

GRIM READER: He may look dead serious, but James Ellroy is in the catbird seat after penning his 12th novel, "American Tabloid." New York Post: Dan Brinza

Blowing Up Camelot

Author finds success trashing JFK in novel

By JOHN O'MAHONY

JAMES Ellroy was 10 when his mother was murdered in 1958. He didn't cry.

"I had wished her dead because she had been s---y to me," he said. "Well! Lo and behold my dream came true."

Thirty-seven years later, Ellroy is on a tour to promote his 12th novel, "American Tabloid." It's an epic retelling of the events leading up to JFK's assassination. Critics say the book marks his development into "one of the great American writers of our time."

In an interview, Ellroy reconstructs the details of his mother's killing with a lively dispassion. His short, no-nonsense sentences fit together in the trademark terse, naked prose he used in "Tabloid."

Perhaps the telling is a rehearsal. Her murder will be the focus of his next book — his first work of non-fiction.

The way he recalls it, his mother was an alcoholic

and promiscuous. A man picked her up in a bar the night of June 21, 1958. He was dark-haired, swarthy and white. He raped and strangled her.

Fourteen miles east of downtown Los Angeles, the man dumped her body in the bushes. It was found the next morning. The fingerprints were caked with skin, blood and beard fragments. She had fought back.

The case remains unsolved. A witness who might know something, a woman who left the bar with Ellroy's mother and the man, was never identified. Neither did she come forward.

Ellroy may have welcomed his mother's death. She had abused him, he said. But the brutal killing and the ensuing mystery left a deeper mark.

"After her death I went to live with my father and my reading tastes took a distinct focus," he said. "I started reading crime novels and true crime accounts. It was the big love



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HISTORY REVISITED: The assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and the events leading up to it, are key to James Ellroy's latest novel.

of my life."

An "exuberant youth" followed, and drink, drugs, a little shoplifting and "micky-mouse" burglary, saw him off to the county jail for seven months — "I never went to the Big House." Then, when he was 29, he cleaned up his act and began to write crime novels.

He wrote one. He sold it. He wrote another. He sold that. And from then on, his new exuberant obsession, one with storytelling instead of drink and drugs, whipped on the printing presses.

Noir mystery followed

his "L.A. Quarter" novels — "The Black Dahlia," "The Big Nowhere," "L.A. Confidential" and "White Jazz" — became international best-sellers.

Now, he says, he's hitting a new peak of recognition and sales with "American Tabloid" — "a dark book about a dark drive through American history."

His present life, however, is nothing like the black, obsessive labyrinths of his books. He lives with his wife in Connecticut — "the most intelligent person I

know" — and he idolizes his dog, a bull terrier called Barco.

"Dogs are my identity," he said. "As a kid I always barked and howled. It was sheer exuberance."

The dog act has struck. While talking, Ellroy's gestures are lavish and animal. He pushes his belly forward by leaning his huge frame back in his chair. He sticks both his thumbs up his nose and twists. He looks hard down his beady round glasses before pausing to create unnerving silences.

When he growls, there's no difficulty believing him when he says he wants to be "the demon dog of American literature." "Tabloid" is, he claims, a benchmark on his way to fulfilling that ambition.

"I think I've graduated from being a mystery writer," he said. "I want to write great books. Thrilling, exciting, obsessive, perverted, big, wonderful, exuberant books."

"I have always contended that John Kennedy's death did not mark an end to America's innocence," he said. "It was analogous to a short-lived love affair. The good sex is still fresh in your mind. But we did not have him long enough to

get truly tired and disgust with him. He was killed in dramatic fashion. He died young. He had a great head of hair."

Ellroy's next book, "break from the 'underworld U.S.A. trilogy,'" will immerse him in his own traumatic history. The "demon dog" saw his mother's homicide file last year and decided to join forces with detective Bill Stoner and become a bloodhound to reopen the investigation.

"Tabloid" is the first of three. Together they will tell the secret "underground" history of America from 1958 to 1973. This one ends at the Grassy Knoll in Dallas on Nov. 21, 1963.

"I saw I had a chance to demythologize that era," Ellroy said. "People believe that things were innocent before Kennedy died. I don't believe it at all. Jack Kennedy went to bed with dogs and got up with fleas. He betrayed the Cuban exiles. He took succor from the mob and then sicced his kid brother on them. His father was in bed with the crime families. He got what he paid for. Malcolm X was right: Chickens came home to roost."

"When I seize on something," he says, "I'm ferocious in my will."

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