

BOOKSHELF

'These Women' Review: The Most Dangerous Beat in L.A.

A crime novel of unusual depth and freshness, constructed on that sturdy old tripod of serial killer, murdered women and dogged female detective.

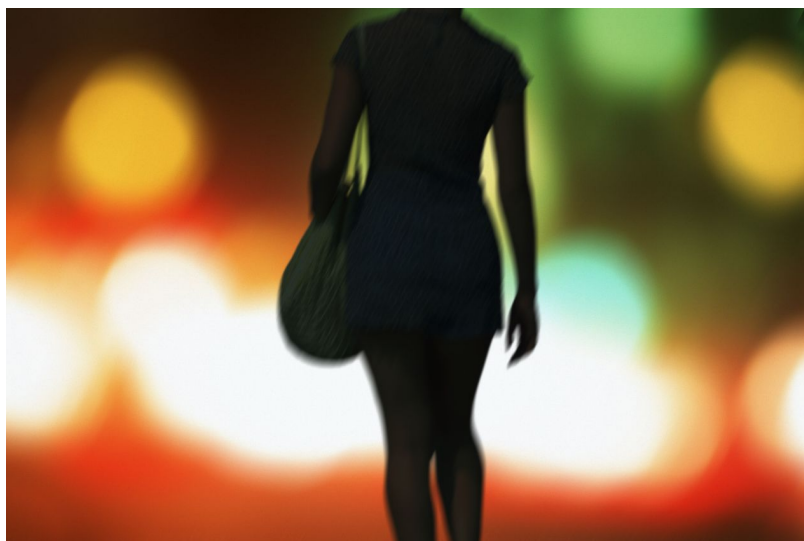


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By Anna Mundow

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Any **writer** who sets a crime novel in Los Angeles steps into the shadow cast by that city's previous creators. L.A. was invented, after all, by Raymond Chandler and Ross Macdonald. Or so it seems when you return to the noir fiction of the 1940s through to the 1970s and see, for example, cars "clotted along both sides of the street" in Chandler's "The Little Sister," or a morning sky with "a yellowish tinge like cheap paper darkening in the sunlight" in Macdonald's "The Underground Man." More recently, investigators such as Walter Mosley's Easy Rawlins and Michael Connelly's Harry Bosch cover the beat staked out by Chandler's Philip Marlowe and Macdonald's Lew Archer. But Ivy Pochoda, in her flawless new novel "These Women," has her own angle on the L.A. street, one not only low to the ground, as you might expect, and razor-sharp, but also trained on the women working the most dangerous beat of all.

"It's a hard game out there," Orphelia Jefferies declares at the outset. "There are rules . . . They say you're lucky if someone slows on your corner. Lucky you get to lean into the car window.

Lucky if someone takes you for a ride. . . . to one of the dirty alleys off Western . . . Luckier still to a hotel. Luckier to be returned in one piece.” Orphelia is lucky. She survives after letting her guard down, having her throat slit, then being left for dead one night in 1999. And hers is the first voice we hear, strong and defiant from her hospital bed, but conveniently ignored by cynical cops. Never mind that by then 13 other young women have been murdered “in surrounding alleys, throats slit, bags over their heads. Prostitutes, the police said. Prostitutes, the papers parroted.” Not Lecia, though, Dorian Williams’s beautiful girl on her way home from babysitting, the last to be butchered.

THESE WOMEN

By Ivy Pochoda

Ecco, 334 pages, \$27.99

“Do you ever think about the person who killed your daughter?” an LAPD detective offhandedly asks almost two decades later. “I stopped thinking about him years ago,” Dorian lies, hoping every day, for her sanity’s sake, that “the past stays put.” But it won’t. Old wounds seep into the present, then break open again in 2014 when two women who work in the streets and clubs around Western Heights are brutally murdered, just days apart. That same LAPD detective sees the link to a pair of recent killings and farther back to the attacks of the 1990s but is baffled by the 15-year hiatus. Until she realizes, “I’ve been asking myself the wrong question . . . I have been so busy wondering why someone stops killing that I never considered why he might start.” The insight seems obvious. Numerous crime novels, after all, hinge on just such a revelation. And indeed, “These Women” is at first glance a conventional murder mystery constructed on that sturdy old tripod of serial killer, murdered women and dogged female detective. But each of those elements is freshly minted here thanks to the psychological depth granted each character and the graceful twists of Ms. Pochoda’s cunning yet unfussy plot.

Four protagonists command our anxious attention: Dorian, the grieving mother, who works in a fish shack; Julianna Vargas, a vibrant young lap dancer who as a child was the last person to see Lecia Williams alive; Marella Colwin, an artist who grew up next door to Julianna; and LAPD detective Essie Perry, surely one of crime fiction’s most memorable and convincing investigators. A diminutive Latina, routinely underestimated, and with ghosts in her past too, Essie has learned that whenever calls flood the police hotline, “in all that noise there could be a single truth. A single fact. Someone who knows something.” So Essie listens. To Dorian when she reports mysterious threats and to Orphelia when she insists she has a stalker, all the while teasing out lies and long-buried truths. She approaches Marella, for example, both obliquely and head-on:

“You grew up in Los Angeles.”

“It’s all on my bio,” Marella says . . .

“It says you grew up in Los Angeles, but you went to middle school in Ojai.”

Marella raises her eyebrows. “That’s not in my bio.”

“So Ojai or L.A.?”

“I lived with my aunt for a few years. Better schools.”

Detective Perry looks up. “What happened to your cheek?”

Marella’s hand flies to the bruise. “Boxing.”*

Then, minutes later, Essie’s knockout question about the latest murder “travels across the gallery, a bullet slowed down by a special effect so that Marella has time to observe it collide with her chest, take her breath away.”

In this scene as in many others, the economical, syncopated technique that brought Brooklyn intensely to life in Ms. Pochoda’s 2013 novel “Visitation Street” is all the more effective for being less obvious—for advancing the story, in other words, rather than primarily creating atmosphere. This is the author’s second portrait of L.A. (her previous novel, 2017’s “Wonder Valley,” ranged from Skid Row to a New Age commune) and here every detail—of the criminal investigation and, equally riveting, of these characters’ lives—draws us deeper into the pulsing, restless city.

“It’s rush hour and the freeway is eight lanes of traffic going nowhere,” Dorian notices, trudging home from work. “To the east the scattershot skyscrapers of downtown are a gray and purple smudge in the hazy sun that’s fading in the other direction.” Somewhere across town, a young woman dressing for the night “tips her head to one side and gives herself her sexy gangster pout once more, testing out the strength of her armor,” while the lap dancer Julianna, in the same mirror, glimpses her future self “playing in the shadow of the game—not a street hooker, never that, but someone invited to motel parties where the line between party girls and paid girls gets fuzzier as dawn creeps in.” And soon another young body lies still: “Some of her curls are matted and clumped in her blood, others are fanned over the weeds and dirt. Her eyes are closed, face turned to the side, like she’s looking away from this crap, like she’s through.”

Only when the last piece of this finely crafted puzzle slides into place is the killer revealed. And here the imprint of a lesser-known noir master is detectable. For like the psychopath in Dorothy B. Hughes’s 1947 novel “In a Lonely Place”—a thriller that influenced subsequent crime fiction

by inviting readers into a deranged mind—this murderer is a weakling; creepily plausible but finally pathetic, his consciousness is a paltry thing when compared with the inner lives of these women. The loudest of whom, Orphelia, fittingly has the last word. “See the city,” she declares, surveying L.A. from the hills, her daughter by her side. “It’s ours, baby.”

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