



The Man Everybody Was Afraid Of

Joseph Hansen

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In the small town of La Caleta, Dave Brandstetter investigates the murder of a very unpopular cop

When Ben Orton's head is found bludgeoned by a heavy flower pot, the people of La Caleta are stunned—not because their police chief has been murdered, but because no one thought to do it sooner. A bruising, violent man, Ben had a commitment to order that did not always take the law into account. But as insurance investigator Dave Brandstetter is about to find out, the corruption in Ben's police force did not die with him.

By the time Dave arrives in the fading fishing town, a young activist has already been arrested for the murder. Only Dave seems to care that the evidence against the accused is laughably thin. As the people of La Caleta try their best to thwart his investigation, Dave must do whatever it takes to catch Ben's killer.

The Man Everybody Was Afraid Of is book four in the Dave Brandstetter Mystery series, which also includes *Troublemaker* and *Skinflick*.

The Man Everybody Was Afraid Of Details

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Nikki says

This is one of those mysteries where you can't root for the mystery to be solved for the sake of the victim, a man who was a bully, a racist, and thoroughly unpleasant in almost all his interactions. Instead, the characters surrounding them need to get their hooks into you, and in this case that didn't really work for me. Much more central was Dave's sadness over his father's illness, his disconnection with Doug, and the connection he does form with Cecil — one that rather surprises a reader familiar with Dave, who doesn't seem like the type to be very appreciative of cheating, and yet does so himself.

It gets a little bit too convoluted in solving the mystery, in order to bring in a bunch of red herrings and implicate several different characters. That made it frustrating, and not quite as smooth a read for me as the earlier books. It's still enjoyable, but not a favourite.

Originally posted here.

Daniel says

Some rambly thoughts on the 4th Brandstetter novel.

This is a good series. I don't know why it took me so long to start reading it despite being aware of it for decades and the general lack of non-self-pitying lgbt fic back in the day. That said, this is by far the cheesiest installment in the series so far.

By the end of the novel, which in the kindle edition I read comes along surprisingly at 85%, it seems practically the entire population of whatever rando town this takes place in must have simultaneously decided to come have it out with our dead police chief in the interval between his murder and the police finding his body. It's completely absurd and unbelievable.

Another absurd thing is the tendency of gay detectives to always end up solving gay crimes. An argument might be made that this is a pleasant exception to that. I don't think this is too spoilery but I'll tag it just in case, (view spoiler)

This series is definitely on the gay side of the gay vs m/m divide with many of the attitudes toward relationships and monogamy that are advanced as "gay" in arguments about gay lit vs m/m. Some readers may be put off by some of that in this book in particular as there's pretty clear "cheating", though it's not super hidden.

I like that Brandstetter has a real life outside of his work, but especially that it doesn't really intrude into the story. I can't stand when writers claim to be writing mysteries but the detective's personal drama overshadows any actual crime or investigation they're nominally investigating. Hansen strikes a good balance as far as I'm concerned, which is to say it's almost all investigation, and very little personal drama, though he manages to clearly advance the character's personal life as the series progresses.

There's a noticeable linearity in these books. By which I mean the investigation follows a clear path, scene/interview A leads directly to B, which leads directly to C, and so on. That sounds kind of bad in the abstract, but I don't think it is at all. And offhand I'm not sure what it being so noticeable to me in this series says about the genre in the whole.

Lena♥Ribka says

4,4 stars!

As always, a superb writing and a good done mystery.

James Thane says

When a small-town police chief named Ben Orton is killed, the P.D., which includes his son Jerry, wastes no time at all actually investigating the crime. Instead, they immediately arrest a gay rights activist who had threatened to kill the chief and whose tote bag was found next to the body. Case closed.

Not for insurance investigator Dave Brandstetter, though. His company, Medallion insurance, is on the hook for \$75,000, a fair amount of money in 1978, when this book was first published. Dave needs to know that the police have actually arrested the real killer, and he cannot afford to do as sloppy an investigation as the police have conducted.

The case comes at a very bad time for Dave. His father is in the hospital, seriously ill and perhaps dying. Dave's love life is also something of a mess at the moment. His lover, Doug, is closing down his mother's business and putting Mom in a nursing home--an emotionally draining proposition. Doug also seems to be missing the faithful gene. But Dave has a job to do and there's really nothing he can do for his Dad, so he heads on up to La Caleta for a talk with the grieving widow.

He discovers a mother and son who insist that Ben Orton was a saint and the best lawman ever to stride across the West, possibly since John Wayne. Others, though, describe the former chief as a narrow-minded bigot who was a law unto himself and who administered "justice" as he saw fit. Orton hated hippies, gays, blacks, liberals and anyone who dared criticize him. And as soon as Dave begins his investigation, he gets a taste of the same medicine. Even in a small town like La Caleta, things can get pretty murky; people are not always who or what they appear to be, and a determined investigator like Dave Brandstetter can find himself in a whole lot of trouble.

This is a complex tale with any number of suspects. The story moves swiftly along and it's aged pretty well. Fans of classic crime fiction should enjoy it. (view spoiler)

Jeffrey Round says

The Man Everybody Was Afraid Of by Joseph Hansen (Henry Holt and Company 1978)

My respect for Hansen deepens with every volume of his Dave Brandstetter series. Brandstetter wasn't the first openly gay protagonist in a mystery series, but in many ways he's still the best. This, his fourth volume, deals with the murder of a publicly admired but privately hated chief of police whose record as a defender of public decency is marred by his behind-the-scenes vigilantism. Every Brandstetter tale is a watercolour of the California scene, painted to perfection, but with something malevolent hidden at its heart. By the book's end, the watercolour has become a deftly interlocking puzzle, wherein every character has an overlapping motive for having wanted the victim dead, but it's not till the last piece is inserted that we realize who actually had the guts to go through with it.

Of course, Hansen had a personal motive for creating the series which, in his words, was to "right some wrongs" when it came to public perception of homosexuals. But unlike many gay writers who followed, he let the message be secondary to the story, thereby ensuring the integrity of the work. That Brandstetter is also an individual of rare integrity is beside the point. Hansen was telling us what most of us know: gays are no different from anyone else when it comes to portioning out vices and virtues. No pity necessary, no applause required. If we want to be respected for what we are, he seems to be saying, it will have to be because we aren't different, rather than because we are.

Dena says

3.75*

Sofia says

This one had Dave chasing his tail and me chasing after him. Everyone had a motive for murder, everyone had possibility and then WHAM. All done in Hansen's usual impeccable succinct style as always.

On the personal side Dave is still chasing, not so sure where he is. His relationship with his father keeps unfolding bit by bit. Not so easy to have it cut and dried. label something and put it in a box. People are complicated.

BR with Rosa

Edina Rose says

4.5 stars

So far, probably one of my fav of the series. The mystery is good, and Dave's personal life is difficult. His dad died, and his relationship with Doug is not working. Doug is not exactly happy with him and he.. strays, repetitively. At the beginning, Doug hid it, he lied, he kept the pretence. But in this book, he does not bother anymore. Dave meets a young journalist intern, a black guy called Cecil, who is 30 years younger. They have great chemistry but it seems Dave is just going to be single again.

Ronald Wilcox says

I usually enjoy the Brandstetter series a lot but this one seemed fairly muddled and hard to follow as compared to previous ones in the series. Police Chief Ben Orton is found dead. A bag is found near his body that belongs to a gay activist and Orton was definitely not a friend to the LGBT community. It seems like an open and shut case but Dave suspects the family may actually be involved in the death so investigates to see if they are able to receive his life insurance policy benefits. It seems like several people hated Orton, making it difficult to pin down the killer.

Toby says

Hansen's Brandstetter mysteries are highly enjoyable, easy to read, complex tales of social issues in the face of rich WASP male dominated Californian society. Much like Mosley's Rawlins series these books are about crimes committed against minorities by the WASP types as well as by the minorities in reaction to their treatment by those despicable rich white dudes who have made the world such a shit place to live for everyone else. That is the road Hansen has trodden almost by rote in his first three entries but, thankfully, this fourth one mixes things up a bit; the bigotry and crimes against minority is still present, but this time it's a WASP on WASP crime that's the focus of the insurance investigation. That his protagonist passes for a straight rich WASP type is a nice touch from Hansen, allowing him to observe the abhorrent behaviours from a position of trust, and adds a layer of discomfort for the reader as you are left empathising with Brandstetter who's only reaction is to brush this behaviour aside despite knowing the insults and assumptions would also be aimed at him. It's strong stuff if you allow it be but due to Hansen's obvious skill at writing a compelling mystery can be read by the unobservant/unaware as a straight detective piece. This is why I keep coming back to this series.

Bill Kerwin says

The fourth adventure of death-claims investigator David Brandstetter. Sheriff Orton has been bludgeoned to death, but is the outrageous gay activist whose knapsack was found near the body really responsible? There are many other suspects, including the adulterous sheriff's wife, the old-school homosexual rights advocate, and the young black man the sheriff framed in a marijuana bust when he found the young man was dating his daughter. Throw in some pre-Columbian artifacts of mysterious provenance, and you've got yourself a tangle of possibilities.

As I've said before, I like these books more for Brandstetter's hardboiled persona and the Southern California

gay milieu than for the plots themselves. I found this one particularly interesting for the tension it shows between traditional homosexual rights advocates (lobbying quietly, accumulating votes) and the in-your-face style of the the post-Milk age (running on to the senate floor and kissing legislators, for example). As always, Brandstetter is undemonstrative and unapologetic in his sexual orientation, and this gives the book a quiet strength.

Rosa, really says

BR with la bella Sofia.

And look, I have a copy of the *actual book*!

Nick is terribly excited. Terribly.

Y says

I found this in an out-of-the-way library and sat down to have a read. Two hours later, I realized I did not have time to get to my next class and ended up being twenty minutes late. Long story short, this is basically the gay version of your average (het) detective story-- it was compelling, fast-paced, twisty, and the romance was understated and sweet. Really, really happy I stopped to check out the LGBT section.

Kaje Harper says

It's been a while since I read the first of these mysteries but they stand alone well, although series purists will want to follow the ongoing threads of Dave Brandstetter's life that parallel the mystery. The original publication date was 1978, and the story is a reflection of the times. The civil rights era is winding down from peak intensity but racial inequality threads through the story; HIV has not yet raised its evil head; gay rights are a breath of hope, a decade after Stonewall, but far from a foregone conclusion.

Against this backdrop, we again meet Dave Brandstetter, laconic insurance investigator, out to prove that the murder of a local police chief has not been solved by the arrest of the obvious suspect. If it was one of the chief's nearest and dearest responsible, Dave can save his employer a lot of life insurance money (in 1978 dollars), but most of all, Dave loves a puzzle.

The writing style is somehow both sparse and evocative, low on emotion but with undercurrents aplenty. As Dave slogs through a complex case - investigating the death of a man with plenty of enemies, including an estranged daughter, a mistress or two, and some questionable business connections - he also is under life pressures. His father is in the hospital, and may not survive. His lover, Doug, continues to insist on an open relationship. And there are gay men whose interactions with the dead police chief were far from friendly,

including the obvious suspect, meaning that this gay investigator must decide how far and with whom to sympathize in his beleaguered community.

Dave is an interesting character. He's come to terms with being gay, and yet he expresses discomfort with the more flamboyant members of the gay community at times. He's in a relationship that isn't satisfying to him, but he still inclines toward monogamy. And Doug is also in a bit of crisis, dealing with an aging mother and immediate pressures, yet neither of them is quite present for the other in the simultaneous crises.

Dave wants to see justice done, as he faces a case where irredeemable injustice has already deeply damaged more than one player. The interactions of the personal and the puzzle make a fascinating but low-key read.

Sylvia says

Bad people and sad people. The melancholic mood reminds me a bit of the Scandinavian mysteries I used to read.
