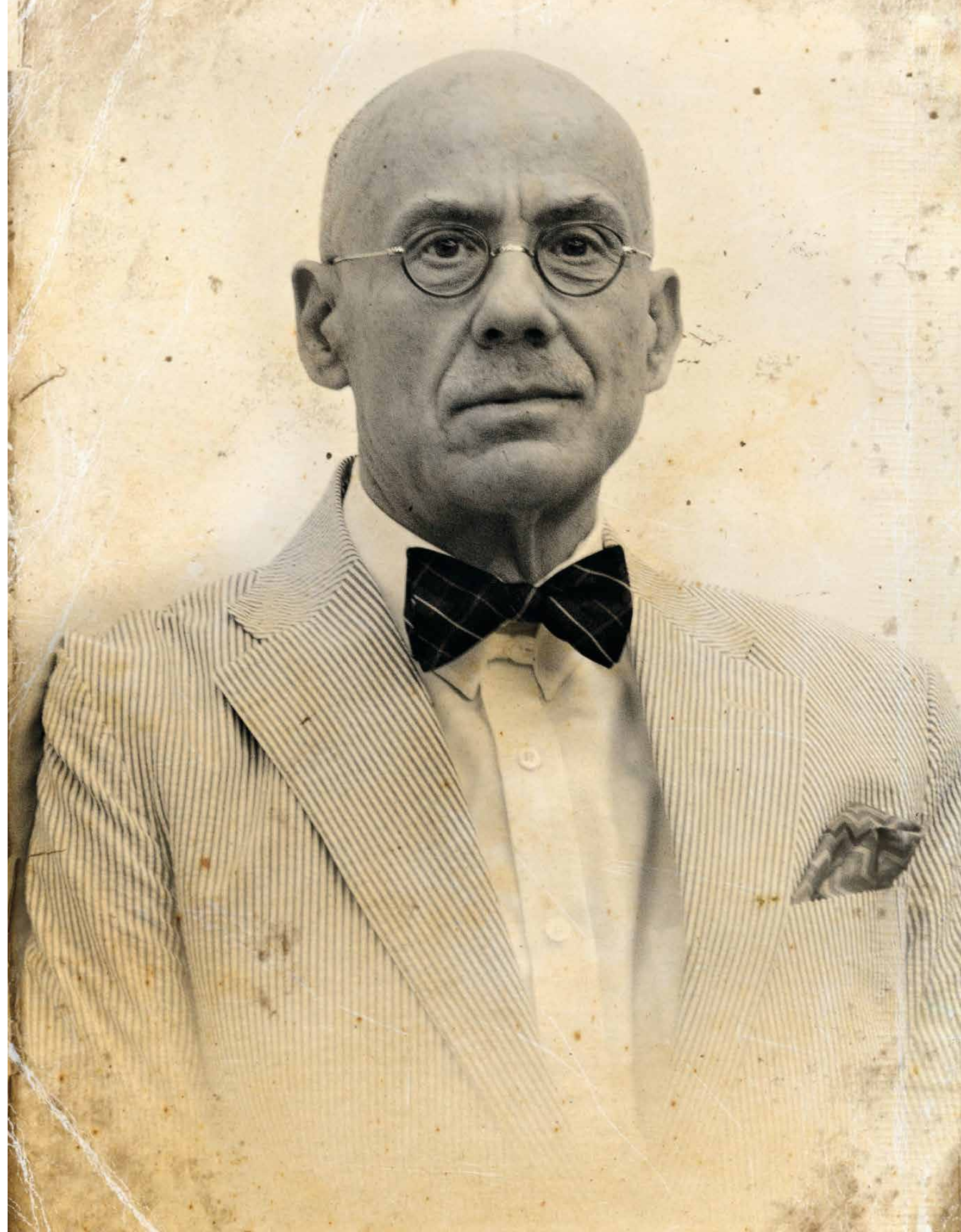


# JAMES ELLROY

HE'S THE KING OF L.A. NOIR FICTION BUT FOR HIS NEW BOOK – **LAPD '53** – THE OUTSPOKEN AUTHOR OF **L.A. CONFIDENTIAL** & **THE BLACK DAHLIA** IS EXPLORING THE REAL-LIFE COPS AND CRIME OF CALIFORNIA IN THE '50s – AND WITH IT, SOME OF HIS OWN DEMONS...

By MATT GLASBY

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**N**obody understands LA's dark past like James Ellroy. The "premier lunatic of American letters" was born in the City Of Angels in 1948, lost his mother, Jean Hilliker, to an as-yet-uncaught murderer in nearby El Monte, in 1958 and his sprawling detective novels, from *Brown's Requiem* (1981) to *Perfidia* (2014), are steeped in its sullied glamour.

Ellroy's latest publication is *LAPD '53*, written in conjunction with retired officer Glynn Martin of the Los Angeles Police Museum (laphs.org), a collection of vintage crime-scene photographs from the archives accompanied by Ellroy's characteristically amphetamised text to shade in the backstory.

After huge door-stoppers such as the 650-page *Blood's A Rover* (2009), *LAPD '53* is a mere stocking filler, but the chilly candour of the pictures combined with Ellroy's noir-inflected not-quite-fiction, makes for a feverish read. Some entries show stoic cops such as LAPD chief William H Parker inspecting bullet-holes in motel hallways, dragging bodies from desolate ravines, and digging up shattered bones in back gardens. Others depict perps lying dead on drugstore floors. One section details the aftermath of a suicide: a hanged man making his first and final bow, resplendent in a woman's bathing costume. But all capture that crystalline moment between crime and resolution, if indeed there is a resolution, and all show LA as it was – and is, in Ellroy's imagination.

It's a period he knows better than anyone. A period he owns (just ask him). So, what makes a great police photograph and what makes a great police novel? "Brother," he says in that hellfire growl, "You know it when you see it. You know it when you read it..."

**The LAPD's presence is marbled throughout your life and work – how do you feel about it as an organisation?**

Well, of course, the books that I write spotlight

the historical LAPD, an agency that's the greatest in the United States, and one that I admire greatly. You can put it this way: a couple of, well, three judicious ass-kickings by the LAPD back in my wayward youth lead to me giving up crime and becoming the great writer that I am today.

**How did you settle on 1953 as the year for the book?**

We were going through the photographs of other decades, and we found a preponderance of the great photos available to us were from 1953. This allowed me to focus my text on 1953, a pivotal year for my *LA Quartet* books [*The Black Dahlia* (1987), *The Big Nowhere* (1988), *LA Confidential* (1990) and *White Jazz* (1992)] the early pages of *LA Confidential*, specifically, enabling me to write about the great LAPD Chief William H Parker [also the star of *Perfidia*], and think up appropriately entertaining, inflammatory and engaging text to capture the history of the events portrayed in the photographs, which I liken to bebop, a minor obsession of mine, and film noir, a major one.

**Why do we find crime-scene pictures like these so fascinating?**

Because it ain't us, brother. We didn't get shot on some roadside. I don't think either of the pretty men on this phonecall here are going to spend four days looking for a woman's bathing suit in which to hang ourselves and be the topic of light conversation like this 60 years in the future – but as you know, brother, men will go to any lengths to be HUNG!



Coast rider: a member of the Californian Highway Patrol surveys the LA landscape in 1953.



Less than angelic: Russell Crowe and Kim Basinger relax in *LA Confidential*.

**You call the LAPD the most storied department in the world – why is that?**

Because it's in LA, because the movie biz was here, because the LAPD had an acrimonious relationship with many local newspapers for years, because of the *Dragnet* TV show, because of the great police novels written by yours truly, because of Joseph Wambaugh, the father of the American police novel, who served with the LAPD from 1960-1974. He really invented the modern police novel...

**Which do you feel have had the most effect on your writing: crime novels, the crimes you committed, or the crimes that were committed upon you?**

There were no crimes committed upon me. I can't think of one...

**There was the murder of your mother...**

Well the murder of my mother took place in the San Gabriel Valley, it wasn't even LA. In any case, I dislike the idea of crimes committed upon me, I don't feel myself as a victim. Also, dare I say it, the crimes I committed were very, very, very minor. I never went to the big house, that's state prison, I went to the

small house, that's the LA county jail system. But more than anything else I just read books. Lot of crime novels...

**Do people underestimate the importance of reading in you finding your vocation?**

Let me put it this way. Between the fall [autumn] of 1966, when I was 18, and the summer of 1969, when I was 21, I broke into houses in Hancock Park – a rich neighbourhood on the edge of Hollywood – with the express purpose of stealing pills out of medicine chests, and food, and sniffing the undergarments of the girls I was obsessed with, the rich girls. It was easy, by the way, to do, back in those days, for a variety of reasons.

I might have done this 20 times total, and I would stay inside, at the outset, half an hour per visit, so let's just round that off to 10 hours of my lifetime engaged in this pursuit. I never got caught at it. There were many days when I spent more than 10 hours a day reading books in public libraries, so the preponderance of my education – even my criminal education – was spent reading books not doing these Mickey Mouse house-breaks or shop-lifting from stores. That's the point I wanna make here.

**So which books most inspired you?**

More than anything else, Joseph Wambaugh's books. His greatest novel is *The Choirboys* [1975], an early novel, but his most instructive work of art, to me, was his first novel, *The New Centurions* [1971], which is a fabulous primer on street humour and anecdotes. The entire book is anecdotal, it's just a marvellous crime book.

**You've said before that "The LA of that period is mine and nobody else's. If you wrote about this period before me, I have taken it away from you." So have you taken it away from Wambaugh?**

It's mine, brother, the preponderance of critical opinion in Britain, in Los Angeles, in America and around the world states that case quite plainly. Wambaugh wrote about a later Los Angeles Police Department and a later LA.

**LAPD chief William H Parker features heavily in *LAPD '53*, what's his appeal?**

He's the greatest American policemen of the 20th Century and if you read biographical accounts of his career I think you might come to that conclusion as well. Look for him as the hero of not only *Perfidia*, my most recent novel, but of the three volumes in the second *LA Quartet* that will follow it. They cover Los Angeles during WW2. *Perfidia* is set the >>

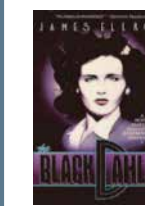
## FIVE TALL TALES

### QUINTESSENTIAL ELLROY...



#### CLANDESTINE (1982)

Nominated for an Edgar Award, Ellroy's second novel – which, with its tale of a strangled young secretary, was surely inspired in part by his mother's murder – lays the groundwork for his *LA Quartet* to come, by introducing the characters of Dudley Smith, Michael Breuning and Richard Carlisle.



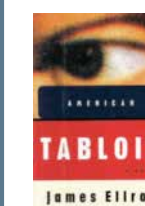
#### THE BLACK DAHLIA (1987)

Both inspired by and incorporating the unsolved real-life murder of 22-year-old Elizabeth Short in 1947 (and dedicated, darkly, to Ellroy's mother as 'this valediction in blood'), the first part of the *LA Quartet* is a heady mix of noir and historical detail, with hardboiled LAPD cops and bad-time gals.



#### LA CONFIDENTIAL (1990)

The book that brought Ellroy firmly into the mainstream, not least when adapted into a movie by Curtis Hanson and Brian Koppelman, this twisting tale flits between celebrity look-alikes, upscale sex parties, scurrilous scandal magazines and a deeply corrupt police department with ease.



#### AMERICAN TABLOID (1995)

Moving on from straight noir to an ambitious mash-up of literary, pulp and historical novels, Ellroy established his *Underworld USA* trilogy with this five-part alternate version of the calamitous events leading up to the Dallas assassination of President John F Kennedy in November 1963 and taking in the CIA-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba.



#### MY DARK PLACES (1996)

While his troubled upbringing had already informed much of his fiction, Ellroy took the opportunity to pen a true-crime memoir that saw him investigating the unsolved murder of his mother ("a classic late-night body dump") and reflecting on its effects on his own life. **EM**

**“TRUTH BE TOLD, I GOT TALENT ON LOAN FROM GOD. I HAVE A STURDY HEART, I HAVE A STRONG WILL TO SURVIVE AND I LOVE TO WRITE”**



month of the Pearl Harbour bombings and thus the narrative extends from 6 December 1941 to VJ Day: 15 August 1945.

**In LAPD '53 you ask “Why are pictures of dead people at crime-scenes so beautiful?” Do you really find them beautiful? Why?**

These photographs were taken by moonlighting LA policemen with on-the-job training reviewing crime-scenes, and there is artistic proportion to each and every photograph we've chosen, but they are not in the least self-consciously artful. Why is art beautiful even though it sometimes portrays violence? Because it makes us, in ellipsis, plead to the beautiful, the spiritual, the godly, the pure...

**You also write that the photographs “place me within the context to dream”. Can you elaborate?**

As I said in my book *The Hilliker Curse: My Pursuit Of Women* [2010], yearning is the chief fount of my inspiration. I was talking more specifically of women in that particular case. But longing for the past, yearning for the past, putting together these photographs, writing about men like Parker and looking at the streets of 1953 again... I will never go back, fictionally, to 1953 because for the foreseeable future I'll be dealing with LA from 1942 to 1945...

**Can you take us back to those “judicious ass-kickings”, though...**

Yeah, well there were three. I was 18 and had stolen a bottle of booze. I ran from the store, and I saw a black-and-white police car heading for me, so I thought I'd run to my buddy's place over on Manhattan Place. I was a pretty long-legged kid, I took off running and [laughs] misjudged the speed



Windscreen wipeout: Josh Hartnett in *The Black Dahlia*.

of the police car. Some men disgorged from the car. I was on my buddy's lawn making for the back door, they threw me down and hauled off on me with beavertail saps [batons] and it hurt. A rather amused patrol sergeant – I was a bigger guy than him, but he did not find me in any way intimidating – asked me, ‘OK kid. Why did we do that?’ And I said, ‘Because I'm a bad kid?’ ‘Guess again.’ ‘Because of the

stolen booze?’ ‘Uh, no.’ Then finally I said, ‘Because I ran?’ and he said, ‘Yeah.’ So, guess what? I never ran again, and I never got my ass kicked in that manner again.

The next time, I was being brutally harassed by the jailer at Wilshire Station, a few years later. I responded with a racial epithet. He hit me so hard that he killed all my ancestors back 40 generations. So I never did that again: I never applied racial slurs against police officers again. But I said, ‘Fuck you!’ to a burglary cop once, that would have been in '73, and he hit me so hard that I've never stolen anything since, and that's the end of the story. Ow! Yeah, it still hurts.

**Yet you still feel warmly towards the police. How does all this feed into your work at the Los Angeles Police Museum?** I've been the spokes-dog for the museum for 10 years. You may have heard me speak

at various gigs in Britain: I'm a bravura public speaker and an outrageous one, and I'm good with an audience. Me and Glynn Martin, my good friend [and co-author of LAPD '53], do lots of events in the museum: we did a showing of the Black Dahlia files, the first time articles from the case have been shown in public. We have film noir double-feature nights where, for \$50, you get a double feature, some pizza, beer and soda pop. It's a blast and the next time you're here in LA you should drop by...

**We'd love to. What's your favourite exhibit in the Los Angeles Police Museum?**

My favourite is the Onion Field exhibit, which pertains to the slaying of – may he rest in peace – an LAPD patrol officer named Ian Campbell, in March of 1963. His partner, Karl Hettinger, escaped [from their captors, who had kidnapped the policemen during

a traffic stop] and cracked up behind the trauma of the event. Joseph Wambaugh's book [The Onion Field, 1973] covered it. It was quite a blunt and imaginative use of space that Glynn decided on. They had an onion scent in the room... We had to buy lots of hamburgers and put them next to a wall vent... [Laughs]

**You've mentioned your capacity to bend the truth. Are you doing that right now?**

Yeah, that's a lie. [Laughs]

**You've also said that “I created myself entirely out of sheer will, egotism, and an overwhelming desire to be somebody.” Is James Ellroy the great American crime writer his own creation?**

Well I am a great American crime writer, Jack, and that's no shit. Listen, truth be told, I got talent on loan from God, God's been very kind to me. I have a sturdy heart, I have a strong will to survive and I love to write.

**As a greatest American crime writer, which of your books would you put forward as evidence?**

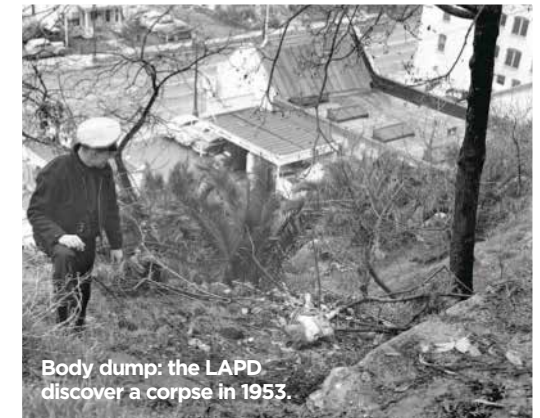
*Perfidia*. Why? My most recent book is my best and I just keep getting better.

**There's a section in *The Cold Six Thousand* [2001] so violent that it actually made this reader feel giddy. How do you feel about writing violence, especially when you've experienced it so cruelly yourself?**

I haven't experienced it myself... Nobody's ever come at me to rip my eyes out, tear my throat out, you know, shove my balls up my ass – nothing like that's ever happened to me. I boxed a little, I had a few scuffles here and there, the LAPD kicked my ass three times. It's not the same. *It's just shit that I MADE UP!* I never assassinated Martin Luther King or John F Kennedy, it was some shit I MADE UP. I don't know who killed Luther King for sure. *I MADE IT UP!*

**But, with respect, violent things have happened to the people around you...**

Well, you know, yeah, my mother was murdered when I was 10 years old. I don't really want to go into it, you know the story...



Body dump: the LAPD discover a corpse in 1953.

**You'd wanted to be “a literary writer, whose creative duty is to describe the world as it is”. Why did you turn to crime novels?**

I couldn't give a shit about anything else. I don't like mainstream literature, I don't give a shit. If you wanna torture me to death put a Faulkner book in front of me. Put a Jonathan Franzen book in front of me. Put a Raymond Carver book in front of me. I don't care. I like crime shit, and I like historical shit.

**You've also said “The great theme of film noir is, you're fucked.” Judging by your *Underworld USA Trilogy*, which presents a fictionalised history of America from 1958-1973, surely we're all screwed?**

I'm entirely optimistic about the human race. But there's something giddy and unprofound about film noir in its implicit sanction on bad behaviour, which I talk about in the long essay in *LAPD '53*. It's fun to go back then and go, ‘Wow, I can rob a liquor store and kill three people for \$84 and a couple of bottles, and there's an APB out on me, and [actor] Sterling Hayden is running a *Crime Wave* [his 1954 movie] of rolling stakeouts and he may break my ass, but in the meantime I'll be pouring the pork to [actress] Phyllis Kirk...’

**You're always great value in interviews, what's the secret of your technique?**

You know, I vibe it. I barked at you a couple of times because I don't like being interrupted, but beyond that I'm here to spread the love. Listen, brother, I'm having a blast... ☺

**LAPD '53 by James Ellroy and Glynn Martin for the Los Angeles Police Museum (Abrams Image) is out now.**

**“I DON'T LIKE MAINSTREAM LITERATURE. IF YOU WANNA TORTURE ME TO DEATH, PUT A FAULKNER BOOK IN FRONT OF ME”**

## TIMELINE

**4 MARCH 1948**

Lee Earle Ellroy is born in Los Angeles to nurse Geneva 'Jean' Hilliker and accountant Armand Ellroy. When his parents divorce, James moves to El Monte.

**22 JUNE 1958**

The body of Jean Hilliker is discovered on a Sunday morning, dumped near a high-school playing ground. She'd been raped and strangled.

**1981**

After a misspent youth, Ellroy publishes his first novel, *Brown's Requiem*, written between stints of golf caddying. He caddies for years to come.

**JANUARY 1988**

The first movie adaptation of one of Ellroy's books (1984's *Blood On The Moon*), *Cop*, starring James Woods as Lloyd Hopkins, is released to lukewarm reviews.

**23 MARCH 1998**

*LA Confidential*, the hit movie based on Ellroy's 1990 novel, wins two of the nine Academy Awards it was nominated for.

**6 MAY 2001**

In the documentary *Feast Of Death*, Ellroy unmasks the man he believes responsible for the infamous Black Dahlia murder.

**22 SEPT 2009**

Ellroy concludes his *Underworld USA Trilogy* with *Blood's A Rover*, an epic historical novel about J Edgar Hoover and Nixon.

**9 SEPT 2014**

Ellroy returns to Los Angeles for *Perfidia*, the first volume of his Second LA Quartet, featuring Dudley Smith.

