

Killer In The Code: Chapter 9 transcript

Michael Connelly:

This is Michael Connelly and you are listening to Killer In the Code: Solving The Black Dahlia & Zodiac Cases. This is Chapter 9. Today we are going to talk to author William Mann, who has a new book out about the Black Dahlia case.

But before we get to that, I want to give a quick update on our investigation. As you must know by now, our suspect in the Zodiac killings and the gruesome torture and murder of Elizabeth Short is Marvin Margolis, also known as Marvin Merrill, also known as Marty Merrill, among several other names. A key piece of evidence uncovered in the investigation headed by citizen sleuth Alex Baber is the so-called Elizabeth sketch that was created and signed by Marty Merrill in 1992, at a time he was dying of cancer. The sketch is of a young, dark-haired woman and is titled Elizabeth. She is nude and the sketch depicts her from the waist up, eerily mirroring the bisection of Elizabeth Short.

There are also contour lines on the body that also mirror some of the injuries sustained by Short. In the shading surrounding the figure, Baber found a hidden word, Zodiac. The sketch was framed under glass by Merrill's son and turned over to the Baber team along with three boxes of documents and other property inherited after his father's death in 1993. We can now reveal something else hidden in the Elizabeth sketch, but first the story of how it was found.

All of the property turned over by Merrill's son was cataloged by veteran homicide detectives, Rick Jackson and Mitzi Roberts, both longtime cold case detectives, formerly with the Los Angeles Police Department. Dozens and dozens of documents and other items were listed on the inventory and a receipt given to the son. This was because it was all on loan from the son who was hopeful that the material might be used to disprove his father's connection to two of the most infamous unsolved crimes in American history.

While several items in the inventory tended to support Merrill as the suspect, the sketch was perhaps the most convincing. Jackson called it a deathbed confession. And though late in his life, Merrill knew another person whose middle name was Elizabeth, the Baber team confirmed she was much older and her physical descriptors were far different from both Elizabeth Short and the Elizabeth in the sketch.

It came time last week to return Merrill's property to his son, as was promised. But before it was delivered, a forensic photographer was brought in to document every item we had received. Thousands of photos were taken. And when it came time to shooting the sketch, it was removed from beneath the glass of its frame so it could be photographed without reflection. Sometimes a photo can pick up what cannot easily be noticed by the naked eye. I'll let Rick Jackson describe what was seen and captured through the macro lens of the camera.

Rick Jackson:

We took the glass off of the sketch and there was an indentation that extended from the left edge of the mouth curled upwards. It was probably a quarter of an inch or three-eighths of an inch, which is significant when it's a small sketch, that were curled upward toward the ear, much like the Dahlia's body was found with the curled incised wound all the way up kinda toward her temple area on both sides. The right side of the sketch's mouth is covered with the hair. So you see nothing there, but it was definitely an indentation that extended from that side of the mouth. You can really see it under the macro lens, especially with the peripheral lighting from the side. Yeah, so it was intentional. It was almost like somebody had taken maybe a dull nail and extended the mouth a little bit right from the corner. The indentation is definitely there.

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It looks like a shorter version of the incised wounds that went from both sides of Elizabeth Short's mouth by the killer. It was deliberately set right there. There's no doubt about it. It matches right in line with the curl smile. It's very, very clear.

Michael Connelly:

You can see the photo taken during the process we are talking about here under episode 9 on our website at killerintheicode.com. It is known as a Glasgow smile as it was a torture originated with criminal gangs in Glasgow, Scotland in the 1920s. According to her autopsy report, Elizabeth Short was cut in such a way while she was still alive. Alex Baber believes the indentation seen on the Elizabeth sketch leaves no doubt about who the subject of the sketch is.

Alex Baber:

I don't think that we have any other conclusion other than the fact that it is Elizabeth Short. This means that the sketch is what we thought it was. It's a representation of Elizabeth Short's last moments. So I think at this point, nobody can challenge us on what the sketch represents.

Michael Connelly:

And now that the line of indentation on the sketch subject's mouth has been seen, we realize it was there and even noticeable all along. Back in December, we posted a photo of the sketch on the website along with other extras relating to episode 2. The photo was taken before the sketch was ever taken out of glass and examined, and yet there is the line of indentation stretching from the corner of the mouth. What wasn't noticed then is clearly seen now, the Glasgow smile.

Okay, so let's move on. I am joined now by William J. Mann, who is on the road promoting his new book, *Black Dahlia: Murder, Monsters, and Madness in Mid-Century Hollywood*.

I'm not a professional critic, but I am a reader and a professional writer. And my one-word take on William's book is riveting. Maybe it's because these days I'm steeped in everything and anything Black Dahlia, but I ended up losing a night's sleep on this book.

I'm more of an audiobook guy because I can be writing when most people can be reading. So I started listening to this book a couple Fridays ago when I went to bed with the plan of listening to a few chapters and then turning it off, but I never turned it off. I just had to go through the night listening to it. I finished it the following Saturday afternoon.

It's exhaustively researched, well-written, and it's elevated. And by that, I mean, it takes this awful crime that we're going to talk about here and puts it in the context of that time in our history. A country emerging victoriously from a world war and a city on the cusp of tremendous expansion. And this is the lens through which William sees this young woman's life. I also have to say that William quite methodically and carefully goes through the many suspects in the killing of Elizabeth Short and convincingly knocks them down one by one until he reaches who he calls the last man standing. And we'll get to him, that man, in the course of our conversation.

So thanks for joining, William. You've told me that you didn't set out to find the killer in this story, that you wanted to find the victim, Elizabeth Short. So I want you to kind of get me off the hook here. I will be the first to admit that on this podcast, we have not paid enough attention to Elizabeth, the victim, but luckily you have. You made a deep dive into her short life and times. You say she had wanderlust. I would like to start with that. Tell us what Elizabeth's wanderlust, tell us about it and what she was looking for before she met her untimely and horrible end.

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William J. Mann:

Well, I think I'm not sure she even knew what she was looking for necessarily, but she was not content to stay in her small town, New England suburb of Boston. That was not what she wanted. She didn't want to be her sisters who got married or one of them went off to the service. Her mother had spent all her life really raising four daughters. Her husband had abandoned the family when Elizabeth was six. And Elizabeth was fired with some curiosity to see places beyond that small town.

She was a sickly child for a while. She'd been suffering from pleurisy. She'd had an operation for that, and she had asthma that caused the cold weather to really affect her. So her mother had agreed to let her go for part of the winters down to Florida. So she got used to traveling and spending time on her own. And she liked that. She really felt that I can find the world. I can make my own decisions. And she wanted more of that. So in the summer of 1946, she gets an offer to meet a boyfriend. It wasn't serious, but she told her mother it was, and meet him in Long Beach. She was stationed there. He was in the Army. And so she takes a bus ride across the country, stopping first in Indianapolis and then Chicago because that wanderlust, she wants to see places. She wants to meet people. And then it finally arrives in Long Beach. And I think what she was looking for was adventure. New ideas, new places, new people. Her father had left the family when she was so young that she had very little memory of him. But to her, he seemed like he was this adventurer there. He was out seeing the world and she wanted to be like him.

And she had gone to see him at one point at an earlier time. It went badly. He rejected her for a second time. So possibly in her travels, she was looking for some affirmation. Maybe some sense of her father, maybe some male approval because she did like to make friends with older men, though she was very puritanical in a way. But so long answer to say, I'm not sure she knew what she was looking for, but she was definitely looking for something and that wasn't to be found in her small town.

Michael Connelly:

In the context of that time, wasn't this a real transformative time in the country, especially for women? They had been called out of the homes to keep the country running while most of the men were off at war. And then the war's over and it's like you can't go back to being normal.

William J. Mann:

Right. Yeah. I mean, you can't see Elizabeth's story without understanding that context. This was a period when many young women were not following the old rules of staying at home, getting married, having children. They wanted to see the world a little bit more.

Women, as you say, during the war had saved the economy and they had gone into the factories, the offices, and really kept the country running while the men were away. And then when the men came home, they were encouraged to go back, put on an apron, have more babies. And for some women, that wasn't ever going to happen again. They had tasted autonomy and they wanted more of it. So Elizabeth was part of that movement. I'm not sure she was actually consciously thinking in those terms, but she was part of that movement of single women making lives for themselves in the nation's cities.

Michael Connelly:

Yeah, we see that in her history. I think you said she did a lot of couch surfing, but she also did that with other women that were also exercising their autonomy.

William J. Mann:

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Yes, absolutely.

Michael Connely:

You've already talked about the impact that her father's abandonment had on her. She also did this thing that was a pretty common thing during the wartime. That is a wartime romance where she actually got engaged to a man that was in the military that she really didn't even know. And that also ended with a big impact. Can you talk about that a little bit?

William J. Mann:

Yeah, sure. While she was in Florida, she met one of the heroes of the Flying Tigers. It was a unit that was pretty independent, but it was President Roosevelt had sanctioned it to go after and protect mainland China. And so the Flying Tigers were a heroic group of people. And Matt Gordon was the maverick of them. He was Tom Cruise. I mean, he was the guy that flew the planes and was glamorous and handsome. And Elizabeth met him one night. They had a lovely evening, and then he was flying out the next day and he asked her if she would wait for him, and she said yes. And later on, it would be seen as if this was this longtime great romance. They met once. So that's important to point out that Matt's mother later revealed that, but that shouldn't necessarily diminish the relationship. They wrote to each other frequently, and Elizabeth's head was filled with all sorts of romantic notions, and he seems to have liked her very much too, from the letters to his mother.

Unfortunately, Matt was killed in an accident. It wasn't in combat, but he was killed in an accident shortly before he was planning to come home and ask Elizabeth to marry him. He did have a ring for her. It was sent to her by one of his friends, and she was surely crushed. She was surely bereft by this. But part of me wonders, would she have really married him? I don't think she was at a point where she wanted to settle down quite yet, but who knows, because she never had the chance to make that decision.

Michael Connely:

Yeah. So she comes to LA, ends up becoming famous in death for this horrible crime. I mean, so horrible. We're still talking about it. We're still writing about it 80 years later. I guess I want to get into that fame that came and the moniker, the Black Dahlia. It really took her in a false direction, didn't it?

William J. Mann:

Yeah. The Black Dahlia is so different, completely different from Elizabeth Short. As you know, the name came only after the death. It was given to her by the press, by the newspapers. And it was a name that became the calling card for the case. And it conjured up all sorts of ideas of the sinister woman who walked by night in black sheer clothing and making connections with dangerous men and all of this. It really layers itself right into film noir, which is a genre that was coming into existence just as Elizabeth was murdered. So she becomes this huge meme in some ways in noir fiction and noir films, and it had very little to do with Elizabeth Short.

She was rather puritanical. She loved to flirt, but she rarely slept with a guy. She was very good at getting a man to buy her a hamburger while she's sitting at a lunch counter because she'd bat her eyes and say, "Oh, I'm hungry." But she wasn't a sex worker, which is what the myth would later make her out to be a sex worker or a pornographic actress or a bit part player who wants to be famous and all of that. She was none of those things. She was just a young woman who was 22 years old, let's remember, and just going from place to place, seeing what she could find.

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Michael Connelly:

So the myth is largely built by the media. And I think there was five or six newspapers in Los Angeles at that time, a very heavily competitive market. And to me, it kind of feels like the media emerged as one of the villains in this story because of what they did to her.

William J. Mann:

Yeah, I would agree that part of the blame for the original detectives not being able to zero in on a killer right away, I think was because of the distractions the media was constantly throwing at them. The two original detectives, Harry Hansen and Finis Brown, in my opinion, were good detectives. They were doing their job. They knew how to research these kinds of crimes, though this one was obviously beyond anything they had seen up until that point. But it was a way of keeping the truth from coming out because in some ways the media didn't want the truth. They didn't want the story to be over. It was selling a lot of newspapers for them. Jimmy Richardson of the *Los Angeles Examiner* said that the Dahlia case was selling more newspapers than Pearl Harbor. So they made sure that there were column inches available for the Dahlia case on every front page. So every front page had some Dahlia news. And that's not just the *Examiner*, it was also the *Herald-Express*, the *Daily News*. Even the *Times*, though they were a little more sober, but the *Times* also had that. There it was on page two.

And so if they didn't have new Dahlia news, they made stuff up. They literally made stuff up. And so Harry Hansen and Finis Brown are obligated, Captain Donahue would say, "Go investigate this. Somebody's just confessed over at the *Examiner*." And they'd have to stop what they were doing and go over and examine the latest crazy confessor. So yeah, the media is one of the reasons why, and not just one of the reasons, but one of the main reasons, why the detectives were unable to zero in on somebody early on.

Michael Connelly:

Yeah, I think it was Brown, one of those two guys, Brown or Hansen. And they testified to the grand jury in 1949, said they had 300 suspects total. They had something like 19 confessors. And so even when they whittled it down to a list of 22, I mean, that is a massive list in itself.

William J. Mann:

Absolutely.

Michael Connelly:

It's no wonder stuff, things slip through, including the guy you call the last man standing. So I guess you kind of already answered this, but I was going to say that it wasn't a state-of-the-art investigation. It wasn't really even a textbook investigation. The department had budget issues. Sometimes these detectives didn't even have a car they could use, but let's talk about that guy, the last man standing. Marvin Margolis, he's the same suspect that we've landed on in this podcast. You quite methodically knocked down that list of 22 prime suspects until there was only Marvin Margolis left. Why didn't you knock him off the list?

William J. Mann:

Well, because Margolis is the only suspect who contains both qualities that the detectives speculated needed to determine who this killer is. So he had both the how and the why, which if "how + why = who" was one FBI equation that's used. And he had the how because he had been in the military and he

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had served in a medical unit. So he assisted in surgical procedures and he had the why, which is the rationale or the motivation for killing. When he was discharged, he had terrible PTSD and was discharged with a 50% psychiatric disability. And the psychiatrist at the time said he could be dangerous. He didn't use these phrases, but he was a loose cannon. And those two attributes do not turn up in any of the other suspects. He also has other circumstantial evidence that makes me say, of all of them, he's the only one I can't rule out. He's the only one who does not have something in his story that just disqualifies him. And for the earlier candidates, whether they be Mark Hansen or Carl Balsiger, they don't have the surgical ability. They could not have conducted that bisection. They did not have the ability to do that. Somebody like Balsiger too, he was a fraudulent guy. He was arrested several times, but at the same time, he didn't possess the rage at society that is needed. He got away with stuff, so he wasn't really raging against society. He got his way against society. The same is true with Glynn Wolfe, who was another suspect. They might have been sociopaths, but they weren't angry sociopaths. They knew how to get what they wanted from society without being frustrated.

Marvin Margolis was constantly frustrated. He was never given the praise when he was in the military. He wanted more experience in the operating room, was always denied that. He was put into the pharmacy instead of the surgery centers. His father had told him he would never make any good, that he was never going to be anything from an early age. And then when he goes to, he enrolls at University of Southern California, he's constantly dropping out of his classes. He can't hack it. And his professors are telling him, "Yeah, you don't have it. You don't have what it takes." So this is a guy with anger and resentment at the world, plus has the surgical skills to do what was done to Elizabeth Short.

I can't 100% say he was the killer because we know there's records that haven't been released, but he's the only one that I can't rule out. And as you say, he is the last man standing. And I think he was the last man standing for the detectives at the time too.

Michael Connelly:

There's a lot of people out there who says he was eliminated and I think he was initially. And that was one of the things where they were overwhelmed and they checked the box with him, believed him, and moved on. But your study of the records that are available, what is the evolution of that, of Marvin Margolis in terms of whether he was eliminated and when, and whether he was then reinstated as a key suspect?

William J. Mann:

Yeah, early on he was investigated, he was questioned. And the other reason he was questioned was because his roommate, Bill Robinson, who had also lived with Elizabeth Short and Marjorie Graham, with Marvin, he came forward and said, "Okay, I know this girl, I lived with her." And they said, "Well, who else lived with you?"

And he said, "Marvin Margolis." "We need to talk to him." And he said, "Well, he doesn't want to come in." So he's then forced to come in, apparently, because he does speak with Hansen and Brown, and he has an alibi for that night, of the night of the murder. His wife. He's recently gotten married and his wife says he was with me. So spousal alibis are always a little bit suspicious, but for the time being, they put all, Marvin Margolis aside, because they had a new suspect coming in every day, whether that be Robert Manley or Lynn Martin.

There was always somebody new to investigate. And it's not until the district attorney steps in around 1948, 49, that Marvin reemerges from the records. I think Frank Jemison was going through them and probably said to Finis Brown, "Well, what about this guy? Look at it. He's got surgical experience. He was

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a boyfriend. He has this rage. Why not him?" And after getting more information about him, Finis Brown actually tells the grand jury he could be a very good suspect.

And that's really the last record we have before the district attorney closes down its investigation. And it is clear from some of the newspaper records I found was that Brown began interviewing people about Marvin Margolis. And why I say that is he goes to Boston to interview Marjorie Graham. And Marjorie Graham would've known Marvin Margolis. He's the only suspect he could have been going to Marjorie to ask about.

So, I think by 1950 certainly, Marvin had risen back up in prominence in the detective's research.

Michael Connelly:

And by then he's under another name in the wind, right?

William J. Mann:

That's right. That's right. He had changed his name. He moved to Kansas where he reinvents himself as an artist. And interestingly, when he's in Kansas, he begins telling another story about himself. Instead of being the frustrated surgical assistant that he was, now he's a member of the Flying Tigers. And if your listeners recall, Matt Gordon was a member of the Flying Tigers. And suddenly Marvin is describing himself as if he was Matt Gordon. And you wonder, did Elizabeth ever compare him unfavorably to when she dated him? Well, you're nothing like my Matt Gordon, who was a hero and he flew planes and did that upset Margolis.

Michael Connelly:

The psychology of that is really interesting. The guy's experience in Okinawa is hero stuff.

William J. Mann:

Yes, exactly.

Michael Connelly:

But that wasn't good enough for him to tell the newspaper.

William J. Mann:

That's right.

Michael Connelly:

I don't know. There's something deep about that and him leaving clues if you ask me, but I'm not a psychologist.

William J. Mann:

Yep. I agree.

Michael Connelly:

Well, you set out to find the victim, not necessarily the killer, but I think you found them both. It's a really good book and I appreciate you spending some time and letting me use you to deliver some information about Elizabeth.

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William J. Mann:

Well, I'm happy to do it because Elizabeth Short, I think, deserves to be remembered. Her death was grizzly and sensational, but her life, while it was ordinary and unremarkable, is still more important than her death.

You've been listening to Killer In The Code: Solving The Black Dahlia & Zodiac Cases. This episode was written and produced by me, Michael Connelly, with editing by Terrill Lee Lankford and music by Mark Henry Phillips. We'll be back with Chapter 10 soon. Thank you for listening.