing career. This conflict, neatly paralleled in the themes of the novel, existed between Ellroy the self-styled Romantic and Ellroy the commercially viable genre author.

The third chapter focuses exclusively on Ellroy's Black Dahlia narrative. Its scope, however, is not limited to the fictional union between Ellroy, his mother and Elizabeth Short that the author creates through the novel *The Black Dahlia*. Rather, I argue that Ellroy has been developing the Dahlia case into narrative since he first learned of it at the age of eleven. A larger, uncontainable narrative external to the novel emerges when Ellroy's engagement with the Dahlia mythology is seen in its full context.

In Chapter 4, the last three novels of the LA Quartet are discussed by examining the writing style Ellroy adapted during the gruelling revisions forced upon him in the editorial process. For *L.A. Confidential*, Ellroy cut hundreds of pages of text, excising words sentence by sentence, but ultimately retained every scene he had envisaged in the original outline. This proved a turning point in his style as a writer and the style of the genre itself. Although steeped in noir, the Quartet novels are works of experimentation, culminating in *White Jazz*, the novel Ellroy conceived as a symbolic end to noir itself.

The fifth and final chapter is an examination of the Underworld USA series. Ellroy moved beyond noir boundaries and its classic 1950s LA setting in *American Tabloid*, a book in which the State, through the bureaucratic rivalries of competing departments, is shown to be every bit as corrupt as the criminals profiting from the system. In *American Tabloid* and its two sequels, Ellroy portrayed fifteen years of American history through a crime fiction narrative that covered the major events of the late 1950s to the early 1970s through the prism of Ellroy's noir style. By the end of his most ambitious writing project to date, Ellroy had, through fiction, developed noir as a form of historical revisionism.

Having just embarked upon the project of writing a Second Los Angeles Quartet, Ellroy seems determined to prove that his best work lies ahead of him. This study demonstrates how critical opinion is divided between reviewers who still marvel at Ellroy's experimentation and narrative risk taking, and those who feel the Demon Dog persona has become an encumbrance on Ellroy's writing. As an author who thrives on controversy and publicity, Ellroy, I believe, would appreciate the critical schism.



# 1

## Lee Earle Ellroy and the Avon Novels

'James Ellroy' came into being with the publication of his first novel *Brown's Requiem* in 1981. Before that, Ellroy was known by his name at birth, Lee Earle Ellroy. The name change marked a significant moment in his long transition from alcohol- and drug-addicted vagrant to author. Yet despite this remarkable metamorphosis, and Ellroy's strong and powerful writing in his early novels, much of his early literary career was plagued by missed opportunities and messy compromises. Ellroy was able to find a publisher for his first novel remarkably quickly, bypassing the often long struggle aspiring writers face getting their work published. Yet he was unsatisfied in his ambitions: he had hoped he would achieve a new crime-fiction style with his early work.

Part of Ellroy's frustration lay in his sometimes difficult relationship with his first publisher, Avon. Against his better judgement, Ellroy was pushed into several editorial decisions, mostly concerning how the novels should comply with the conventions of the crime fiction genre. Avon published Ellroy's first two novels, *Brown's Requiem* and *Clandestine* (1982), before rejecting his third novel. After a short crisis in his career when he was unable to find a publisher, Ellroy began his professional relationship with the Mysterious Press, who published the Lloyd Hopkins novels. Ellroy returned to Avon to write his sixth novel *Killer on the Road* (1986). One of his most bizarre works, it would also be the last novel Ellroy would write for the publisher.

The lack of recognition Ellroy received as a newly published author drove him to constantly reinvent and refine his writing style during this period. The three Avon novels have been critically overlooked despite the fact that as Ellroy's only stand-alone, non-series novels, there is a greater capacity for stylistic experimentation between each novel than in his later work. Ellroy would draw on his past, often harrowing,