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**Friday, May 18, 2007**

### My Dark Places

Reviewed by [Lisa Alvarado](#)

Murder, memory, loss, and anguish -- all the stuff of crime fiction and tragedy. It is the subject matter of novelist James Ellroy, whose literary career has garnered him praise from the national press, and whose novel *L.A. Confidential* became a critically acclaimed film. But in *My Dark Places*, Ellroy throws the reader an unexpected twist. This book is about the killing of his own mother, whom Ellroy lost when he was 10. It was the single incident that propelled Ellroy through a life as an inverted child, a teen criminal, a con, a drug addict, and finally a writer.

But even as Ellroy dredges his tortured life from the ashes, his mother's ghost is never far behind. He longs for her, dreams about her, and she insinuated herself into every waking moment of his life.

*My Dark Places* is a memoir, crime story, love song, and a cry in the dark. Jean Ellroy was very much like a character in a noir novel. A woman of duplicity, torn between two lives, she was subdued and distant with her son, and acted more as a disciplinarian than loving mother. In her other life she was a secret alcoholic, habitually drawn to anonymous sex with violent men. One of those men killed her on June 22, 1958. It was the single experience that rent the fabric of James Ellroy's life. He spent the next 36 years both running from her ghost, and recreating her life.

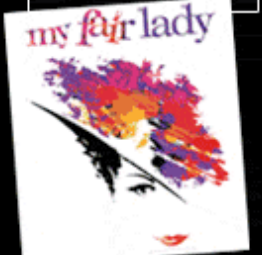
As soon as he was able, Ellroy disappeared into the underworld. He was his mother's son, after all. She drank, he grew up and did eight balls and speed. She hung with criminals, he became one. She picked up men in bars and had one-night stands, he met women, screwed them, dumped them, and moved along. When the drugs and the sex and the crime failed, Ellroy even reconstituted himself as a sober, successful writer. Nothing healed that wound that was his mother. He desired her,

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despised her, and finally decided to investigate the case himself, hoping in this way, to reclaim her. What happened was an odyssey of obsession and redemption, but not peace.

Despite a kind of resolution, James Ellroy will never be a peaceable being. He ends *My Dark Places* with these words: "I can hear your voice. I can smell you and taste your breath. You're brushing against me. You're gone and I want more of you." Then he lists the name and number of the detective who is still looking for leads, still looking for the killer.


Why is this so compelling for me? I was drawn to read this book after hearing an interview with Ellroy, feeling shocked to hear him talk about the tragedy in words that were my own. My own poetry about mother-loss ([published on this site](#) for Mother's Day) echoes Ellroy's: *I am looking for you mother, looking for you everywhere. In the corridors of dreams, windowless, empty. I look for the door that will lead me to you. I look, but I never find it.*

I ran from my own childhood holocaust, tried to escape any way I could think of. I also reworked, re-envisioned, and reshaped my life by writing. That wound has never completely healed, for him or for me. Maybe it never will, if my own intuition and Ellroy's cautionary words mean anything. But we write, we keep digging up the past, we keep afloat.

On a purely stylistic note: this is riveting writing. The book is crafted with a staccato rhythm, the use of simple, clean phrasing, and icy-hot imagery. I hope to tap a similar vein for a trilogy of performances I'm working on about personal and pop culture violence, *Bury the Bones*. Maybe Ellroy would enjoy the title.



Posted by nbennett at 07:56 PM

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