

## Two Outstanding Mystery Books

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Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File); Jul 5, 1970;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times  
pg. 08

# Two Outstanding Mystery Books

BY DOROTHY B. HUGHES

● Seldom if ever do two previously unknown authors produce almost simultaneously the two outstanding books of the mystery year, in fact of many years. Moreover, both are American authors, which after the long dominance of British quality, is a harbinger of spring on our side of the Atlantic.

The first was Tony Hillerman whose Navajo story, "The Blessing Way" (Harper & Row), I truly believed could not be equaled in the foreseeable future. Now comes Pat Stadley, also of newspaper background, with "Autumn of a Hunter" (Random House: \$4.95) to receive matching honors for a most brilliant performance.

And then the name of Pat Stadley to the select list of the greats of suspense fiction. She has taken the imminent danger of forest fire in the Sierras, at the time of the October hunting season, as the fearful thread of suspense on which to suspend the stories of a diverse number of persons.

There are the rangers, old and young, with problems to limit possibly their efficiency; there are hired killers and a husband and

wife on holiday; there is the Mexican shepherd, inheritor of the land, and the puma he has long protected for its courage in adversity.

Miss Stadley weaves these stories together so intricately and in such perfect proportion that each is dominant against the brooding background of the inevitable conflagration. "Autumn of a Hunter" is a beautiful and breathtaking book, one to place with George Stew-

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art's "Fire" for its re-creation of the menace and toll of the tragedy of our forests.

From a superb premiere to an old master is a happy continuity, particularly as the master is the master of masters, Ellery Queen. "The Last Woman in His Life" (World: \$5.95) is the Ellery we have always delighted over, as sparkling and as intuitive and as civilized, and as loaded with

surprises as if this were his debut.

He has always been the champagne of detectives. With Inspector Queen, his father, for balance wheel, he is on holiday in his favorite Wrightsville when murder occurs. And what a puzzler he faces with a glittering playboy, three ex-wives and a small entourage, out of which one is certainly the most mystifying murderer of the season! For pinwheels and Roman candles of plot, no one approaches Ellery Queen. "The Last Woman in His Life" is Queen at his best, and as everyone knows this is the Olympus of bests.

Without advance pressure, as sometimes happens in the world of books, a singularly delightful tale of atmosphere, archaeology and a maid in distress has appeared. "The Dead Sea Cipher" (Dodd Mead: \$4.95) by Elizabeth Peters. Miss Peters is a pseudonym, it says, for a "popular fiction writer" cum professional archaeologist, which certainly accounts for its easy charm and its incisive background material.

As for the distressed damsel, the author obviously has no interest in

the usual sniveler, Dinah is of tough fiber, who asks nor grants no quarter from her pursuers. Why she is a threat is a deftly designed conundrum, to be solved against the magic of Tyre and Sidon and Jericho and biblical neighbors. Better start saving your pennies now, after reading Miss Peter's map you'll never be content until you follow it.

Make no mistake about it if you want your yarn tough and gritty and turned on with the cliché of dirty words, and if you want it high mod with its beautiful black detective on a job for a gargantuan Harlem rackets boss, with a Muslim-Panther type for pivot man, you've got it in

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"Shaft" (Macmillan: \$4.95) by Ernest Tidyman. You've also the drab New York of today (and can mourn for the excitement of its yesterday), as Shaft hunts the racketman's wayward daughter through streets and sewers.

The book is good in its class, doubt it not. But I wonder how long it will take The Scene to realize how dull the four letter and portmanteau inventions have become. In their overuse they're about as shocking as jeppers creepers. Wonder whatever happened to the cardinal rule and dialect: suggest, don't cross every T.

There are always pros and cons in an Amanda Cross mystery, "Poetic Justice" (Knopf: \$4.95) being no exception. This one is heavier on the pro side, with the most cogent thinking on campus disorders yet to come along. There is also a fine evocation of a city university conclave and some fully realized academic characters. On the con side, Prof. Kate has her customary instant and total recall of her current favorite author, W. H. Audin this time, and spouts him to all and sundry. Also she continues the larger than life heroine; no one, not even Kate, can endure such perfection, only an author can superimpose it. There's murder and Kate's D.A. finance to put the story in the mystery category.