

Unsolved Murders That Still Shock the Nation

Five whodunits that continue to confound the law

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Who Killed the Black Dahlia?

A former Los Angeles police detective is sure he knows who the murderer is, and the suspect is too close for comfort.

Winter mornings in Los Angeles can be chilly, and so it was as Betty Bersinger pushed her daughter's stroller along the weedy sidewalks of Leimert Park on January 15, 1947. In those days, LA was full of half-finished developments like this: gap-toothed mixtures of bungalows and empty lots, construction stalled by the war.

As she approached 39th and Norton at about 11 a.m., Bersinger spotted amid the tall grass and shattered glass what she thought was a broken mannequin just feet from the street. A cloud of insects hung over pale body parts. In the distance, she saw children on bikes. "It just didn't seem right," she said later. "I thought I'd better call somebody."

Within an hour, the overgrown lot was crawling with cops and reporters, all gaping at a dismembered corpse. The body of the victim—a small woman, about 118 pounds, dark hair, five foot six—had been meticulously severed at the waist and emptied of blood, and it was covered with bruises and violent lacerations. The woman's liver hung from her torso. Her mouth had been sliced from ear to ear. It was, said one eyewitness, "sadism at its most frenzied."

All signs pointed to an agonizing death at the hands of a disturbed soul—perfect fodder for LA's rapacious news biz. The victim, Elizabeth Short, was on every front page within hours: an unemployed Boston girl with no fixed address who'd once been named "Cutie of the Week" while working the PX at a nearby Army base. The owner of a drugstore the aspiring actress frequented mentioned the floral nickname some of his male customers had for

her, and the papers soon slapped “Black Dahlia” on every story they ran.

For weeks, police and reporters furiously chased one lead after another: boyfriends, pimps—even folk singer Woody Guthrie was fingered. The weeks turned to months, the months to years. The headlines faded. Even the newspapers faded, replaced by television. Officially, the case remained open.

Unofficially, it ripened to legend, spawning novels and films, a grisly reminder that all is never as it appears in Hollywood.

No one knows that better than Steve Hodel. Just five at the time of the murder, he wouldn’t learn much about it until 1999, when his half sister, Tamar Hodel, with whom he’d just reconnected, dropped this bombshell about their recently deceased parent: “Steve, did you know our father was a suspect in the Black Dahlia murder?” Steve was shocked, not least because he was a retired Los Angeles police detective.

As a boy, Steve knew his father as a powerful and charismatic but somewhat distant figure. The son of Russian emigrants and a musical prodigy with an IQ higher than Albert Einstein’s, George Hodel had started college at 15 and eventually became a physician and a chief medical official for the city of Los Angeles. He married a well-connected Hollywood beauty and befriended luminaries, including the surrealist artist Man Ray. “He’d walk into a room and all heads would turn,” Steve says. “He’d take control and mesmerize people.”

Steve was still a boy when his parents divorced and George moved away. The two reconnected when Steve was a young man, and the son learned that his father had a troubling side—an unhealthy obsession with sex, a deep disregard for women, and a powerful need to control and manipulate. Steve came to accept that his beloved father was anything but a model citizen. Even so, when Tamar suggested that George had been a violent killer, Steve’s first instinct was: “Impossible.” But as a police officer, he knew that only one thing mattered—the evidence. “We go through life with so much BS. To absolutely know the what-is of something is the ultimate,” he says. So he started digging. He concluded Tamar was

almost certainly right, given the evidence he uncovered:

- Multiple sources said that George knew Short; the two probably met at his health clinic, which specialized in treating venereal diseases.
- Just before the killing, George purchased cement in 50-pound bags. Police found empty 50-pound cement bags at the crime scene. (Steve believes that George killed Short elsewhere and used the bags to transport her to the park.)
- George was one of the few people trained in the procedure used to sever Short’s body—an unusual, delicate technique known as a hemicorporectomy, in which the body is cut in two without breaking a bone.
- The killer sent letters and some of Short’s possessions to the newspapers soon after the murder; the handwriting was a close match to George’s.

George initially came to the cops’ attention in 1949, after being charged in the sexual assault of his own daughter, Tamar. Witnesses claimed to have seen George molest the teen, but defense attorneys argued that she had made it up to get attention. The jury acquitted him. By 1950, Steve learned, police were investigating George for the Black Dahlia killing. They bugged his Hollywood house and recorded hundreds of hours of conversations. At one point, police heard what sounded like an unidentified woman being beaten to death and buried, though they never acted on it. Later, police heard the doctor come close to confessing to Short’s murder: “Supposin’ I did kill the Black Dahlia. They couldn’t prove it now.”

But, Steve learned, instead of questioning George about Short, the police suddenly quit the hunt. And nobody tried to stop him when he left the country in 1953 to spend the next 40 years in Southeast Asia.

Why did the LAPD let him slip away? Steve has a simple theory: His father had dirt on practically everybody, and he used it. “He’s performing abortions for the rich and famous, for the cops, for the brass,” says Steve. In an infamously corrupt era when would-be starlets such as Short counted for little or nothing, it’s entirely plausible that a well-

connected man like George Hodel could have made a murder investigation disappear. Many agree with Steve's hypothesis about the Black Dahlia—"I have no doubt," says one senior LA prosecutor. Others have their own theories, one being that a bellhop murdered Short because she knew of his schemes to rob hotels. As Los Angeles newspaper columnist Steve Lopez puts it, "Once you step inside the cloud of mystery surrounding the Black Dahlia murder, there's no way out."

Today, Steve Hodel toils on in Los Angeles, trying to uncover the undeniable facts about his twisted father.

"I loved Dr. Jekyll, the good part. He could have cured cancer, done so much for humanity," he says. "But Mr. Hyde was the stronger character."

Hodel realizes that he carries some of his father's traits—the better ones, he hopes.

"What my dad gave me was the strength and the doggedness," he says. "Those genes that served him in darkness serve me to pursue the truth."

Capitol Murder

What did the congressman know?

On May 1, 2001, Chandra Levy, a 24-year-old college student who'd just ended an internship with the Federal Bureau of Prisons, left her Washington, DC, apartment building and disappeared. Five days later, after not hearing from their daughter in all that time, Robert and Susan Levy called the DC police from their home in Modesto, California. As police searched Chandra's apartment, Susan looked through her daughter's phone bills, which she and her husband paid. One number kept coming up. They called it and were soon connected with the office of Gary Condit, their congressman.

Chandra met Condit, 53 at the time, while visiting his office with a friend. He was warm and friendly, going so far as to personally give them a tour of the Capitol. By the end of the day, the friend had a job in Condit's office. Chandra had a date.

The relationship reportedly grew quickly. Chandra confided to another friend that her unnamed boyfriend had promised to give up

his seat in the House, divorce his wife, and start a second family with her. Based on a similarly cryptic conversation Chandra had with her mother, the Levys were convinced that Condit had played a role in Chandra's disappearance and shared that view with the media. Soon, reporters were camped outside his home and office. Even some in the DC police department suspected the congressman. Condit's lack of directness didn't help him. When asked by police whether he'd had an affair with Chandra, Condit replied coyly, "I don't think we need to go there,

and you can infer what you want from that."

On May 22, 2002—386 days after Chandra Levy had gone missing—a man walking his dog near a wooded trail in Washington's Rock Creek Park stumbled upon what he at first believed to be a sun-bleached turtle shell. It was Chandra's skull. Her remains had been exposed to the elements for so long that an autopsy couldn't determine the cause of death or even detect any important clues.

However, the crime scene did remind police of a series of attacks that had taken place at Rock Creek around the time of Chandra's disappearance. Two female joggers had been grabbed from behind and dragged into a remote part of the park. They were fortunate enough to have fended off their attacker, a 19-year-old El Salvadoran immigrant named Ingmar Guandique, who was convicted of those crimes and serving a ten-year prison term. When a jailhouse snitch alleged that Guandique had confessed to killing Chandra, he was charged with her murder and, in 2010, tried, convicted, and sentenced to 60 years. Then a twist: A friend of the snitch gave authorities secret recordings in which he admitted to lying about Guandique's confession. Guandique was released and deported to El Salvador, and the identity of Chandra's murderer was once again a mystery.

By then, Condit's career had dissolved. Two months before Chandra's body was discovered, he lost his Democratic primary in a landslide. To this day, no evidence has surfaced linking him to her death, and he has steadfastly refused to say whether he had an affair with her.

In Northern California, Chandra's grave is unmarked. The family will put up a stone only once her killer is found. And Robert Levy told the Washington Post what it will say: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The Atlanta Child Murders

The question lingers: Who killed the 24?

For two years, from the summer of 1979 to the summer of 1981, African American parents in Atlanta were terrified. During that span, at least 24 black children and teens vanished from the streets only to turn up later as corpses. The first two, 14-year-old Edward Smith and 13-year-old Alfred Evans, were found by a woman rummaging through roadside woods for aluminum cans and bottles. Seven-year-old LaTonya Wilson, one of six children who disappeared over the summer of 1980, could be identified only from her teeth and clothing when her remains were found nearly four months after she went missing.

"Every day, every night, it seemed like they were finding bodies," Sheila Baltazar, whose stepson, Patrick Baltazar, 12, was killed in 1981, told the New York Times. "And we were just trying to hold on to our babies."

President Ronald Reagan ultimately sent Vice President George H. W. Bush to Georgia to be briefed on the murders. But the killer has never been found.

At least, not officially. Many Atlanta residents believe they know who the killer is—and he is already in prison. On May 22, 1981, police were staking out the James Jackson Parkway bridge when they heard a loud splash in the Chattahoochee River below. The only person driving across the bridge at the time was a 23-year-old failed music producer named Wayne Williams. The officers stopped and questioned Williams, then let him go on his way.

When the body of 27-year-old Nathaniel Cater floated to the river's surface two days later, Williams was arrested and ultimately convicted of murdering him and another black man, 21-year-old Jimmy Ray Payne. Both men had been asphyxiated, which was a leading cause of death in the child murders.

Investigators found carpet fibers and dog hairs on Payne and Cater that matched those on ten of the murdered children. Perhaps most telling of all: Williams was jailed on June 21, and no more children were killed after that day.

So did Williams murder some, or even all, of the children? The authorities thought so, but they saw no need to charge him, former Fulton County prosecutor Joseph Drolet told 11Alive in Atlanta because Williams was already serving two life sentences for killing Payne and Cater.

But not everyone is comforted by that conclusion. Some residents think Williams is innocent and that the Ku Klux Klan was involved. A few of the parents contend that their children were killed in some kind of government conspiracy directed by the CIA or the CDC, which is headquartered in Atlanta. Celebrated author James Baldwin insisted Williams was simply a convenient patsy for city leaders desperate to quiet the whole affair, lest it tarnish Atlanta's rising fortunes in the 1980s, especially of the black middle class. But the murders may not stay unsolved for long. Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms, who was a frightened nine-year-old at the time of the last killing, has ordered the police department to reopen the case. "This is about being able to look these families in the eye," Atlanta police chief Erika Shields told the Times, "and say we did everything we could possibly do to bring closure to your case."

The Town That Saw Nothing

A man was murdered in broad daylight. Why isn't anyone talking?

The most hated man in Skidmore, Missouri, was a thief, a bully, an arsonist—a jack-of-all-horrible-trades. He had no qualms about sticking a gun into an innocent man's belly and pulling the trigger, which he did. And he always got away with it. That is, until July 10, 1981.

Ken Rex McElroy, 47, once described as "a big brute of a guy with slicked-back hair like Elvis," was a short-tempered man with a long rap sheet. His criminal résumé listed livestock rustling, assault, harassment, and attempted

murder. He rarely faced time, thanks to the talents of a cunning lawyer, Richard McFadin, and a loyal cadre of friends always ready with an alibi. If none of that worked, a little bit of intimidation would do the trick. Once, a farmer who caught McElroy stealing two horses filed charges but recanted after McElroy smashed in his face with a rifle butt. The legal system seemed impotent against McElroy. When a farmer named Romaine Henry surprised McElroy on Henry's land, McElroy shot him in the stomach. Henry survived and pressed charges, but McElroy produced witnesses who swore he was home at the time of the shooting. A jury found McElroy not guilty.

McElroy's fortunes changed in July 1980, when the local grocer, Bo Bowenkamp, accused McElroy's eight-year-old daughter of stealing candy. An enraged McElroy sought out Bowenkamp and fired a shotgun round into his neck. The 70-year-old survived, and McElroy was arrested and tried. The jury convicted McElroy of second-degree assault. He was sentenced to two years, then released on bond pending appeal. Two years for shooting a man? Released on bond? The people of Skidmore felt betrayed by the legal system yet again. This time, they'd had enough.

On the morning of July 10, 1981, a mob that allegedly included the mayor and the sheriff gathered at the American Legion hall to discuss what to do. When someone ran in and announced that McElroy had just entered the nearby D&G Tavern, the group descended upon the bar, surrounding him. McElroy, undaunted, grabbed the six-pack of beer he'd bought. Then he and his wife sauntered out of the D&G and into the parking area, where he climbed behind the wheel of his Chevy Silverado, his wife by his side. By then, up to 60 men had drifted out of the bar and neighboring businesses. Others peered out from behind the curtains of store windows. McElroy turned the key in the ignition. But before he could put the pickup in reverse, someone—or maybe it was several someones—started firing. The truck's rear window shattered. McElroy slumped over, dead. Everyone on the street that day claimed to investigators not to have seen a thing.

While some would call what happened to McElroy justifiable, McFadin echoed what others believed when he told the New York Times, "The town got away with murder."

Jonbenét Ramsey

Did she know her murderer?

The death of a beauty queen is guaranteed to make big news, and the murder in the Ramsey house was especially shocking. It happened on Christmas in 1996, in an upscale neighborhood of Boulder, Colorado. The Ramseys were a picture-perfect and prominent local family of four. John Bennett Ramsey owned a successful software company. His wife, Patsy Ramsey, was a former Miss West Virginia. But she was not the beauty queen who was found dead in the basement, her mouth covered with duct tape, her wrists bound with an electrical cord, her body wrapped carefully, almost lovingly, in a white blanket. The murder victim was the Ramseys' six-year-old daughter, JonBenét. The cause of death was a broken skull and strangulation with a macabre weapon called a garrote.

The fact that little JonBenét had won several beauty contests—including Little Miss Colorado—added a layer of twisted curiosity to the tragic story. Pictures of JonBenét with full makeup and blond highlights wearing fancy costumes and gowns filled TV screens and magazines for months. Some wondered what kind of parents would objectify a little girl like that. The tabloids had a field day: Maybe Patsy had killed her daughter in a fit of rage over some kind of imperfection, such as wetting the bed. Maybe JonBenét's nine-year-old brother, Burke, was consumed by jealousy of his beautiful sister. Maybe John had been abusing his daughter in some way.

When the police searched the Ramseys' stately Tudor home, they found a potentially telling piece of evidence resting on the kitchen staircase: a ransom note. Written in neat but slightly rushed print, it began: "Listen carefully! We are a group of individuals that represent a small foreign faction." The writers demanded precisely \$118,000. Suspiciously, \$118,000 was almost exactly the amount of

John Ramsey's year-end bonus. Not many people would know that outside of the family or the business. Most ominously, a practice ransom note was found elsewhere in the household.

The Ramseys proclaimed their innocence, and police found evidence that could arguably point in other directions. In the basement, there were two windows left open, a third that was broken, and an unlocked door. Police went on to discover a string of robberies in the neighborhood in recent months. There were also 38 registered sex offenders living within two miles of the Ramsey's house. Maybe JonBenét's pageant career had attracted a predator. Or maybe the killer knew the family. For a time, suspicion fell on a former housekeeper and a neighbor who played Santa Claus.

Still, the spotlight never moved far from the Ramsey family, and in 1999 a grand jury indicted John and Patsy on two counts of child abuse that resulted in the death of their daughter (though not murder itself). But the Ramseys were never tried: The district attorney believed the charges were unprovable. Separately, the DA announced that JonBenét's brother, Burke, was not a suspect either.

After a long struggle with ovarian cancer, Patsy Ramsey died in 2006, at age 49. She is buried next to her daughter in Marietta, Georgia.