

Literary Novels Lift Above Detective Fiction Legacy

By Peter Wolfe

Book Reviews:

Dahlia's Gone, by Katie Estill. St. Martin's Press, 2007.

My Dreams Out in the Street, by Kim Addonizio. Simon & Schuster, 2007.

D*ahlia's Gone* reflects careful planning and nifty execution. These virtues move to the fore immediately. Estill's thoughtful, well-crafted novel begins when Norah Everston asks her neighbor Sande Williams to check on her two teenage children while Norah and her husband are weekending in Myrtle Beach.

The request catches Sande unawares. She has come to the Missouri Ozarks to slow down and decompress. She and her husband, Frank, had worn themselves ragged fighting starvation in China, Africa, and India. Now anxiety whacks Sande in her front yard. Her and Frank's habit of skipping church already has riled the stay-at-home, Bible-belt fundamentalist Norah, and Sande regrets straightaway agreeing to oversee the children.

Disobeying her instincts will rock her life. Dropping in on the Everston kids after a heavy storm, she finds the retarded Tim watching TV, as usual, and then, upstairs in her bedroom, his step-sister. Dahlia, though, the victim of multiple stab wounds, is dead. But she's not lying in her blood. Nor are there any signs of blood or even a fight in her death room. Dahlia's murderer not only cleaned her and bled her; he/she also changed her clothes.

Her corpse invokes James Ellroy's 1987 bestseller and 2006 movie hit, *The Black Dahlia*, which turns on the discovery, in 1947 Los Angeles, of Elizabeth Short, aka, the Dahlia, nude, halved at the waist and disfigured with lacerations, bruises, and deep cuts. (In another echo of Ellroy's novel, *Dahlia's Gone* is based on a

real-life crime.) It also comes out that Beth's body, like that of her namesake half a continent and some 60 years later, was washed, shampooed, and drained of its blood.

Guilt, confusion, and resentment rack Sande after her discovery of Dahlia Everston's corpse. The backwater she came to in search of peace has outdone the Third World in menace. Though a quarter of a mile can separate an Ozark resident from her nearest neighbor, the act of murder collapses the distance in a heartbeat. Within days, Sande becomes both a social outcast and the most likely suspect in the area's most spectacular murder case ever.

Her status as the most likely suspect stems from a device used by the father of detective fiction, Edgar Allan Poe, another legacy of whose "Murders in the Rue Morgue," the red herring, Estill puts to use, as well. Just hours before Dahlia's death, Sande saw the willowy 18-year-old sunbathing by a riverbank, clad only in a yellow shoestring thong and thus suggesting that she'd die later that day a rape victim. But enough of the detective story formula. The parallels between *Dahlia's Gone* and *Brothers Karamazov* lift Estill's novel above the ranks of formula fiction. Like Dostoevsky's great novel, *Dahlia's Gone* builds the impression that everybody in town shares the guilt for the victim's bedroom death.

Estill also links Dahlia Everston's death, as Dostoevsky did with that of another recent fatality, to a puzzling aroma, moving her book into the realm of mysticism. Where she's comfortable; the rainstorm and the flood that sent Sande to the Everstons imparts a mythicity to the murder story. Estill's sharp writing has seized us. Her background detail resonates without overwhelming the foreground action. The more her people reveal of themselves, the more they fascinate us.

Estill's shifting point of view both spreads and deepens the fascination. The conflictive, badgered Sande provides but one standpoint. The book's recording intelligence can switch to Patti Callahan, a capable, conscientious police deputy whose foes include a weight problem and the good-old-boy sexism that rules the workplace where she's trying to build a career. Terrific immediacy

also comes from hard-working, God-fearing Norah Everston. The hardy foursquare Christian virtues that helped Norah survive a cruel, abusive first marriage desert her when she finds herself protecting, in Timothy, who has become a suspect in the murder case, the son she always loved more than her second husband's dead daughter.

Norah's heartaches, like those of the book's other characters, unfold at a sure, measured pace, proving, once again, that it's more important for a writer to be simple than clever. Entertaining, thought provoking, and lyrical, *Dahlia's Gone* deserves big sales and a wide readership.

The harder, more assaultive, *My Dreams Out in the Street* resembles *Dahlia's Gone*. Besides interweaving plot lines, Addonizio's novel also features a murder. Nor does it hide its roots. It includes a private investigator familiar with Dashiell Hammett's *Maltese Falcon*. It both alludes to Raymond Chandler's *Long Goodbye* and, like Chandler's *Big Sleep*, takes place under a cover of rain clouds, all the more vexing because the cold weather front that blows it in also penetrates the skin.

Most of *My Dreams* comes to us from the point of view of a woman. But 24-year-old Rita Jackson lives in San Francisco, not the Missouri highlands, and, as a jobless, homeless woman, she's bone-to-bone with her physical surroundings. She has more to cope with than foul weather. The book's first page finds her "shit out of luck," hunkered on the cement stoop of the shelter where she sometimes sleeps. She has arrived, she claims, "just after 10 p.m.," when the shelter's doors shut for the night. Now she must survive the cold, dark November night, scrounging food and drinks, but avoiding the petty theft, drunkenness, and prostitution that could take her from the streets to the jailhouse.

Her chances look grim. Though no victim, Rita has had bad luck, especially with men. Her father fled the nest when she was 12; after raping her, her mother's boyfriend killed the mother; a drug addict Rita has been staying with tried to push her face into an electric burner. Finally, the bruises and lacerations worn by that

face throughout the novel came from the boot of a fellow vagrant who also robbed her while she was sleeping in Golden Gate Park.

These knocks hurt her less than the absence from her life of her husband, Jimmy D'Angelo. Jimmy now wants her back, as she does him. But time is running out. They have to find each other before her would-be murderer finds *her*. A thug who saw her witnessing his removal of a corpse from the hotel where she was staying wants her dead. Will he do the job? He certainly goes about it with cruel efficiency. Rita remarks inwardly after being kidnapped by him at the end of the book's next-to-last chapter, "Now I don't have anything—no clothes, no ID. Gone, vanished, dead, who would care?"

We care. Addonizio has made us wonder if Rita's despair will usher in the big affirmations that follow a possible escape. Go on wondering. I envy you the first-time thrills that await you. And the anxieties, too; we see ourselves in Rita, a survival artist who's also sometimes her worst enemy.

She keeps harming herself. This high-school dropout lost her job as an erotic dancer when the club's manager spotted a needle mark on her. And she speaks home when she says that the wrongness in her keeps drawing the wrong kind of people to her. But there's more to her than flaws and defects. This sporadic churchgoer still believes that she saw God while saying a Hail Mary at age seven. She also gives \$3 of the \$12 she had collected street-begging to a street-beggar more needy than she. Perhaps the hot tea she favors over all other non-alcoholic drinks implies a pathway to the middle-class routine of a steady job and a fixed residence she has been aching for.

With her scraped, swollen face and drug habit, she's far from this goal, and she knows it. In the spirit of Baudelaire, Conan Doyle, and James Joyce, Addonizio has designed the San Francisco Rita prowls like a maze. It's a maze with a down-dragging pull. Though Rita may panhandle in Union Square, she always returns to the Mission and Tenderloin districts, with their tattoo parlors, porno bookstores, and dingy, reeking hotels. Advisedly, it's in San Francisco's Financial District that she's kidnapped.

What has been helping her survive is her street savvy. She has learned the value of spare-changing in front of a bus stop, where her prospective marks have to look at her, making them less likely to snub her. She knows the bathrooms of the diners, cafés, and donut shops where she stands the best chance of cleaning herself and changing her clothes without being thrown out. During those lucky times when she sleeps in a hotel, she always pockets whatever soap bars, shampoo, and tea packets she can find before checking out. Fast thinking helps her on the streets, as well. To thwart an aggressive stranger, she tells him, “Shut up . . . or—my pimp will cut you.”

Addonizio’s own street savvy helps fuel the book’s compositional excellence. *Dreams* gains righteous points by using poetic devices like zeugma (a slum street is “full of trash and sadness”) and structural motifs like intercutting. It also deploys fresh, offhand details that work at multiple narrative levels. An ace performer, Addonizio knows what to leave out, too, and the carefully foreshadowed and weighed material she does include, she puts where it belongs. This material can shock. She presumably knows what happens to the tongue of someone whose mouth is ducktaped. Though it isn’t pretty, it supplies one of the book’s many remarkable moments.