

What I Know: *White Ghost*

The great crime novelist Ross MacDonald wrote about his protagonist, “I wasn’t Archer, exactly, but Archer was me.” So it is with Graham Gage, the protagonist of *White Ghost*. Not only do Gage and I share the same sense of the world and walk the same moral landscape, but he knows the rough ground of crime and the hard people who make it so only because I traveled there and learned it all before him. And he knows how to live in the shadow of death only because that shadow fell over me first.

As I approached my seventh novel, it seemed to me it was time to display at least some aspects of what that life is like. And not for my sake, but for others who live, have lived or will live, or who will die, in that shadow. And what I learned over the last fifteen years of biopsies and chemotherapy, of examining rooms and hospitals, of radiology labs and infusion centers is that contrary to the mythology of panic and terror, of collapse and paralysis that surrounds cancer, we carry on. Except for those who have been inflicted with forms that are too disabling or who survive only weeks or months—we carry on:

Mothers mother. Fathers father. Workers work. Sellers sell. Writers write. Doctors doctor. Liars lie. Cheaters cheat. Predators prey.

We are who we are and do what we do.

Regardless of what our initial reaction to the diagnosis might have been—rage, fear, resignation, self-estrangement, or self-pity—it fades.

Regardless of the promises we might have made to ourselves—to be kind or generous or Zen-like in our equanimity—we return to whoever we’ve always been.

Regardless of the ways in which we might have viewed ourselves—as patients, victims, sufferers, warriors, or survivors—in the end we rediscover who we’ve always been.

Regardless of the ways we think the world has been changed and remade—brighter or dimmer, engaging or indifferent—in the end we find it is the same world and we are the same in it—

And we carry on.

All this should be obvious. And it certainly is, inside infusion rooms and radiation oncology departments and in all the other places where patients are diagnosed and treated. But outside, in fiction and in memoir, on talk shows and in films, and in the cottage industry of self-help and popular psychology, the mythology lives on. And *White Ghost* is partly an attempt to combat it.

The adversity Gage faces in the novel is more urgent than mine, a chronic and often treatable, but ultimately incurable form of lymphoma. The oncologist’s original prognosis of my time from diagnosis through treatments to death turned out to be overly conservative and I rode, am still riding, the prognostic bell curve, first traveling up and then down the sweeping arcs, and now along the thinning tail. Indeed, I worked for

another nine years in scores of places around the globe before I reached the sort of moment in Gage's life when the story begins.

But by then I was transitioning from investigator to writer and whatever discomforts I underwent in treatment were compensated for by my undergoing them in the company of my wife and in the comfort of my home. My commute was no longer to my office downtown, but only to a converted bottom-floor bedroom. My lunch, just a short climb up the stairs. A nap, just one more flight.

While there is never a good time to undergo cancer treatment, my two years began during a busy period. I was performing the final edits of the first Gage book, finishing and editing the second one, and writing the second Harlan Donnally novel. It also occurred while I was investigating a homicide that occurred ten years earlier, one of my last cases.

According to the local police department, a young man in his twenties, found dead in a basement, had been beaten by drug dealers a few weeks earlier and had died of his untreated injuries. During the intervening decade, no one had been arrested, no suspects even identified. The case was old, cold, and closed.

It had been many years since I'd worked in the tough parts of the Bay Area. My practice had developed into one that found me working more often in London, Kiev, or Chennai than in San Francisco, Oakland, or San Jose, and investigating this death meant for me, as for Gage in *White Ghost*, going to once familiar places and relying on people from the past to catch up to the present.

In searching the housing projects, skid-row motels, and drug corners for witnesses, I found myself surrounded by death, and not only because of the reminders provided by my continuing visits to the Stanford Cancer Center. Driving around those streets was like walking through a cemetery, one not made up of headstones and crypts, but of sidewalks and corners, streets and alleys, front steps and backyards, empty lots and abandoned houses, each a reminder that many of those in the generation I once knew and on whom I had once relied to get me to the facts behind the tales were dead.

As I was talking to an old-timer outside the liquor store at Eighth and Campbell in West Oakland, I thought of Stymie Taylor, a damaged man who'd spent much of his life in prison, but who many times knew someone or something that helped me get to the truth. I stopped in to visit his mother, who had been at his bedside when he died. By then she'd outlived four of her children. She told me Sunday dinners had become a time of empty chairs.

Driving past a drug-dealing spot in East Oakland, I thought of Henry Scott, a cunning man who'd done a lot of bad in his life. I saw him last when he dropped by my office about a dozen years ago. I'm not sure why he came to see me and I'm not sure he knew why either. I was long out of his world, but by his walk and his talk, I understood the place he still held in it. I told him if he stayed in the Bay Area, he'd be a dead man; and a couple of months later he was, shot down outside a bayside nightclub.

And there were many more. Way too many more.

I passed the corner flower shop near the Sixty-Fifth Avenue housing project, within gunshot distance of hundreds of murders in the previous thirty years, and I remembered a sign I'd seen in the window in 1986: *Funeral Sale*. There are so many things wrong with that phrase, so disturbing anyone would even think it, I'll just let the image of that storefront speak the thousand words for itself.

I drove through the once infamous intersection of Ninety-Eighth and Edes where in 1989 I had been trapped as men shot at each other from opposite corners. At least I'd had my car's sheet metal around me. The people running and ducking didn't. Six rounds were exchanged in seconds, the gunfight was over, and the shooters fled, leaving nothing behind but lead and a memory.

Hairless, fatigued, pale, infused with chemotherapy drugs, and on the hunt for witnesses, I walked into the courtyard of an apartment building where I had been told one was living. It was also where years earlier a drug dealer had me at gunpoint. It struck me that if he'd pulled the trigger I wouldn't have lived to die of cancer. I saw where I'd been standing and where he'd been standing, a dead strip of concrete on which there had occurred a live moment. I remembered his hand coming up out of his pocket and the look in his eyes.

They say cancer is the emperor of all maladies. At least on that day, it wasn't. It was a man with a gun.

In the end, it had turned out to be just another day in the life. He went his way. And I went mine.

Ultimately, I located witnesses who told me that the men who had beaten the victim and inflicted the injuries that led to his death weren't drug dealers at all: They were undercover police officers, and the homicide detective assigned to the investigation had known it almost from the start.

Based on the testimony of these witnesses and admissions by some of the officers involved, a federal judge later ruled that the department had engaged in a decade-long cover-up. In truth, the injustice went far beyond the death and the conspiracy. Not only did the detective remain in the homicide unit even after his role in the case became known inside the police department, but upon his retirement, the district attorney, the chief law enforcement officer in the county, hired him to work as an inspector in her office. And the lieutenant who supervised the officers, who was present at the time of the assault and who engaged in what the department admitted was an attempt to influence officers' reports of the beating, was assigned to head the internal affairs unit and promoted to the rank of captain.*

I considered using the death of this young man as the basis of a Harlan Donnally novel, but unlike the mayors, city council members, judges, prosecutors, police chiefs, and city managers who served during these years, no reader of fiction would tolerate this kind of ending. And many of these endings have there been. The recent unjustified police killing of Laquan McDonald in Chicago is another. It, too, was followed by

an attempt to conceal the truth. Not only the officer who did the shooting, now charged with murder, but five other officers on the scene claimed in their reports that McDonald “was aggressively swinging his knife and was moving toward the police” at the time he was shot. The video, to the contrary, shows he was walking away.**

The readers of my Harlan Donnally series understand my view of how law enforcement and political structures can develop in which these immoral and criminal practices become institutionalized, so I won’t repeat that here. But the issue does raise the question of the role of crime fiction in public discourse and returns us to the point of *White Ghost*.

I certainly had mixed feelings about taking it upon myself to try to demythologize cancer. A writer reflecting on his own illness in print, even in fiction and by way of a character, is uncomfortably like those politicians, sports figures, and celebrities who rush to afternoon talk shows the day after receiving their cancer diagnosis to exploit the mythology in order to prompt and then accept the public’s sympathy. I think that’s why I waited fifteen years and seven books before I decided to take this on. I finally concluded that I should make the attempt because, simply put, the argument was worth making and it was probably a good idea for someone with a little experience to make it. The bad news about having cancer for fifteen years is that you’ve had cancer for fifteen years. The good news is that you have time to learn a few things. And one of those things you learn is that those with cancer—whether investigators, plumbers, parents, programmers, or politicians, sports figures, and celebrities—carry on: We are who we are and do what we do.

Some of Gage’s thoughts in *White Ghost* are ones I had as I searched for witnesses, and they are at least some of the thoughts all cancer patients have as we carry on. Among other things, it meant thinking about time and what is worth spending it on and a reminder that the young man whose death I was investigating died at about the same time as I was first diagnosed. His life was stolen, beaten out of him by fist and boot, but mine remained—it still remains—my own to spend. And at least some of that time I chose to spend walking Graham Gage and Harlan Donnally, and their readers, through the landscape on which I have lived much of my life.

In the end, the decision to publish *White Ghost* was driven by the recognition that the connection between Gage and me in illness is not much different than the connection between Gage and me as private investigators: both inform my fiction, just as both have informed my life.

Writers are told to write what we know, and this is what I know.

* The death is well documented in court rulings and news reports: Northern District of California, Docket No. C 09-01019 WHA, *The Estate of Jerry A. Amaro III; Geraldine Montoya; Stephanie Montoya, Plaintiffs, v. City of Oakland; E. Karsseboom; R. Holmgren; S. Nowak; M. Battle; C. Bunn; M. Patterson; T. Pena; Edward Poulson; Richard Word, Defendants*. United States Court of Appeals, Ninth Circuit, Docket No. 10-16152, *The Estate of Jerry A. Amaro III; Geraldine Montoya; Stephanie Montoya, Plaintiffs-Appellees, v. City of Oakland; E. Karsseboom; R. Holmgren; S. Nowak; M. Battle; C. Bunn; M. Patterson; T. Pena; Edward Poulson; Richard Word, Defendants-Appellants*. “Court-Oakland Cops Stonewalled Beaten Man’s Mom,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 28, 2011.

** <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/06/us/officers-statements-differ-from-video-in-death-of-laquan-mcdonald.html>: "At least five other officers on the scene that night corroborated a version of events similar to the one Officer Van Dyke, now charged with murder in the shooting, gave his supervisors: that Mr. McDonald was aggressively swinging his knife and was moving toward the police, giving Officer Van Dyke no choice but to start shooting."