

REVIEW

Danger zone

Doug Johnstone hails an LA serial killer story which focuses on women's experiences



C rime fiction continues to expand its boundaries, with new and exciting novels coming along seemingly every week that defy and confound the traditional idea of a police procedural. This week we have two wonderfully original offerings, one from either side of the Atlantic.

First up is *These Women* by Ivy Pochoda. The book is set in the author's home city of Los Angeles, in a nondescript neighbourhood split by a freeway, with a wide range of demographics, from expensive townhouses to homeless people and sex workers.

It's the latter which come under the spotlight in this thoughtful feminist story about a serial killer, told by the women on the periphery of the killer's life and actions. So we meet Dorian grieving for her teenage daughter killed in a spree in the 1990s, before there was a 15-year gap. It looks as if the killing has started again in the present day, but the only police detective to take that idea seriously is Essie, who works vice and deals with the sex-worker victims every day.

Thrown into the mix are Julianna, a young stripper dabbling with a very dangerous world, her artist neighbour Marella, Marella's highly strung mother Anneke and Feelia, the only woman to have successfully escaped an attempt on her life.

The book is really about these women's experiences, both in terms of their everyday struggles and hardships, but also in the shadow of these murders that have begun again in the neighbourhood. Pochoda takes each woman in turn, interspersing small chapters from Feelia's point of view, and she skilfully weaves the women into each other's stories, moving the plot forward at the same time.

The author paints a very vivid picture of her neighbourhood setting, a Los Angeles full of energy and danger. The daily misogyny and abuse that the various women encounter is delivered in unflinching detail, and she subtly makes a connection between that routine discrimination and objectification and the more extreme violence of the murders occurring all around them. It's a masterclass in making characters drive the plot, and at fully exploring the rounded lives of ordinary women. It's writing with deep empathy and resonance.

Next up we have *Body Language* by AK Turner, a book that introduces readers to the terrific central character of Cassie Raven. Cassie is a 25-year-old, tattooed, goth mortuary technician who hears the voices of the dead people she works with. When the body of someone she knows from her homeless days comes into the lab, it looks to the stuffy pathologist like an accidental death, but Cassie hears differently from the deceased herself, and endeavours to investigate further.

She's helped in that regard by standoffish detective Phyllida Flyte, although the two have a rather antagonistic relationship thanks to Cassie's previous experiences with the police.

There is a mysterious death to be solved here, sure, but the real strength of *Body Language* is Cassie, a beautifully rounded and believable character, a complex young woman who is nevertheless a lot of fun to spend time with. Turner also deals with the sensitive subjects of death and grief with real empathy and respect, reflecting Cassie's own attitude to her work. *Body Language* is the start of a planned series, and I can't wait to see what Cassie Raven gets up to next.

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These Women by Ivy Pochoda is out now (Faber, £8.99)
Body Language by AK Turner is out on November 26 (Zaffre, £8.99)



AUTHOR FEATURE

Universal truths

Emma Chapman was so fascinated by the sky as a child she resolved to uncover the story of the very first stars

I was almost nine years old when my dad and I stood in our garden and looked up. Spread across the night, like the accidental stroke of a paintbrush, was Hale-Bopp, the highly anticipated comet. I remember being cold and exhilarated that I was awake well after dark. When I looked up and saw the comet though, according to my dad, I burst into tears because it was "just so beautiful".

The sight of it triggered a little revolution in my mind. It was one of the first times I grasped there was an entire Universe that we had little control over. I have vague memories of being awestruck, but also oddly sad. This beauty was at the whim of the Universe. This particular comet was in a large orbit and hadn't been in the

neighbourhood since the great pyramids were the new-builds of Egypt. I knew it wouldn't be back now for another few thousand years. I didn't want it to go away. I wanted to see more.

A nice origin story, eh? Despite the promising start, though, I passed through my childhood and teens convinced that I would be an Egyptologist. It fascinated me, the unveiling of ancient tombs and ciphered messages. Yet here I am now, having taken a different path. Now, I research the first stars to exist in our Universe, the stars that illuminated the total darkness of the earliest times.

Our Universe is about 14 billion years old, give or take. It began with an explosion of space-time calling the Big Bang. After that first cataclysmic moment, the Universe was predominantly filled with only hydrogen and helium. Any materials more complicated couldn't form in such a hot, violent universe: just how you can't succeed in building a large Lego tower when there are hyper toddlers running amok. And yet here we are, carbon-based life forms breathing oxygen.

Complex materials are everywhere on our planet, in other planets and within other galaxies. Over the last century we have realised it is the stars that create these heavy elements in their fiery furnaces, seeding their surroundings when they end their lives in explosive supernovae. The first stars were the ones to start it all off. They are remarkable entities. They live brief lives of only a million years and are hundreds of times more massive than our sun... and no one has ever seen one. In fact, there are about one billion years missing from the timeline of our Universe. Just like Ancient Egypt, the era of the first stars is buried out of sight.

When I was 16, I spent my work experience packaging 5,000-year-old shoes at my local museum, and my weekends reading about Ancient Egypt. My mentor had given me a frank talk on the unlikelihood of my getting a rare job as an Egyptologist, and my pragmatic head turned to other shelves in the library. I saw a book on time travel and took it home, thinking it was a fiction title on the wrong shelf. It set out the rules of a strange universe. Our Universe. It stated that the faster you travel, the less you age, and this effect has been measured by comparing the running of identical clocks on Earth and on commercial airliners.

This caused a second revolution in my mind. Our Universe is unpredictable, beautiful, but, crucially, measurable. There were mysteries to be solved, just like with Egyptology! I didn't follow 90 per cent of that book, but it drove me to study physics, just so I could understand. When I then didn't understand astrophysics, I pursued that.

What greater mystery is there than missing billion years from the Universe's timeline? All that absent data is equivalent to missing every milestone up to the first day of school in your photo album. There are so many fantastical ways scientists around the world are working to expose the era of the first stars. We are searching for a faint signal from the birth of the first stars with vast arrays of radio antennae. We are looking for the traces of their fatal explosions using space missions. Stellar archaeologists are combing our Milky Way for the super-rare tiny variants that may just have survived until now. What an adventure! We now have the technology to seek it out and decode the signals from the past to understand how ancient civilisations of stars triggered the evolution of our Universe.

I won't be too grandiose about *First Light: Switching on Stars at the Dawn of Time*, the book I have written on this subject. It isn't about philosophy or the meaning of life. It is foremost a book of science and discovery. I have infused it with my passion though, and I hope it inspires readers to look up at the sky and marvel.

First Light: Switching on Stars at the Dawn of Time by Emma Chapman is out on November 26 (Bloomsbury Sigma, £16.99)



Top 5 cult books you might not know

Kirkland Ciccone

01 The Boy Detective Fail by Joe Meno

Ever wondered what happened when Nancy Drew and The Hardy Boys grew up? This novel by Joe Meno skewers the cosy mystery stories we read as kids, bringing them into the real world. The result is dazzlingly smart and ferociously readable.

02 Dogrun by Arthur Nersesian

If you know about Arthur Nersesian, you can be friends. In *Dogrun*, Mary – a struggling writer – finds her lazy boyfriend dead on the couch. What transpires is a hilarious story about a woman finding out she knew nothing about the man she loved. Luckily, he had a lot of exes and they live nearby...

03 Popular Hits Of The Showa Era by Ryū Murakami

A gang war starts between two groups: a bunch of middle-aged spinsters vs teenage hooligans who spend their time dressing up and singing karaoke. As the battle escalates, so does the body count. Hilarious, bleak, but always gripping.

04 Fake Fruit Factory by Patrick Wensink

Dyson, Ohio, is a town so small even Google Maps ignores it. Then a satellite decides to make the town its destination. Some want to run before they're flattened, others want to turn Dyson into a tourist trap. A small town novel that makes Twin Peaks seem as normal as *Butlin's*.

05 Mary's The Name by Ross Sayers

A cult Scottish novel told in a clear voice. Mary is a little girl who loves Elvis and her grandfather. Witty, life-affirming, and a good solid read, this should have been more successful.

Kirkland Ciccone's *Happiness is Wasted on Me* is out now (Fledgling Press, £9.99)

