



Literally Dead

James Conroy

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In the midst of the Great Depression, one man must do battle against corruption with nothing but his wits and a host of great literary figures...Amos Jansen is merely a clerk. He is not a crime fighter, the next great writer, or a man of privilege. He is the humble employee of a Chicago literary society. That is, until he is arrested for murder. The scapegoat of a perfidious lieutenant, Jansen stands wrongly accused while his idols rally around him. Literary personalities the likes of Ernest Hemingway, Carl Sandburg, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Nelson Algren, and H.L. Mencken, as well as civil liberties war-horse Clarence Darrow, join Amos in his search for the real murderer of both the society's vice-chairman and his own father. Will the pen prove mightier than the pistol? Will mercenary police, politicians and money-barons meet with justice? Or will Jansen fail to solve the mystery and wind up literally dead?

Literally Dead Details

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From Reader Review Literally Dead for online ebook

Elizabeth of Silver's Reviews says

Chicago, Chicago my kind of town.....but at the moment it definitely wasn't Amos Jansen's kind of town since he is being accused of murder simply because he found his boss, Dwight Eldon, dead at his desk. Amos' only saving grace was that Ernest Hemingway and Carl Sandburg, yes both of those famous authors, came to his rescue and got him out of the interrogation room and out of jail for now.

You will follow the story from present day back to the rioting that caused the death of Amos' father. You will love the characters especially Nelson who is an aspiring author and a real con man who has an answer for any dilemma. Nelson is Amos' best friend, and he even talks Ernest Hemingway into something not above board and gets them both into trouble. Underneath all of this, though, is police corruption and other individuals who are covering up the murder of Amos' father and Dwight Eldon while trying to pin it on an innocent person.

I really enjoyed the book because of the time period, because of the numerous famous authors brought in as characters, and because it made me laugh out loud at some of the antics. It is funny and serious at the same time, and is a great inside look at what life was like in Chicago for law-abiding and non-law-abiding citizens in the 1930's during the depression.

LITERALLY DEAD is a wonderful history lesson with many names you will definitely want to look up to find out what part they played in America's history of unions and civil liberties. Murder mixed with laughter make this book an historical page turner. If you want to laugh and truly enjoy a book's characters, you will want to read this book. 5/5

Caitlin says

Writing a satirical mystery set in the 1930's with a Raymond Chandleresque tone populated with famous figures of time, many of them literary, is a high bar to set for yourself as a writer. Fortunately, this is a bar that James Conroy is able to reach reliably. Entertaining as a mystery, even more entertaining with major figures who may or may not have ever interacted (Carl Sandberg, Ernest Hemingway, Clarence Darrow) is a fun read. It's Chicago Depression Era setting is a huge bonus.

Conroy has written a historical mystery with plenty of laughs and many people to care about. This isn't a book with lots of language to distract, Conroy isn't writing for style, but rather for uncluttered story and for this book the choice really works. Well-imagined with characters to care about, many of them literary figures, this book has plenty to say about Chicago at the time and will make you want to learn more about everyone he includes. Good read!

Tina Petriella says

James Conroy gives a great description of the 1930's in Chicago in the book "Literally Dead". This book, which is a historical work of fiction involving great authors in an interesting plot of murder, suspicion, intrigue and history, was a wonderful quick read. James Conroy gives definition to the history of the 1930's, while adding in the movement of Communism that was happening back during the depression years. This was a fun and interesting storyline involving not only some famous authors as characters but introducing us into a world of underworld crime, gambling, crooked cops and the spectacular world of literature. James Conroy did a great job of making all the characters jump off the page making you feel that you were right there in the thick of the action and suspense. It was packed full of fun, entertainment, history, and great writing. I would recommend this book to anyone including those who are not into history.

Amanda says

I must have been half-asleep the two or three times I read the blurb before reading the book, because where it says, "with nothing but his wits and a host of great literary figures," I read it as "with nothing but his wits and THE GHOSTS of great literary figures". You can imagine my surprise when I started reading and woke up. It was a good surprise, though. I'm not a literary snob, and have read relatively few "classics", so I know very little about the authors in this book or their work. I feel like I know the authors so well now, though, that I feel guilty about that, and almost want to apologize to them. As none of them are in my author groups, I suppose I'll have to make due with checking out their work.

The author did a wonderful job of writing a "whodunit" with quite a bit of humor, featuring some of the great figures of the Depression era. I got so wrapped up in the story, I actually cried when the epilogue mentioned Hemingway's suicide. And yes, I actually did know about that before I read it in this book.

I received this book free from the publisher in exchange for an honest review.

Mirella says

Literally Dead is an engrossing satirical murder mystery set in 1930s Chicago during the Great Depression - those grand old days of gangsters, corrupt policing, and Prohibition.

At the heart of the story is a poor writer named Amos Jansen who gets wrongly arrested for a murder he doesn't commit. Supporting him, eager to prove his innocence, are a bevy of real literary figures of the time, among them Ernest Hemingway, Clarence Darrow, and Edna St. Vincent Millay along with a few others. I loved the way the author made Ernest Hemingway come to life - 13 crusty, wily, charismatic, and witty, I could not get enough! It made the story highly entertaining. Along with a fascinating mystery to unravel, there were pleasant laughs along the way.

If you are looking for something different in historical fiction, this rich, enchanting story is sure to entertain you from start to finish. I really enjoyed it and highly recommend it. Exceedingly charming!

Sheila says

Ernest Hemingway shot himself in the leg while hunting shark. Carl Sandburg wrote a wonderfully evocative poem of “We the people.” Nelson Algren won the first ever National Book Award with *The Man with the Golden Arm*. Meanwhile the fictional Amos Jansen lived and worked in a literary society in 1930s Chicago, till his boss was murdered. After that, where the money will come for the rent seems almost as important as who-dun-it, and a truly fascinating, thoroughly enjoyable tale ensues.

The era, people and place all come to life in James Conroy’s literary mystery, *Literally Dead*, from the treatment of Hemingway’s dysentery and the fight for employees’ rights. The voices of old movies sound in the ear from pitch-perfect dialog. Dark streets, corrupt police, madly rushing cars, and gambling joints distract the eye. Politics and corruption seem sadly contemporary, and the main character’s musings evoke an honest sympathy for unions and the call to social justice.

Particularly impressive is the way the author avoids any semblance of delivering a message while powerfully evoking an era where message was needed. The lives of these characters seem real and true, and form a convincing background to those famous depression-era writers. Plus there’s a mystery with convincing red herrings, plot and counterplot, dark murder and cover-up.

Literally Dead is a literary mystery of the Depression, smoothly written, easily read, and deeply intriguing, historically, sociologically and literarily.

Disclosure: I received a free copy of this book from the publisher, Knox Robinson, in exchange for my honest review.

Brenda says

The cover of James Conroy’s *Literally Dead* offers a fairly accurate representation of its concerns and characters. “Chicago, Corruption, Unions, Money-Barons.” “Hemingway, Algren, Sandburg, Millay, Mencken, Darrow.”

I entered the First Reads contest for this novel because of its promoted cast. I tend to gravitate toward literary mysteries (Mathew Pearl’s *The Dante Club* and *The Poe Shadow*, for example). Despite Conroy’s interest in such figures, his own work did not strike me as particularly literary--at least not in voice. He’s not likely to be taken for a prose stylist, at any rate. In fact, I can’t say that a single sentence really registered with a flourish.

Visual imagery is minimal. Indeed, the cover of this novel features words and splotches, probably meant to suggest blood splatter, but, no images that could accurately be described as pictures, no urban backdrop for the all-capped bold face. Yet, the cover’s sparseness seems appropriate for Conroy’s aims.

He might be taking the advice that Hemingway gives the novel’s protagonist after reviewing some of the

latter's writing: ""Pare it down, boil it down; extrude the facts and feelings. Assign it a specific time and place. Discard any clutter."

Although I found Conroy's dialog to be more verbose than Hemingway's, I imagine that readers who don't wish to linger over elaborate descriptions of 1930's Chicago, who aren't hankering for focus on Hemingway's nose hairs and chin bristles, probably won't mind the methods of Conroy's telling. I find that I need more imagery to keep me interested in conversation--unless, of course, the script is being interpreted and enacted on a stage.

Indeed, I sometimes wondered if Conroy had tried his hand at play or screen writing. The emphasis on wise guy dialog with occasional gunplay would seem perfect for such a platform.

Although I can't award three stars to this novel, I would grant it 2.75 if such a rating were possible. I enjoyed the representation of Algren--and learned a bit about communist party history along the way. At least, Conroy has stimulated my interest in the biographies of the writers he honored with this text. I also plan to read another Hemingway treatment (The Paris Wife by Paula McClain) if only to get a female perspective.

Alleluialu says

I was asked to read and review this novel by the publisher. It interested me because there were several authors mentioned in the blurb I read. I'm not a fan of crime fiction, but this book held my interest. Many famous authors' names were dropped - Ernest Hemingway, Carl Sandburg, Edna St. Vincent Millay. The story takes place in Chicago and deals with the effort to start workers' unions and the corruption of Chicago's police force. I guess it held my interest because I have family that would have lived in Chicago when the story takes place AND my father was a steelworker and belonged to the Steelworkers' Union. The young writer who is at the center of this story was also son to a renowned union organizer. His father was killed during a worker strike in an attempt to get better wages and working conditions for the workers of a shoe company. It turns out that he was actually murdered and now his son is trying to put the pieces together to find out who murdered him. Hemingway is depicted as you would expect - garrulous and independent; Sandburg and Millay are very important people in this Chicago and help the boy out as much as they can. They also bring along Clarence Darrow to get him out of jail and help with his puzzle. Writing it here, it seems rather fantastic, but reading it, it flows together. It was a very good book. The only reason I didn't give it 5 stars is because I don't particularly like crime fiction, but this was okay - almost historical. I recommend it.

Stephanie says

James Conroy's Depression-era mystery, combining a whodunit with a story of Chicago political corruption, is a fun read—mainly because major literary personalities of the age, including Carl Sandburg, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Nelson Algren, H.L. Mencken, and most importantly Ernest Hemingway, play an important part in the proceedings.

Amos Jansen is a clerk and aspiring writer, but he carries the legacy of his father, who, before he was killed in a riot, was an important leftist organizer. As the employee of a Chicago literary society, he befriends the author Ernest Hemingway ("call me Hem") just before he is arrested for murdering the society's vice-

chairman. Hemingway and his famous writer pals rally to help Amos figure out who's behind the murder and what link there might be to his father's death, years before.

Conroy paints a colorful picture of 1930s Chicago, with details that will be startling to those of us used to modern-day police procedurals. In those pre-Miranda days, cops routinely took in whomever they wanted, and roughed them up with impunity. Communists and anarchists organized openly and pitted themselves against an equally shameless political machine and corrupt police force. The novel is sprinkled with colorful language straight out of old gangster movies, like "You coppers got nothing on me," and "I always knew you was a chiseling little coward...yellow-bellied stooge."

The literary greats' colorful personalities liven up the plot, with quirks of personality that are very believable, like Algren's inveterate gambling, Hemingway soldiering on through a reading of his works while nursing a "perforated leg" (gunshot wound) and dysentery relapse, and St. Millay informing Amos he's to call her Vincent, not Edna—as her friends do. With the literary greats along as company, it's a lot more fun getting to the bottom of this mystery.

Emily (Heinlen) Davis says

I absolutely adored this book! The setting was one that I enjoy reading about and the characters were perfect! Their wit, humor and manner of interactions were just what the story ordered. I loved the writer's style, too. It was quick, to the point and easy-to-read. You couldn't ask for a better combination. This book is a must read!
