



West of Western

Eileen Robertson Hamer

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One wounded ex-Marine starting a new life as an architect in Chicago. An abandoned workshop west of Western Avenue. Smashed windows, death threats, a dead body on the doorstep and a crazed ex-nun next door. A mysterious Ukrainian, a principled gang leader, a 350 lb Haitian baritone. Bodies in a vacant lot. A secret garden, actors living in a church, a pregnant teenager dying in a back room. Looking for a home, architect Seraphy Pelligrini hunts a killer in a neighborhood on the verge of change.

West of Western Details

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From Reader Review West of Western for online ebook

So, I Read This Book Today says

Violence, even well intentioned, always rebounds upon oneself. Lao Tzu

Suddenly, to everyone's horror, the tomb of his grandfather opens and a hand grabs Don Carlo's shoulder, pulling him back into the tomb. – Verdi's Don Carlo

As I was reading Chicago Stories: West of Western I was brought to mind of a modern day opera, a tragedy, lived across the streets of the west side of Chicago. Blood and war, incest, murder, hatred, fear - all the themes are there, richly portrayed. The brutality of poverty reaches out and grips the reader by the throat, and yet, the layers of the story are not just those of poverty and gangs. They are so much deeper. As Richard, one of the characters in the book puts it, "Someone recently called this kind of wanton destruction a failure of imagination." And, as Graham Greene said in "The Power and the Glory," Hatred is a failure of imagination.

There is no failure of imagination in Hamer's writing. Rather, she writes brilliantly about a neighborhood, and the people within it. What she writes about, however, is the deep and abiding failure of imagination of the gangs that roam the streets of the neighborhood, sowing devastation in their wake. These people live in small worlds, with no comprehension of what a wide world there truly is out there – what there actually is which may be accomplished, should one simply reach out, stretch the imagination beyond a few small blocks. Purposeful ignorance, and the temptations of power, if only in small and violent ways, taking the lives of those who both do, and do not, deserve to die.

Seraphy has moved into this neighborhood, on the border of two gang territories, purchasing a beautiful but run down building to live and work in as an architect. She fixes up the building and moves in, only to be faced with murders, gang warfare, and threats all around her. But there are also good people – her neighbors around the corner are two wonderful gay male characters I immediately fell in love with, as does she. There are artists and singers, legal and illegal immigrants, the wonderful fellow who owns the corner market, and the crazy nun next door. And there are the gangs, those dredges of humanity so soulless and evil that they would feed upon their own people, like jackals upon a corpse.

This book was vibrant and violent, deeply moving and deeply disturbing on many levels. The stories it has to tell are a microcosm of America, where we have been, where we are going, and how it can all go so very, very wrong. It is mystery and suspense, thriller and literary novel, pain and redemption and absolutely riveting.

Highly recommended.

Sharon Michael says

A wonderful introduction through the adversarial interaction between the main character and her real estate agent hooked me from the first few pages.

A first book by a new to me author rarely gets a 5 star rating as it's my 're-reads' that I usually reserve my 5

star ratings for. While I have not re-read this one yet, I have gone back and bought the second book in the series, which is also rare enough for me that this one gets all 5 stars.

Many of the 'not police/not P.I.' mysteries are just not believable enough for me but the main character in this series really caught my attention. An architect, with a *history*, ex-Marine, ex-private security/undercover ops the author manages the tightrope between tough/kick-ass and female very well. A very deft touch with characterization, with well rounded and individual personalities.

The unique background and plot twists kept my attention all the way to the end and I wanted more.

Susan Anderson says

This isn't a real review, all fancied up with tight thought because I don't have time for memorable prose but I wanted to tell you how this book hit me.

I bought Chicago Stories: West of Western by Eileen Robertson Hamer because, well, I'm a Chicagoan and I haven't read many novels that take place in my city. Thinking that the cover was really good and the title cool, I opened the book and began reading and was astonished at the strong, remarkably original voice of the author which throughout the story did not wane.

Not sure if the author has Italian roots, but she understands Chicago and its architecture and painting and Italian families and grief, and I love her line about the family's matriarch who had been enjoying "the brink of death" for a long time (my poor paraphrase, you'll have to read the book to get the full punch.)

So I couldn't stop reading. It's a thriller and a mystery and a love story in its own right. The pace is fast, the characters full of flesh and blood and, I don't know, the book just spoke to me, especially Seraphy and her family, the friends she meets after she buys a building to rehab west of Western Avenue. Loved Richard and his lover, Emily and Black Jack.

Some of the scenes and the dialogue were memorable, for instance, the dialogue between the main character and her mother. And I really liked the way the story began, almost as a prequel, such a great way to introduce the main character--pit her against everyone's real estate agent--and the end was a real surprise for me, didn't see it coming.

But what's not to love about this book--cheaper than a latté, but delivers a much stronger punch. The sense of place was remarkable, the mood shifting from humorous to elegiac to tragic and the building Seraphy buys almost becomes another character.

Sorry, can't think of anything bad to say about this book. I'm going to sit for a while in a quiet place and try to recover from the words and then buy Eileen Hamer's next one.

Toni Roush says

Surprisingly good

This was one of those books I picked up for free, and quite truthfully I didn't have great expectations. The book started off a little rough and slow, but as it gradually drew me in it started moving and smoothed out. Nice character development, with surprising twists and turns and a satisfying ending. There were a couple of "mistakes" such as dates going out of order, but nothing that can't be figured out. For that it gets only 4 stars. Looking forward to seeing what this author does next.

Kristi Echandy says

I actually liked this book. There were a few things to comment on. I grew up on the south side but never heard anybody call a garbage can a toter. I find Mario as a real person to be unbelievable- although I suppose not impossible. I also thought that everything happened in too short of a time span. Lastly, there were few typos, but typos don't really bother me. Good job.

Elizabeth says

I was torn between a 3 or 4 star review. As a Sara Paretsky fan the book description reminded me of some of Ms. Paretsky's early books. The author Eileen Hamer has her own unique voice and thank goodness.

Seraphy Pelligrini is searching for a new home and driving the Chicago realtors crazy because they keep showing her yuppie condos and she is adamant that she doesn't want one. So when her latest realtor accidentally shows her a listing for a property "west of Western" and Seraphy insists on seeing it the horrified realtor complies with great reluctance. "West of Western" is an undesirable neighborhood with gangs, legal and illegal immigrants, but also includes artists and long-time locals. Seraphy, who is an architect by training and an ex-Marine, finds the perfect property for her -- an old dry cleaning business with a built-in garage, space for a workshop, and living quarters with great light, space, and character.

The neighborhood is a challenge and slowly, steadily Seraphy discovers the many and often jarring aspects of life "west of Western". So we learn with her about life "west of Western" and of her re-acclimation into civilian life.

It is wonderful to find a new novelist. Still occasionally rough but the promise of future good reads is there.

Joyce says

As a native Chicagoan, I am quick to read novels set there. Most are written by individuals who really don't know the city at all. Hamer's book is right on. She knows the city and the feeling of the neighborhoods she is writing about. Seraphy, the protagonist is an architect with a history of being a Marine followed by a stint with Darkpool, which is exactly what it sounds like. She is tough, unafraid and well able to deal with the complexities of a non-gentrified neighborhood in gangland. Her story is well written and well thought out and well worth reading. I will be looking for the other Chicago Stories.

Nancy Harmon says

I'm rather ambivalent about this book. It could have used better editing. I spotted numerous typo's, misspelling and words out of place. It drew me out of the action when I had to stop and figure out what the author was trying to say. A tighter storyline would have enhanced the action. It seemed to take forever to get to the crux

A.B. Shepherd says

You can read my review here:

<http://abshepherdsreinventedreader.bl...>

Michael says

I loved this book

The author had an advantage when it came to my just loving this book. I lived in Chicago during my college days and the book brought visions to me. I also enjoyed that this was not a typical modern mystery. The heroes were almost indistinguishable from the villains. I look forward to the next book in the series. My college was not far from the end of the Ravenswood Line. I look forward to learning what Ms. Hamer will show me about the neighborhood.

Iris Szymanski says

Good read.

I found this to be interesting read. The main character. Just did not evolve into the person she should have been. The timeline of the days were confusing to me and made it confusing in retrospect. The author should have corrected that aspect of the story.

With that said, it was a good story. I will read the next book just to see if the author corrects the timeline mistakes.

Polly says

Worthy Debut

I enjoyed this book on so many levels. First, that Ms. Hamer resisted the prevailing pressure for crime writers to slap a dead body in the first chapter or, even worse, to have the hero or heroine trip over a corpse on the first page, made me sigh with relief. Architect Seraphy Pelligrini, an ex-Marine and undercover

Darkpool agent, injured in Iraq by an IED, finds the perfect building to set up her workshop and living quarters. Her real estate agent tries to dissuade her because the building, an abandoned mess but with “good bones,” is also West of Western, an area rampant with competing gangs spewing violence on an almost daily basis. But Seraphy is a fearless protagonist, and she treads where others fear to go. She’s not foolhardy in her bravery, but when needed, she holds her own with the worst of the criminals. The book is filled with a cast of interesting characters, all of whom Ms. Hamer takes the time to develop so that we learn to care about each one. I personally found one of the gang leaders fascinating, and I hope he’s in the following books. A good character is a terrible thing to waste. But he’s not the only one.

The story builds tension in a realistic manner—nothing forced, but you sense there’s going to be an explosive conclusion, and Ms. Hamer doesn’t disappoint. I highly recommend this book and look forward to the sequel.

Mary says

This was a free Kindle download and having grown up in Chicago, I'm always looking for a new book about "home" I grew up on the Northwest side before the Latin Kings and other gangs had the presence they have now but much of the story still rings true.

The characters had depth, the neighborhood descriptions are clearly written by someone who knows the area and I enjoyed the twist at the end.

Looking forward to seeing how Seraphy grows into her own

University of Chicago Magazine says

Eileen Hamer, PhD'92

Author

After ten years in the Middle East, ex-Marine and Darkpool agent Seraphy Pelligrini doesn’t scare easily. So when she’s wounded by an IED and sent home to Chicago to begin a new life as an architect, she’s not concerned the home she chooses lies in a marginal neighborhood west of Western Avenue.

Gangbangers toss bricks through her windows; she orders bulletproof windows. They paint death threats on her garage door; she installs video cameras. The Lobos stalk her; she eludes them. She makes a new friend in a filthy bodega, takes it in stride when she’s accosted by the mysterious Mischa in Humboldt Park and a Marxist ex-nun in the alley, finds common ground with Gang Squad detectives Markowicz and Terreno. But when a Duques gang member is shot on her doorstep and the police write it off as a gang shooting, Seraphy’s experience tells her otherwise. She knows a professional execution when she sees one—this is not a gang shooting. It’s the work of a pro. Still, she’s an architect now. She leaves the investigation to the police.

Until, that is, foul-mouthed Sister Ann coerces her into helping nurse Maria, a pregnant teenage runaway dying of AIDS in a dingy back bedroom, and discovers Tito, the man shot on Seraphy’s doorstep, had raped and abandoned Maria. Maria’s half-brother Mario admits he was searching for Tito to kill him but claims someone else got there first.

When three Lobos gang members attack Seraphy, she disarms the leader, slicing his knife hand to the bone. Later that night the three are found shot. Detectives Markowicz and Terreno question Seraphy, but it seems clear to them that the three Lobos were shot by Mario's Duques gang in revenge for Tito's murder. It's the beginning, they say—this will end in a bloodbath.

Seraphy can no longer stand aside. An outsider in a neighborhood of strangers, she struggles to find the killer as Duques and Lobos prepare for battle.

Jeri Otero says

Excellent book.

I didn't think I was going to enjoy this book when I started it, however I soon came to like and respect Seraphy. She was a strong and competent character and I enjoyed her personality. Her neighbors were well written and likeable. They all felt like real people to me. I enjoyed it immensely. You will too. Enjoy.
