



ANGELS FLIGHT

by Michael Connelly

New York: Little, Brown

By David Peelle, *part-time clerk at Wooden Spoon Books, Ann Arbor's oldest used bookstore.*

Angels Flight is Michael Connelly's sixth and latest crime novel featuring Los Angeles police detective Hieronymus ("Harry") Bosch. It is a very good book.

When Connelly visited Ann Arbor a few weeks ago, he said that for him the key to writing his Bosch novels is the character of his protagonist. When he understands how Bosch's character will change or grow in the new novel, the rest of the task—background, plot, secondary characters, dialogue and language—almost writes itself. And Harry Bosch is a remarkable character. He is (or is making the effort to be) a righteous man (AF, p. 393). And, believe it or not, a righteous LA cop need not be an oxymoron. Bosch is a Vietnam vet, a Los Angeles native who loves his city, a detective who does not believe in coincidences. (I should point out here that Connelly is a writer who believes in creating coincidences for Bosch not to believe in. He does this subtly and skillfully and, of course, it moves the plot right along.)

Considering Connelly's assertion that plot is far secondary to character, it's amazing to me how good his plots are. Though not impossibly contorted, there are enough twists, turns, reversals, and surprises to satisfy most of his readers, which include a fair number of "mystery buffs".

Back to Bosch—besides having to clear his cases, a job that is not only stressful, frustrating, and not always successful—he's usually in hot

water with his superiors, if not the IAD (Internal Affairs Division), because he persists in doing things his own way. His love life is rocky (sometimes nonexistent), and he doesn't always get along with his partner(s) on the job. He finds solace in listening to jazz, and is characterized by one of his fellow female detectives as "morose". In many ways, he reminds me of Ian Rankin's John Rebus, who works as a police detective in Edinburgh, Scotland.

Which brings me to a point: there is nothing new here—nothing in these novels that is particularly new and different, but 1) Connelly is not imitating anybody, and 2) what he does do is done gloriously right.

For me, above all, the question about a police procedural writer that I want answered affirmatively is: Does he get it right? By "it," I mean the setting, whether it be the city of Los Angeles, Detroit, or Edinburgh; coal mining country in West Virginia, or the beaches and bars of the Florida Keys. "It" also has to do with police methods and behavior—at the crime scene, at the station, on the street; "it" also includes the technology that policemen and their "techs" use, not to mention the specifics of guns and weapons that inevitably play a part in most crime novels. Does all this ring true?

I've never been in Los Angeles, but Connelly's (that is, Bosch's) Los Angeles seems to me close enough to a real city in which real police detectives work, that I need only suspend a little disbelief (this *is* fiction) to enjoy his novels immensely.

Consider a passage from Connelly's second Bosch novel, *The Black Ice*:

[Bosch] stopped at a mariscos truck parked on Alvarado and ordered two shrimp tacos. They were served on corn tortillas, Baja style, and Bosch savored the heavy cilantro in the salsa.

A few yards from the truck stood a man reciting scripture verses from memory. On top of his head was a cup of water that nestled comfortably in his seventies-style Afro and did not spill. He reached up for the cup and took a drink from time to time but never stopped bouncing from book to book of the New Testament. Before each quote, he gave his listeners the chapter and verse numbers as a reference. At his feet was a glass fishbowl half full of coins. When he was done eating, Bosch ordered a Coke to go and then dropped the change into the fishbowl. He got a "God bless you" back, (BI, p. 132)

Connelly's prose is not as lush as James Lee Burke's describing the Louisiana landscape in his Dave Robicheaux novels, but it does the job and occasionally employs an apt figure of speech, e.g.,

"The gloom in the squad room was thicker than cigarette smoke in a porno theater." (BI, p. 38) Connelly's Los Angeles isn't as gritty or dark as James Ellroy's, but it is both dark and gritty often enough that the reader gets a pretty good idea of how unglamorous the life of a Los Angeles police detective must be.

In *Angels Flight* (by the way, an actual 300-ft-long inclined railway in downtown LA) the city police department is operating as well as it can—post-Rodney King and post-O.J. The emphasis is not only on getting results, arrests, convictions, etc., but also on avoiding bad public relations, media criticism, and even the appearance of unrest in the streets. Thus, many of the department's administrators are little more than spin-doctors. When a black civil rights lawyer who has sued dozens of LA's finest, turns up dead on Angels Flight, Bosch, who gets the case (naturally), finds himself caught between finding the perpetrator (who may well be a cop) and trying to evade roadblocks created by his bosses, themselves bossed by the spin doctors. On top of this, Bosch must work with IAD officers and FBI people because of the nature of the case.

The minor characters are well drawn and only enhance the plausibility of what happens in the novel. At novel's end Connelly goes over the top a little, but by that time, of course, the reader is done.

Angels Flight is not Connelly's best book, but I liked it anyway. It is a splendid addition to the series. (Most of the earlier books are likely available in one or another of the area's used bookstores.)