

Melodie Johnson Howe: Hollywood reflections

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, NEWS-TELEGRAM ARTS EDITOR
Wednesday, 21 August 2013 11:03



Actor-turned-mystery writer Melodie Johnson Howe's 21st birthday was memorable for several reasons. Although it was 46 years ago, she remembers every detail.

"I was 21 when I signed my contract with Universal," she noted in a recent telephone interview from her home in Santa Barbara. "I married my husband [record producer Bones Howe] who had three children. My mother had a nervous breakdown. The executives at Universal asked me if I was crazy [for taking on so much]."

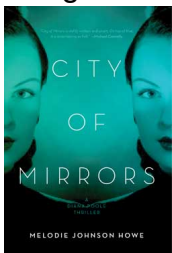
Howe has the last laugh, however.

She starred in several major motion pictures, including "Coogan's Bluff" with Clint Eastwood, where she played the star's girlfriend, "Ride to Hangman's Tree," with James Farentino and Jack Lord, and "The Rickey Nelson Story."

While she landed a solid seven-year contract with Universal, Howe knew she wanted to pursue a career in writing. She attended UCLA and studied creative writing. Her 1980 play, "The Lady of the House," was produced by The Los Angeles Theater Center.

"When I was at UCLA, the first review I got was from a kid at the back of the class who stood up and asked me how I could write with a body like that," she remembered with a laugh. "I told him I didn't write with my body."

She followed the play with her debut novel, "Mother Shadow," which was nominated for an Edgar, Anthony and Agatha. Her second novel, "Beauty Dies," was published in 1995 by Penguin.



Her new book, "City of Mirrors," began as a project for "Sisters in Crime Anthology."

"I knew I wanted to write about Hollywood, which I hadn't done to any extent in my play or my first two novels," Howe said in a press release. "I also knew I wanted an actress to be the narrator. I thought it would be more interesting if she was older, alone and had to go back to acting to earn a living. So, I gave her a recently dead husband. Voila! Diana Poole was created."

Diana, whose mother was a glamorous movie star, lives in a run-down Malibu house with a rotted deck. The heater in her ages-old Jaguar doesn't work. There are bills to pay. And old friend and producer offers her a role playing the mother to starlet Jenny Parson's character, she puts her ego aside and takes the part.

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Jenny parties hard, comes in late and blows her lines, which does not sit well with Diana and they have a heated exchange on the set.

The real trouble begins when Diana discovers Jenny's body in a dumpster the next morning.

Diana is the number one suspect, so she sets out to find the real killer. Turns out, Diana is quite the detective. She is close on the killer's tail and finds herself stuck in several precarious positions.

When asked what makes a good mystery, Howe was quick to respond, "You need a solid plot. It doesn't have to be overly complicated. It doesn't have to be the best plot ever. You just need a good solid story and you want suspense. You have to create suspense."

In the book, Diana meets a mysterious man named Leo Heath, who could be her salvation or her downfall.

"I like flaws in my heroes," Howe confessed. "Otherwise you just have a hunk of male flesh walking around."

The tension between the Diana and Heath, as she calls him, is at once dangerous and seductive. The tension reaches a fever pitch as they face down operatives from Los Angeles' treacherous underbelly.

Heath has a murky background and is not very forthcoming with secrets from his past.

Together, the two of them must team up to find Jenny's killer before the killer finds them.

While Diana is Howe's creation, the author says her heroine has distinct characteristics.

"They have their own tastes, personalities," she noted. "Diana is not a phony. She grew up in Los Angeles with a very famous movie star for a mother. She has a loner spirit. She's a survivor with serious mommy issues. We need a hero like Diana."

Writing this book helped Howe merge two aspects of her life.

"Hollywood is filled with wonderful ghosts for me," says the former star. "City of Mirrors' is the novel that brings my writing life and my acting life together. Diana Poole is another side of me just as that young actress who now shows up in reruns on TV is. But of course neither really is me. They are only reflections in a city of mirrors."

As for those Universal executives who asked her if she was crazy, the proof is in the pudding.

"I'm still married to the same man," she says with an easy laugh. "And I'm a great-grandmother, for goodness sake."

For more information on Melodie Johnson Howe, visit <http://www.melodiejohnsonhowe.com/>

For more information on "City of Mirrors," visit <http://www.pegasusbookstore.com/book/9781605984681>