



Skies of Ash

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Los Angeles homicide detective Elouise "Lou" Norton and her partner, Colin Taggert, arrive at the scene of a tragic house fire. Juliet Chatman perished in the blaze, along with her two children. Left behind is grieving husband and father Christopher Chatman, hospitalized after trying to rescue his family. Chatman is devastated that he couldn't save them.

Unless, of course, he's the one who killed them.

Neighbors and family friends insist the Chatmans were living the dream. But Lou quickly discovers the reality was very different. The flames of adultery, jealousy, scandal, fraud, and disease had all but consumed the Chatmans' marriage before it went up in smoke.

Lou's own marriage hangs by a thread. Soured by the men in her life, Lou is convinced that Chatman started the fire. Her colleagues worry that her personal issues are obscuring her judgment. With very little evidence regarding the fire—and rising doubts about her husband's commitment to monogamy—Lou feels played by all sides.

Was the fire sparked by a serial arsonist known as The Burning Man? Or by the Chatmans' son, who regularly burned his father's property?

Searching for justice through the ashes of a picture-perfect family, Lou doesn't know if she will catch an arsonist or be burned in the process.

Skies of Ash Details

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From Reader Review Skies of Ash for online ebook

Lynn says

Second in a series -- I'm loving these books. Lou is my kind of police detective. She's smart and kickass but has baggage enough for two women. Looking forward to #3!

Eric says

For those that enjoy Michael Connelly and the Harry Bosch books, the Elouise Norton series would most likely interest you.

In some ways the two series are similar, but in other ways vastly different. Of course, Rachel Howzell Hall tells her stories through the eyes of her created black, female detective and to suggest the writing of Rachel Howzell Hall as an imitation to Michael Connelly is not the intent of this review - it is instead to point out how enjoyable her writing is and with just two books featuring Elouise Norton. It is also to point out the promise this series has in store for the future.

In the second novel involving these characters, Elousie Norton and her partner are investigating a house fire that has claimed the lives of a mother and her two children. Is it murder or a terrible accident? The story unfolds involving a number of characters that are chameleon-like in their nature and may or may not be what they profess to be.

Through the investigation, Hall also uses the flaws of her main character to be sprinkled through the story to allow the reader to accept Norton is human and not the typical fictional character made of steel.

While reading these novels, my mental image of the two main characters are those of the actors Michael Hyatt (she played Avon Barksdale's sister Brianna in HBO's *The Wire*) and Chris Evans (Captain America). Through the novels, Norton and her partner Colin Taggart, a green, hyper-sexualized, white male, show growth in their working relationship, which involves a sprinkle of sexual tension thrown in. Though readers my hope for some sort of physical relationship, I'm hoping future novels avoid that. To me, it's more enjoyable reading how their relationship is developing.

I highly recommend this series to those that enjoy police procedurals and to enjoy the road ahead with this author.

James Thane says

L.A. Homicide detective Elouise "Lou" Norton returns here in her second outing, following her debut in 2014's *Land of Shadows*. As the book opens, Lou and her still relatively new partner, Collin Taggart, are called to the scene of a raging house fire. A woman named Julia Chatman and two of her children have died in the late-night blaze, and Julia's husband, Christopher, a commodities broker, has been injured in a vain

attempt to rescue his family when he arrived home in the middle of the night and discovered the fire after having allegedly worked late in his office.

It's much too early to tell if the fire started accidentally or if it was set deliberately. It's also too early to know if the three victims were murdered or if their deaths were solely the result of the fire. But from the jump, Lou is suspicious and the focus of her suspicion is the family's sole survivor, Christopher Chatman.

On the surface, the family appears to have had it all. They were well-to-do, living in an upscale neighborhood, with lots of clothes, cars and toys. But even before the fire is out, Lou is hearing stories suggesting that all might not have been well with this family and that relations between Julia and Christopher Chatman were severely strained.

Lou would know something about that. Her own marriage has been circling the drain for some time now. Her husband, Greg, designs video games and travels extensively for his job. He's also a serial philanderer, and the last time he got caught, he bought his way out of it by apologizing and giving Lou a Porsche. But it's clear he hasn't changed his ways, and this time around, a Porsche probably isn't going to be enough to save his sorry ass.

It's a complex case that will strain Lou's relationship with her partner and with her supervisor. The clues lead in any number of directions and solid evidence is hard to come by. But Lou will soldier on, following her own instincts both on the case and in her personal life, letting the chips fall where they may. All in all, it's a very entertaining novel, featuring one of the freshest and most intriguing new protagonists in crime fiction. Hall writes very well and has clearly done her research. The end result is a book that will keep readers turning the pages at a pace almost as blistering as the fire that lies at the heart of this story.

Amy says

Still really enjoyed this book and character although I wish the author had not rushed the ending and let it play out a little more. Can't wait for the next in the series.

Melissa says

I am really wild about Hall's writing in this book. She has such a way with not only delightful hyperbole like: "No crowds meant better parking, though. And better parking meant less walking. And zippity-do-dah, I pulled into a parking space only seventy-six miles away from the hospital" but with sharply funny observations that sum up in a few words the things that other writers might fumble with in a few sentences, like: "This was not the lobby of your grandpa's commodity firm" - this is basically all I need to know about *that* setting, right? My lasting impression of *Land of Shadows* is that I liked it & I liked Lou Norton, but this is snappy as hell & it lit me right up. I am also thrilled about some personal choices that Lou makes (view spoiler).

Jennie says

3.5 stars. Loving this series so far. Hall is great at putting down a twisty mystery and then letting the reader see how it all unfurls along with the detective. I had inklings of who might be at fault, but no idea how they did it or why. My only complaint is how personal the main detective gets with her suspects. It throws me out of the story a little because I can't imagine a real cop doing that. However, Lou's actual personal life with her family and friends is very interesting and engaging, so the other is a quibble I'm willing to look past.

Monica **can't read fast enough**** says**

Thoroughly enjoyed, review to come.

Columbus says

Detective Elouise Norton is a tough sister investigating crime on the streets of Los Angeles. I love this series cause she's tough, smart, quick with a bon mot and can wear a mean pair of Jimmy Choo's. Yes, I'm all in for this series, Lulu. Bring on book #3!

Kevintipple says

“Personal drama handled, my heart found its regular pace, and I shoved the phone back into my bag. I muttered another “thank you,” then jammed up the hill, following a dank river of water and ashes that would end in blood.” (Skies of Ash, Rachel Howzell Hall, Chapter Two, Page 20)

It is almost mid-December and six months after Land of Shadows when Detective Elouise “Lou” Norton is called out to a house fire in Baldwin Hills. There are bodies in what is left of the house ravaged by a horrific fire most likely caused by an arsonist. As it happens, the scene is a short three miles away from her home. While she has directions, she could have just followed the smoke plume over the area.

Much of the house at 6381 Don Mateo Drive is gone. What remains and still barely stands hides the bodies of Juliet Chatman and her kids, Chloe and Cody. All three were found dead. The smoke got to them before the flames worked their way to them. But, there are troubling aspects that indicate Juliet Chatman knew they were in serious danger. One is the fact that while she clearly was holding on to her daughter, Juliet Chatman died while clutching a gun in the other. Then there is the 911 call Juliet made where she said somebody was trying to kill her. The name of that person is not discernable on the tape.

Clearly, person or persons unknown, did kill the mom and her kids. Somebody did it. While law enforcement always starts from the proposition that the spouse did it in this case that initially seems unlikely. Christopher Chatman, a commodities broker, arrived as the fire was blazing and was injured fighting firefighters in attempt to go into the inferno after his family. His alibi for why he was not home stands up to scrutiny.

If he didn't do it, then who did? And why are the neighbors being so weird about the Chatmans? Two of the many questions for Detective Norton and her partner Colin Taggart to answer in Skies of Ash.

Often the second book in a series is weaker than the first. That is certainly not remotely the case here. *Skies of Ash* builds on *Land of Shadows* and adds further depth to the Norton character as well as most of the other characters.

Like a lot of really good series, this second book continues everything regarding personal relationships while offering a brand new intriguing case to solve. Such is the case here with what is definitely a horrific tragedy in the deaths of two children as well as their mother. Author Rachel Howzell Hall does not focus on the gruesome details of what happens to a body in a fire and instead keeps the focus on the reason why things like this happen.

Skies of Ash is a very good book. Interested potential readers are strongly encouraged to read *Land of Shadows* as major plot points from the first book carry over here amongst the new case and that investigation. There are a lot of things going on in this second book that tie directly into the first making both books well worth your time and effort. Good stuff and very much recommended.

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Sarah says

4.5 stars. I know there are a zillion police procedural series out there, but I wish this one got more attention because it's really good! I liked this one even better than the first. The mystery here isn't intertwined with Lou's personal life the way it was in the first one, but it is engaging--a woman and her two children killed in a house fire in the middle of the night while her husband is conveniently absent, and of course everyone connected to the family has secrets galore. But what I really love about this series is Lou. Her inner monologue is often laugh out loud funny and brimming with her acerbic wit. The dialogue is also great, and her relationships with her partner, friends, and cheating husband all helped add up to a really satisfying personal life part of the story, which I think is what procedurals need to really shine. I highly recommend this series, but you should start with the first one, *Land of Shadows*, because there are spoilers for that one in this book.

*Used for Read Harder 2018 prompt "A mystery by a person of color or LGBTQ+ author."

Mark Stevens says

I dug "Land of Shadows."

"Skies of Ash" might be better.

This one quickly took me back to Norton's sharply-barbed worldview and her grinding sense of determination when put on the scent of a murder. If fellow L.A. detective Harry Bosch gets a TV show, certainly Elouise Norton deserves one, too. Maybe Bosch and Norton could meet up? I bet Norton could make Bosch laugh, loosen up some of that grim weight he drags around. (I'm a Bosch fan, don't get me wrong. But I think Bosch would get a kick out of Lou's dark comic jabs. He'd admire her work ethic, too.)

A sample of Norton's snappy narrative about her endlessly awkward partner, Colin: "On my best days, Colin merely annoyed me—like the constant beeping of a truck backing up. To be fair, I didn't know many (okay, any) twenty-eight-year-old, white-boy detectives from the Rocky Mountains. And he didn't know any thirty-seven-year-old black female detectives from Los Angeles. So there was a cultural rift between my partner and me. A rift that was three galaxies wide."

Hall injects her prose with a brisk liveliness. Standard descriptions take on a vivid quality with Hall's eye and ear, as in when Norton shows up at the scene of house fire. "I photographed the crowd: a bald black man holding a toddler, an elderly Asian couple wearing matching jogging suits, a dark-skinned weight lifter with headphones around his thick neck, and the heroines of *Waiting to Exhale* wearing yoga pants and fruit-colored tank tops."

Elouise Norton has her share of problems. Husband. Co-workers. Bosses. Let's say "men" in general. Hall shifts gears effortlessly between the case and Norton's personal life. Norton's world, in fact, is a tangled braid of both. The twain don't only meet, they meld. Norton is constantly marveling at odd bits about how the world functions—and why. Work and personal issues both serve up ample issues for Norton to contemplate. Norton's pride is ferocious. She would very much like the world—including all of those in close orbit—to behave. But she's already seen too much and knows when something doesn't seem right.

"As a homicide detective, I regularly entered the homes of slain victims. There, I smelled tobacco caught in the curtains; smelled spilled beer and whiskey fumes in the rugs and wafting from the mountain of empties in the trash can. I noticed walls dented by doorknobs, fists, and skulls; crimson-colored splatters on ceilings and floorboards; teeth stuck in carpet."

Teeth? In the carpet?

Skies of Ash revolves around a house fire. Something doesn't line up. The dead inside include Juliet Chatman and two children, Cody and Chloe. The fire was arson, but was it arson designed to cover up a murder? Steadily, Norton pulls back the layers. The mother and children all had Valium in their system, and the mother was fighting cancer. Juliet's husband Christopher is a commodities broker who returned to the house when it was fully engulfed. He had to be restrained from rushing inside. And there's the husband's best friend, a neighbor who is also an insurance lawyer. There are money issues that highlight possible motives. There are timing issues with Christopher's comings and goings. And there are histories and

relationships to uncover.

Pinning down Christopher is a challenge. Norton weighs the pros and cons of going “polite bird” or “rude bitch” to make him squirm. It’s the “secret sorcerers,” after all, who worry Norton more than the “obvious” villains. Christopher Chatman is a worthy nemesis and Norton tries every tack available to nail her prey, only after being taunted more than a little about how she treats men (both at home and at work).

I’m not saying Chatman did it. I’m just saying to read "Skies of Ash."

Nakia says

I’m not a huge “series” reader but Rachel Howzell Hall definitely makes me step out of my comfort zone.

In this second installment of her Detective Elouise Norton series, Lou is charged with finding the culprit behind the fire that killed Juliet Chatman and her son and daughter in their home, while husband, Christopher, was supposedly working a late night at the office. Everything seems fishy, from the husband’s antics to his best friend’s incessant defense, how quickly the insurance is claimed, and mysterious notes from the dead wife which prove all was not well in their marriage.

What shines for me in this series though, is not the mystery but, Lou’s life while trying to pin down the bad guy. She has an unfaithful husband who claims he’s turned over a new leaf, but Lou doubts his efforts despite letting him back in her life. She has a vanilla wafer of a police partner who is young, fine and flirts with her all the time. And she’s caught the eye of her suspect’s best friend, and doesn’t see the harm in giving him a bit of her attention, despite the fact that it could mess up her investigation. Oh, and he’s married! Throw in the changing dynamic between her and her mom now that they are slowly moving on from her sister’s disappearance and murder two decades ago, and Lou’s “take shit from no one attitude”, and the department’s idea that she is letting her issues with her husband cloud her judgment with the investigation, and you have a story full of ups, downs, trauma, make up sex, shoot outs and a jaw dropping ending.

I love me some Lou, and can’t wait to read the next book, *Trail of Echoes* !

The FountainPenDiva, Old school geek chick and lover of teddy bears says

Oh Tina! You have a lifetime invite to the Reed family barbecue!

My grandmother is reading *Land of Shadows* and I'm under orders to not bother her until she's done. In short, she may adopt you, lol.

I do need to get one thing off my chest: Greg: Boy (you're not worth being considered a "man"), you don't get that fancy, expensive presents won't fix your marriage. A marriage you kept fucking up through your infidelity. Trust cannot be bought for a \$90,000 dollar Porsche and a diamond-platinum cross. And how dare your lying, cheating ass throw shade your *faithful* wife's way because her job doesn't keep bankers hours or goddess forbid, it's *dangerous*. Then, to add insult to injury, you suddenly cared that Lou was flying to Vegas with Colin as part of their investigation? You need to take a seat, preferably in the nosebleed section. I

hope she asks for the Ducati as part of the alimony.

Now I need to sit my girl Lou down somewhere and talk some sense into her head, since you don't seem to be listening to Lena and Syeeda. Girl, he's not going to change. He'll just buy your affection with another shiny, expensive toy. You do not need the drama, the ulcers and an app to catch cheating spouses in your life. You almost messed up this investigation by letting your personal mess cloud your judgment. Sorry, but Colin was right to call you out on it and I cheered him when he did so. He might be a somewhat clueless White dude from Colorado Springs, but he's not stupid and he has high regard for you. Stop pity partying, chuck that "support Black love" stuff 'cause it's always one-sided. Move. The. Fuck. On. Do an Angela Bassett from *Waiting to Exhale*. Set that damn Ducati on fire and sashay away holding a glass of chardonnay. Then take his cheating ass to the cleaners (after all he did use your image in one of his video games), and when payday hits, do the horizontal mambo with Colin - 'cause you know you want to. And your girlfriends Lena and Syeeda know it too.

Okay, I'm zen now. Seriously though, the above monologue is one of the hallmarks of a good book, when the characters read so real that you talk to them like friends. And in Lou's case, a friend who needs, as some call it, a come to Jesus moment.

Lou Norton's newest case takes her to the posh suburb of Baldwin Hills, a tony enclave of predominantly Black wealth. What? You mean there are like, wealthy Black people? Oh they must be like athletes or rappers right? Sorry, my inner snark couldn't resist. No, despite the pervasive stereotype of Black wealth and mobility coming from sports or entertainment, most of the Black wealth in this area belongs to professionals like doctors, educators, lawyers, stock brokers and other high-income, highly-educated Black people. Again, this is an area I know intimately, and obviously so does the author. In this case, it's a Black commodities trader whose house has burned to the ground with his wife and two children inside. A horrible accident??? That assessment changes when Lou and her partner "Colorado Springs" Colin get involved and discover there was a lot more to the tragedy than it first appears.

What I enjoyed was never knowing exactly whodunit. There were a lot of suspects. No one's hands were clean. The suspects are incredibly shady. Including the creepy neighbors, who seemed to know everyone else's dirt.

Note to self: don't live in a neighborhood like that. Ever.

Talk about a tangled web: securities fraud, adultery, arson, life altering secrets, marriages on the brink, all mixed up with three dead bodies. One of them holding a gun ready to shoot someone who wasn't themselves.

One thing that stood out to me, and it kind of ties into the issue of colorism, which is a big problem in our community (though some would like to pretend otherwise), is that the wives of the two men involved in the fire are light-skinned (think Lena Horne/Mariah Carey). We don't talk about it, but the dynamic of dark-skinned Black men often choosing partners who are closer to Eurocentric ideals of beauty is a dirty little open secret.

The Chatman's little boy, Cory, he was some piece of work. And while there were times I seriously wanted to reach into the book and slap some sense into his spoiled ass, what he truly needed was help. His firebug behavior was a cry. He knew his life wasn't perfect, his parents a mess. Many of our Black children act out, but are not getting the help and the mentoring they deserve. Instead they tend to end up in the juvenile "justice" system.

Now I know I need to take a break, but Hall just threw more stuff into the game with that ending. I am so mad right now, lol. Really, Ms. Hall???

Of course, Lou's tried and true BFF's are still riding hard, though there's some honest friction between her and Lena that hits close to home. And the diverse LAPD Hall writes about is one that probably exists somewhere (it's just not 77th, lol).

I'm trying to decide. Do I really need the next book in the series?

Stay tuned...

Don Gorman says

(3 1/2). While I read this book, a lyric from a Temptations song kept running through my head - "like a snowball rollin' down the side of a snow covered hill, it's growin'." This book starts off with a simple enough event and just picks up steam. It just keeps getting more and more entangled, kind of like that weird backwards book I read earlier this year where it ended at the start and unraveled from there. Elouise Norton is a great protagonist and she drives the bus. Occasional flashes of other characters occur but she is the point of everything and Hall makes it work very well. If the ending had just been a little stronger I would have rounded up to 4 stars but this is a really nice effort.

Jeanette says

I'm a fan of this author. She can write, and she writes honestly. Authentic! Descriptions are crisp and real, not P.C. nice-nice coated. And she can really zing those one liners. Very much in the category of professional comic material. But within more depth. Enjoyed this to a 4.5 star level.

I did not read Trail of Echoes yet, but that will be rectified.

But Skies of Ash was zippy as her L.A. lanes during a car chase. She also takes the 45 minute to Vegas once here, but most of the copy is right in her own backyard.

Lou is 37 and no naive rookie. She's smart enough not to have any need for use of her Black or her Woman card. She's also far from perfect, and has been too often falling for the rationalizations and excuses of her husband, Greg. And she knows she has.

The case is more than just one circumstances for demise, and it is complex. All the players, under-characters in the investigated, or within Lou's unit are finely drawn. Much above average in that category to the current best seller mystery/cop fare. Not endlessly foul, it is within actual city life language and colloquial expression at the same time. And as almost every character in this book is Black (and Hall spells it with a small b), except her partner- the real life and accurate physical descriptions and concurrent cultural minutia are apt to include barriers that the P.C. police will have some work to jump over. Perhaps. Hall is also VERY good within t.v., sports, tech games, celeb interest scenarios of our last 12 or so years, as well. She gets 5 star in that arena here. Absolutely.

3 people dead. How was the fire started? Who had the motives. Is that slick Ben going to get Lou to some dalliance?

There are all kinds of undercurrents here for a tremendous series to follow. So I don't want to tell you too much about Elouise. My vote is she will be the next #1 Woman Cop in the sense of a Bones, or a Evanovich, or Kinsey (Grafton) or Women's Murder Club members. This character is interesting, gutsy, can be impulsive when it's needed. She has a solid back story history and an EXCELLENT set of women friends. Lots of things are going on and Rachel Howzell Hall has a future with Lou, that's for sure.

I'll read all of hers.
