

BOOKS

He sleuthed, she sleuthed

Queer mystery writers explore the trail
blazed by the late Joseph Hansen

BY STEPHEN BLAIR

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Agatha Christie. Raymond Chandler. Joseph Hansen.

You may not recognize the last name on this list of legendary mystery writers, but Hansen was a true pioneer. The author, who died of heart failure Nov. 24 at the age of 81, created one of the genre's first gay protagonists.

Hansen penned a 12-book series starring a gay Los Angeles detective/insurance claims adjuster named Dave Brandstetter. He published the first installment, *Fadeout*, in 1970 and completed the series in 1991 with *A Company of Old Men*.

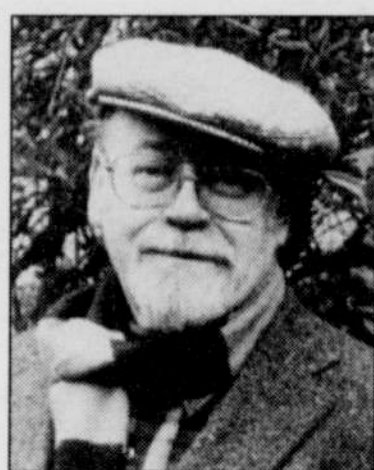
Appraised for his sensitive treatment of the AIDS crisis, he was, above all, a crackjack storyteller. *The Los Angeles Times* called him "the most exciting and effective writer of the classic private-eye novel working today."

Hansen's legacy lives on in queer mystery fiction, as seen in two recent offerings.

Flight of Aquavit

by Anthony Bidulka; Insomniac Press, 2004; \$29.90 softcover

Meet Russell Quant. He's cute, he's queer, and he's an ex-cop turned private investigator.



Joseph Hansen created one of the mystery genre's first gay protagonists

You may know him from *Amuse Bouche*, the first book in this series. But don't fret if you haven't read that installment. *Flight of Aquavit* gives newcomers plenty of opportunities to catch up with Russell's antics.

Named after a strong Nordic aperitif, *Aquavit* mostly takes place in the detective's hometown of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. It's Christmastime in Canada, which means it's really, really cold outside. Our hero packs away lots of Starbucks lattes and his mother's fatty cooking, making him a bit self-conscious about his usually trim bod. He takes his dog for walks, "hoping to ward off the several pounds I could feel attaching themselves to my tummy like barnacles of fat."

Funny, I can't remember Sam Spade or Hercule Poirot ever fretting about their weight. Leave it to a queer detective to put vanity first.

Russell's mission is to find "Loverboy," a dangerous and mysterious figure who blackmails a successful, closeted businessman. His search takes him to gay chat rooms on the Internet and to New York City, where he's tempted to suspend his ethics and sleep with a foxy suspect.

Overall, *Aquavit* is a quick, entertaining read that's occasionally brought down by predictable plotting and weak character development. It's not particularly sexy, either, since Russell only ends up in one or two compromising positions.

But these flaws don't really detract from the fun when you're in the saucy company of a private dick who's not ashamed to say, "Feeling like Superman and Wonder Woman rolled into one, I grabbed the edge of the door and gave it a mighty tug."

The Eleventh Hour

by Lauren Maddison; Alyson Publications, 2004; \$28.90 softcover

If you can suspend your disbelief for 300 pages, you're in for quite a wild ride. How can you not like a book that spotlights psychic detectives, magical crystals and characters whose souls date back to the lost city of Atlantis?

The Eleventh Hour is a part of Lauren Maddison's Connor Hawthorne series, which also includes the

books *Witchfire* and *Death by Prophecy*. The action begins on an island in the Bermuda Triangle, where a bunch of baddies murder members of an anthropological team to secure a powerful crystal that can change the course of history.

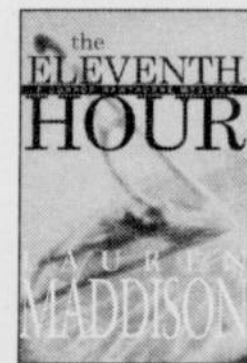
Meanwhile in Palm Springs, Connor and her girlfriend, Laura, learn that an innocent young woman has been killed because a cult wants her inheritance money. The ladies head to York, England—headquarters of the dastardly cult. With a little help from family and psychic friends, they infiltrate the cult and unleash the murderous wrath of some power-hungry schemers.

Following the plot so far? It only gets more outrageous from here on out, as Maddison swaddles ludicrous plot developments in florid, laughable prose. "For a few brief moments, every person in the room felt connected to every particle of creative energy extant in the universe," the author writes in one of many New Age moments. Suffice it to say that crystals play a vital role in every stage of the plot.

Despite—or maybe because—of its excesses, *The Eleventh Hour* is a fun, strange read that doubles as a substance-free acid trip. Maddison deserves kudos for pushing her cosmic vision to the limits.

She can't be forgiven, however, for opening each chapter with quotes by the likes of Shakespeare and George Eliot. Sorry, honey, but your literary pretensions don't disguise this book's hamminess. You might as well play Beethoven at a tractor pull. **B**

STEPHEN BLAIR is a Portland free-lance writer whose current guilty pleasure is season four of *Dawson's Creek* on DVD.



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Casual Dining

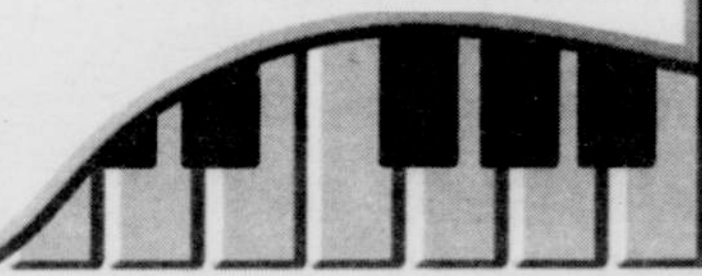
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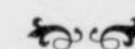
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