

Murder, *They* Wrote

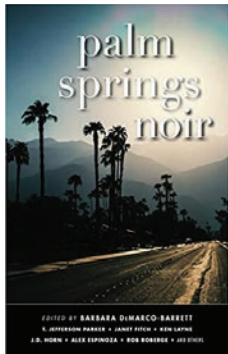
*'Palm Springs Noir'
brings together SoCal writers
in a dark and dangerous
anthology*

BY CANDICE YACONO

Despite noir's enduring popularity as a literary and film genre, its exact definition is nebulous: Something to do with moral ambiguity, cynicism, and perhaps a crime.

"My mother-in-law once asked me what noir was and I said it's where things go from bad to worse," Orange County writer Barbara DeMarco-Barrett recounts. "She said, 'Oh, like real life,' and we laughed."

DeMarco-Barrett is the editor of the upcoming "Palm Springs Noir" anthology, which includes contributions from 14 Southern California authors including Janet Fitch, Alex Espinoza, T. Jefferson Parker and Tod Goldberg – many of whom live in Palm Springs full-time, and some who just pop in for regular getaways.



PALM SPRINGS NOIR

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"All noir has sex, greed and murder to one degree or another," DeMarco-Barrett says. "Noir is all about characters who may aspire to more, who may have good intentions, but they keep getting caught up in the dark side."

For Fitch, who contributed the first story in the anthology, noir also allows someone to move between social zones.

"If you read [Raymond] Chandler, he's going from high to low," she says. "He goes into ballrooms and barrooms, and everything in between. It shows how the separation of classes and the perceived separation of worlds actually are interlinked."

While the range of noir protagonists has expanded greatly since Chandler's day, its central tenets remain. Espinoza, whose work rounds out the collection, says noir also exposes the sometimes insubstantial boundary between good and evil.

"Noir, as I understand it, is about the relationship we have walking the fine line between life and death, between light and shadow," he says. "Noir is the gray area that exists where transactions that might not otherwise occur happen. Noir, like any art form, casts a mirror on society because it intensifies the conflicts and dilemmas that oftentimes go unspoken or unrecognized."

Fitch has been a fan of noir, including classic authors like Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, since her early years. She sees noir's rise since World War II as a natural development, given the national mood at the time.

"Where do you put all that vigilance and anxiety, trying to stuff yourself back into civilian life after war?" she asks.

In wartime, the messiness of life is visible, but following the return to the quotidian, "everything is tamped down and stuck back in a room," she says. "I think that noir is about the past catching up with you. It's such a theme of California, where people come to get away from who they were, and what happened back there, and try again. Life doesn't segment that way and the past tends to catch up with you."

"Palm Springs Noir" is the latest California-focused release in Akashic Books' respected series of noir anthologies set in locations around the world.

DeMarco-Barrett has long loved the Palm Springs area, ever since she and her husband honeymooned there. Since then, she has hosted writers' retreats there for several years. "I love the heat and sunrise and sunset," she says. "I love the sound of the cicadas and the way the San Jacinto mountains rise out of the

desert with their knife-sharp peaks. I love the light and the quiet."

She first learned about Akashic's geographical noir series when she contributed to one of their previous anthologies, "Orange County Noir." "I was spending time in Palm Springs and began thinking: Palm Springs is ripe for a noir anthology, and if ever there was going to be a 'Palm Springs Noir,' I had to be the one to edit it," she says.

After getting the green light, she began contacting area writers. "Everyone in the book needed to have a connection to Palm Springs, the stronger the better," she says.

Fitch says she was thrilled to have the opportunity to contribute to another Akashic noir collection, following her publication in "Los Angeles Noir." She says she likes noir because "there's a certain kind of mythological feel to it that I don't find so



much in the things that I generally write. The kind of stories that I write are very naturalistic. But when you move into the noir world, it's like moving through the looking glass. And you're entering into a little bit more of a mythological space. I just love writing in that world."

Some of that mythology comes across in the anthology's sense of place. Many of the writers chose where they set their work.

"I wanted the stories' settings to be scattered around the Coachella Valley and not clumped in the Palm Springs city limits only," DeMarco-Barrett says. The resulting collection sprawls from Joshua Tree to Anza-Borrego to the Salton Sea, where Espinoza set his story, "The Salt Calls Us Back."

When Espinoza lived in the Inland Empire, he says, "I often caught myself driving out there, strangely fascinated by the almost alien-like landscape – the paved roads leading to nowhere, the dried fish bones along the

Photography by Istock,
Leonard Ortiz



Author Barbara DeMarco-Barrett
at her Corona del Mar home.



Janet Fitch



Tod Goldberg

shoreline, the brine scented air – and I still am. The desert landscape is almost talismanic for me. There's a volatility and beauty to it that I respond to. It's the extremes – in temperature, in light, in economic status – that fascinate me."

Fitch called upon her experiences of visiting her grandparents' mobile home in Palm Springs to color the world of her story, which ranges from a rusty trailer to the IHOP on Dinah Shore Drive to the flimsy dreams of a luxury construction site.

She describes how Palm Springs has changed since her grandparents' generation from its "wild and woolly" roots to middle-class playground with its ability to attract Hollywood types like Bob Hope and Frank Sinatra to the luxury modernist mecca it is today.

"I love the old showbiz-y part of Palm Springs," Fitch says. "It's still the underlying cachet of the place. It's very Rat Pack-y. There's a class divide between the denizens in the trailer park and the fancy people in their very private areas. So, when my character impersonates them, it becomes very interesting. I think that my character, who's oddly rooted as a rootless person, has roots in a transitional place. There's a sense of belonging in a fiction – it's a place built on dreams. It's a sort of liminal space. Interesting place to be."

She also drew from a family experience to create her story.

"My father got involved with somebody who was a con man," she says. "I can just remember how glamorous he was. My parents were kind of dazzled by him – my father more than my mother."

Fitch imagined what she would do in their shoes.

"I've always thought about him," she says of the con man. "And then I came across a story about a developer in the Palm Springs area. You know how things come together when you're writing, and you end up seeing something very much like what you'd imagined. It's always astonishing when it happens. And it happens very regularly, to the point that sometimes we can be a little superstitious about what we write, because, God forbid, you know?"

Like Fitch, DeMarco-Barrett plumbed her own experiences while drafting her own contribution to the collection, "The Water Holds You Still" – particularly her family dynamics and the iconography of the Palm Springs swimming pool.

"On one of my stays, I began thinking about how those of us who like to swim in swimming pools are awfully trusting when it comes to the electrical wires energizing underwater lights," she says. "What might go wrong? I did a little research and learned



what indeed could go wrong and how that might work in my story."

Espinoza also drew his inspiration from a visit to the area.

"I happened to be staying at a resort spa in the Coachella Valley when I decided I would take on the challenge of writing a story for the anthology," he says. "I was laying around by the pool reading a book about fringe religious cults in California, and that's how my piece came about. Since I didn't know much about noir other than what I'd read, I asked my friend Tod Goldberg for advice. He said, 'Whatever you do, include a dead body.' And that's what I did."

While Palm Springs may not seem like the obvious setting for noir literature, DeMarco-Barrett doesn't see it that way.

"Crime is high in Palm Springs, more than in any other desert city. That surprised me," she says, citing the confluence of wealthy people, opportunists preying on tourists, legalized gambling and how Palm Springs is a "good place to hide in plain sight."

"Something that I always think of is daylight noir," Fitch says. "There's something especially interesting about that because bright light creates very dark shadows. In

Palm Springs, there's no industry. There really isn't any reason for it to be there except for tourism. So places kind of spring up out of nowhere. It's kind of built out of a dream to begin with. It's real estate for real estate's sake.

"I know there are solid builders and city fathers and so forth, but there's a lot of flim-flam that goes on when you're building something out of nothing like that," she adds. "It's about dreams. And so naturally it would attract predators. And in this noir dreamscape of what could be, there could be a lot going on in the shadows."

Espinoza sees noir and Palm Springs as being night and day from each other.

"But, as we know, nefarious actions don't always take place in the darkness, in the shadows," he says. "I used the light of the desert, the heat, the dryness to tease out the sinister in my piece, to play with notions of desperation and fear and anxiety among a community of religious zealots who lack direction."

"It's such a pleasure to take a look at the mysterious places that aren't necessarily on the sanitized map of life," Fitch says. "You know, picking up a corner and seeing what's under there." ■



Alex Espinoza

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