



Exquisite Corpse: Surrealism and the Black Dahlia Murder

Mark Nelson, Sarah Hudson Bayliss

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Presenting the most compelling explanation yet for the bizarre nature of the Black Dahlia murder, this volume includes never-before published crime-scene photographs and links the alleged killer to a vast array of influential people.

Exquisite Corpse: Surrealism and the Black Dahlia Murder Details

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From Reader Review Exquisite Corpse: Surrealism and the Black Dahlia Murder for online ebook

Paquita Maria Sanchez says

Want a hint? If you want to read a true-crime book without looking like a creep or a washed-up housewife, choose one that's disguised as an art book. Well...that's not entirely true. This is more of an art book parading around as a true-crime study. The authors make some interesting points concerning the symbolism throughout Surrealist art (the minotaur, the bisected or dissected or otherwise slopped up and chopped up female form, the connections between eroticism and violence, and the general "do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law" mentality) and their references in the Black Dahlia crime scene. However, the additional evidence provided pinning the crime on the art collector, psychologist, pedophile, and chummy chum of Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp by the name of George Hodel is precarious at best. Sure, he was interested in Surrealism. All his friends were doin' it, so why shouldn't he? That DOES NOT MEAN that he Jack the Ripper'd on some random chick to make a piece of (hrrrm) *living* art. Yes, perhaps someone did...maybe it even *was* George Hodel. MAYBE he did, and MAYBE you don't want to go around smearing a man's memory posthumously. Ever heard of DNA evidence, or evidence in general? Did you know that circumstantial evidence doesn't hold up in court? Surrealism was all the rage, and just because this guy was friends with the top-dogs of the L.A. Surrealist art movement and clearly prone toward violence against women (he DID rape his own daughter...so obviously he WAS a total scum-fucker), it does not follow that he was necessarily a psychokiller qu'est-ce que c'est. What, so you think there was only one psychopath in L.A in the fourties with a taste for the finer things in life? That frilly frilly shit ain't just for Hannibal Lecter, people. Since their evidence was slim at best, I bumped this book down in star power. It is, however, a rich history of the Surrealist art movement and the effects upon it by World War II and its resulting split relocation to New York City and Los Angeles. It also has beautiful illustrations (we're talking Aperture Monograph quality reprints of dozens of paintings, sculptures, and photographs). For seven dollars rather than the initial \$35 cover price, it was worth it for me. Buy it and read it if you find it "on the cheap," as they say.

Doug says

As a piece of research, this book is very good. It has completely convinced me, through some of the most disturbing photographs I have ever seen, that the Black Dahlia murder was almost certainly some twisted surrealistic artistic expression, of a kind not normally associated with modern psychopathology. There are rich connections and inferences to be made here, in terms of how responsible an art movement is/should be for the corruption and encouragement of sick minds, who, absent from artistic influences, would seem simply pathological and need of medical help.

As non-fiction, I think this book works less well. The writing is a little dry, and the relatively few actual tentpole points that the authors wish to make are needless reiterated from multiple confusing angles. There is also very little sense of 'thrust' of the book overall; the sections and chapters do not appear to be organized in any particular way, and the thing sort of ends out of nowhere. Perhaps the book should be thought of as a work of art itself, a collage of 'research expressions' intended to evoke in the reader a sense of logical conclusion, somehow.

RB says

I was interested in "Exquisite Corpse" because of my love for Ernst and Duchamp and a passing interest in Man Ray and the whole surrealist circle of friends who also made, mostly, fascinating art. However, in this book, we are focused on the surrealists move to L.A. (New York for Duchamp) and a friendship with one George Hodel who, judging by the circumstantial evidence presented here, committed the infamous Black Dahlia murder. And while some of the connections our authors present us may either be laughable or reaching, a good portion of the theories presented here seem likely. And anyone who shares a love for Duchamp's *Etant donne* will get a kick out of the connections between it and the crime scene. Throughout this book we are shown enough gorgeous art to give this slim book more value, for once it ends it feels as if the writer just decided, we've got most of it covered so let's end here--however, where this book ends, there are still numerous questions swirling through the reader's head and other avenues that could have been traversed and others that could've been seen with more insights, but for the most part this is a pleasing read save the crime itself and the photographs of the corpse. A must read for anyone interested in the surrealist movement, the Black Dahlia murders, the corrupt law enforcement in California around the 1940's - 50's, or for those interested in narratives that present the "perfect crime".

Linnea says

Interesting take on a well-known murder. While the authors' backs might be sore from reaching so far at times, it was an enjoyable read and I learned more about the Surrealism movement.

Jeff says

This book really only makes sense if you've read Hodel's *Black Dahlia Avenger*. It is NOT a detailed exposition of Hodel's evidence, but rather a focus on the surrealist connections on which Hodel focuses in his own book. I wouldn't start with this book, but would definitely recommend it if you were intrigued by Hodel's book.

Nancy says

This is an interesting concept for a true-crime / art history book. The author uses another author's premise (Steve Hodel) that his own father (George Hodel) was the murderer of Elizabeth Smart and Nelson takes the ball and runs with it. What results is equal parts true crime and art history. Nelson examines the surrealist art movement in America in the 1940's-1950's and how the artists and their art might have inspired the murderer to do what he did. Though the Black Dahlia case is still unsolved and will probably never be resolved, Nelson makes a very compelling argument that Hodel was indeed the murderer and why he may have done it. I read a lot of true-crime books, but this one kept me up at night and actually gave me the heebie-jeebies. The book is full of pictures of Elizabeth Smart, both alive and dead, and various artists and their pieces. People with weak stomachs are advised that there are plenty of graphic pictures.

Ashlea says

'Exquisite Corpse' reads as much as an art history book as it does a whodunit, which is fitting coming from authors who hail from fine art backgrounds. Hence, it also makes for a great lesson for us Surrealism fans who thought they knew about the writers, painters, and sculptors they admired. Although careful not to point fingers towards any one artist, Nelson and Bayliss weave a convincing story that interconnects murder suspect George Hodel to some of the most respected names of the time, most especially Man Ray.

Regardless of Hodel's ultimate guilt in the slaying of Elizabeth Short, there is still an disturbing underworld of misogyny and twistedness that can't be argued against, a misogyny- or at least an unrealistic interpretation of women- that many of the Surrealists of the time are implicated in. Nelson and Bayliss do as well, if not better, at indicting Surrealism's sexist pitfalls as they do suggesting Hodel's guilt. After reading this book, I am still not 100% convinced that the Black Dahlia murder was a nod toward the Surrealist movement, but I do have a cleared understanding as to why the suggestion is a completely viable one.

Eva says

A quick read and an impulse sale purchase. "Exquisite Corpse" refers to a game played by artists involved in the Surrealist movement of the early 20th century. This book is primarily an exploration of several of the major players in that movement and the themes of sadism and violence against women that were pervasive in work by many artists and in fact seem to have been a uniting theme across the decades. The theory presented within the book is that a physician, George Hodel, who was a close acquaintance of many of the surrealists living in LA in the 1940's (as well as being a fan of the Marquis de Sade and a sex offender), is the actual perpetrator of the infamous Black Dahlia murder. He was considered a suspect by LAPD at the time, and his son, Steve Hodel, has written a book in which he purports to reveal his father as the murderer. The authors take pains to distance themselves from all of the accusations in the son's book while still using him and his family as a source of material.

The examination of the work of the surrealists was fascinating and disturbing and posed many philosophical questions about the nature of art that were beyond the scope of this book, although I still wish the authors had made them more explicit. The reproduction of seminal pieces by Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp made this worth having in hard cover. However, there are graphic crime scene and autopsy photos included (for the purposes of comparison to the artwork discussed), and many may find those grisly and disturbing. However, the book is more about the art than it is about the murder, and while their suggestion that Hodel may have been the murderer is intriguing, it certainly comes nowhere near presenting proof of that assertion.

An interesting if macabre intellectual experience. Not your typical true crime book, to say the least.

Fletcher says

More of a book on surrealist art (in particular the L.A. scene in the late 1940's) that also mentions the black dahlia. Pointed out some very striking shared motifs between major Man Ray Duchamp Dali et al. pieces and the crime scene

Teresa says

I got this book from my boyfriends mom for christmas. She kind of apologized when she handed it to me and then referred to all of the 30s and 40s crime photo books on my Amazon wish list. hmm awkward. Then I couldnt really read it there because it is full of naked corpse photos and it was you know....christmas. But I REALLY REALLY wanted to.

I thought it was pretty rad. She gave me a half dozen books for christmas and this was definatley the one that I had the most curiosity about. At my first chance I sat down and devoured it.

It touches on how the surrealists were personally connected and how one of the prime black dahlia murder suspects is linked to them. An art history lesson from the perspective of an unsolved murder.

It is a pretty grueling crime. She was BISECTED drained of blood and then her corpse was posed. Perhaps to look like a surrealist piece of art. The photos are compelling evidence, and the author says they use the least disturbing crime photos.

The connection to the surrealists both as an inspiration for the murder and then an inspiration to later surrealist pieces is interesting.

I read it through in a day and I really enjoyed it.

Also it reminded me of Hans Bellmer and his creepy dolls that I saw at a Surrealist exhibit at the met. That is a good thing.

Meaghan says

While I usually DETEST the inclusion of the crime scene and autopsy photographs of Elizabeth Short in books, the reason they are included in this book is necessary. Exquisite Corpse builds from the belief that Dr. George Hodel was the man who murdered Beth, and compares Beth's death with a lot of famous surrealist art of the time, an art form which Mr. Hodel was obsessed with, and which often focused on the broken bodies of women. The comparisons in this book are astounding. I would recommend this for all those interested in Beth's death, and all those interested in surrealist art. But take Hodel and his claim with a grain of salt. The comparisons are fascinating, but Hodel's claim about his father doesn't hold water.

Betsy Murphy says

Wow shows the photos of Miss Short's murdered and butchered body ! But I can see how her body placement is like those of the Avante garde surrealism . Especially those of Man Ray's and Duchamp art work until William Copley who artwork is dead on like how her body was posed - makes you wonder . So its a good quick read but if weak in the stomach don't .

lisa_emily says

Honestly, I never really knew much about the Black Dahlia murder until I read the review of this book in late Sept. I became fascinated by the book, since I had studied Surrealism, with many different angles, as an art history student. This connection of surrealism to a murder was a radically strange approach for me.

It is irrelevant whether or not they solve the murder by the end of this book.

I appreciated the analysis connecting the Short's sadly fragmented body with the often grotesque female body depicted by surrealist artists. Nelson & Bayliss do a pretty good job of discussing this horrific crime without dipping into crass sensationalism (which would have been easy to do with all the Black Dahlia interest now- with the movie et all.). The writers stay focused in presenting coherent and cogent art evidence to back up their claim. They discussed art works that are not very known, showing the depth of their research. The chapter on the art world connections with Hollywood insiders could be a book in of itself.

CD says

This was truly an impulse purchase. I've re-read the book since my first run through and still found it a worthy endeavor.

Putting it down until it was finished the first time didn't seem like much of an option. Crime story meets lurid noir journalism meets esoteric art history of a period that combines to a guilty pleasure worth more than most attempts at this genre.

Having read also Steve Hodel's "Black Dahlia Avenger" prior to this book this was the next chapter.

Exquisite Corpse provides the bookend at the other end of the literary/visual spectrum being richly illustrated with a surfeit of gruesomely surreal photographs. All the biggies in Surrealism make this book. I was surprised at how much about Duchamp I had forgotten or didn't know.

If you are a "True Crime" fan, an art and or Surrealism aficionado, or are looking for a compelling well crafted read, this is it!

LibraryCin says

Exquisite Corpse: Surrealism and the Black Dahlia Murder / Mark Nelson and Sarah Hudson Bayliss
3 stars

The "Black Dahlia" murder was the murder of 22-year old Elizabeth Short in LA in 1947. She was found with her body cut in half. The murder has never been solved, but George Hodel was one of the suspects at the time. This book illustrates the similarities between Elizabeth Short's murdered body and surrealist art. Hodel was apparently connected to the art scene in LA around the time, as well as being a doctor.

I am more interested in the crime itself and not surrealist (weird!!!) art. There were plenty of photos in the book, of both surrealist art and the crime scene. The crime scene photos are pretty graphic, but the authors assure the reader that these are the least bad of the crime scene photos. The photos do show how closely her body does resemble plenty of surrealist art. There was a LOT more information than I ever wanted to know about surrealism and the artists themselves. The bulk of the book was really about the art and the artists and less about the crime. Despite me not really being interested in art history, the book mostly did hold my attention, so it's an "ok" for me, but I'd really like to find more information on the murder itself where the book actually focuses on that.
