

LITERARY LOCALS



Barbara DeMarco-Barrett COURTESY

In ‘Palm Springs Noir,’ local authors share ominous desert tales

Greg Archer

Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

Forget pristine pastels and midcentury modern mojo. When it comes to the Coachella Valley, something ominous — even bloodstained — exists in the shadows of the glaring sun.

That’s the premise behind “Palm Springs Noir,” a compelling anthology of short stories edited by Barbara DeMarco-Barrett. In an unlikely noir setting, the valley is hardly an idyllic oasis.

Devilish things take place, in fact. DeMarco-Barrett, an Orange County resident and frequent valley visitor, has curated 14 short stories that delightfully raise eyebrows and keep your eyes feasting on the page. There’s some Airbnb mischief, a tale about an addict-turned-cat burglar, a nice touch of gay camp in one memorable outing and a gaggle of other shockers sprinkled into the mix.

“I just had to do it,” DeMarco-Barrett says of organizing the anthology. “It was really my pursuing the project with the publisher over time that they finally relented and said: ‘OK.’ They hadn’t had Palm Springs on their list of places to cover.”

That publisher is Akashic Books, whose successful anthologies are set in traditional noir locales such as Los Angeles, San Francisco and Berkeley, among other cities. In this endeavor, DeMarco-Barrett features desert-based tales in a variety of hotspots — from Twin Palms and the Historic Tennis Club to Indio and the Salton Sea. Local writers Tod Goldberg, Rob Bowman, Michael Craft and J.D. Horn are in the mix, while scribes T. Jefferson Parker, Janet Fitch, Eric Beetner, Kelly Shire, Rob Roberge, Eduardo Santiago, Chris J. Bahnsen, Ken Layne and Alex Espinoza round out the collection. DeMarco-Barrett also penned a story, which is bound to capture the attention of any homeowner with a pool.

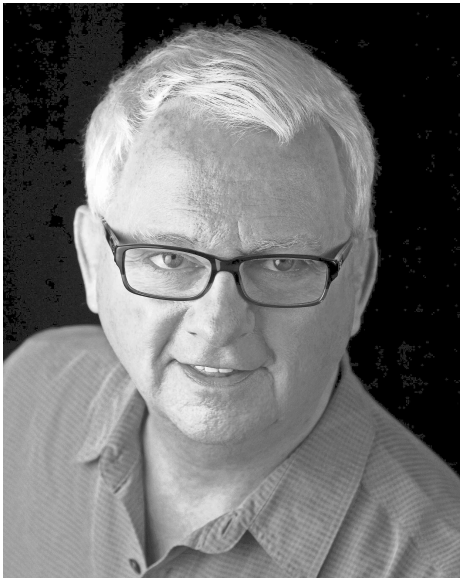
“There are so many great writers throughout the Coachella Valley, and it took some time to find the right ones — they weren’t falling out of the sky,” she says. “I scrambled to find them, but it was exciting.”

Some writers she had previously befriended. Others came to her by referral. All of them managed to effectively capture the allure of noir in a hotbed of desert possibilities.

“Like so many main characters [in noir stories], we can relate to wanting to improve our lives,” DeMarco-Barrett says. “These characters have high aspirations and goals, but they just keep making the wrong choices. Most of us



Rob Bowman MINDY MCEACHRAN/SPECIAL TO THE DESERT SUN



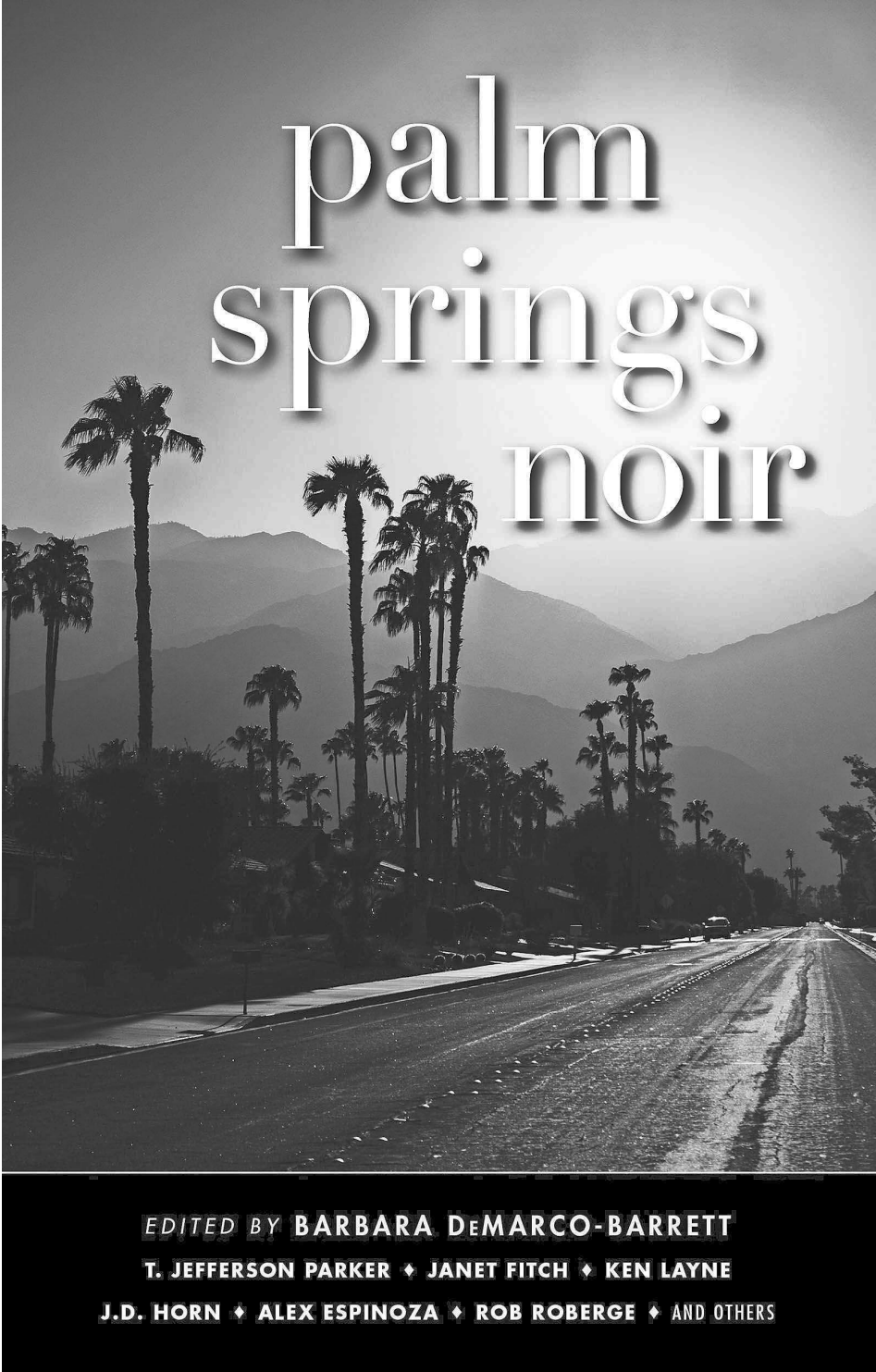
Michael Craft TIM COURTNEY, PECIAL TO THE DESERT SUN

try to take the high road, but it’s kind of delicious to read about characters who go the other way.”

That’s one reason mystery writer Agatha Christie is outsold only by the Bible and the works of William Shakespeare. Her characters are just that compelling.

“We want to hang out with these people,” DeMarco-Barrett says. “We like living vicariously through them. We wonder, ‘How are they going to get out of it? What would we do?’”

DeMarco-Barrett spent many years pondering those kinds of questions. Born in Altoona, Pennsylvania, she ventured west to San Francisco before settling in Orange County. She’s seen every slice of humanity — from her time as an Avon lady to her present-day success as an educator, writer and editor.



Palm Springs Noir COURTESY

Her short story “Crazy for You” was published in the Akashic’s “Orange County Noir” and went on to appear in a Best of the Akashic Noir series. Her first book, “Pen on Fire: A Busy Woman’s Guide to Igniting the Writer Within,” hit the Los Angeles Times best-seller list, landing the Outstanding Book Award from the American Society of Journalists and Authors.

“What I love about writing and what’s mysterious to me about the art form is how writers make something from absolutely nothing and need hardly anything to do so,” she notes. “All you need is something to write with and a surface to write on. That’s quite magical.”

Bowman, who has lived in Coachella Valley for more than seven years and whose short story, “Everything Drains and Disappears” takes place in Bermuda Dunes in the anthology, concurs. He also believes the desert to be a “wonderful and strange place” for noir.

“The Coachella Valley is defined by those who enjoy a life of leisure and those who work to provide that leisure,” he says. “The working class here are obscured from view very intentionally, like hidden work paths on giant estates, so that the view won’t be ruined. My story is about those working class who find themselves in desperation. They’re looking toward what they wish they had — and what they are willing to do to get it.”

Craft, a longtime Rancho Mirage resident, penned “VIP Check-in” with that idea in mind. Finding inspiration in Palm Springs’ vibrant LGBTQ culture and how it presents a uniquely diverse slant for storytelling, he set the short story in Little Tuscany. It revolves around two antagonists — a gay white man and a straight Black woman — who are seemingly polar opposites.

“Many residents of the desert’s re-

sort cities refer to life here as ‘paradise,’” Craft muses. “To my way of thinking, that’s just asking for trouble. What could possibly go wrong?”

Hitting a wonderfully campy note, Craft went on to develop that short story into a full-length mystery novel titled “Desert Getaway,” to be published next summer by Brash Books.

DeMarco-Barrett says readers typically “hope the characters we’re reading about in noir get out of their bad situation, but it’s more realistic that most of them don’t find happiness. It’s a form of realism.”

Was she shocked by any of the anthology submissions?

“They all surprised me,” she says. “A couple in here are just so funny. That surprised me — that a story can be so dark and so funny. Writers like Eric Beetner and Michael Craft pulled it off nicely. We think of noir as being dark and depressing — those old ‘40 and ‘50s movies, shadows everywhere, no sun. But the writers in this book were able to take the setting and do something with it without the common noir tropes.

“It’s like, ‘Let’s do something new with the form that is gratifying, something that we didn’t think was allowable,’” she adds. “I hope readers are entertained by the flawed characters in the book and see a version of Palm Springs that they won’t find in coffee table books.”

For more on “Palm Springs Noir,” visit akashicbooks.com/catalog/palm-springs-noir.

Greg Archer writes about change agents, happenstance, and the entertainment industry. His work has appeared in the USA Today Network, Palm Springs Life, Huffington Post, The Advocate and other media outlets. His memoir “Grace Revealed” chronicles his Polish family’s odyssey during WWII. gregarcher.com.

REVIEW

Ragan captivates with new thriller ‘Count to Three’

Donna Edwards
ASSOCIATED PRESS

“Count to Three” by T.R. Ragan (Thomas & Mercer)

T.R. Ragan’s alluring new thriller, “Count to Three,” centers around private investigator Dani Callahan after her daughter, Tinsley, went missing five years ago. Dani’s ex-husband Matthew accepts that Tinsley is dead and gone, but Dani won’t give up the hope that someday she’ll find their beloved Tinsley.

But Tinsley’s is only one of the three cases dominating Dani’s life right now. A lawyer is experiencing strange disturbances in her house – furniture moving, food missing from the fridge, clothes rearranged. And a teen girl named Ali Cross has gone missing. Police think she ran away, but a local kid

swears up and down he saw her shoved into the back of a van.

Meanwhile, Dani’s young, rambunctious assistant, Quinn, doesn’t mind using uncouth and even irresponsible methods to make progress on their missing persons cases. On the five-year anniversary of Tinsley’s abduction, Quinn stirs the pot. Neither Quinn nor Dani could be ready for what that stirring dredges up from the muck.

“Count to Three” starts like a new-aged re-imagining of a hardboiled detective novel and quickly ups the ante when Ragan introduces chapters from the perspectives of Ali and her abductor. These chapters are as brutal and intriguing as episodes of “You,” allowing a grisly view into the unhinged life of a madman.

Ragan explores the thought processes of each character, chapter by paranoia-inducing chapter, through a third-

person, limited omniscient perspective. “Count to Three” is a great novel for true crime and thriller lovers, so long as readers are willing to suspend their disbelief and go along for the ride.

Certain annoying quirks riddle the novel: lengthy descriptions of details and actions that have no bearing on the story; timeline issues that just don’t add up no matter which way you shake it; inferring something and then blatantly stating as though the reader can’t be trusted to understand; and a tendency toward the convenient for convenience’s sake.

Despite those issues, the story is captivating and the writing genuinely thrilling. Through an emphasis on the PI perspective in which every detail could be important, “Count to Three” keeps the suspense up and threatens that the tides could turn at any time.

