



Neon Mirage

Max Allan Collins

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Chicago, 1946. Gambling chief James Ragen is shot right before the eyes of the man hired to protect him: A-1 Detective Agency's Nate Heller. Which mob boss hungry for Ragen's gambling action has made a fool of Heller: cold-blooded Capone heir Jake "Greasy Thumb" Guzik or hotheaded, movie star-handsome Bugsy Siegel? The answer's not in the mean streets of Chicago, because the city's mob wars have moved west, to the glitz of Hollywood and the fabulous-and illicit-potential of a shabby little desert way station they call Las Vegas(.

Neon Mirage Details

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From Reader Review Neon Mirage for online ebook

Richard Block says

Heller Goes Bugs

Neon Mirage is Nate Heller's 1945-46 account of his imagined Bugsy Siegel case, and it keeps up the entertainment standard of the first three Heller novels. MAC does his usual noir historical fiction, interjecting his Zelig like Nate Heller into real life events with real bad guys, outsmarting most of them and coming out like a slightly battered rose.

Despite all the artifice, these Heller books work because the detective is so likeable, shrewd and the background is so beautifully woven into the detective story, it seems natural. This is some trick, and it is based on a tonne of research and hard work. Some of this tale stretches credibility to the breaking point - especially the romance with Peggy Hogan, whom our hero loves, gets jilted by and ends up marrying. But that's a small price to pay for so satisfying a tale. As usual, MAC resolves the mystery part of the story with panache, a fact most appreciated by this reader, who has seen it all before. He springs it on you and it's perfect.

Doug says

Colorful historical fiction

It's not an action-packed nail-biting thriller, but it's an entertaining read none the less. Based on real-life characters and events from the Chicago mob scene in the early 1900s, after Nathan's assignment to protect his friend turns deadly, the investigation which follows leaves him with more professional mob connections than he cares for.

Greg Trosclair says

This one was a slow start but became quite engaging. What I enjoy about Max Allan Collins Nate Heller series are the historical tie ins and how his character fits into the history so seamlessly. This book covers Heller's experience in early Vegas and his dealings with Bugsy(don't call him that) Siegel. I enjoy Collins characters voice. It feels real. This was pretty good.

Art says

Three of my favorites genres intersect in the Nate Heller series: mystery, historical fiction and a touch of alternate history. The series makes its way from Prohibition Chicago (with Ness, Capone and Nitti) to the JFK assassination. It's clever, well-written and grounded in fact. This time around, Heller gets involved with Bugsy Siegal, Virginia Hill and the founding of the neon mirage that is Las Vegas. Along the way, Heller finds time to increase his presence in LA, where he will become private eye to the stars, and to start building his business into a nationwide concern. Organized crime is always a presence, although it takes center stage here. When I started the series (admittedly with the last three books), it seemed too daunting to go back 40

years (and 14 books). But now that I have started the journey, I am eager to follow Heller's growth and see what history we can encounter along the way.

Vincent Lombardo says

Not the strongest one in the series so far. But a weak Collins novel is still a pretty damn good novel. Love the characters especially Heller but felt the plot a little light and it seemed to drag a little. As much as i loved the ending and loved that it connected back to the events in Chicago at the beginning of the novel but wished the ending was more satisfying.

Jeff J. says

Another great entry in the Nathan Heller historical crime series. In the fourth book in the series Heller encounters Bugsy Siegel. A few years ago I stayed at the Flamingo hotel while attending a conference in Las Vegas, so I enjoyed getting some background on its construction and central role in Vegas history. My one disappointment in the book was that Collins failed to write an afterword discussing where he embellished the true story.

Ken Bour says

I am a devotee of detective Nate Heller and Max Allan Collins' writing style. This particular story covers the late 1930-1947 criminal underworld based in Chicago and winding up in Las Vegas at Ben ("Bugsy") Siegel's financially ruinous attempts to bring the Flamingo Hotel and Casino to fruition. As a fan of the movie "Bugsy," I was pleased that Collins' story line tracked pretty closely. Overall, this was an enjoyable continuation of the Heller detective series.

Jeffrey Cavanaugh says

An enjoyable romp that explores the seedy, interconnected worlds of mob-tainted national racing wires and the glittering, newly-built gambling palaces of late '40s Las Vegas. As usual, our hard-boiled hero serves as the author's eyewitness to, and often unwilling participant in, underworld history.

Neilie J says

This for me, is the most disjointed of the Nate Heller stories. Although it's held together by historical events, it somehow comes off like two different books jammed haphazardly together. It starts by focusing on Chicago mobster Jim Ragen but mid way, moves to examine the L.A./Las Vegas world of mobster Bugsy Siegel. Yes, the two men had business interests (and possibly contract killings) in common, but the narrative here feels dissonant. The result is, by the end of the story you've forgotten completely about the characters who served as the catalysts for the action.

Still, Heller's fun to follow around and once again Collins unabashedly resorts to a hefty dose of name-dropping to keep things interesting. Now if only he'd stop describing characters as "patting the air" and avoid over-using the word "natty".

HBalikov says

It's been less than two months since I finished Collins' "Nitti trilogy." I didn't stay away long from following the further adventures of Nate Heller, P.I.

Why? Because Collins is a writer who has all the skills and knows how to use them, even in what is probably the longest running noir tribute to The Windy City. And, he gets it all so right! It is obvious that he has researched Chicago up and down. The neighborhoods feel right, and I knew many of them. His command of history is not a veneer on top of the story but blended into every paragraph. Take for example Bronzeville, a bit of "negro history" which I have other more scholarly works in my bookcase. Collins version is totally consistent with them, yet he brings it more alive to those of us who didn't live in that era.

The era is just post World War II, 1946. Crime is still part of everyday life in Chicago. Frank Nitti, we have learned, was the criminal who made crime a regular business in Chicago by being a "businessman" about it. Just like Nate Heller is a businessman who now runs a much larger detective agency. The details and the wider circle of personalities that Collins includes flesh out a story that gives insight (somewhat different than in Puzo's The Godfather) about how (and why) Las Vegas became what it now is.

Nate has to walk a narrow path between competing gangs and among the rich and infamous as he looks for motivation in the attempted assassination of the head of a big money racing toutsheet. That guy also happens to be the uncle of Nate's current love interest. And Nate is displaying all his skills and foibles as he moves down that path. Part of what I appreciate in Collins' writing is that, while each story is told from Nate's point of view, I don't have to always like Nate or agree with him while I am totally captive to this fast moving plot.

Now that I have finished this book, I can say that Collins isn't coasting in any way. There is none of that "variations on theme" stuff that many series authors fall into. Nate has grown up, even if he hasn't quite matured. His problems are true to his age and the age he lives in. And, the edginess of it all is still front and center.

Debbie says

I started out liking this right up there with other Nate Heller's I've read, but then it seemed to lose any semblance of a plot. the first half in Chicago is about Nate's love life and the murder of a local wires man. Then it slows way down and eventually Nate ends up in California and Las Vegas with the likes of Virginia Hill, whom he does not like, and Ben (don't call me Bugsy) Segal. At the very end the first murderis answered by the second. It still has a lot of local and era color to it and Nate's great cynical view of life like this comment on being offered much more money for a job he had already turned down, "that raised my eyebrows and lowered my standards."

Zach says

NOT THE BEST NATE HELLER!!

Okay. This has most of the elements of Nate Heller, Nate involved in moment of American History (ie development of Las Vegas), gangsters, and women.

Other Nate Heller novels Max Allen Collins creates suspense/mystery surrounding a real historical event (ie who really shot Huey Long, what really happened at Roswell, the shooting at the 1932 Democratic Convention) by combining it with great historic details.

The character of Nate also is usually interesting as he is definitely gray--he is a former Chicago cop who played on both sides of the line and continues to be associated with the Chicago Outfit. He is also not opposed to killing or setting one up where necessary.

The problem is that in this novel there is not the same historic elements and Heller is missing his edge. Regarding the historic angle, the fight over race wires between Reagan and Guzik is interesting, but the part with Ben Seigel and Virginia Hill was disappointing. Unlike his other novels, Collins does not bring in much new historic angle. If you have seen the movie Bugsy or read James Ellroy's American Tabloid you have seen/heard all the same characters and angles ie George Raft, Mickey Cohen, or that Siegel was killed by Luciano and Lansky for going over budget/ripping off the NY Combination.

The other disappointment is that Nate does not have his edge. Much of the novel is spent with him and his relationship with Peg Reagen. She has way too much time in the novel. For being the niece of a Chicago mob boss she comes off needy and naive. She seems especially uninteresting every time Virginia Hill makes an appearance in the novel!

David Williams says

Nathan Heller is hired to guard racketeer James Ragen. Ragen has been threatened by mobsters who want to take over his gambling wires. Something goes wrong and Ragen is shot in an ambush. Complicating the matters is Ragen's niece Peggy Hogan. Peggy and Nate have a past that is unknown to her family. Peggy wants Nate to find her uncle's attackers. Heller investigates trying to locate who hired the killers. The investigation eventually leads him out west where he meets up with Virginia Hill and finally with Benjamin Siegel. Siegel has gone west with the vision of turning the sleepy town of Las Vegas into a gambling paradise. Before he knows it Heller is involved with Siegal and helping him to train his security staff to spot pickpockets and to find out why so much material is disappearing from the casino sight. Of course all of this is complicated by the lovely Peggy who Nate is completely in love with. The only trouble, she has the hots for Siegal.

The story takes place in Chicago and Las Vegas in 1946. This is great modern noir at its best. Nathan Heller does not disappoint. Pick up this volume and enjoy the gangsters, cops, private eyes, and lovely ladies from the end of the gangster era.

Michael Brown says

Bugsy Siegel and Heller clash over a girl, a casino and a wire service. We start in Chicago, move to L.A. and then Vegas as the Outfit in the windy city tries to take over a gambling service by assassination and deceit.

Add in the East coast mob bosses and a crazy visionary in the desert and you have a disaster in the making. And in the middle is former cop now detective Nate Heller, his girl and his code.

Timeforme says

Main Character:

Nathan Heller - Private Detective and owner of the A-1 Detective Agency

Synopsis:

In 1946 Chicago, Nathan Heller, president of the flourishing A-1 Detective Agency, is hired to protect racing-wire gambling chief James Ragen, who is nonetheless shot down on the streets of Chicago. Not one to take such an affront sitting down, Nate goes after the killer, but he's in for the biggest surprise of his career.

Heller follows the trail as it leads to Hollywood and Las Vegas, specifically to Benjamin, Bugsy, Siegel but when he proves Siegel's innocence, Heller and the suave gangster wind up friends...and rivals for the love of Nate's life. Bugsy hires Heller as security chief of the under-construction Flamingo hotel, where mob bag woman Virginia Hill is a dangerous, if glamorous, distraction. It all comes to a boil with a shocking mob assassination in Beverly Hills that sends Heller into fever-dream ride of vengeance.

My Thoughts:

This is the second Nate Heller book I've read and it is another fascinating look at a 1940's Chicago (and west coast) that is gritty and dirty and more than a little corrupt. The characters for the most part were real people and while some of their experiences were altered or added, I'm sure, to accommodate a piece of fiction, everything that happened was very realistic and felt historically accurate. This was a very good read.
