

A detective novel about AIDS

A nightmare world is exposed — a world where the fear of AIDS dominates all other concerns and causes irrational behavior.

BY STANLEY JOHNSON

Early Graves, by Joseph Hansen (The Mysterious Press, 1987).

Historians of popular culture have assured us that the detective novel is the most widely read literary form of the twentieth century. One claimant has asserted that Agatha Christie is the most popular author of the

Books

century; another gives the title to Erle Stanley Gardner. And it may be that the prolific French novelist, Georges Simenon — creator of Inspector Maigret and author of more than 400 books — has been read by more people than any other writer who ever lived.

One reason for the continuing popularity of the detective novel lies in its adaptability — its capacity to change with the times, to use its classic puzzle-solving framework to accommodate contemporary themes and even controversial subject matter.

One classic example is Rex Stout's series of novels with Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin. Over the years, from the '30s to the '70s, Stout had Nero commenting on and reacting to all kinds of public events, from income-tax raises (he hated but tolerated them) to the publication of the new Webster's Dictionary with its permissive attitude toward usage (he loathed it). In one of the best of the series, *The Doorbell Rang*, Nero took on the whole FBI — and won.

The detective novelist who today best exemplifies the use of the mystery framework to deal with public concerns is Joseph Hansen. The Los Angeles-based novelist, in his series of nine books about Dave Brandstetter, has incorporated into his mystery plots such relevant modern themes as corporate greed, toxic-waste spillage, and Central American involvement. Now has come a grim subject that had to be faced: AIDS.

The topic is integral to Hansen's new novel, *Early Graves*. It is introduced early in the book when Brandstetter, an insurance investigator who is gay, returns from a business trip to find a young man in front of his Hollywood home, stabbed to death. The man, though unknown to Dave, is carrying his business card.

The crime is reported to Lt. Leppard of the Los Angeles police; he immediately connects it to a series of killings in the Los Angeles area: all young men, all stabbed in the same way — and all dying of AIDS.

The latest victim is soon identified as Drew Dodge. Brandstetter did not know him, but knew his reputation as a go-getting real estate developer who had perhaps over-reached himself to the extent that his financial empire was in danger of collapsing. He had settled down in a conventional marriage. Brandstetter's investigation reveals that he had also had a private gay life which links him to the other serial killings.

Brandstetter shares his knowledge of the gay world with Lt. Leppard as they investigate the case together. It is a nightmare world that is exposed — a world where the fear of AIDS dominates all other concerns and causes irrational behavior. He finds a woman whose lover left her when she tried to help her dying brother, a crippled old black man who saw a family disown their son with AIDS, a landlady who sterilizes her whole house after an AIDS patient leaves.

Unlike most detective novels, *Early Graves* offers the solution — to one of its plots, at least — in the form of a confessional letter from the serial killer, who was himself a victim in many



E. Ann Hinds

ways. It is a powerful document that tellingly reveals the plight of the person with AIDS. The young man, who is good at his job, is fired from his programming position. The reason as explained to him: "Personnel says you have AIDS. We have to protect the rest of the staff. . . . If you don't go, they will. We can't afford that. We also can't afford the group insurance rates we'll be slapped with if you stay. Would that be fair to the others?"

It's a situation in which everybody loses. And so the boy, unnamed up to this point, becomes a scapegoat, a sacrifice to his society's fears. A horrible retribution follows.

Even with this confession, however, the book is not over, for *Early Graves* actually has two plots, one superimposed on and intertwined with the other. The confession solves the serial killings, but not the initial murder with which the book began. Brandstetter still has another path to pursue into an old crime and a long-delayed vendetta.

Early Graves follows Hansen's usual pattern of interweaving a murder investigation with Dave Brandstetter's private life. Readers of his earlier novels, beginning with *Fadeout* and *Death Claims*, will already be familiar with the sympathetic treatment Hansen gives him. In one early book his lover of many years died, and he went through a period of shock and withdrawal. He gradually began to re-establish relationships, and now is going through a period of adjustment with a new friend, Cecil Harris, a young black newscaster.

In *Early Graves*, as in all the other books in the series, the private concerns and the detective plot are skillfully joined and become a single entity with Brandstetter at the center. Readers have already discovered that Brandstetter is one of the most sympathetic and admirable characters to emerge in recent detective fiction. The most important thing about him is not that he is gay, but that he is a kind, thoughtful, concerned human being. He has never been better than in this excellent new novel.

Early Graves, then, is perhaps Hansen's best example of the way in which detective fiction can use an engrossing plot as a vehicle for expressing concern on a serious social issue. Read simply as a straightforward thriller, it crackles with Hansen's usual tension and suspense, as well as his keen observation of the Los Angeles milieu, especially its sleazy underside. Read at a deeper level, it wholly carries out Hansen's concern with shocking his readers into a new awareness.

In describing the aim of his new book, the author has made this statement about it:

The background is AIDS. It was a grim subject to tackle, and not an easy one to fit into the frail framework of a mystery novel, but I felt that the Brandstetter books are the books of mine that reach the largest number of readers, and I had to deal with the topic there, rather than in one of my mainstream novels, which almost no one reads. Whatever the odds against, I hope I've written a book here that will replace fear and revulsion in its readers with compassion and a desire to help. •

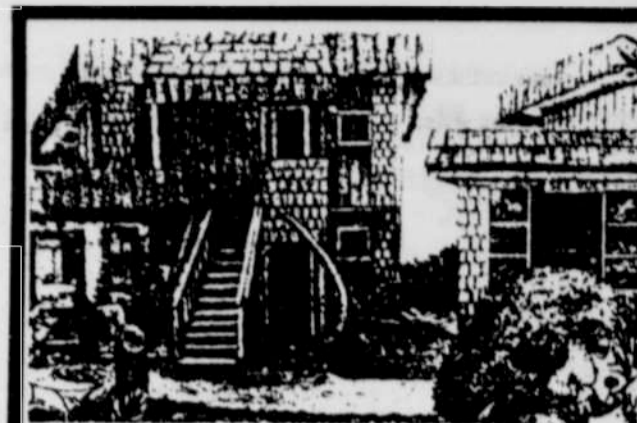


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