

I have been obsessed with crime since 1958, when a policeman squatted to my little kid level and said, “Son, your mother has been killed”

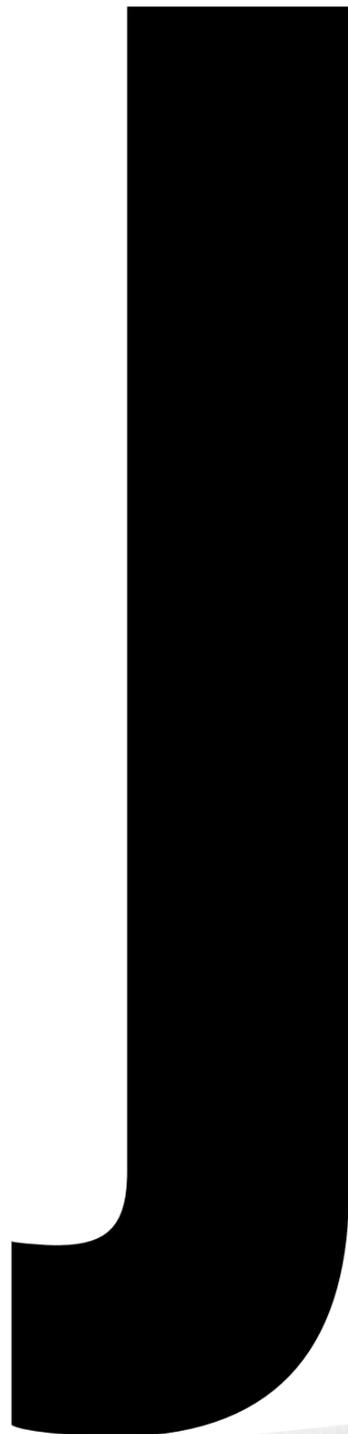


James Ellroy, the author of *American Tabloid* and *LA Confidential*, on the murder that defined his wild life

**INTERVIEW BY  
HELENA DE BERTODANO**

Left: Ellroy's mother, Jean Hilliker. She was found strangled a mile from her home in El Monte, California, on June 22, 1958





Below: Ellroy's mother worked as a staff nurse at the Packard Bell electronics factory in Los Angeles. Ellroy, aged ten, is pictured in the Los Angeles Times alongside his mother on June 23, 1958 — two days after her murder

ames Ellroy is prowling a tiny hat shop in a side street in Seville, Spain. His angular 6ft 3in frame, loud bark and garish Hawaiian shirt draw attention. Everyone watches as he reaches for a khaki green cashmere fedora and tries it on. "Does it look big?" he drawls, squinting at himself in a mirror. "Shake your head and see if it moves," I suggest. He waggles his head: the hat fits but he is still not sure. "It does not vibrate my vindaloo," he bellows. "Let's broom on outta here."

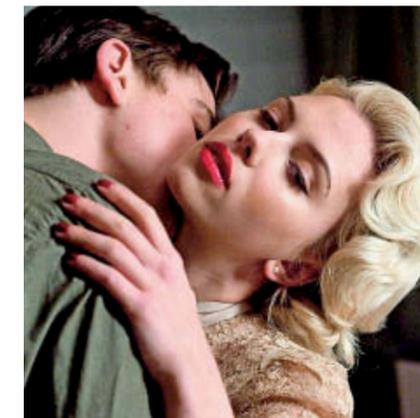
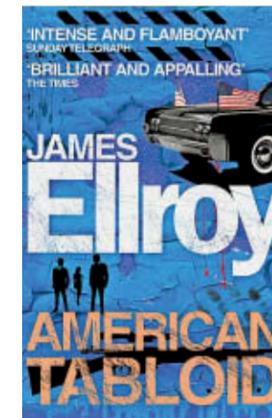
Ellroy, 77, has been vibrating the vindaloo of millions of crime fiction readers for decades, and he is part of his own myth-generating machine. "I am the greatest popular novelist that America has ever produced," he declares. "The author of 24 books, masterpieces all, which precede all my future masterpieces."

He repeats variations of this self-praise multiple times during the week I spend with him in Spain, where he has come to speak at a literary festival. When I ask

how he feels about the author Joyce Carol Oates describing him as the American Dostoyevsky, he snorts derisively: "Dostoyevsky is the Russian Ellroy."

His densely plotted novels, which include 1995's *American Tabloid* and 2023's *The Enchanters*, focus on the criminal underbelly of postwar America, especially Los Angeles, and have sold millions of copies. Several, including *The Black Dahlia* (1987) and most notably *LA Confidential* (1990), have been adapted into movies.

His writing style is a sort of staccato cop rap from a bygone era, sometimes echoed in his own speech. And he has a truly shocking origin story for a crime writer: when he was ten years old his mother was murdered, her body found in shrubs beside a California high school with one of her stockings tied around her neck. "I have been obsessed with crime since the hot Sunday afternoon of June 22, 1958, when a policeman named Ward Hallinen squatted



From left: Russell Crowe and Guy Pearce in *LA Confidential*, 1997; Ellroy's 1995 novel, *American Tabloid*; Josh Hartnett and Scarlett Johansson in *The Black Dahlia*, 2006

down to my little kid level and said, 'Son, your mother has been killed,'" he says.

Ellroy's own life inspires much of his work, which often blurs fact and fiction. At times it seems as though he has walked out of one of his novels. And it's no wonder he wants a convincing hat to wear: the Hat Squad in his books, as any self-respecting Ellroy fan will tell you, comprises four inseparable fedora-wearing robbery detectives who are based on real LAPD officers, known for their tough veneer and compassionate hearts.

Which sums up Ellroy too. Despite the braggadocio, he is not insufferable — he veers between extreme self-confidence and a touching unworldliness. "The world bewilders me," he says in a moment of self-doubt when we are trying to find our seats on a busy high-speed train to Madrid. He cannot stand crowded places. "I am only comfortable around a few people."

However, when I interview Ellroy in front of an audience at the Hay Festival Forum in Seville he is more than comfortable, bounding on to the stage and roaring like a lion. Literally. The audience is aghast. "Good evening, peepers, prowlers, pederasts, pedants, panty sniffers, punks and pimps," he snarls in full performance mode. "I'm James Ellroy, the death dog with the hog log, the foul owl with the death growl and the slick trick with the donkey dick..."

On stage it is all swagger and stonewalling. "I have no view on Donald Trump," he declares when I ask for his take on the American president. He adds primly: "I rigorously abstain from moral judgment on the current times."

Yet away from the crowd, one on one, he is much more candid. "If you want to stray to Trump, I realised very early on that he was, at the very least, a career criminal, mobbed up and very probably a serial sexual harasser. So that should exclude him from the presidency. My cop friends like Trump because Americans have a tough-guy complex. They don't realise how weak and craven he is," he says.

Lee Earle Ellroy was born in Los Angeles in 1948, the only child of "a great-looking, cheap couple". His mother, Jean Hilliker, was a nurse and his father, Armand Ellroy, an accountant and, as Ellroy describes him, "a Hollywood bottom-feeder". He had no idea how to parent. "He once said to me, 'Hey kid, I f\*\*\*ed Rita Hayworth.' I said, 'F\*\*\* you, Dad, you did not f\*\*\* Rita Hayworth.' Ten years after his death a man who was writing her biography looked me up — my father was her business manager. Did they ever have sexual congress? I'd like to believe they did but my father was a notorious bullshit artist."

Ellroy's parents split up when he was five, and he later moved with his mother to El Monte, just outside LA, spending weekends with his father. Both parents were promiscuous. "I realised there was a secret adult world out there and that sex is at the heart of it. I saw my mother in bed with men. And later on I came home and found my dad in bed with my sixth-grade teacher. I heard the grunting and groaning as I walked up the steps. What was funny was the dog was trying to take a nap on the bed while all those legs were kicking around."

With the encouragement of his father he grew to hate his mother. When he told her he would prefer to live with his dad, she slapped him. "I fell and whacked my head on a glass coffee table. She didn't hit me again. She was nothing but solicitous... [But] from

that point on it was over. It was him and me against her. She was the bad guy."

His mother was murdered on the night of Saturday, June 21, 1958, while Ellroy was staying with his father. Sixty-seven years on, the murder remains unsolved. Only Ellroy could make it even more shocking by saying he was grateful to the killer. "What I recall most prevalently is forcing myself to cry on the bus going back to LA," he says.

"I cranked the tears out. I remember waking up the next morning, looking out at a bright blue sky and thinking I had a whole new life. This is not a retrospective," he insists. "I'm not concocting this."

In fact his feelings towards his mother are more complex. "I admired her tremendously. She was capable and competent in a way my father was not."

In his 1996 memoir *My Dark Places* he admits to having had sexual thoughts about her both before and after her death. Many years later he spent 15 months and a lot of money trying to solve her murder with Bill Stoner, a retired homicide detective. Stoner later said he thought Ellroy was "falling in love with his mother". Not quite, Ellroy says today, but "I am of her".

Living with his permissive father was not all he had hoped it might be. The apartment was filthy and meals were erratic. It was a "horrible, horrible childhood", he says, ▶

**"MY COP FRIENDS LIKE TRUMP BECAUSE AMERICANS HAVE A TOUGH-GUY COMPLEX. THEY DON'T REALISE HOW WEAK AND CRAVEN HE IS"**

PREVIOUS PAGES: JULIEN LIENARD / CONTOUR BY GETTY IMAGES; THESE PAGES: ALAMY



Ellroy at his desk in 1992. Below: Marilyn Monroe appears in his 2023 book, *The Enchanters*. The assassination of President Kennedy features in 1995's *American Tabloid*

but he cautions against pity. “I’m not some crack baby butt-f\*\*\*ed in his crib by his Uncle Charlie.”

A voracious reader, he gravitated towards crime books after his mother’s murder. He was expelled from school for fighting and truancy as a teenager, then stayed at home to care for his father, who had suffered a stroke. Eventually he could stand it no more and in 1965 he briefly joined the army to escape — something for which he has never quite forgiven himself. “I used to dream about the abandonment of my father when he was dying,” he says. He returned from the army just before his father’s death later that year. “His final words to me were, ‘Try to pick up every waitress who serves you.’”

Ellroy — who adopted the name James because he hated the “tongue-tripping l’s and e’s” of Lee Earle Ellroy — hit a precarious

decade. Often homeless, he would sleep in parks, could not hold down a job and sank into alcoholism. He was arrested multiple times: “I used to shoplift. I used to break into houses and sniff women’s undergarments, I stole a few cars — Mickey Mouse misdemeanors. I probably got arrested forty times but [on] aggregate I served no more than four or five months of county jail time.”

His determination to write lifted him out of this spiral. In 1977 he took a job as a golf caddy at the Bel-Air Country Club outside LA and started his first novel, *Brown’s Requiem*, about a caddy who hires a detective to spy on his sister. Murder and mayhem ensue, interwoven with a love story. “All my books are love stories set against violent backdrops,” he says. “If there are two great themes in my books it’s history as a state of yearning and bad men in love with strong women.”

His most recent book, *The Enchanters*, published in 2023, features a real-life Hollywood private eye, Freddy Otash, spying on Marilyn Monroe to get dirt on the Kennedys. Describing Monroe as “talentless and usurious”, Ellroy conjures a murky world of corrupt politicians and craven stars and looks on with his readers, enthralled and titillated, as they tear each other apart. “Absolute factual reality means nothing to me,” he stresses. “What I do is I slander the dead.”

The police in his novels are often as corrupt as the criminals. “I love the cops. It started when a policeman put a nickel in a vending machine and handed me a candy bar the afternoon [after] my mother was killed. He gave me a little pat on the head and I have given my heart to cops ever since. I don’t care what kind of outré illegal shit they pull, I take gleeful joy in describing police misconduct. Rogue cops are my guys.”

Would he ever have contemplated becoming a cop himself? “Naaah,” he growls. What about a criminal? Has he ever fantasised about murdering someone? He narrows his eyes and for a moment I wonder if I have overstepped the mark. But his face softens into a smile: “No, I never have.” ►



# “GET A GUN AND SHOOT YOUR COMPUTER THROUGH ITS EVIL DIGITAL HEART. IN ITS GUISE OF CONVENIENCE IT HAS DESTROYED CIVILITY”



With the Canadian author Helen Knode in 2003. The pair divorced two years later but have since resumed their relationship

Ellroy has been married and divorced twice — first to Mary Doherty, a phone company executive, from 1988 to 1991. These days he lives in Denver with his second ex-wife, the Canadian author Helen Knode, whom he met in 1990 when his marriage to Doherty was crumbling.

“She’s the single most brilliant human being I’ve ever met,” he says of Knode.

They married in October 1991, but their relationship became tumultuous: Ellroy was tackling addiction and mental health problems. They now live in the same building but in different apartments.

“I have a key to hers, she has a key to mine. It’s not monogamy that’s the problem, it’s cohabitation. We can fight a fight. She gets shrill real quick. Helen would believe she is remarkably more open-minded than me. I would say I’m remarkably more open-minded than her... Tell her I said that. She will bray like a horse.”

A few days later I speak to Knode on the phone. She splutters indignantly when I tell her what Ellroy said. How does she put up with him? “It’s breathtakingly exhausting to be him and to be around him,” she says affectionately. “There are several James Ellroys and they all cohabit sometimes.”

He has never had children, saying in the past he feared he would be a “bad father.” “I have absolutely no feeling for families,” he tells me. He and Knode experimented

with an open marriage but by 2005 they had agreed to split. “It was the best day of my life when I realised I could divorce him,” Knode says with a laugh.

Ellroy then had a series of relationships with, as Knode puts it, “parasitical women” — but they remained close. During his last relationship, more than a decade ago, his girlfriend complained about the amount of time he spent talking to Knode on the phone. “She said, ‘Her or me?’ I said, ‘Her.’ We’ve been together ever since,” Ellroy says.

They usually spend the late afternoon together at Knode’s apartment, have “dinch” (lunch/dinner) and watch a documentary or an old movie. “I’ve had to put my foot down,” she says. “I told him we’re not watching any movies with guns.”

“Then we say goodnight,” Ellroy says, “and I go back to my apartment. I have insomnia, so I’m padding around.”

Ellroy’s flat is austere with grey walls, overlooking a railway track. “It’s reassuring. Trains going by at two and three o’clock in the morning.” The bookshelves are filled with copies of his own books.

He rarely goes out. “Helen has friends, I don’t. I actually have panic attacks if Helen stays out too late.” He spends most of the day at home, writing and listening to classical music, especially Beethoven. “I write by hand, I’ve never logged on to a computer. I believe the internet, computers, cell phones, apps,

electronic devices are the most pernicious version of Satan on earth. Get a gun and shoot your computer through its evil digital heart. In its guise of convenience it has destroyed civility and turned younger people into uncivil, brusque, rude, low-attention-span, shithead kids and we have to rescue future generations from this evil.”

He will never write a novel set in the present — or even in the last half century: “In 1972 Watergate eats up the political scenery. There’s no place to go after that.”

He knows his political history but very little about the world today. He admired Margaret Thatcher as “the saviour of Britain” (he even named a dog after her), but when I ask what he thinks of Keir Starmer, he replies, “Who?”

Ellroy has almost finished writing his next novel, set in the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis but spanning back to include the bombing of Guernica. He has never seen Picasso’s *Guernica* painting of 1937, so we arrange to meet one afternoon at the Reina Sofia art museum in Madrid. He stands silently in front of the huge monochrome oil painting for a full ten minutes, scanning every detail, before making the sign of the cross. “It’s horrifying,” he says quietly. In the next room, though, he is back in ebullient mode. Catching sight of Salvador Dalí’s 1929 painting *The Great Masturbator*, he chuckles. “Wanker!” he says loudly.

There is something restless about Ellroy, both physically — loping around, fidgeting — and in spirit. “I want to get lost,” he says repeatedly. “I gotta get outside of myself. I wrestle with it all the time.” What does he mean? “I’m always thinking. I can’t sleep for shit. I just want to go to a place where nobody knows me and have one double Manhattan, or eat a marijuana cookie, and just see what happens.”

But he won’t let himself. He has been teetotal for years and during his sleepless nights he worries about everything, death above all. “Horror of death is the tremor that lies beneath everything. And 77 will get you there.” He has thought carefully about how he would like to be buried. “I want to have my briefcase and my three stuffed alligators.” He’s not joking — but they are fluffy toys rather than taxidermy.

“Sometimes I’ll put the gators under the covers with me, they’re a family. Al is the alligator, of course. Wife is named Clara and they have a daughter named Gertie. They’re going in the hole with me.”

Not that he is winding down. “I’m not checking out of here any time soon.” Indeed he often says that he will live until he’s 101. “I’ve got a lot of books left in me. I’m going to have a strong third act. Not to labour a point, but I am a genius.” ■

Hay Festival Segovia runs Sep 11-14 and Hay Forum Seville Feb 11-14, 2026; [hayfestival.com](http://hayfestival.com)