

Two gay detectives and their authors

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The archetypal detective in American crime literature is a heterosexual male, usually living alone though enjoying female company. Dashiell Hammett was an expert in creating such characters and the genre he helped create developed its tropes further with the works of writers such as Elmore Leonard and James Ellroy. In the 1950s, one young writer aimed to emulate these successful others. Joseph Hansen (1923–2004) did not succeed in becoming a writer of pulp crime novels, but he did have some success writing as James Colton and publishing paperback originals marketed in sex-oriented bookshops.

Hansen claimed that in writing these books he honed his fiction-writing skills and found out what he wanted to say. He aimed to write honestly and unapologetically about homosexuality in a manner interesting and acceptable to all kinds of readers (O'Mara, 1988 p. 830). In some of these titles, such as *Lost on the twilight road* (1964), *Strange marriage* (1965), and *Known homosexual* (1968), the main protagonist is usually a married man who is drawn to have sex with other men. *Known homosexual* was published in later years as *Stranger to himself* (Hansen, 1977) and as *Pretty boy dead* (Hansen, 1984). Hansen also wrote a number of stories for *Ellery Queen's mystery magazine* as well as *Alfred Hitchcock's mystery magazine* featuring a character, Hack Bohannon, who is more the traditional archetype of the mystery genre.

In 1970, he published *Fadeout*, the first of twelve books featuring the gay insurance investigator Dave Brandstetter. In these books Hansen portrays gay California as it emerged over 40 years. Brandstetter also has strong, committed relationships. In a 2003 interview Hansen said: "I've told people before that the actual reality of these books is like an archeological dig ... The strata are there and sometimes things are there that are no longer there even at the time I was writing (Shenitz, 2003)." It is a remarkable achievement, all the more so for seeming so effortless and taking place within the confines of the mystery genre. But more than this, he traces the life of one of the first openly homosexual detective-fiction heroes, seemingly an anathema in a genre of tough he-men and buxom blondes. He has said of his Brandstetter books:

The message that homosexuals are no different from other people hardly seems earthshaking—at least not to men and women of goodwill and commonsense. Alas, such men and women make up a breed small in numbers. I hope the Dave Brandstetter novels can add to them (Baird, 1985).

Michael Nava (1954–) is a lawyer turned writer whose novels feature Henry Rios, a gay criminal defence lawyer who solves crimes. The first, *The Little Death*, was published in 1986 and a further six have appeared. Rios is a more modern character than Brandstetter. He is more morally nuanced, and struggles with alcoholism. Rios also has a committed relationship.

Both Hansen and Nava engaged with gay activism, Hansen working for law reform and Nava in HIV-AIDS related matters. They represent a continuum in the changing representation of gay characters in genre fiction.

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