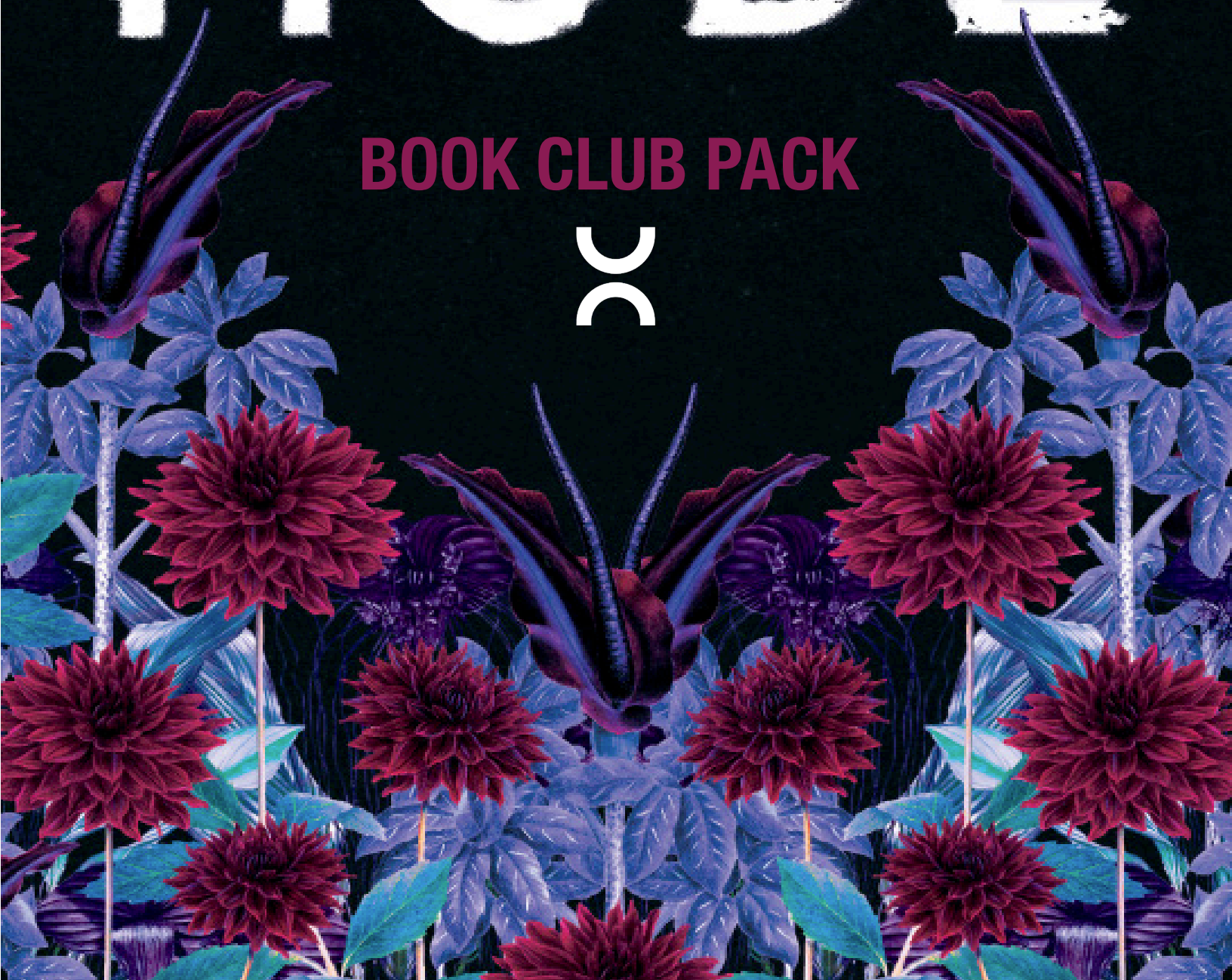
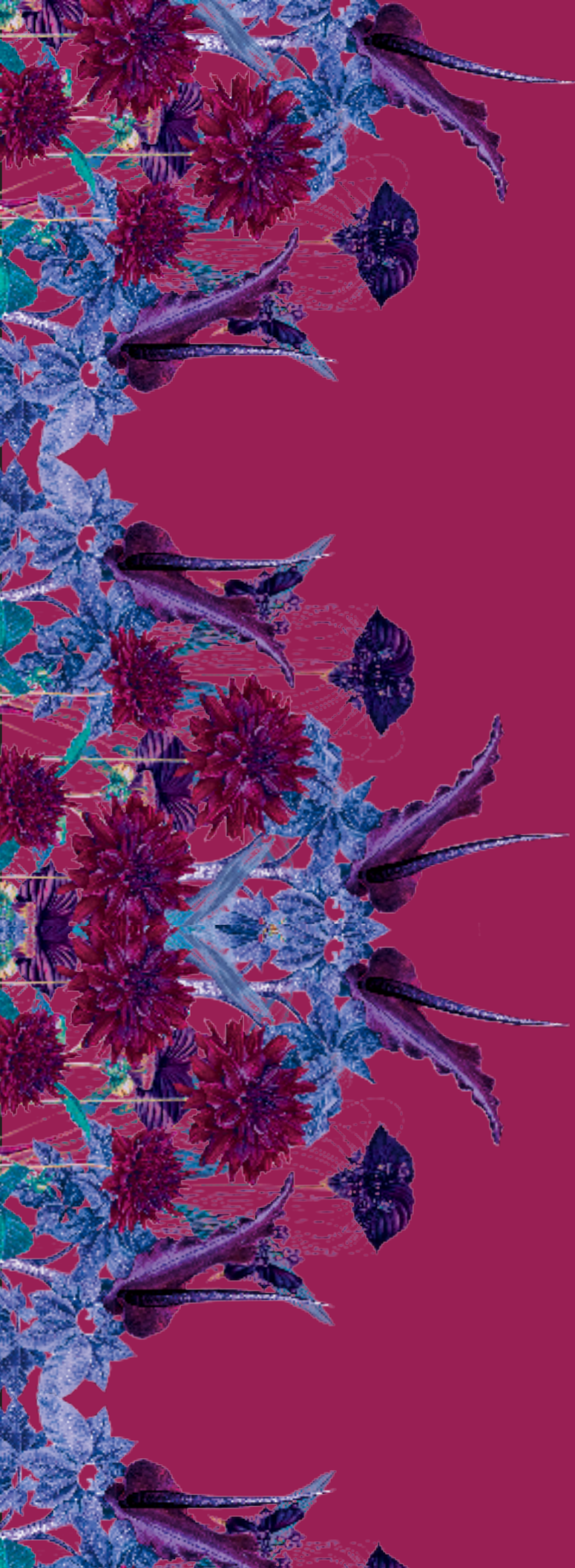


DARK MODE

BOOK CLUB PACK





contents

01 .

A note from the author

02 .

Why we're still obsessed with the
Black Dahlia case, 76 years later

03 .

Praise for **DARK MODE**

04 .

Extract from the prologue

05 .

Book club questions

A note from the author

I'm a huge thriller fan, and I'm fascinated by all aspects of crime – who commits it, how it's investigated, and what it tells us about our society. As I got into the research for this book, what came to terrify me most isn't a possible serial killer lurking in the shadows. It's what's happening in the darkest corners of the internet, how little most of us know about that world, and the risks we're taking online, every single day.

In 2017 I was diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome and spent two years mostly bedbound. I made the most of it by listening to hundreds of hours of true crime podcasts, and watching crime documentaries and all nineteen seasons of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*. So when it came to write my next book, it felt destined to be a crime novel.

A case that particularly intrigues me is the murder of the Black Dahlia, Elizabeth Short, in 1947. Though technically unsolved, a retired Los Angeles homicide detective is convinced he's solved the case. The suspect he names and the motive for the killing are a shock. But I chose to incorporate true facts from this case into my debut crime novel for a bigger reason – and it connects to what's happening in those dark online spaces.

The attitudes that drive the crimes in *Dark Mode* are real. And they're everywhere. It's urgent that we learn about these attitudes, discuss them, and work to counteract them in our society.



About the author:

Ashley Kalagian Blunt is the author of *How to Be Australian*, a memoir of moving from Canada to Australia, and *My Name Is Revenge*, which was a finalist in the 2018 Carmel Bird Digital Literary Award. She teaches creative writing and co-hosts *James and Ashley Stay at Home*, a podcast about writing, creativity and health.

Dark Mode is her first psychological thriller.



Why we're still obsessed with the Black Dahlia case, 76 years later.

By Ashley Kalagian Blunt

Elizabeth Short was 22 years old, living in Los Angeles and trying to break into acting, when one January morning, her naked body was discovered in a weed-covered lot, drained of blood and bisected at the waist.

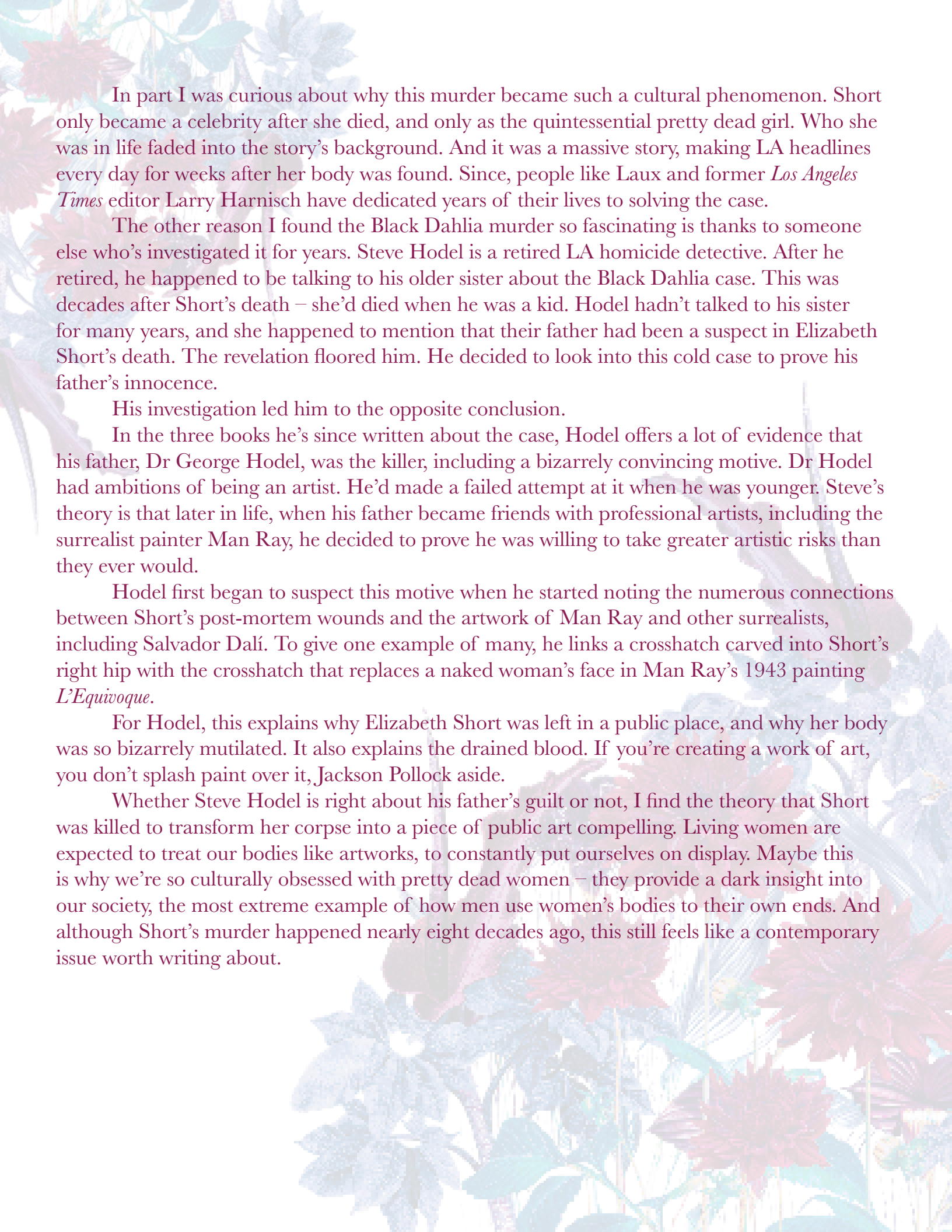
If there's one detail about the notorious Black Dahlia murder that makes it stand out from hundreds of other murder cases, I suspect it's that one. It requires a certain amount of surgical precision to cleanly sever a human spine. The LA police detectives were convinced the killer had medical training.

The Black Dahlia case is also compelling because it remains unsolved, 76 years after Short's death. Though there are dozens of types of dahlias, the closest their blossoms come to black is a shade of dark purple. Elizabeth Short earned her nickname for her pale skin and curly dark hair. In the black and white photos of the time, her face is ghostly white, her eyebrows hard slashes, and she wears dark lipstick over Hollywood-perfect teeth.

After learning about the Black Dahlia murder, I became so fascinated, I ended up incorporating a modern version of the crime into my debut psychological thriller, *Dark Mode*. Set in Sydney, the book opens with a murder similar to Elizabeth Short's.

I'm certainly not the only person who's felt compelled to write about the case. James Ellroy's novel, *The Black Dahlia*, came out in 1987. In 2006, Josh Hartnett and Scarlett Johansson starred in the movie adaptation. The 2019 miniseries *I Am the Night* with Chris Pine also draws heavily on the Black Dahlia story. Joyce Carol Oates wrote about Elizabeth Short in her collection *Black Dahlia & White Rose*. The crime features in other movies too, like 1975's *Who Is the Black Dahlia?* There's The Black Dahlia Murder, the melodic death metal band, and what Wikipedia describes as a 'computer adventure game' named *Black Dahlia*, which came out in 1998. And of course there are dozens of podcast episodes devoted to the case, and most recently former CIA case officer Douglas Laux's miniseries, *Solving the Black Dahlia*, released in 2022. It's also a thing among a certain type of person to go to the South Norton Avenue property where Short's body was found and have themselves photographed sprawled on the lawn, arms and legs spread. Women cosplay as the Black Dahlia, and people get tattoos of Short's face, some depicting it before her killer slashed her cheeks into a gruesome joker smile, some after. When I say we're still obsessed, I mean obsessed.

I personally would never dress up as a murder victim or post photos of myself posing as a corpse. But when it came to writing *Dark Mode*, I incorporated the Black Dahlia murder because I had questions about the case that needed exploring.



In part I was curious about why this murder became such a cultural phenomenon. Short only became a celebrity after she died, and only as the quintessential pretty dead girl. Who she was in life faded into the story's background. And it was a massive story, making LA headlines every day for weeks after her body was found. Since, people like Laux and former *Los Angeles Times* editor Larry Harnisch have dedicated years of their lives to solving the case.

The other reason I found the Black Dahlia murder so fascinating is thanks to someone else who's investigated it for years. Steve Hodel is a retired LA homicide detective. After he retired, he happened to be talking to his older sister about the Black Dahlia case. This was decades after Short's death – she'd died when he was a kid. Hodel hadn't talked to his sister for many years, and she happened to mention that their father had been a suspect in Elizabeth Short's death. The revelation floored him. He decided to look into this cold case to prove his father's innocence.

His investigation led him to the opposite conclusion.

In the three books he's since written about the case, Hodel offers a lot of evidence that his father, Dr George Hodel, was the killer, including a bizarrely convincing motive. Dr Hodel had ambitions of being an artist. He'd made a failed attempt at it when he was younger. Steve's theory is that later in life, when his father became friends with professional artists, including the surrealist painter Man Ray, he decided to prove he was willing to take greater artistic risks than they ever would.

Hodel first began to suspect this motive when he started noting the numerous connections between Short's post-mortem wounds and the artwork of Man Ray and other surrealists, including Salvador Dalí. To give one example of many, he links a crosshatch carved into Short's right hip with the crosshatch that replaces a naked woman's face in Man Ray's 1943 painting *L'Equivoque*.

For Hodel, this explains why Elizabeth Short was left in a public place, and why her body was so bizarrely mutilated. It also explains the drained blood. If you're creating a work of art, you don't splash paint over it, Jackson Pollock aside.

Whether Steve Hodel is right about his father's guilt or not, I find the theory that Short was killed to transform her corpse into a piece of public art compelling. Living women are expected to treat our bodies like artworks, to constantly put ourselves on display. Maybe this is why we're so culturally obsessed with pretty dead women – they provide a dark insight into our society, the most extreme example of how men use women's bodies to their own ends. And although Short's murder happened nearly eight decades ago, this still feels like a contemporary issue worth writing about.

03.

Praise for **DARK MODE**

'Thrilling and twisty – get ready to be paranoid'
J.P. Pomare, author of *The Wrong Woman*

'Wow. Page turning, chilling dread that kept me guessing until the end. Ashley Kalagian Blunt hits it out of the park, creating a dark world where your worst fears aren't the worst thing to fear – not even close.'
R.W.R McDonald, author of *Nancy Business*

*'With **Dark Mode**, Ashley Kalagian Blunt has turned her love of true crime and passion for suspense fiction into a fierce wake-up call of a thriller, one that looks unflinchingly at the horrors of the dark web and sheds light on the unimaginable. Riveting, tense and supremely chilling, this is an eye-opening must-read for crime fiction fans everywhere.'*
Anna Downes, author of *The Shadow House*

*'Absolutely terrifying! I turned every page with my heart in my mouth, utterly hooked by this explosive thriller. Ashley Kalagian Blunt taps into the dangers we face online every day and the monsters in our midst. **Dark Mode** is a powerful and disturbing story which will keep you thinking long after you've finished reading.'*
Petronella McGovern, author of *The Liars*

*'**Dark Mode**'s greatest achievement is that, as the pieces fall into place, it's not just Reagan Carsen's world that's turned upside down – it's ours. Its stunning payoff doesn't just reverberate through the pages, but beyond the book and into the world at large ... there are some realities most of us would sooner pretend are impossible than acknowledge are already here. Kalagian Blunt forces our gazes upon them in this compulsive and breathless thriller.'*
James McKenzie Watson, author of *Denizen*

*'**Dark Mode**'s tension is visceral from the first page. The story is terrifying and timely. I found myself looking over my shoulder and thinking about Reagan for days after I finished reading. I'm excited to see what Ashley Kalagian Blunt writes next; she's a new crime writer to watch!'*
Amy Lovat, Secret Book Stuff

Extract from the prologue

Sunday, 15 January 2017

A spider web caught at Reagan's face as she turned the corner, its invisible strands trailing across her cheeks. Busy rubbing the web from her eyes, she got closer than she otherwise might have. Close enough for the early morning sun to catch the wet inner cavity of the naked, pale-skinned torso on the concrete.

A mannequin. It had to be. Human bodies didn't come apart like that.

She edged forward. Gipps Lane was tidy, all bitumen and graffitied concrete, brick walls, and two commercial dumpsters. Nothing alive, not a dandelion or a tuft of moss. Her Timex read 5.57 am. The sun had barely cracked the horizon and already Sydney's mid-January heat was clinging to her skin.

The body lay in a patch of light, its two severed pieces a half-metre apart, off-centre.

A mannequin wouldn't have a wet body cavity, and now that Reagan was closer, she could see flies crawling over the flesh.

A metallic whiff of organ meat caught in her nostrils, jarring loose a memory of a night her mother had cooked liver for dinner.

It's a body. Reagan stood frozen, the knuckles of both hands pressing into her lips. Above, masked lapwings broke the hush, their sharp *kri-kri-kri* like an alarm.

There was no blood. None on the concrete, none on the body.

And for someone to die like that, there should have been a lot of blood.

The smell hit her again – *amorphophallus titanum*. Corpse flower. The plant's giant blossoms gave off a rotting, sweaty, mothball smell to attract carnivorous insects.

The woman's right breast was gone, leaving a rough-edged circle of pinkish-red flesh. A strip of her left thigh was missing. A grotesque joker smile marred her face. Her arms were flung above her head, and her spread legs lay to the right of the torso, as if they could be part of another person. She looked younger than Reagan, twenty or so, no lines framing her eyes. Her skin was chalky. A rash of red bumps ran along the crease of her legs, and chipped turquoise polish covered her toenails. She had no clothes, tattoos or jewellery, no handbag. Her face tilted eastward. *Like a sunflower.*

...

She ran, too fast, fighting to calm her pace.

Sydney red gums lined her street. Neighbours grew gerberas and coleus alongside strips of patchy, browning grass. They'd gone thirty-four days without rain in the roiling summer heat. Scientists had discovered that plants in need of water produced a high frequency distress sound, an ultrasonic scream far outside the range of human hearing. Reagan couldn't hear the plants screaming, but she swore she could feel it.

She'd put on her running gear with a tentative smile that morning, admiring the new peach tank she'd received for Christmas, and tugging on her favourite cap, the colours of the Sydney Olympics logo faded with age. Thinking today could be the day things turned around. Now the dead woman's face stayed with her. Pale and oval-shaped with a broad forehead, defined lips, thin straight eyebrows, a cherubic nose. And those loose, wild black curls.

She could have been Reagan's twin.

It could be a coincidence. A gigantic fucking coincidence.

But there was another possibility.

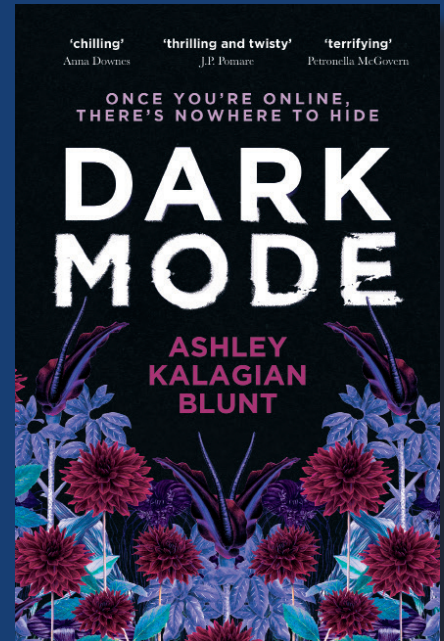
Him.

Book club questions

About the book:

Inspired by true crimes, including the Black Dahlia murder, *Dark Mode* is a psychological thriller that delves into the insidious nature of our online world, creating a creeping sense of suspense. Garden centre owner Reagan Carsen has long avoided as much of the internet as possible. One morning, she stumbles on a murder and is all the more shocked because the victim looks just like her. Further murders follow as Reagan begins to suspect her secret past is catching up with her.

Set over a sweltering Sydney summer, *Dark Mode* highlights the price we pay for surrendering our privacy one click at a time.



Enjoyed **Dark Mode**? We'd love to see your reviews on Goodreads and on our socials!

 [ultimopress](#)

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1. *Dark Mode* is ultimately about trust – the trust we put in others as well as in our devices and online services. How does this theme play out across the novel?
2. As a teenager, what lessons did Reagan learn – about friendship, dating, family and safety – that she carried into adulthood?
3. How did the use of plants influence your experience of the story? What strange plant fact surprised you most?
4. *Dark Mode* makes the point that certain types of crime are taken very seriously by the police and society, but other crimes, particularly certain types of crime against women, are taken less seriously. What's your feeling about this at the end of the book?
5. Describe Reagan and Min's friendship. How does each woman see the other?
6. Reagan often reflects on how her friendship with Min changed after they left Korea:

When she and Min had lived in Korea, they talked about their teaching work, about their students and colleagues and the forever-broken photocopier. They talked about hiking in the Taebaek mountains, about catching the high-speed KTX-Sancheon train to Busan on the long weekend. They talked about trips to Seoul to see the National Palace Museum and hunt down the Itaewon shop that stocked Iced Vovos...

In Sydney, Min talked about serial killers and DNA evidence and court proceedings, and she talked about Owen and wedding plans and her move to the north shore and her babies. Reagan talked about Cynthia's cancer treatments and her garden centre and visiting exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art they never quite managed to see. (p.176)

Is it inevitable that friendships change as each person's life changes?

7. Had you heard of the murder of the Black Dahlia, Elizabeth Short? What do you think about retired homicide detective Steve Hodel's theory on why his father may have committed the murder?

'Dr Hodel had ambitions of being an artist, had made an attempt at it when he was younger, and failed. The son's theory is that Hodel was hanging out with these surrealists and decided to prove he was willing to take greater artistic risks than all of them.' (p.120)

8. In addition to the Black Dahlia murder, characters mention several infamous true cases, including Leonard Lake and Charles Ng (p.161), Dennis Rader, who named himself 'BTK' (pp.368-9, 382), and John Edward Robinson and Keith Jespersion (p.382). Why do you think the author chose to reference these real-life crimes?
9. Reagan doesn't understand Min's interest in true crime. They discuss this on pages 172-3, and again on page 177. Whose perspective do you relate to more? Why do you think so many people are fascinated by crime narratives?
10. The manifesto on pages 136-7 is the antagonist's justification for his actions. What do you make of his perception of women and society? The author drew on real-life examples of manifestos from men who have committed extreme acts of violence. Does knowing that change your perception of the novel?
11. The deepfake technology described in the book is real. Were you aware of it? How do you feel about its potential use in society?
12. Did the ending surprise you? How did you feel at the end of the story?