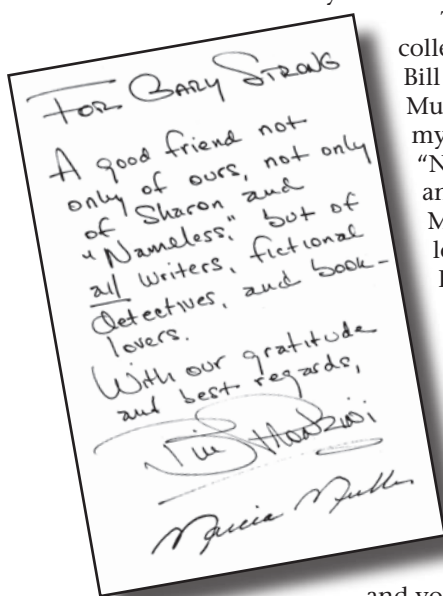


# MYSTERIOUS CALIFORNIA:

## A BIBLIOGRAPHIC ESSAY

By Gary E. Strong

When I agreed to this writing assignment, I knew discussing California mysteries would be a task that was almost impossible. I began collecting the genre shortly after becoming State Librarian in 1980. The State Library had acquired Bill Pronzini's archive for the California Section, so I naturally began reading his work. Of course, I had read Raymond Chandler, Ross MacDonal, and others, but I did not concentrate my collection on them. I collected books I wanted to read done by authors who lived in California and used California settings. While my criteria have changed somewhat over the years, I wanted the setting to be California and even better if written by a California writer (after all I was State Librarian of California). This essay will be limited to authors represented in my collection. It is in no way meant to be comprehensive. In fact I cannot include all of them in this essay.



For Gary Strong  
A good friend not only of ours, not only of Sharon and "Nameless," but of all writers, fictional detectives, and book-lovers.  
With our gratitude and best regards,  
Bill Pronzini  
Marcia Muller

The core of my early collecting started with Bill Pronzini and Marcia Muller, both established mystery writers. Bill's "Nameless Detective" and Marcia's Sharon McCone have been long-time friends, and I look forward to each new installment. Nameless works out of San Francisco, but ventures throughout Northern California on his cases. Pronzini is a master at description,

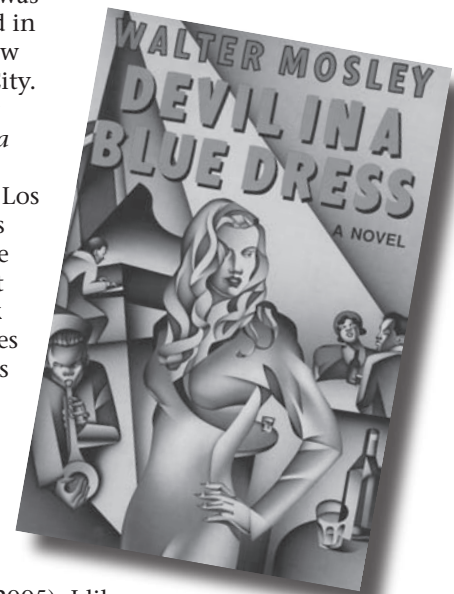
and you feel as if you are seeing the places "Nameless" sees. The series began with *The Snatch* (Random House, 1969). *Mourners* (A Tom Doherty Associates Book, 2006) is the latest in the series. His *Shackles* (St. Martin's Press, 1988) is still the most haunting of the series to me, and one which I read in one sitting and have re-read several times. We are all faced with our demons, but nothing of this magnitude. As "Nameless" has aged, so have I. I often feel his aches and pains and the struggles he has in dealing with his associates and facing the changes put forward by emerging

technologies and changing attitudes. But he has also settled into a new set of routines waiting for you to discover. Pronzini also does "stand-alone" books which are haunting and keep you on the edge. The latest, *The Crimes of Jordan Wise* (Walker, 2006) is a "tale of love, greed and betrayal."

Marcia Muller's Sharon McCone has developed into a most interesting private eye. First working with All Souls Cooperative in San Francisco (*Edwin of the Iron Shoes* (David McKay, 1977), she now operates her own firm complete with interesting operatives. Her Native American heritage and personal struggles add to the stories. As I have followed her, I keep thinking, "We all have families like this." McCone has learned to fly which adds a note of adventure beyond the norm. Marcia's latest installment is *Vanishing Point* (Mysterious Press, 2006). This one begins on the Mendocino coast where Sharon and fellow investigator Hy Ripinsky are to be married and—well you have to read it.

Bill and Marcia have done a couple of joint mysteries, but *Double* (St. Martin's Press, 1984) is still my favorite. This one is inscribed to me, "A good friend not only of ours, not only of Sharon and Nameless, but of all writers, fictional detectives, and book lovers." Marcia also writes standalone mysteries. Oh yes, if you read Muller carefully, you discover the identity of "Nameless."

Walter Mosley was born and raised in Los Angeles and now lives in New York City. He introduced Easy Rawlins in *Devil in a Blue Dress* (Norton, 1990). Set in 1950s Los Angeles, Easy seems to fall into detective work. You get a first hand, up close look at forties Los Angeles from shops in Watts to the boardrooms and homes of the white political establishment. The most recent installment for Easy is *Cinnamon Kiss* (Little Brown, 2005). I like



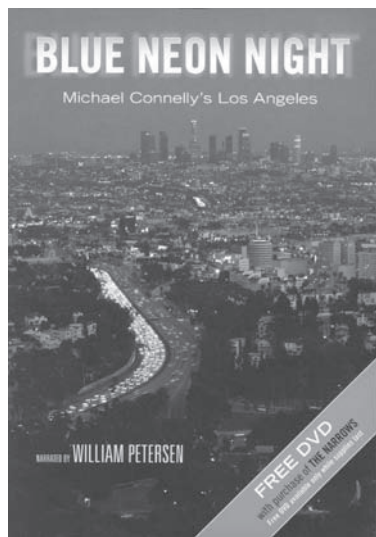
Easy's philosophy of things and included his views on public libraries in several of my speeches when I was State Librarian. *Fearless Jones* (Little Brown, 2001) brought Jones and Paris Minton together to get out of trouble. Again set in Los Angeles in the 1950s, these characters literally rise up off the page. Socrates Fortlow arrives on the scene in *Always Outnumbered, Always Outgunned* (Norton, 1998) to explore life outside the law in modern Los Angeles. Mosley's two most recent books, *Fortunate Son* (Little Brown, 2006) and *Killing Johnny Fry, a sexistential novel* (Bloomsbury, 2007) are departures from his series but open new avenues to enjoy Mosley. He is also a frequent essayist and contributor on literary and current topics. Well worth reading.

When I read Faye Kellerman's *Sacred and Profane* (Arbor House, 1987), I knew I had found a new writer that would teach me new things. Introducing Rina Lazarus and L.A. detective Peter Decker, Kellerman began to weave tales that took me into the realm of Orthodox Judaism, a totally new arena for me. Decker's spiritual journey is parallel to the horrifying events that have brought them together. Her plots revolve around a mystery Decker needs to solve, but also their religious and family struggles. Her newest installment is due out in August 2007.

Jonathan Kellerman's Alex Delaware is a child psychologist with close ties to the LAPD and friend Milo Sturgis. *Gone* (Ballantine Books, 2006) is the latest in the series. It moves into the murkiest corners of Los Angeles. I love his side trips to the UCLA library to do research as he pursues his cases. But it is the interaction between Sturgis and Delaware that makes the books. Son Jesse Kellerman has finished his second mystery and the legacy seems in tact (okay, Jesse lives in New York and sets his novels outside California but roots are roots).

Flying to the California International Antiquarian Book Fair in San Francisco in February, I took along *Capital Crimes* (Ballantine Books, 2006) that includes novellas by Jonathan and Faye Kellerman. I enjoyed both and their link back to Peter Decker and Alex Delaware. This is the second joint non-series outing for these two good writers. But my disappointment is that these are not true collaborations bringing their characters together.

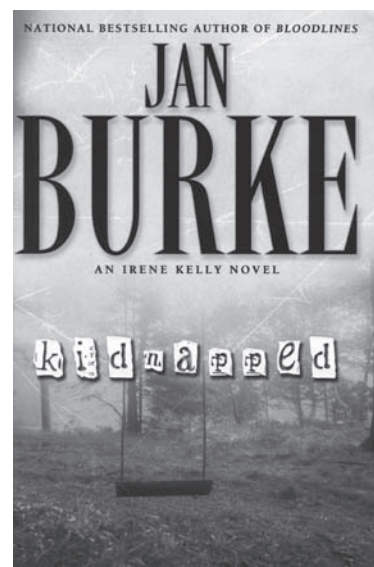
Michael Connelly, former *LA Times* crime reporter burst onto the scene with his Hieronymus Bosch character in *The Black Echo* (Little Brown 1992). His rough streets of Los Angeles are the setting for action and intrigue. The cases he covers



are involved and complicated and his reporter style enriches the text. The latest in the series is *Echo Park* (Little Brown, 2006). He decided to become a writer after discovering the books of Raymond Chandler and minoring in creative writing in college. His major was journalism. *Crime Beat* (2006) is a non-fiction collection of crime stories from his days as a journalist.

When Connelly released *Lost Light* in 2003, he produced a limited jazz CD, *Dark Sacred Night, the Music of Harry Bosch*. It is a compilation of jazz music mentioned in the Bosch novels. I got my copy when he visited the Mystery Bookstore in Westwood. A DVD would follow which took one into the streets of Los Angeles where Bosch works.

When Jan Burke's first Irene Kelly novel *Goodnight Irene* (Simon & Schuster, 1993) was published, I



immediately added myself to her following. Her novels are set in Las Piernas where Irene is a reporter for the local newspaper. Las Piernas is a consolidation of Southern California coastal cities in which Burke grew up. Kelly finds herself working with a man from her past, detective Frank Harriman. Their own turmoil only

adds to the excitement. *Kidnapped* (Simon & Schuster, 2006) tackles the subject of missing children. Burke's back story is unusual. She spent a number of years managing a manufacturing plant. Her first book was written during long evenings after work. The completed manuscript was sold unsolicited to Simon & Schuster. Who says new talent can't be published? But it is rare for it to happen this way.

Moving up to the Santa Barbara area (the picturesque Santa Teresa) you find Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone in "*A is for Alibi* (Holt, 1982). Millhone is twice divorced, no kids, and lives in a small converted garage apartment. She is friendly with her landlord Henry and Rosa the tavern owner in the neighborhood. Kinsey is also an ex-cop. Working her way through the alphabet, Grafton is now up to S with "*S is for Silence* (Putnam, 2005). She tells a good story, and the reader explores not only the case but this area of California's landscape.

I discovered Stephen J. Cannell rather recently when I picked up his book *Cold Hit* (St. Martin's Press, 2005) at the Mystery Bookshop. I knew that he had created over forty television series, among them the *Rockford Files*, the *A-Team*, *21 Jump Street* and *The*

*Commish*. I suspected he would be a good read. And he was. Shane Scully takes on the regional boss of Homeland Security and the murder of Vietnam vets in Los Angeles. Scully is married to a police detective. In his newest venture, *White Sister* (St. Martin's Press, 2006), he works to unravel the mystery of her disappearance. As with new writers I discover, I am now going back and finding those that came before and seeing how the series and its characters have developed.

That is also where I find myself with John Lescroart. His *Hunt Club* (Dutton, 2006) and *The Suspect* (Dutton, 2007) are set in San Francisco. You get an inside look at a legal firm and the relationship of its partners with the police and political structure. The stories are rich with courtroom and street drama and keep you thinking to the conclusion. These are true legal thrillers.

Kelly Lange, herself a reporter and special correspondent, brings Maxi Poole into full bloom in *Graveyard Shift* (Mysterious Press, 2005). Maxi gets assigned to the graveyard shift and is immediately drawn into a mystery that involves her boss. The body count rises and the homicides baffle the cops and grips LA in terror. Maxi navigates these streets to break the case wide open. I like Maxi.

Abigail Padgett is a former court investigator for the County of San Diego and works as an advocate for the mentally ill. Her debut novel *Children of Silence* (Mysterious Press, 1993) was the first to

feature an investigator (Bo Bradley) living with manic depression. Social Psychologist Blue McCarron in *Blue* (Mysterious Press, 1998) is one of those characters you want to meet. Set in the California desert, Blue discovers the peril of searching for truth. *The Last Blue Plate Special* (Mysterious Press, 2001) again takes Blue into the desert but also in support of the SDPD. These are good stories with fresh insight.

When Karen Kijewski burst onto the scene with *Katwalk* (St. Martin's Press, 1989), I thought Sacramento had finally found a detective of its own. Kat Colorado is gritty and believable. She holds her own. Kijewski taught high school for ten years. Later she became a writer by days and a bartender by night. I know the Sacramento places about which she was writing. I drove those same streets. The series ends with *Stray Kat Waltz* (Putnam, 1998). Too bad.

T. Jefferson Parker was born in Los Angeles and his writing career got its start when he was a cub reporter on a weekly newspaper in Orange County. He covered police, city hall, and cultural stories then moved to a daily. Carrying his interest in politics into the stories he had been tucking away, he wrote *Laguna Heat* (St. Martin's Press, 1985) on evenings and weekends. His follow-on novels deal with crime, life and death in sunny Southern California. *The Fallen* (Morrow, 2006) is his latest and is set in San Diego.

Les Roberts began his career as a mystery novelist after spending twenty-four years in Hollywood writing and producing more than 2,500 half hours of network

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and syndicated television, including *The Andy Griffith Show*, *The Jackie Gleason Show*, and *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* He introduced his Saxon series with *An Infinite Number of Monkeys* (St. Martin's Press, 1987). The last installment was *The Lemon Chicken Jones* in 1994. Saxon works in Los Angeles, and I liked his style and wondered what happened to Saxon after *Lemon Chicken Jones*. Roberts' other series is set in Cleveland, Ohio.

Steve Martini was born in San Francisco and grew up in the Bay Area and Southern California. Again, his first career was in journalism, working as a reporter in Los Angeles and as a correspondent at the California State Capital in Sacramento specializing in legal issues. He earned his law degree, entered private practice, served as legislative representative for the State Bar of California. Martini introduced attorney Paul Madriani in *Compelling Evidence* (Putnam, 1992). *Double Tap* (Putnam, 2005) explores the attorney-client relationship in depth.

Robert Eversz's Nina Zero novels *Shooting Elvis* (Grove Press, 1996) take you behind the camera of a woman photographer. After coming out of prison violence stalks her as she tries to make a living taking pictures for a tabloid newspaper. Her latest outing is *Zero to the Bone* (Simon & Schuster, 2006).

Robert Crais began his career writing scripts for television shows like *Hill Street Blues*, *Cagney & Lacey*, *Miami Vice*, and *L.A. Law*. His private detective is Elvis Cole, a wisecracking tough guy with a heart of gold and all of the charm of his namesake, Elvis Presley. His partner, Joe Pike—an intimidating ex-Marine who never smiles—is important in each adventure. Crais tackles a variety of subjects. *Free Fall* (Bantam, 1993) was inspired by the Rodney King riots and *Sunset Express* (Hyperion, 1996) dealt with a killer who bore an uncanny resemblance to O.J. Simpson. Crais values honesty and the long-term value of not covering up problems. He also tackles family and loyalty issues. *The Two-Minutes Rule* (Simon & Schuster, 2006), which is as long as you can open for at a robbery before the police arrive, is his latest installment.

Joseph Hansen is best known for his Dave Brandstetter mystery novels starting with *Fadeout* (Harper & Row, 1970). Brandstetter lasted for twelve books spanning 21 years and was the first hardboiled detective who just happened to be homosexual. The series ended with Brandstetter's death in *A Country of Old Men: The Last Dave Brandstetter Mystery* (Viking, 1991).

Michael Nava was born in Stockton and educated as an attorney. He later moved to Los Angeles where he opened a private legal practice. With *The Little Death* (Alyson Publications, 1986) he introduced Henry Rios, a Latino gay criminal defense attorney. With *Rag and Bone* (Putnam, 2001) Nava announced the end of the series. He now works as a staff attorney for the California Supreme Court.

Roger Simon has mixed his screen writing and filmmaking career with writing books. Moses Wine was introduced in the *Big Fix* (Straight Arrow Books, 1973). Wine is a hippie private eye with a great personality. Simon spins a good yarn (as my father

would say) and takes his readers into places most of us would not venture. Simon says he is back to writing novels and his newest release is *Director's Cut* (Atria Books, 2003) which links into his film career. He is also an active blogger.

Ken Kuhlken's Hickey family mysteries—*The Loud Adios* (St. Martin's Press, 1991), *The Venus Deal* (St. Martin's Press, 1993), *The Angel Gang* (St. Martin's Press, 1994), and *The Do-Re-Mi* (Poisoned Pen Press,

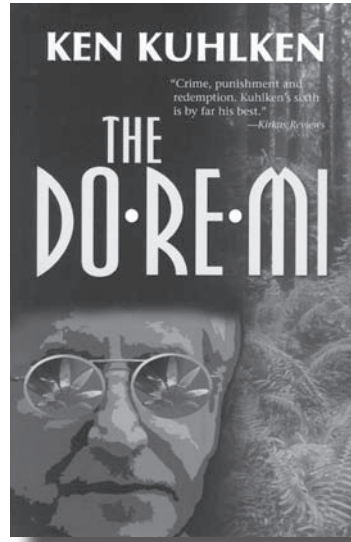
2006)—are brilliantly written. With roots in the noir tradition, they are complex, offer some of the finest historical writing in the genre, and feature a colorful cast of characters. The series gives the reader a unique look into cultural history.

Laurie R. King says she spent her childhood reading her way through libraries, mostly in northern California. My

favorite series concerns homicide inspector Kate Martinelli, her SFPD partner Al Hawkin, and her life partner Lee Cooper. It begins with *A Grave Talent* (St. Martin's Press, 1993).

Timothy Hallinan created his Simon Grist character to take you into the streets and neighborhoods of Los Angeles. Grist is a professor turned private eye and appears first in *The Four Last Things* (New American Library, 1989). Hallinan brings the violence of the crime on stage in his books and you feel as if you are involved—perhaps more than you want to be. *The Bone Polisher* (Morrow, 1995) is a “can't lay it down” read.

Well, I have reached the limit of my word allowance, but not of my collection, which contains the works of at least fifty other California mystery writers. It was difficult to pick these, but they are the writers that sustain my interest and with whom I spend my nights and weekends. They help me explore the reaches and diversity that is California itself. I am sure that I have not mentioned a writer that someone dearly loves. Do write me and tell me what I have missed, as I am adding new “mysteries” to my reading all of the time. I still prowl through bookshops looking for books and spend a little time on-line searching them out. I like to browse; it's part of the mystery.



Gary E. Strong is University Librarian at UCLA. He served as State Librarian of California from 1980 to 1994 and Director of the Queens Borough Public Library until he came to UCLA in 2003. You can write him at [gstrong@library.ucla.edu](mailto:gstrong@library.ucla.edu).