

What follows is less a conventional whodunit and more of a moral reckoning on wheels. Matt, described only once, almost in passing, as ruggedly handsome, is not your typical gumshoe. He has no badge, no agency, and no particular plan — just a moral compass that won't let him walk away. His declaration to his friend Jake afterward cuts to the heart of the book: "I'm gonna find the son of a bitch. I just ended a life, and I don't like the feeling, and I don't like being used." That line does double duty — it establishes Matt's character and launches the novel's engine in a single breath.

Amster has invented something that feels genuinely new here: the freeway detective. *Death by Proxy* is a road novel as much as a mystery, and Matt's classic Mustang — at least until it sustains damage — becomes a character in its own right. The California highway system, the long drives between Ridgecrest and Los Angeles, and the passing views of Pacoima, Monterey, and neighborhoods in between all contribute to a sense of geography that feels deeply lived-in. Comparisons to the work of Michael Connelly, Dashiell Hammett, and the 70's thriller *The Parallax View* are apt — this is neo-noir with deep roots in a very specific California experience.

Amster clearly knows his territory intimately. He writes with the confidence of someone who understands how a film set actually functions — the hierarchy, the social currents, the peculiar way people behave when cameras are rolling — and he deploys that knowledge to make the world of film production feel authentic and a little menacing. His eye for architecture and neighborhood character gives the novel a vivid sense of place, and readers can picture the streets and sense the cultural vibe throughout. The novel moves through some of Los Angeles's lesser-sung corners alongside its more famous landmarks, treating each location with equal attention and affection.

Music runs through *Death by Proxy* like a second narrative, especially jazz music. Matt's listening habits function as a kind of emotional weather report, revealing his state of mind in subtle but effective ways that reward attentive readers.

The cast Amster assembles is colorful and memorable. Oleg, the Russian mafioso, provides comic relief with genuine menace. Jenny, an aspiring actress and secretary to a private detective, becomes the emotional anchor of the story. Evelyn's murder sets everything in motion, while the final revelation arrives naturally through carefully constructed clues and believable red herrings.

One particularly intriguing aspect of the novel is how it portrays Matt himself as a kind of Rorschach test. His ordinariness allows him to move comfortably through Hollywood, working-class neighborhoods, and small-town California without triggering suspicion, giving him a unique investigative advantage.

Structurally, the novel recalls a classic Agatha Christie mystery—not in setting, but in the careful arrangement of characters, motives, and false trails that make the final revelation feel both surprising and inevitable.

*Death by Proxy* is the first installment in the Matt Stephens series, followed by *Old Sins Cast Long Shadows*. Together they establish Matt Stephens as a detective with genuine staying power.

Amster's own background as a longtime defense analyst at China Lake informs the novel's analytical approach. His familiarity with California, military research, and the Sierra Nevada lends an authenticity that cannot be manufactured.

His dedication to preserving the Owens Ridge Climbers Guide and supporting the China Lake Mountain Rescue Group reflects the same attentiveness to community and place that defines his fiction. Even the novel's cover photograph was taken by Amster himself.

*Death by Proxy* is a confident, intelligent debut from a writer who understands both investigation and storytelling. Matt Stephens is a detective worth following, and with the second installment already available, readers won't have to wait long to continue the journey.