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The Dead Circus: A Novel

By John Kaye



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John Kaye's two novels have established him as one of today's most stunning chroniclers of Los Angeles, a city of rockers and private eyes, script girls and wiseguys, innocents and Charles Manson. In *The Dead Circus* it's 1986. Gene Burk is an ex-cop, fanatical record collector, and private eye. Devastated by the death of his fiancée, Gene becomes obsessed with an unsolved mystery from his days with the LAPD: the late-sixties death of up-and-coming rockabilly star Bobby Fuller. As Gene attempts to reconstruct the circumstances that led to Fuller's demise, he is unexpectedly contacted by a survivor of the Manson Family who needs Gene's help to bury her past. As Gene travels back in history to the moment Manson partied alongside Bobby Fuller and the Beach Boys, John Kaye spins a masterful, disturbing portrait of twenty years in Los Angeles, of the promise of the sixties and the hellish realities of the morning after.



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The Dead Circus: A Novel By John Kaye Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #1869496 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Grove Press
- Published on: 2003-07
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.40" h x .87" w x 5.50" l, .85 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 336 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

A seemingly ordinary tragedy plunges an ex-cop-turned-detective into the murky, bizarre world of the Manson family in screenwriter and film director Kaye's second novel, an overplotted but riveting noir thriller set mostly in 1960s and '70s Los Angeles. The action begins in 1986, when former LAPD cop Gene Burk (brother of Ray Burk, the central figure in Kaye's debut, *Stars Screaming*) is shattered by the death of his fiancée, a flight attendant named Alice Hanson, in an airline crash. When Burk inherits her effects, he discovers some letters that link her to a fictional woman from the Manson cult named Alice McMillan. Burk is able to connect McMillan's comings and goings to the death of '60s rockabilly star Bobby Fuller, whose mysterious demise possibly ordered by Frank Sinatra when the star dated Sinatra's daughter is an obsession of Burk's. Kaye populates his novel with enough suspects and shady Hollywood characters to fill two murder mysteries, but the story remains reasonably tight despite the abundance of characters and the presence of several tangential subplots. Kaye does a nice job with scenes of real-life entertainers, and the lurid details of Manson's decadent lifestyle add narrative momentum. While the climax doesn't quite justify the buildup, there are some chilling final sequences. Kaye could stand to rein in his tendency for busy plotting, but this book packs a major wallop nonetheless.

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From [Booklist](#)

(*Starred Review*) This evocative novel is a sequel of sorts to Kaye's earlier book, *Stars Screaming* (1997), which focused on screenwriter Ray Burk. Set in 1986, this one focuses on Ray's older brother, Gene, who has just lost his fiancée in an airplane crash. Afraid that he will lose himself entirely to his grief, Gene starts to obsess about the 20-year-old mysterious death of rockabilly newcomer Bobby Fuller. He had worked the case, unsuccessfully, when he was a cop with the LAPD, and as he begins to reopen old leads, he starts to shake up the wrong people, putting his own life in danger. He is also contacted by a former member of the Manson family who needs his help in putting that life behind her once and for all. Kaye calls up a richly atmospheric and surprisingly small-town version of L.A., where everyone seems to be connected and who becomes famous is completely arbitrary. Masterfully creating and sustaining a palpable, pure, elegiac paean to lost hopes and dreams, Kaye seems to suggest that the human impulse toward yearning and hopefulness can exist unmarred by and side by side with rampant corruption and pure evil. Although Kaye himself is a screenwriter, his literary narrative can legitimately be called anti-Hollywood because it never feels forced and is entirely unpredictable. *Joanne Wilkinson*

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Review

"John Kaye knows a lot of stories about the city [Los Angeles], and he tells them well....The Dead Circus is a great baggy monster of a book, shifting shape, made up of tales of murder, desertion, and love, as full of life as the city it describes."

"A looming thundercloud of a book; it begins in a Southern California that seems permanently infused with sunshine and ends in one that has been forever submerged beneath the dark surf of a noirish nightmare....Kaye [is] such a compassionate writer."

"Kaye makes real (and humane) what James Ellroy fakes....[A] rich and troubling book."

"A fine new novel...Kaye...explores two of the most tantalizing unanswered questions about Manson."

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Larry Parrish:

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