



## **A Bright and Guilty Place: Murder, Corruption, and L.A.'s Scandalous Coming of Age**

*Richard Rayner*

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**A Bright and Guilty Place: Murder, Corruption, and L.A.'s Scandalous Coming of Age** Richard Rayner  
**Best Book of the Year**

*The Los Angeles Times • The Washington Post*

Los Angeles was the fastest growing city in the world, mad with oil fever, get-rich-quick schemes, and celebrity scandals. It was also rife with organized crime, with a mayor in the pocket of the syndicates and a DA taking bribes to throw trials. In *A Bright and Guilty Place*, Richard Rayner narrates the entwined lives of two men, Dave Clark and Leslie White, who were caught up in the crimes, murders, and swindles of the day. Over a few transformative years, as the boom times shaded into the Depression, the adventures of Clark and White would inspire pulp fiction and replace L.A.'s reckless optimism with a new cynicism. Together, theirs is the tale of how the city of sunshine went noir.

## A Bright and Guilty Place: Murder, Corruption, and L.A.'s Scandalous Coming of Age Details

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Author : Richard Rayner

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# From Reader Review A Bright and Guilty Place: Murder, Corruption, and L.A.'s Scandalous Coming of Age for online ebook

**BAM The Bibliomaniac** says

3.5 stars

RTC

True Crime Commemoration # 2

Setting: 1920s and 30s Los Angeles

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**Hundeschlitten** says

Rayner tells the story of L.A. in the 1920's and early 30's as film noir. He portrays a dynamic city being built on the scrub, where the modern culture of greed and materialism rubbed shoulders with a flashy religious revivalism, all of it driven by the enthusiasms of folks who looked at their recent move to these sunny climes as a personal manifest destiny. As a former Angeleno whose family moved to the Golden State in the early 1900's, I have become fascinated with the mentality of those times. My dad used to tell a lot of odd family stories that fit right in with the mood of Rayner's tome. My one complaint is that, after setting the stage, Rayner just lets these characters drift away to their random lives. It's like reading the post-script at the end of a movie. This seems to be a pretty common way to write a book these days, and it drives me nuts.

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**Lexi Vranick** says

It took me a while to get into this one, but by about the third or fourth chapter I was definitely captivated. I bought this books years ago after finishing "L.A. Noir". Having never visited Los Angeles before, and never even going to California, I was surprised at how wrapped-up I got in its history. It's got such a deep, colorful, oftentimes shady history that will definitely pull you in regardless of your proximity to the city. Half the time it feels like you're reading a script for a movie being filmed in its shimmery, famous Hollywood hub, and yet these are all real. Definitely fascinating, and definitely a topic I'd love to read even more about.

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**Zedder** says

There's something simply delicious about reading nonfiction books like this. They're the intellectual equivalent of Dove Bars: one part nonfiction--so feel like you're actually learning something--and one part narrative--so you actually enjoy reading it.

Anyway, like another recent LA history book (John Buntin's "L.A. Noir"), this book spells out the real historical basis for Raymond Chandler's fictionalized version of Los Angeles. It turns out that the real L.A. was just as corrupt as Chicago--if not moreso. Rayner's narrative device for recounting the 20s and 30s history of this corruption is to trace the overlapping careers of two employees of the D.A.'s office: an investigator and a public prosecutor. Along the way, we get detailed accounts of many of the big events of

the day: the 1928 St. Francis dam catastrophe (fictionalized in "Chinatown") and the 1929 Doheny murders at the Greystone Mansion (quasi-fictionalized in "There Will Be Blood"). Wisely, Rayner only starts to compare Chandler's fictional L.A. with the real L.A. at the end of the book, after he's thoroughly immersed us in the atmosphere of 20s and 30s L.A.

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### **Beth Cato says**

This absolutely fascinating book explores Los Angeles and environs from the mid 1920s into the 1930s and details the workings of The System: the intricate web of corruption and wealth that tied together the criminal underworld and police and legal networks. Real crimes--and their cover ups--are described. If this sounds like the stuff of noir authors like Raymond Chandler, Chandler himself was there and plays in own small part in the sordid goings-on. The book goes beyond the reality of graft to show how it inspired a film and literary genre that continues today.

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### **Margaret Bessai says**

Learned about this non-fiction book from the Annotated Big Sleep, and enjoyed reading it. Rayner covers LA in the early 20th century, bringing to life several historical situations that formed the fabric of Los Angeles and Chandler's fictional universe. The book is stuffed with anecdotes and vivid characters woven together from meticulous research (great notes at the end) and touches on several historical situations including the syndicates that formed around water, land and oil, the graft and gangsters in government and Hollywood, to discuss the background of real events which inspired Chandler, Gardener and several of the Black Mask pulp writers. Made me curious to do follow up reading in several topics.

Great discussion of this book by reviewer Rich Cohen of the LA Times:

"In his brilliant new book, "A Bright and Guilty Place," Richard Rayner has given us, finally and definitively, the nonfiction equivalent of the Raymond Chandler classics that fell like hammer blows in the middle of last century: "Farewell, My Lovely," "The Long Goodbye," "The Big Sleep." Chandler turned fact, the criminal underworld of Depression-era Los Angeles, into fiction, and now Rayner, by a strange Didion-like alchemy, has turned fiction back into fact."

and

"the book is about the birth of noir -- it's like a diorama in which you see the underworld and graft that created the hard-bitten attitude as naturally as a cold wind creates fog.

"[N]oir is more than just a slice of cinema history," writes Rayner. "[I]t's a counter-tradition, the dark lens through which the booster myths came to be viewed, a disillusion that shadows even the best of times, an alienation that assails the senses like the harsh glitter of mica in the sidewalk on a pitiless Santa Ana day."

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment...>

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## Tony says

Rayner, Richard. *A BRIGHT AND GUILTY PLACE: Murder, Corruption, and L.A.'s Scandalous Coming of Age*. (2009). \*\*. I've read several of Rayner's earlier works and found them to be relatively well written and cogent accounts of specific people or events. In this one, I found myself confused. The hint that the reader might be in trouble starts on p. xi, "Cast of Characters," that continues on to p. xiv, followed by a paragraph that lists an additional minor cast of characters consisting of eighteen people, followed by "...and others." How is one to keep track of all these characters? It might have helped if the author stuck to his objective of outlining the life and careers of the two intended main characters, Leslie White, a photographer who landed a job as a crime-scene investigator in the L.A. D.A.'s office, and Dave Clark, a young lawyer and a rising-star prosecutor who ultimately became involved in many of the city's dirty dealings. The period is the 1920s into the mid-1930s in Los Angeles. The city is growing at a rapid pace, and is the biggest oil producer in the world at the time. Oil means money, and money usually means men who will do anything to get it. From crooked oil stock dealings, to the theft of water from the Owens River Valley, to the Teapot Dome Scandal, to the emergence of writers Raymond Chandler and James M. Cain, this book is an encyclopedic look at the city and its citizens of the time. The problem is that all of the information is unfiltered. Even flipping back and forth to the front of the book and re-examining the "Cast of Characters," doesn't always help. Rayner has done the research required for several books, and wants to share it all with us. Sorry. I couldn't take it all in, and ultimately didn't care anymore if I did or not. I even took a close look at the book I was reading to see if it was improperly paginated. It wasn't, but it might as well have been. Skip this one.

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## Jim says

On the face of it, this is an odd book. It deals with L.A. noir years before noir really existed as a literary genre. And it views a strange slice of history, from 1927 to 1933, through the eyes of two people of whom I had never heard: the prosecuting attorney Dave Clark and the criminal investigator/detective writer Leslie White. Not really a promising field.

And yet, the British writer Richard Rayner manages to carry it off. Using primarily newspapers and autobiographies as his main sources, Rayner shows us the proto-noir Los Angeles, with its corrupt politicians, attorneys, and mobsters. He begins with the breaching of the St. Francis Dam, which killed hundreds on a broad swath of carnage from Santa Clarita to the sea. We see the genial mobster Charlie Crawford, and how he was killed by Dave Clark, who managed to be acquitted because, well, he was a very good prosecuting attorney and knew how to look good to female jurors. We see the murder/suicide of Ned Doheny and his servant Hugh Plunkett; the destruction of the acting career of Clara Bow, the "It" girl who seemed to be out of a job during the ravages of the Depression; and a plethora of minor characters who made the headlines during that formative period.

It is no secret that California produced Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, Horace McCoy, and Dashiell Hammett. They were just writing about what they saw.

*A Bright and Guilty Place: Murder, Corruption, and L.A.'s Scandalous Coming of Age* is worth reading. It definitely surprised me, who knew little about the period and characters discussed. The book also contains an extensive bibliography, which makes it a keeper for me.

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## James Thane says

Richard Rayner focuses on the careers of two men, Leslie White and Dave Clark, to detail the history of Los Angeles in the turbulent 1920s and '30s. The city's population was exploding in the boom years of the '20s, and its government and police force were thoroughly corrupt. Movie stars, oil men, gangsters and countless others flooded into the city in the hope of making their names, their fortunes, or both. Newspapers exploited the sensations of the day, often with little regard for the truth, in the hope of gaining an increasing readership and an advantage over their rivals.

Leslie White is a young photographer who basically trains himself to be a crime scene investigator in an era when forensic science was in its infancy. He manages to get a job in the district attorney's office where he meets Dave Clark, an ambitious, handsome prosecutor with a taste for the finer things in life that will take him, ultimately, over to the dark side.

Rayner details a number of sensational trials where the lives of White and Clark intersect and which would ultimately inspire any number of novels. White himself ultimately becomes a pulp fiction writer, inspired by Erle Stanley Gardner, the creator of Perry Mason, who makes a cameo appearance. This is the L.A. that would inspire any number of crime fiction writers, principal among them, Raymond Chandler an L. A. oil executive who would become one of the great crime writers of all time and who drew much of his inspiration from the characters and events that Rayner describes.

Rayner's principal contribution with this book is to demonstrate how this beautiful city on the Pacific was transformed into the noir capitol of the world. Anyone who enjoys reading noir, or who loves movies like "Chinatown" and "L.A. Confidential," will doubtless enjoy this book.

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## John says

Although I don't know if there's an actual category in crime fiction called "LA Noir," no reader of Dashiell Hammett or Raymond Chandler or the countless crime writers who have followed in their footsteps would have any problem recognizing the phrase. All cities are corrupt and crime-ridden, but Los Angeles, so hot and sunny, so dark and sinful, has a paradigm all its own. And the truth about the place is equal to the fiction. Richard Rayner's account is a sharp, stark, black and white photograph of the City of Angeles on the cusp of the Great Depression, when the excesses of the Twenties are about to drive off the cliff. Crime and corruption are rampant, and politicians elected to clean the city up universally turn out to be fakes or failures or both. In short, LA at the time was a lousy place to live but a fascinating place to read about. Rayner gives us two threads to follow this increasingly complex account: the careers of a sharp-dressing, movie-star handsome DA named Dave Clark and a crime-scene expert and pulp crime writer named Leslie White, whose interconnecting careers and sharply contrasting destinies provide the story's momentum. Clark's rise to prosecutorial stardom leads to an addiction to the perks of privilege and money, while White's increasing technical proficiencies lead to bitter disillusionment when his crime scene discoveries are routinely ignored or, worse, "lost" during the investigation. So, instead, after a conversation with Earl Stanley Gardner he starts writing crime stories for pulp magazines like Black Mask, Crime Busters, and Detective Action Stories, and hence becoming a forerunner of LA Noir.

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## **Alyson says**

Narrative non-fiction is a rare gift and this book was like Christmas. Rayner makes believable the mystique and mythology of LA noir, which inspired a whole genre of writing (pulp fiction) and film (film noir), through his exhaustive research and the retelling of the lives of two lesser known historical figures whose destinies are interwoven with the glamour and corruption that was LA's messy coming of age.

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## **Heyhansen says**

A lot of fun for me, great to tie in to the Chandler books I've been reading. Another glimpse into how truth is stranger - and wilder - than fiction. I'm hopelessly romantic about LA so this was good background info for me, essentially a detective "story" set against the backdrop of LA becoming the city it is - with an emphasis on it's crime & corruption. While Chicago had it's Capone, LA had "the system" something that I imagine is still deeply rooted there today.

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## **Armin says**

Wird mich einige Zeit in Bestform kosten, um eine einigermaßen angemessene Rezi zu schreiben. Aber das Buch ist ein Muss für jeden aufmerksamen Leser.

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## **Jason says**

While this narrative nonfiction tome is set in 20s and 30s Los Angeles, my soundtrack for reading was 60s and 70s California Soul. For whatever reason, it fits perfectly in my mind with what is essentially the true story of the birth of noir in America. It probably has to do with my own indoctrination into a love of noir through Walter Mosley's Easy Rawlins tales. That fictional Los Angeles is dripping with soul. A Black soul. California Soul.

A Bright and Guilty Place, however, is about the creation of Los Angeles's soul and, as I've spent a good amount of time in the last few years in other American cities, this is what I'm interested in. What makes my home the way it is? What makes other places the way they are? What I find most unique about Los Angeles is it's kind of pathological desire to look forward. We don't make much of history here. Buildings get put up and pulled down without much concern for their place in time. With the sun shining bright on us nearly every day, there's a nearly constant belief that things will be better tomorrow so you can forget yesterday. There's a wonderfulness to this kind of outlook. It supports our population of dreamers and creators in a way that I haven't quite seen elsewhere.

But there's also a dark side. Dreamers are also risk-takers, sometimes to a fault. Forward thinking breeds confidence and, with it, confidence men and women who seek to take advantage of hope and possibility. In between, there are those just trying to get along and they often are hit with the collateral damage of both the bright and the guilty. Rayner's story looks deeply at that and, it seems, attempts to answer the question of

whether or not our city's duality must corrupt those who seek to stake a claim here or can "good" win out?

Fans of the likes of Mosley and Chandler or films like Chinatown and L.A. Confidential already know the answer.

Doesn't stop us from trying to come out ahead, though, does it? As Rayner notes, "on an average day, Los Angeles receives 14 times more sunlight than New York."

That means it shines on a dog's ass here more often than most places.

I like those odds.

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## **Jan C says**

Why did I stop reading this? Probably other things just got in the way.

In the end, I found it pretty interesting. But I took so long to read it that I may have to go back to the beginning and read some of it again.

I did find a couple of tiffs though. He cites gangster movies The Public Enemy and Scarface and quotes the line about someone "bringing a knife to a gunfight" - believe this is a quote from The Untouchables. The minor note was that all three of these movies were about gangsters in Chicago, not LA. Perhaps it was safer in the '30s to use gangsters from Chicago rather than LA. Although Ben Hecht has said that Capone did send a couple of "fellows" to talk to Hecht when he found out about Scarface. He convinced the fellows to stay on as "consultants" (per Howard Hawks: The Grey Fox of Hollywood by a former schoolmate, Todd McCarthy).

Through much of the book we are (I think) following photographer/investigator Leslie White and his book, Me, Detective, which apparently is very difficult to find. But the author was also able to interview Mr. White's children who remembered the stories their father told.

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