

BOOKS & THE ARTS

Mother Night

EMILY GORDON

MY DARK PLACES: An L.A. Crime Memoir.By James Ellroy.
Knopf. 351 pp. \$25.

Before dawn on June 22, 1958, James Ellroy's mother, Jean, *a.k.a.* Geneva Odell Hilliker, was raped, strangled to death and dumped on an empty road in El Monte, California. Ellroy was 10. What does it mean for a best-selling crime novelist when his mother is a case—a number filed in a dusty archive labeled “unsolved”? *My Dark Places*, a memoir as much about Ellroy's evolution as a writer as it is about his mother and the search for her murderer, takes the sustained anguish of that experience and builds a monument.

Nearly all narratives of our parents are patchy; we spend our lives assembling connections and explanations. Until he was 46, Ellroy had little to go on but this one event, framed in newspaper clippings, and his traumatized memory (her bourbon, appropriately, was *Early Times*). There was no trial, and the murder festered in his imagination. “Every mystery solved was my love for her in ellipses,” he writes. He has signed all 50,000 copies of this book, a sculpture cast from a mold of missing pieces and silence.

James Ellroy's dark places are in those ellipses and that signature. They are everything he has censored or pushed under: the street they found his mother on; the bar where she was seen dancing with her date, a “swarthy man”; the drive-in where they had eaten earlier, whose carhop observed that Jean's clothes were disheveled and the man seemed distracted. One place is Ellroy's own body, the pitch darkness of his sexuality; another is the “cavelike” L.A. hotel room he rents to consider her; and the first jail cell whose darkness “jump-started [his] imagination.” Darkness is history that wants to stay, like a weak-shelled creature, under its rock. The darkest places of all are Jean's, her involuntary legacy: Divorced from James's father, her past life a blank, she came to El Monte, her neighbors sup-

posed, to hide. Ellroy's father, he writes, “never told me that sitting in the dark was a strange thing to do.” Ellroy spent his life doing exactly that.

Well known for genre-mixing and -bending, Ellroy here makes his biggest leap yet: a true-crime detective story, an L.A. social history and a kind of romance. The result is a twisted literary memoir, the white-hot spinning of a loner and autodidact. “My father was a liar. My mother was a fabricator”; being a writer, Ellroy's a liar too. For years he set fictional characters in the historical past, then re-wrote history. Confined to the forms of real life, cold facts and un-outlinable characters, in *My Dark Places* Ellroy is more powerful than ever.

It's as The Redhead that Ellroy imagined his mother for much of his life: an icon, a beacon, a red light that arrested gentleness.

He was a history junkie from way back. Hooked on crime news as a kid, he was “developing a tabloid sensibility.... My brain was a police blotter.” In his novels he exhumes the past along with the secrets it would have preferred to keep. But to get at his own history—not forties L.A. or J.F.K.'s Camelot—he had to go beyond his fields of expertise: “I had to attack the central story of my life.”

Many fans of Ellroy's *oeuvre* (twelve books, the kind whose spine you break without shame—among them *Clandestine*, *White Jazz* and *L.A. Confidential*) are already familiar with that story, an exploitation Ellroy freely admits. Being “a thief and a voyeur” may have served his writing well, but he felt cheap presenting Geneva's history as his own: “I plundered her in a fever dream and denied my own message of yearning.” This time, “I had to submit to her spirit. If I hurt her, I'd feel her censure.”

My Dark Places is composed of four sections, replete with Ellroy's heart-surgeon humor and cool irony: “The Redhead,” “The Kid in the Picture,” “Stoner” and “Geneva Hilliker.” Just the facts: “The Red-

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head" is a chronicle of Jean's murder, as represented by her L.A.P.D. homicide file. It offers the bare bones of a mystery, irresistibly inviting us to play detective. It's not in Ellroy's voice but the detached narration of cops on the stand—"The coroner's deputy took a scalpel and made a deep 6-inch-long incision in the victim's abdomen...jabbed a meat thermometer into the liver and got a reading of 90 degrees"—or a nonchalant private eye: "Dead white women always stirred things up." It's as *The Redhead*—a *noir* moniker, a cliché that renders her nameless—that Ellroy imagined Jean for much of his life: an icon, a beacon, a red light that arrested gentleness.

Ellroy's protagonists tend to lose their innocence, through betrayal, carnage or both. But Ellroy was never innocent. His intimacy was with the politics of divorce, its ugly scenes and shameful loyalties—"a bifurcated life divvied up between two people locked in an intractable mutual hatred." Screaming his father's vicious slurs at Jean and getting slapped for it is one of James's last clear memories of his mother alive. In a child's view of cause and effect, it's a simple equation. "I hated her and lust-ed for her. Then she was dead."

"The Kid in the Picture" is Ellroy, at 10, posed by newspaper photographers at his neighbor's workbench the day of his mother's death. He's sent back to L.A. to live with his father—what he'd wanted all along—whom Jean had kicked out four years before. He and his father (a "Hollywood bottom-feeder" and Rita Hayworth's onetime agent—otherwise a profligate with his own invented past) live in a filthy house. His father has his own crude theories of how Jean, "a drunk and a whore," ended up dead. After years of brainwashing and neglect, he dies of a heart attack, leaving James at 17 a furious, maladjusted orphan—his brain tuned to death as though it were a radio frequency.

Even before his mother's murder, Ellroy says, he was "the poster boy for the If-You-Can't-Love-Me-Notice-Me chapter in all child psychology textbooks." He graduates from "stalking" girls from school on his bike to breaking into their houses for money and panties; from snitching pulp novels to shoving supermarket steaks down his pants; from daydreaming to declaiming white-supremacist propaganda at school; from smoking joints to swallowing the cotton wads in 69-cent Benzedrex inhalers. In a rare moment of adult guidance, a wino called Flame-O "told me I was wino bait myself. I didn't believe him." There's plenty of sly wit in the teen-angst story, too:

"I read a beat-up copy of *Atlas Shrugged* and came to the unsound conclusion that I was a superman."

It can be hard to be in the same book with this Ellroy, who lives the life of adolescent fantasy: expelled from school, sleeping in flophouses, locked up forty-odd times for drunkenness, theft and trespassing (jail was his "health retreat") before he kicked what was fueling him. The prevailing voice in "The Kid in the Picture" is raw and crass—less the hepcat lingo of his thrillers than a hyper-angry, juvenile slang ("The high was *gooooood*... [it] left me dingy and schizzy"). Listening to this kid can be wearying. But then, as Ellroy himself likes to say, not every book should have a true-blue hero; "I have empathy for monsters," he's said, and so do we.

His lust for stories of the dead turns out to be even more potent than his chemical addictions. Young Ellroy is perpetually tanked on a cocktail of ego and media, following female-murder-victim cases obsessively, fantasizing himself, by turns, as killer and rescuer, punisher and lover. The Black Dahlia murder (which he would "solve" in his 1987 novel of the same name) was the 13-year-old James's favorite, "explicitly pornographic" subject and his deepest bad dream: "She was the heart of my crime world. I didn't know that she was the redhead transmogrified."

It's not long before the suppressed longing leaps up and his fantasies collide: "I jerry-rigged a story straight off... My mother didn't die in El Monte. She wasn't a drunk. She loved me woman to man... It was the most impassioned and loving story I'd ever perpetrated. It left me ashamed and horrified of what I had inside me." He stops short of acting out all the horrors he imagines, though; and after a complete mind-and-body breakdown, he somehow manages to pull himself together. He cad-dies at posh golf courses and starts to write. And there we leave him for a while.

In the scat sentences and wise-ass repartee of "Stoner"—a portrait of Bill Stoner, the retired L.A. County detective Ellroy hired in 1994 to reopen Geneva's file—lie the other romance, besides Ellroy and Jean's, of this book. Stoner has solved plenty of murders (including the *Cotton Club* case, a movie-biz contract hit, several years earlier), but the unsolved ones itch him badly. We don't know why Jean was strangled that night, but through the lens of Stoner's thirty-two-year police career, we learn a lot about men's motives. Concluding a long list: "Men killed women because the world ignored and condoned it." Like

Ellroy, Stoner has "a gender-wide crush on women"; simultaneously, they "both worshipped testosterone overload. We both reveled in tales of male energy displaced. We both saw through it. We both knew it killed my mother."

If you're steeped in Ellroy, you'll notice how much sweeter Stoner is than Ellroy's rogue-cop antiheroes and leg breakers, especially in interrogation scenes. He's not the type to kneecap an 85-year-old witness, and Ellroy soaks up the way Stoner listens—no bruiser/talker games in this man-hunt. Ellroy doesn't presume to speak for Stoner, respectfully granting the restrained detective his privacy. By the end, though, we get a glimpse of Stoner at play, eating sausages with Ellroy's new-found cousins. Ellroy wears his love for the man on his sleeve; Stoner gets it—so much so that a triangle forms: Jean, Ellroy and Stoner, who Ellroy "knew... was falling for her."

It's in "Geneva Hilliker," the book's most lush and revelatory section, that the investigation—left for dead since 1970—recommences. Stoner and Ellroy talk crime and "anthropological tangents" and circle, like cop partners, the small map of the murder, "chasing names" for fifteen months—finding and re-interviewing everyone in the files (cops, suspects, witnesses) who isn't dead or a senile junkie, hoping someone wants to clear his conscience. It helps that we know the details by heart.

The hallmark of obsession is the endless hope it sustains. Like Ellroy's novels, *My Dark Places* is rich with polygraph and interview transcripts, psychological profiles and autopsy reports. Any one of these details could be crucial, and as vicarious detectives, we exhaust each scenario till it delivers or dissolves. As the futility mounts, the pace slows. There are false leads, delusional confessors, evidence discounted or destroyed—and ordinary people like Jean Ellroy, who reveal almost nothing to the people they know. It's a macabre dating game: We desperately want one of these names to be the one—who was there, who knows, who will tell. People want to forget the past. Yet what they remember is startlingly moving. That goes for Ellroy, too, who closes his eyes to plumb another darkness: "The 47-year-old man had to interrogate the 10-year-old boy."

At last, Ellroy loosens his terror grip on the reader and proves himself capable of translucent tenderness. We crave Geneva's story now, too—not out of grief or revenge but as tribute and redemption. With Ellroy and Stoner, we travel to Tunnel City, Wis-

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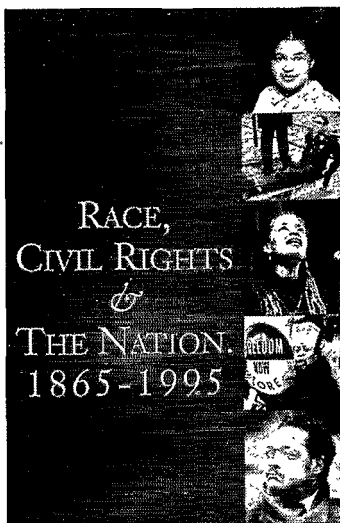
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consin, where Jean grew up, look at photographs and hear stories of the redheaded girl before she succumbed to cheap booze and slick men. Through the quest for his mother's killer, Ellroy is finding some of her life; and by coming to know "the redhead," Ellroy begins to love and redeem Geneva Hilliker. By returning to Geneva her true name, he identifies her. He's given her back her dignity and history, as though her grave had been unmarked till now.

"Closure"—writing as exorcism—doesn't work; confession does not equal absolution or peace. Early on in the book, Ellroy re-creates the scene of his 10-year-old self eavesdropping on the cops and his father talking in the kitchen: "His father was calling his mother a promiscuous drunk. The cops were saying their case was dead. Jean was such a goddamn secretive woman. Her life just didn't make sense." *My Dark Places* is Ellroy's emphatic rebuttal. ■

tend toward the adolescent.) The prosecution claimed Kimberlin had contracted for the killing, and that the bombings had been perpetrated to distract attention from the murder investigation.

To write *Citizen K*, Singer began pulling at the threads of all three stories (the Scyphers murder, the Speedway bombings and the Dan Quayle allegations), talking to investigators in Indiana and witnesses from the trial, contacting Kimberlin's associates in the drug trade, interviewing family members, friends, enemies. What he found out was by turns baffling, startling and dismaying.

The three cases reside on ever more elusive and unprovable notions, all put forth by Kimberlin himself. He reports being told of Scyphers's murder at about 1 in the afternoon, yet she was not murdered till 3. He purports to have been meeting Quayle to sell him piddling ounce-size bags of grass, yet by his own admission, at the time these insignificant transactions were supposedly taking place he was already involved with multi-ton marijuana deals. It seems safe to assume that Kimberlin, a very savvy businessman, wouldn't have bothered selling ounces to a young law student at the Burger Chef when his business had grown to the point of unloading bales of marijuana at secret airstrips. Singer initially imagines he can separate fabrication from fact, but eventually he is reduced to simply trying to find something that even resembles fact, as he realizes that he has been "sucked whole and cast adrift inside Kimberlin's narcissistic universe, a black-and-white realm of dreams and schemes and factoids, a galaxy far beyond the gravity-bound realities of politics and logic and justice."

As the extent of Kimberlin's duplicity dawns on him, Singer invokes Janet Malcolm's *The Journalist and the Murderer*, and the comparison is apt. Singer refers to Malcolm's "famously devastating thesis... that journalism is a confidence game in which the reporter holds a stacked deck," and he also cites Malcolm's comparison of the journalist-subject relationship to a love affair: "Like the credulous widow who wakes up one day to find the charming young man and all her savings gone, so the consenting subject of a piece of nonfiction writing learns—when the article or book appears—his hard lesson." Malcolm also wrote, though Singer doesn't refer to it, that "the metaphor of the love affair applies to both sides of the journalist-subject equation, and the journalist is no less susceptible than the subject to its pleasures and excitements."

Twilight Zoned

KRISTIN ELIASBERG

CITIZEN K: The Deeply Weird American Journey of Brett Kimberlin.

By Mark Singer. Knopf. 381 pp. \$25.

In October 1992, five weeks and a day before the election that would bring Bill Clinton, notorious non-inhaler of pot, to the presidency, *The New Yorker* published a story by Mark Singer about a prisoner named Brett Kimberlin. Kimberlin claimed he had sold marijuana to Dan Quayle on a number of occasions

in the early seventies, and further claimed that in 1988, when he tried to speak to the press about his dealings with Quayle, he was prevented from doing so by officials in the Bureau of Prisons and was thereby deprived of his First and Fifth Amendment rights. On these occasions, either just after talking to a reporter or just before a planned meeting with reporters, he was placed in a holding cell where he was unable to contact the outside world. There was no ostensible reason for the confinements except to silence the prisoner, and it also seemed possible that the Justice Department had knowledge of these actions. It was even within the realm of possibility that the White House, in the form of James Baker, had exerted its influence.

Singer wrote an impassioned article on Kimberlin's story, then devoted four years to delving deeper into the subject. *Citizen K: The Deeply Weird American Journey of Brett Kimberlin* is a fascinating unraveling of Kimberlin's "life," which turns out to be a complicated fabrication, fueled by his narcissistic ego and overactive imagination. Kimberlin's bluster and utter self-confidence persuaded many others—from Kimberlin's mother to the cartoonist Garry Trudeau to Erwin Griswold, former Solicitor General and former Dean of Harvard Law School, and, in part, to Singer himself—to play supporting roles in bolstering

his fiction. Singer had found the ideal subject: Kimberlin was an immensely successful drug smuggler with juicy tales of his outlaw adventures; since his incarceration he'd become a jailhouse lawyer whose appetite for litigation was limitless; and, besides claiming to be a political prisoner because of his confinements in 1988, he also claimed that he was in prison in the first place only because he was the victim of a sophisticated government frame-up.

Kimberlin was convicted in 1979 of a rash of bombings in Speedway, Indiana, that had resulted in the maiming of a man who subsequently committed suicide. Government investigators had found timers and traces of the explosive used in making the bombs in Kimberlin's car. How they came to be searching the car is, as everything involving Kimberlin would turn out to be, a long story. He was illegally in possession of various items with government insignia, clothing patches, fake ID cards, copies of the presidential seal. These had been used in a multi-ton marijuana deal that had gone awry, one result of which was marijuana raining down out of the south Texas sky as a scared pilot ditched his load, and another result of which was the Feds tailing Kimberlin. His drug-dealing had long aggravated law-enforcement agencies, and he was also a suspect in the murder of Julia Scyphers, who disapproved of the bizarre relationship Kimberlin had with her teenage granddaughter. (Kimberlin's female interests

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