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Guy Stevenson

Monkey Business / Some Like It Hot

The Enchanters

By James Ellroy

(Hutchinson Heinemann 448pp £22)

As the backlash against Andrew Dominik's 2022 film *Blonde* suggested, attempting to retell the Marilyn Monroe story in the age of #MeToo is a queasy business. Billed by its author – America's most celebrated crime novelist – as 'not a Marilyn Monroe book', *The Enchanters* nevertheless has her sexual exploitation by powerful men and the conspiracy theories that emerged following her death at its heart. The story is seen through the eyes of Freddy Otash, the real-life private investigator responsible for bugging Monroe's apartment, who spends the novel spitting vitriol at her sloppiness, 'sloth and disarray'.

The premise is knowingly, conspiracy-theory absurd. 'Shitbird' Otash, extorter of celebrities, 'strongarm goon' and consorter with corrupt cops, finds himself hired by Jimmy Hoffa to spy on Monroe and gather dirt about her affair with his nemeses, Jack and Bobby Kennedy. Monroe dies while the job is in full swing, propelling Otash into a position of precarity-cum-leverage between the LAPD and the Kennedys themselves (Bobby plays a central part and comes in for a lot of stick, while the 'kahuna' Jack gets only one scene). Buzzing in the background are the kidnap job Otash got mixed up in at the start and a combination of big and small cultural and political flashpoints: Elizabeth Taylor causing trouble on the set of *Cleopatra*, the LAPD's brutal raid on a Nation of Islam mosque and the 1957 school segregation affair in Little Rock, which still casts a shadow. Monroe is joined by a cast of real and made-up celebrities: bit-part movie stars, singers, psychiatrists, mobsters and the Kennedy brothers' sister Pat (with whom Otash is having an affair). Here, as elsewhere, Ellroy has fun lampooning B-listers, including Taylor's fourth husband, Eddie Fisher, and Peter Lawford, a peripheral member of Sinatra's Rat Pack and JFK's brother-in-law, rumoured to have acted as a 'presidential pimp'.

The countercultural period detail and the hum of paranoid rumour call to mind the novels of Thomas Pynchon. Ellroy's character-crammed, free-associational 'wild riff' on the 1960s sometimes reads like a straighter version of Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*. Bikini-clad girls audition for films about doing the twist; hip surfer bums sip mai tais with John Birch Society members; cryptic messages zap across the speed-addled narrator's brain. At other times, Ellroy gives us 1960s Hollywood as a graphic, noirish version of the Jazz Age: Otash slumped in the corner of glitzy parties like a hood Nick Carraway, glugging highballs and making mind 'imprints' of mayors cavorting with movie stars; a 'starlet with a squirt gun filled with crème de menthe ... telling people, "Open wide"'. In his hat-tip to *The Great Gatsby*, Ellroy goes as far as to include a stand-in for Jordan Baker in Jeanne Carmen, celebrity golfer and actress friend to Monroe.

Besides the historically accurate but suspiciously overdone misogyny, another thing that jars in *The Enchanters* is the endless technical detail to do with snooping. It feels authentic at first to hear about Otash casing a joint and assembling his evidence kit, but we begin to glaze over after the umpteenth walk-through. Factor in Ellroy's own history of 'peeping' (he went to prison as a young man for breaking into women's apartments while they were out) and passages like 'this prowl-and-peek gig eroticized me' start both to make sense and to unsettle. The psychopathic beatings Otash doles out – such beatings are a feature of all of Ellroy's work – are casual and slang-inflected ('I grabbed his legs and pulled him out and kicked his nards raw'). At times this feels artistically warranted. At others, the novel starts to resemble an embarrassing, X-rated version of *Austin Powers* ('I grabbed him by the hair and ... bitch-slapped him'; 'stewardesses displayed their woof-woof').

Composed with the eye for detail that made *LA Confidential* and *The Black Dahlia* masterpieces and told in a tough-guy voice straight out of 1962, *The Enchanters* is an impressively inventive and absurdly outdated novel. By a man who, aged seventy-five, still calls himself 'the Demon Dog of American Letters', it is a proud up-yours to modern sensibilities. Ellroy lives off-grid, without the internet, a television or any interest in contemporary discourse, which perhaps means he is better able than most to re-create the mind-sets, speech and thought patterns of postwar Americans. At the same time, though, he hams up their prejudices and luxuriates in smut and sexual violence. Denying that the fun he has with 20th-century American history is a 'comment on the present day', Ellroy ignores the fact that he is rewriting history according to his own predilections. Rather than seek the messy woman behind the mythologised Monroe, Ellroy caricatures her as vacuous and vain, in thrall to 'radical' psychoanalysis, 'left-wing frog fare' and 'outlandish criminal fantasies'. In the words of one of Otash's informants, she was 'nothing but a scene maker, as well as being *the* fantasist and premier bullshit artist of our time'. Ellroy meticulously restores a grim world, one of shady collusion between 'movie stars, major politicians, a corrupt Hollywood element, and a vicious criminal demimonde', which has 'faded from public consciousness'. As he does so, he becomes the latest in a long line to dump on a mistreated woman in the name of art, and to try to score points against the 'disingenuous schmaltz' of the liberals who celebrate her.