

Fatal Distraction

Det. Harry Bosch realizes that a careless error has allowed a serial killer to strike nine more times.

Reviewed by Kevin Allman
Sunday, November 19, 2006; BW06

ECHO PARK

A Novel

By Michael Connelly

Little, Brown. 405 pp. \$26.99

In his 11 Harry Bosch novels, Michael Connelly has bucked two pervasive trends in modern crime fiction. Too many writers have fallen into the trap of writing quirky detectives who detour into cutesy or hard-boiled stories that devolve into violent, ironic self-parody. But Detective Hieronymus "Harry" Bosch of the Los Angeles Police Department is serious and straightforward, and Connelly's latest, the knowing, taut and suspenseful *Echo Park*, proves that Harry's creator is as well. Since making his first appearance in 1992's *The Black Echo* as a 42-year-old, Bosch has aged in real time.

Now, nearing 60, Bosch is back with the LAPD, working in the Open-Unsolved Unit, going over cold cases with his most recent partner, Kiz Rider. Most of the cops on the unit, including Rider, are from a different generation. Harry may have backup, but emotionally and mentally he's alone.

A serendipitous traffic stop in L.A.'s Echo Park neighborhood nabs Reynard Waits, a man with body parts in his front seat. Soon Waits has confessed to a string of slayings involving prostitutes and runaways, as well as to two earlier murders: one of a pawnshop owner during the 1992 riots, the other of a young equestrian named Marie Gesto, whose car and clothing turned up in a garage but whose body was never found.

Bosch had worked the Gesto case and had in years since reopened the files on occasion, but had come up empty. He had even pegged a likely culprit -- the son of a wealthy and powerful industrialist -- so Waits's confession and knowledge of the body's location throw him for a loop. But Bosch is shaken more deeply when the case files are reexamined and it seems that Waits had called the police shortly after the murder, pretending to be a tipster; he could have been implicated within a week of Gesto's disappearance.

"Bosch considered himself a true detective, one who took it all inside and cared," writes Connelly. "Everybody counts or nobody counts. . . . It made him good at the job but it also made him vulnerable. The mistakes could get to him and this one was the worst of all mistakes." He could have prevented nine murders, and that knowledge leaves Bosch ready to crack.

Connelly, a former crime reporter, knows both the squad-room and the newsroom, and once again he assembles a formidable group of adversaries for Bosch: the LAPD brass, the L.A. Times city desk and a powerful, well-connected lawyer who sees the Gesto case as the key to the district attorney's office.

Connelly is still a master of the economical scene. His action never devolves into cheap suspense or sentimentality but moves along at an unforced clip. Several people from Bosch's past -- most notably his friend and former lover, FBI profiler Rachel Walling -- also make appearances in *Echo Park*, and their relationships with the aging detective are well sketched.

What puts Connelly in the top rank of modern procedural writers -- and, perhaps, into the ranks of the better modern L.A. writers of any genre -- is his willingness to accept that there aren't always easy answers in Bosch's life, or sometimes any answers at all. (Indeed, the future of more than one major character in the series is left in question at *Echo Park's* end.) That sense of uncertainty and dread, combined with Bosch's going from middle age to the precipice of old age, informs every page of this novel.

Connelly is one of the few crime writers who could conceivably kill off his hero and make it an organic, even inevitable, literary development. And like his namesake, the original Hieronymus Bosch, Det. Harry Bosch is groping his way through a violent and often surreal netherworld, with no guarantee that he'll be coming out the other side. *Echo Park* is simple, straightforward writing that plumbs beneath the deceptive surface of a deceptively surfacey city, and Connelly's chronicles of Bosch -- like the detective himself -- are aging like a fine Scotch. ·

Kevin Allman is a writer living in Portland, Ore.

© 2006 The Washington Post Company