



## Clandestine

*James Ellroy*

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## **Clandestine** James Ellroy

Fred Underhill is a young cop on the rise in Los Angeles in the early 1950's -- a town blinded to its own grime by Hollywood glitter; a society nourished by newspaper lies that wants its heroes all-American and squeaky clean. A chance to lead on a possible serial killing is all it takes to fuel Underhill's reckless ambition - and it propels him into a dangerous alliance with certain mad and unstable elements of the law enforcement hierarchy. When the case implodes with disastrous consequences, it is Fred Underhill who takes the fall. His life is in ruins, his promising future suddenly a dream of the past. And his good and pure love for a crusading woman lawyer has been corrupted and may not survive. But even without the authority of a badge, Fred Underhill knows that his only hope for redemption lies in following the investigation to its grim conclusion. And the Hell to which he has been consigned for his sins is the perfect place to hunt for a killer who hungers but has no soul.

## **Clandestine Details**

Date : Published February 1st 1999 by William Morrow Paperbacks (first published 1982)

ISBN : 9780380805297

Author : James Ellroy

Format : Paperback 328 pages

Genre : Mystery, Crime, Fiction, Noir, Thriller, Detective

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## From Reader Review Clandestine for online ebook

### Robert says

The main character was interesting and had some reality for me. The story was also exciting and moved right along. In many ways, it was familiar Ellroy police procedural stuff, and I didn't like it as well as some of his other books. It was a good read and kept me interested, although the plot seemed a bit contrived. I will continue to read Ellroy's books, as this one, while not on the level of L.A. Confidential, did succeed in holding my interest through to the end.

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### Andy says

When I went to a James Ellroy reading I went through my collection to find a good one I wanted him to autograph. I picked "Clandestine". It's that good! When he signed it, he wrote:

"To Andy -  
Doom Dwells!  
James Ellroy"

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### Darwin8u says

*"'Wonder' meant the same thing to both of us: the job, the streets, the people, and the mutable ethos of we who had to deal daily with drunks, hopheads, gunsels, wienie-waggers, hookers, reffer smokers, burglars, and the unnamed lonely detritus of the human race."*

- James Ellroy, Clandestine

An early Ellroy, that planted many of the themes and dark LA seeds that would eventually sprout and mature in his LA Quartet novels (The Black Dahlia, The Big Nowhere, L.A. Confidential, & White Jazz). The book isn't as good as his Quartet, but if you've finished the four and are looking for more Ellroy LA Noir, this is a good place to check out. It was originally published in the early 82 and still hold up very well.

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### D'face says

In an interview with Paris Review in 2009, James Ellroy said "If you're confused about something in one of my books, you've just got to realize, Ellroy's a master, and if I'm not following it, it's my problem."

He is indeed a master. His beautiful, lyrical writing of brutal and dark subjects is inspiring. I read this book many years ago and now have re-read it. It tells the story of a young ambitious policeman in Los Angeles who suspects a serial killer is at work in the deaths of two women. In trying to uncover the links he finds that he enemies within the police force and on the streets.

There is a swag of interesting characters all revolving around a spiritual mastermind revealed toward the end of the book. The story retells aspects of Ellroy's own life and one suspects that the description of the troubled child orphaned by murder, but neglected well before this event is a description of Ellroy as a child.

A theme of this story is seeking to capture the "wonder", that is the mystery of life. Different methods of pursuit are explored – women, jazz, poetry, alcohol, even death. It is this wonder that Ellroy conveys so beautifully as he writes about murder and mayhem.

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### **Patsy says**

This was my first James Ellroy book and I found it intriguing. The characters are all so beautifully flawed it makes them fascinating. The hero Fred Underhill risks his career as an LA Cop in a high profile case that winds up getting him kicked off the force. The crime and it's collateral damage to his life haunt him for years, threatening to destroy his life. *Clandestine* is a beautifully written who-done-it with unique twists and turns.

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### **Steven Godin says**

A cracking piece of crime fiction and an early and personal novel from Ellroy after the slaying of his own mother. Here in 50's Los Angeles ambitious rookie cop Fred Underhill (who is also too cocky and smug for his own good) tackles a murder case involving a strangled female to try and get a name for himself so he is catapulted up through the ranks, the woman in question was a lonely dame he had recently picked up in bar and spent the night with. Eventually this would lead him to team up with the fearsome and psychotic Lieutenant Dudley Smith (his first outing for Ellroy) but things don't go to plan and in the end he is forced to stand down. A few years later another killing similar to the one before and this lingers in his mind and stays there, once a cop always a cop and it's not long before he starts up another investigation on his own which will send him on a journey of obsession into the dark underbelly of Tinseltown and beyond to seek justice and the truth regardless of where this will leave him. And it's from the mid-point onwards that Ellroy's talent really shines through with a dark, complex and enthralling plot he perfectly captures both place and time. A love story, multi-layered characters, twists and turns, plenty of leads and suspects to send your brain into a frenzy make up a great hard as nails noir thriller!.

This would go on and set up the scene for his now legendary 'LA Quartet' of which I would say there are more similarities with 'The Black Dahlia' and especially 'The Big Nowhere' (my personal favorite) although this was more rougher around the edges and easier to read because the cop slang dialogue of his later work was not present, so unless you were hanging around with cops in downtown LA back in the 50's this works well and is understandable...at least to some degree anyway. As for James Ellroy he is master of the crime genre, and is set apart from everybody else because of his ability to go that extra mile. This would be a great introduction to Ellroy for those who have never read him.

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### **Mark says**

I haven't looked into where this sits in Ellroy's oeuvre, but it's a bit of a mess.

Plus side: a few of the characters are the most compelling of Ellroy's creations, I really didn't know what was really going on until the last chapter.

Downside: I had a very hard time understanding the motives of the very complex main character, Fred Underhill. Seems that Ellroy was trying to include as many disparate traits in one man as he could get away with, and I don't think he really does get away with it.

Still a good, quick and rich read, but more than any Ellroy to date, it made me feel that I had to suspend judgement a number of times to move forward with the story.

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## **Bobby says**

My first Ellroy book, and it won't be my last but I wasn't very intrigued by this one.

\*\*\*SPOILERS BELOW\*\*\*

The main character is something of a cipher and mishmash, at first an ambitious good guy but later like a younger Dudley Smith himself without much transitional explanation. Too many characters are too similar both in name and traits. The nine year-old(!) child who nearly looked like a man and acted like a perverted teenage delinquent, what was up with that? Why did our hero "fall in love" with this scary kid? The story lost my interest in the second half when it got into such long winded family history about one of the murder victims. And I didn't buy that Lorna allowed herself to be swept up again at the end.

I'm not a mystery buff so perhaps I don't have the reading chops required for the genre, but I just became lost plot-wise trying to keep track of all the characters and what they were all supposed to have done. Justice is served at the climax, but its secrecy bugged me and that it didn't redeem our hero with the public or the LAPD.

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## **Dan Lemke says**

Another early work by James Ellroy (see Brown's Requiem review) that is pretty typical of the author's narrative style. Ellroy's prose grows more staccato later in his career, but here (as in the Lloyd Hopkins trilogy) the prose is fairly typical of the genre (partially this is because the book is told from the first person POV). The murders are grotesque without being overly graphic; Ellroy's murders tend to be more offensive than that of Christie or even Chandler, but he knows when to stop on the details. Overall, a fun read, albeit with a pacing that sort of wavers.

On a final note, LAPD Lt. Dudley Smith plays an important role in the story. Since this book predates the LA Quartet series it serves to demonstrate how much depth Ellroy has created in his Los Angeles.

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## **Cyrano says**

The fact that this took me over a year to read is likely indicative of something. I'd been wanting to read Ellroy since seeing LA Confidential, and maybe I should have held out for a copy of that.

I really liked the first half of the novel, and the cop who finds that his need for justice is too constrained by the police department. This is the formula that gives you Batman. It's also the formula that gives you Magneto. There's a dangerous line, and unlike many vigilante stories this one admits the line is there. Also, our female character is allowed some spunk, rather like Vivian in the Big Sleep.

Our boy Underhill gets burned, and gets tossed off the force, and... it feels like around there the story loses traction. He loses none of his intensity, just his direction. And then we got to the infodump, flashback thirty or forty years, and I found myself lacking the interest to pick the book up for six months.

When you get to the end of the story, loose ends get tied. (I think. See 'six months'.) Damage done is not \*entirely\* washed away, but it's still a happy ending, for a gritty book about the dirty underbelly of L.A. in the fifties.

And that's one of the things that Ellroy is good at, and that kept me reading. The descriptions, of the places and the people and the attitudes and the culture, felt real, like the sting of gravel and the ache of impact when you fall on your hands in a parking lot off Sepulveda. And that's worth three stars right there.

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### **Chris says**

I love L.A. Confidential (the film) so much that I wanted to read a book that evoked the same milieu, the same literary "terroir," while avoiding a reread of the same plot that would inevitably come with reading L.A. Confidential (the novel) itself. What better way to accomplish that goal than by going to James Ellroy's other work? Clandestine isn't one of Ellroy's most widely-known efforts, but possibly because it was one of his earliest, there's a rough-edged "rawness" to the writing that I found more absorbing than some other, more obviously polished hard-boiled novels. Reading this was a bit like reading Hammett with a twist of Chandler -- sharp prose, engrossing plot, and complex and deeply flawed characters. At times it seems that Ellroy is engaging in a public therapy session to work out his well-publicized personal issues in his writing -- and I say, fine by me; it results in some superb noir. Highly recommended.

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### **Jeff says**

Pretty good early Ellroy. Though I had problems with the middle third (the pacing just goes totally dead as he goes into a longwinded, heavily expository backstory), I'd still call this "essential" to anyone (like me) who loved the LA Quartet--as it introduces key characters, like Dudley Smith, and locales, like the Victory Motel, that figure so prominently in the Quartet. In fact, the entire first third reads a lot like the LA Quartet, though a lot less polished. Once the story moves away from LA and the LAPD, it goes a bit off the rails....but there's still plenty here to like, you can see all of Ellroy's obsessions taking root, and a few sentences here and there hint of the genius to come.

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### **Jose says**

El prodigio. Sólo muy de vez en cuando surge en una novela. El autor te atrapa y te lleva allí donde quiere y sólo allí. No están permitidas las disgresiones ni las distracciones, no puedes imaginar, no puedes suponer, sólo leer, página tras página, mientras el autor hace contigo lo que quiere. Sin embargo, y porque sabes que estás siendo utilizado, manipulado, es de esos libros que estás deseando acabar, que termine de una vez. Esto

me ha pasado a mí con 'Clandestino'. Pura literatura. El prodigio.

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## tENTATIVELY, cONVENIENCE says

review of

James Ellroy's Clandestine

by tENTATIVELY, a cONVENIENCE - JUNE 6, 2017

Read the full review here: <https://www.goodreads.com/story/show/...>

It's been a while since I read an Ellroy bk. I'd forgotten what a good writer he is. Take this 2nd paragraph of the Prologue as an example:

"Nostalgia victimizes the unknowing by instilling in them a desire for simplicity and innocence they can never achieve. The fifties weren't a more innocent time. The dark salients that govern life today were there then, only they were harder to find. That was why I was a cop, and why I chased women. Golf was no more than an island of purity, something I did exceedingly well. I could drive a golf ball three hundred yards. Golf was breathtaking cleanliness and simplicity." - p 1

Some people chase ambulances, some people chase women, women move slower.

"I breathed it all in, and gave what I hoped would pass for an ironic grin: "So you don't like cops," I said. "Big deal. Most people don't. Would you rather have anarchy? There's only one answer, Miss Weinberg. This is not the best of all possible worlds. We have to accept that, and get on with the administration of justice."" - p 30

Of course, these days there're plenty of people who, yes, *w*d rather have anarchy - & those who *w*dn't, for the most part, are only reacting to the term like a Pavlovian dog preconditioned to experience fear w/o having more than a very vague idea of what it is they're afraid of.

"Lorna did not relent. "I can't accept that, and I won't. You can't change human nature, but you can change the law. And you can weed out some of the sociopaths who carry badges and guns.

""For example, my father told me you were curious about that man who caddied for you today. I know about him. He's one of your victims. An attorney who's a member of this club once represented Dirt Road Dave in his suit against the Lose Angeles Police Department. During the Depression he had stolen some food from a grocery. Two policemen saw him do it and chased him, and when they finally caught him they were angry. They beat him unconscious with their billy clubs. Dave suffered internal hemorrhaging and almost died. He sustained irreparable brain damage. The A.C.L.U. sued your police department, and lost. Cops are above the law and can do what they please." - p 30

Now, I'm an anarchist &, unlike most anarchists I know, I don't hate cops. I think most of them are working class people who are in over their heads. Still, let's be realistic: the above story fits in w/ my idea of realism. I'll give a few relevant stories that explain why:

I had a friend whose brother was in the LA Police. One day my friend was at his parents' house when his brother came by w/ another policemen. They were joking about going out to "shoot cans. Afri-cans, Mexi-cans" Nyuk, nyuk. Black Panthers talked about the police as being like an occupying army in their neighborhoods. I think that's spot-on.

I had another friend who was a junkie poet. He was a nice guy, he probably resorted to some theft to support his habit. The police took a dislike to him. 2 cops cornered him in an alley & one of them systematically beat him w/ his billy club in the same spot on his stomach over & over again to cause internal organ damage &, thereby, shorten his life. He sued the police w/ the usual outcome of NADA police responsibility. I haven't seen the friend for decades. He's probably dead. He was a sensitive person who just cdn't make it in this society in the approved-of ways. If being a poet in this society got more respect he probably wdn't've had to resort to theft - but being a poet or most other types of creative person is undervalued to an extreme in this society.

Yet another friend of mine, of Mexican descent, was at a protest in California at a motel where illegal immigrants were being held for deportation. My friend was arrested & taken to jail where he was hog-tied (ie: w/ his hands tied behind his back to his feet) & beaten repeatedly on the soles of his feet so that he cdn't walk properly. That was torture. His mom reported this to Amnesty International who informed her that there is no torture in the US. They've since changed their tune.

I've sat in a courtm before & witnessed a man sentenced to jail for stealing a piece of meat from a supermarket. The man was very skinny. My point is that if you're poor in this country there's a different set of laws & treatments for you than if you're rich. The police know that rich people have too many retaliatory resources AND that their actual purpose is to.. protect & serve THE RICH. They're a bodyguard pd for w/ public money, heaven forbid that the rich shd have to pay for anything.

For maybe the 1st 15 yrs that I had sex, from 1970 to 1985 - & more sporadically up 'til 1996 - the use of diaphragms was a common form of impregnation-prevention. This was preferable to birth-control pills b/c it didn't disrupt the biological cycle of the woman. Once fear-of-AIDS changed the whole dynamic of sex, the use of condoms started to dominate & diaphragms seemed to fall into disuse. I never really had a handle on when diaphragms were invented so it was interesting to find them in the 1951 of this novel:

"I pushed open the door. Maggie was starting to insert her diaphragm when she saw me. She jumped, startled and angry, into the bathtub, where she covered herself with the shower curtain.

""Bill," she said, flushed. "Please, goddamnit, I'll just be a minute. Wait in the bedroom, honey. Please. I'll be right there."

""I just wanted to watch you, sweetheart," I said. "I wanted to help you with it."

"Maggie said nervously, "It's a private thing, Bill. A woman's thing. If you don't see me do it, then you don't really know it's there. It's better for you. Believe me, honey."" - p 38

Ah, humans & our complications. This was a one-nite stand. Can you imagine a cat-in-heat going thru this? [Cat steps into litter box & turns her back] "Meooooowweerr."

"Jack groaned and the old woman giggled as Wacky did his Frankenstein imitation, walking toward her slowly, arms extended, groaning deeply." - p 46

"232. Player-Belt Girdle Monster

- Neoista?! Puccs - Black Black Galéria & environs, (Buda)Pest, Hungary

- Monday, July 7th, 1997, 6PM

- Black Black Galéria is the gallery of Opál Színház (Opal Theater). It's in a complex of basements which was entered by stooping through a sidewalk-level window & walking down a sloping board laying on a sand pile. Large piles of sand were faintly visible off to the left when entering. At the bottom of the piles were 2 rooms. Off to the right off of the 1st room was the closed off entrance to living quarters. Off to the left of the 2nd room, I could walk through another awkward entrance down into another room where Amen! had an

exhibit. At the end of this room was a cage that blocked entrance to a room beyond. This cage is reputed to've been lived in for 1 month by 1 of the main people of Opál Színház. I stayed mainly in the dim light on the sand piles off to the left when I entered - playing tapes with my Player Belt (see entries 212 & 217, etc..). Eventually, etta cetera, Brian Damage, Ghera & I ventured forth into the gypsy neighborhood - with the Player Belt playing my tapes all the while. Back in front of Black Black, the neighborhood people had gathered out of curiosity. My tape started playing loud steady explosive sounds & I began to walk stiffly with my feet hitting the pavement in sync with the sounds holding my arms out like the stereotypical zombie/monster. etta probably took something from me (like my flaming steam iron necklace) & I started pursuing her through the thick of the crowd. Children started laughing & pretending to be terrified & running frantically to get out of my way."

How did that get in there? I'm listening to Lambert, Hendricks & Ross's "Sing a Song of Basie" (recorded 1957 - a little late to be of the same period as the novel) as I wrote this. Thought you might like to know. 'Bill' insults his superior officer & pays the price, a transfer to an unglamorous & dangerous district:

"Wacky Walker never made it to Seventy-seventh Street Division, Watts, L.A.'s heart of darkness, but I did.

"Beckworth bided his time and in June, when Captain Larson retired, to muted fanfare, after thirty-three years on the job, I got my orders: Officer Frederick U. Underhill, 1647, to Seventy-seventh Street Division to fill manpower shortage.

"Which was a joke: the ranks at Seventy-seventh Street were swelled to bursting. The ancient red brick building that served the hottest per capita crime area in the city was painfully overstaffed with cops, and undersupplied with every crime-fighting provision from toilet paper to fingerprinting ink. There was a shortage of chairs, tables, floor space, lockers, soap, brooms, mops, and even writing implements. There was no shortage, however, of prisoners. There was an unsurpassed daily and nightly parade of burglars, purse snatchers, dope addicts, drunks, wife beaters, brawlers, pimps, hookers, perverts, and cranks." - p 65

I'm sure that Ellroy is well-read & researched on the eras he represents but this still seems daunting to me as a writerly task to try to accurately represent a place & time he doesn't have personal familiarity w/. It's 1951, & Ellroy has Underhill blackmailing a bartender for information b/c he's caught him w/ pot:

""Shut up. Listen to me. I'm interested in pickup artists—pussy-hounds, guys who score regular here. You help me out and I'll let you slide. You don't and I'll bust you. I'll call for a patrol car and tell the bulls you tried to sell me these three reefers. That's two to ten at Quentin. What's it gonna be?"" - p 83

Two to 10 at San Quentin prison for selling 3 joints. Those were the days. The days of ridiculous penalties for victimless crimes. The days when being gay meant hiding it to save yr life. Henry Cowell, major American composer & music theorist & publisher, etc, was imprisoned in San Quentin in 1936 w/ a 15 yr sentence for a "morals" charge. He wd've gotten out at the time this novel began if he'd served the full sentence, wch he didn't, he got out after 4 yrs.

I'd originally read that Cowell was busted in a sting operation for cruising in a park. Perhaps that story was circulated to generate more sympathy for him & for others like him. Wikipedia claims that having oral sex w/ a 17 yr old boy. I don't know wch story is true. Having been a 17 yr old boy in 1971 who hitch-hiked & got such offers fairly often I can truthfully say that saying no was all it took to prevent it from happening so I assume that the 17 yr old consented. At any rate, those were the days. The days when a major composer cd get sentenced to 15 yrs in prison b/c of his sexual activities. We're not talking Oscar Wilde in 1895, sentenced to 2 yrs hard labor for indecency, we're talking the 20th century.

""Don't thank me yet, Officer. You are a very gifted young man, but your arrogance supersedes your gifts. Arrogance cannot be tolerated in police officers; to tolerate it would be to promote anarchy. The Los Angeles

Police Department is a superbly structured bureaucracy, one you have sworn allegiance to. Your actions have reviled the department. Know that, Underhill. Know that your ambition is threatening to kill you as a policeman. Do you understand me?" - p 96

There they go, picking on anarchy again. What's so bad about thinking for yrself & sabotaging unjust institutions? Sheesh.

My 1st encounter of a close kind w/ Ellroy's work was upon witnessing the movie "L.A. Confidential". I loved it & thought it represented as great Film Noir made long after the 'classic' era for Noir. The Ellroy bk that the movie was based on was copyrighted in 1990, 8 yrs after Clandestine. Clandestine seems to hold the seeds of at least 3 later bks: L.A. Confidential, the Black Dahlia (1987), & My Dark Places (1996). The only bk that I've read by Ellroy earlier than Clandestine is Brown's Requiem (1981). Clandestine presages L.A. Confidential b/c it's got the brutal Lieutenant Dudley Smith in it taking a suspect to an abandoned motel & 'interrogating' him by beating the shit out of him until he gets a confession.

"Dudley Smith was a lieutenant in the homicide bureau, a fearsome personage and legendary cop who had killed five men in the line of duty. Irish-born and Los Angeles-raised, he still clung tenaciously to his high-pitched, musical brogue, which was as finely tuned as a Stradivarius. He often lectured at the academy on interrogation techniques, and I remembered how that brogue could be alternately soothing or brutal, inquisitive or dumbfounded, sympathetic or filled with pious rage." - p 97

Smith explains to Underhill something he did to try to discover who the Black Dahlia's killer was:

""Dick Carlisle and I snuck the stiff over to the warehouse late one night. I dyed her hair jet black, like the Dahlia's. I stripped her nude, and tied her ankles with a rope, and Dick and I hoisted her up feet first and hung her from a low ceiling beam. Then Dick went and got our eight degenerates from the Hall of Justice jail. We let them view her, one at a time, lad, with appropriate props. One scum was a knife man; he had scores of arrests for knife fighting. I handed him a butcher knife and made him slice the corpse. he could hardly do it. He didn't have it in him. Another filth was a child molester, recently paroled from Atascadero. His M.O. was asking little girls if he could kiss their private parts. I made him kiss the dead girl's private parts, smell that dead sex flesh up close. He couldn't do it. And on and on. I was looking for a reaction so vile, so unspeakable that I would *know* that this was the scum that killed Beth Short."" - p 125

It didn't work. I doubt that the above story is rooted in historical fact, it seems more likely to be rooted in Ellroy's lurid imagination. Maybe I'm wrong. Here's another story that seems more likely to be realistic:

"["]At five minutes of six we will kick in Eddie's door. We will subdue him, and put the fear of God into any colleen or homo who might be sharing his bed, then send them on their way. I have an interrogation place set up, an abandoned motel in Gardena. Freddy, Dick, Engels, and I will travel in my car. Mike will follow in his. This is apt to be a long interrogation, lads["]" - p 134

Think of the murders of Black Panthers Fred Hampton & Mark Clark (while they slept a drug-induced sleep as a result of downers put in their food by an undercover agent) by the police in Chicago in 1969 & you'll get a good idea of the way the police sometimes work.

In the meantime, Underhill is dating cop-critical legal eagle Lorna whose artistic taste we get a glimpse of:

"There was a Hieronymus Bosch painting that represented insanity—hysterical grotesque creatures in an undersea environment importuning God—or someone—for release from their madness. There was a Van Gogh job that featured flowery fields juxtaposed against brown grass and a somber sky. There was Edward Hopper's "Nighthawks"—three lonely people sitting in an all-night diner, not talking. It was awesome and filled with with lonely wonder." - p135

I share her tastes. At the same time that she's dating Underhill, however, he's being schooled by Smith. Dudley's techniques are do NOT appeal to Lorna's tastes:

""Eddie," I said, "do your parents know you're homosexual?"

""No."

""Do they know that Lillian is a lesbian?"

""No. Please!"

""You don't want them to find out, do you?"

""No!" He screeched the word, his voice breaking. He wrapped his arms around himself and rocked back and forth." - p 165

Yep, those were the days. At least people can be a little more openly gay these days so such blackmail is less likely to be effective. Of course, let's not get too happy here, right? There're still cases like Pittsburgh policemen David Sisak, Michael Saldutte, & Richard Ewing beating the shit out of black teenager for no good reason Jordan Miles in the all-too-recent 2010. The cops got financially penalized but did no time. The attorney who represented Ewing was quoted by the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette as saying: "they'd do it all over again. They did nothing wrong. They have nothing to be ashamed of." Any civilian who beat a cop like they beat this kid wd probably be given life w/o parole or executed. There's no way they'd get off like these cops did. These are the days. Still, Lorna & Fred get married, demonstrating once again that opposites attract.

"So the dead hovered over my wife and me, solidifying their presence as Lorna and I lived on. For years we loved, and it was worth the price in sorrow that my blind ambition had exacted from me and so many others. For a long while I wanted nothing that I didn't have, and I was moved beyond movement by Lorna's willingness to give it to me." - p 201

I love a little romance, esp in my own life. Thank you, you know who.

The dead are definitely hovering over this novel. Given that I'd read Ellroy's My Dark Places about the murder of his mom when he was a kid, it was easy to see parallels to his actual life story & the fiction in Clandestine:

**"NURSE FOUND MURDERED IN EL MONTE  
Strangulation Death for Attractive Divorced Mother"**

[..]

"one of the Scouts, Danny Johnson, age 12, thought he saw an arm poking out of a line of scrub that runs along the fence on the school's south side." - p 209

Ellroy's own mom was a divorcee living in El Monte. "Some kids found her." (p 3, My Dark Places).

""Marcella was such a good woman. A good mother, devoted to her son." Mrs. Hariis, 43, was divorced from her husband, William "Doc" Harris, several years ago. They have a nine-year-old son, who was spending the weekend with his father. When notified of the death, Harris (who has been eliminated as a suspect) said, "I have every hope the police will quickly catch my wife's killer." Nine-year-old Michael, distraught, is now living with his father in Los Angeles." - p 210, Clandestine

"Hallinen and Lawton quizzed Ellroy on his ex-wife's social life. He told them Jean was a secretive woman who kept things to herself. She lied when it suited her—and she was really 43, not the 37 she claimed. She was promiscuous and an alcoholic. Her son found her in bed with strange men on several occasions. Her recent move to El Monte could only be explained as a run from or run to some lowlife she was seeing." - p 13, [My Dark Places](#)

"The victim's son was pudgy, and tall for 10 years old. He was nervous—but did not appear in any way distraught." - p 12, [My Dark Places](#)

Ellroy was put into his father's care. The parallels go on & on. Ellroy's mom's murder was never solved.

""Well," he said, "she said the kid was gettin' into fights, and talkin' dirty . . . and . . . exposing himself to all the other little kids."" - p 215, [Clandestine](#)

"I was becoming quite a large kid. I was foulmouthed and spouted profane lingo on the schoolyard. My father's favorite expression was "Fuck you, Fritz." His favorite expletive was "cocksucker." I mimicked his language and reveled in its shock value.

"I was refining my Crazy Man Act. It kept me miserably lonely and sealed up in my own little head." - p 99, [My Dark Places](#)

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## Simon says

Even when reading one of James Ellroy's earliest and most conventional novels, it's easy to understand both why he divides fans of crime fiction so much \*and\* why he's one of the writers in the genre who have earned the most respect from academic literary circles. "Clandestine" is far from perfect, but mostly succeeds in going even further than Hammett and Chandler in elevating the detective novel to serious literature.

From the first page, you can notice that Ellroy's sensibility is closer to the common stereotype of literary fiction than 95% of authors in his genre: There's a clear inspiration from the concise, hard-boiled prose of the aforementioned classics, but his style is so much more abstract and fragmented it sometimes gives off a Thomas Pynchon-lite feel. It wouldn't surprise me if Ellroy in turn inspired Pynchon's own retro detective novel "Inherent Vice".

The storyline is likewise just as concerned with exploring the protagonist's psyche as with solving its central murder mystery: A process that in the story takes several years, and ties up several plot tangents that at first appeared to be red herrings in the unravelling of its central conspiracy. At the same time, the depiction of LA's sleaziest parts gets way more explicit than the 1930s pulp writers could ever get away with to the point the end results sometimes feel more like Bukowski than Chandler. (maybe for a reason, many elements in the story are taken directly from the still unsolved murder of the author's own mother during his childhood)

As to be expected from an early novel by a very ambitious author, "Clandestine" doesn't quite reach its high aspirations. The plot structure feels clumsy early on when building up its basic premises and also later when the shocking revelations start piling up it comes close to straining the reader's suspension of disbelief. Neither can Ellroy's prose quite make up for the narrative issues, since it's not as effortless-looking in its brilliance as Chandler... let alone as advanced as Pynchon. However, for the most part it works because how Ellroy uses the same underlying themes recurring in all the disparate tangents to pull them together into a unified narrative.

I'm definitely curious about the LA Quartet now, since "Clandestine" is often seen as a test run for those novels.

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