

A Conversation with Melodie Johnson Howe  
Author of **CITY OF MIRRORS**

**Q: CITY OF MIRRORS is a great title. How did you come up with it?**

A: I had a difficult time finding a title. Sunset Boulevard, the famous street in Los Angeles, is almost a character in the book. So I had such titles as Taking Sunset, Leaving Sunset. Yuck! I was talking about my plight with a writer friend who kept saying the title has to reflect Hollywood and Los Angeles. I told her that the Indians once referred to Los Angeles as 'The City of Smoke'. (LA is a basin and it holds the fog and mist and what would later become smog). Musing, she said, "City of Smoke... City of Smoke and Mirrors." We looked at each other then blurted in unison, "City of Mirrors." Sometimes two heads are better than one. The title captures a city of constant reflected images and self love, but it also has enough mystery to make it work for a suspense novel. Now I'm trying to find a title for the next novel.

**Q: You spent many years acting in Hollywood—with actors such as Clint Eastwood, James Caan, and Alan Alda—and CITY OF MIRRORS exposes the moral decay of the industry. What experiences did you have that informed this aspect of the story?**

A: It's not just Hollywood. Moral decay is pervasive in our society. Look at what's happening in football. Look at our politics. How did we end up glorifying Snookie, Kim, and Paris? Who are these women? They are Moral Decay for Dummies.

Hollywood has its own particular kind of immorality. It's survival of the fittest. Betrayal is a way of life. William Faulkner once said, "Hollywood is the only place where you can get knifed in the back while climbing a ladder." In *City of Mirrors* betrayal is another form of moral decay and it permeates the entire book. Yes, there are actors, producers, and directors who would kill their mother for an Oscar. It's not a very subtle business. If people think you are gaining a little attention, a little fame they will want a piece of you. A little chip off your soul. I remember being alone in the make-up room on the Universal lot and staring at myself in the mirror. I could feel this abyss between my lush reflection and myself. It frightened me.

**Q: The life of an actress is much different from the life of a writer. One is very much in the public eye whereas the other can be completely isolated. How did you transition from actress to author?**

A: It wasn't easy. But you have to remember I always wanted to be a writer. When I finally got the courage to quit acting everybody thought I was crazy. And told me so. You have to be a little bit crazy to go against the grain. What I did not anticipate was the isolation, and the self-discipline that writing requires. I was never late to the set because a hundred people were waiting for me, depending on me. There was nobody waiting or depending on me when I walked into my office alone. There was no chair with my name on it, nobody to tell me how great I was, to get me coffee, to fix my hair. The empty page was daunting. But I wanted this more than anything. Soon I began to like the quiet that surrounded me, that allowed my imagination to flourish. Slowly, I learned self-discipline. I had to care more than anybody. Writing took a different kind of creative strength than acting, but I knew I had it in me. When I got my very first check for *The Lady of the House*, a play I wrote, I knew I had become a professional.

**Q: What are some of your most fond memories of your time acting?**

A: The camaraderie among the crew and the actors. The practical jokes and shared humor. There are a lot of good people in the business. And I loved listening to actors sharing stories like a band of gypsies sitting around their camp fire, very chic camp fire to be sure.

**Q: Is it true that CITY OF MIRRORS came from a short story collection based on your book's protagonist, Diana Poole? Why did you decide to develop this into a novel?**

A: I was asked to write a short story for the *Sisters in Crime Anthology*. I knew that I wanted to write about Hollywood, which I hadn't done to any extent in my play or my first two novels. 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. And her age would give a very particular female perspective to the story. *Voila!* Diana Poole was created. A character in a short story should be done with just few deft brushstrokes. As I continued to write the short stories and Ellery Queen continued to publish them, I realized that Diana would also make a great protagonist in a novel. The Diana Poole I thought I knew in the short stories paled against the large canvas of a novel. I had to create a more complex past for her. So I gave her not only a dead husband, but also a dead mother that she had never made peace with.

**Q: Were any of the characters in CITY OF MIRRORS inspired by real people? Is Diana Poole really you?**

A: I honestly can't look at any character that I created and say that is so and so. Writers are scavengers. We take bits and pieces from people we know and love, from people we know and don't love, and from people we don't know at all. We eavesdrop on strangers in Starbucks and restaurants. I was in Nordstrom's trying on shoes when I saw a man dressed in baggy Bermuda shorts, a Hawaiian shirt, and wearing Uggs on his feet. Uggs? Why Uggs? He looked like a big kid. His image stayed with me, and Ryan Johns, Diana Poole's neighbor, was born. In the same day I lost a beautiful paisley wrap. A short story called, *Losing It*, came out of that. All in all, not a bad day for a writer. I suppose Diana is me only in that we are both actresses. We understand Hollywood and have a love/hate relationship with it. But am I writing about myself? No. Diana is much more "cool" than I am.

**Q: Identity is a strong theme throughout this novel, particularly for Diana Poole—a forty something actress trying to make her big comeback, living in the shadow of her more famous deceased actress mother. Do you think most actors struggle with identity? Why? Was this a problem for you?**

A: Yes, it was. I think most actors struggle with identity. When we are children we're free to imagine and take on all kinds of imaginary roles, but as we grow older we build defenses. Actors always have to break down their defenses so they can appear natural in what is basically an unnatural situation. How natural can you be with lights and cameras on you? But that's the actor's job. I think most actors feel like a fake in some way. They create images that are not connected to their own sense of self. They are treated like royalty. The late James Gandolfini said the saddest thing to a friend. He said, "I just want to be a man." Actors work out of insecurity, out of fear of the void. Laurence Olivier is said to have thrown up before every stage performance. If you really know

who you are I don't think you'd be an actor, or at least a very good one. That very lack of confidence is what drives actors to be better, to me more believable. To be accepted. I'm still insecure, but then I'm an actress and I don't show it.

**Q: What's next for you?**

A: I'm writing a new Diana Poole novel. In this book she has been able to afford to have her rotting wood deck fixed and get the heater in her old Jag working properly.