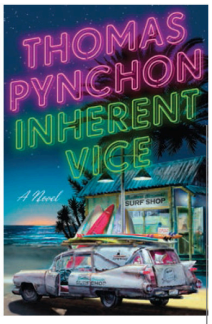
Grit Large

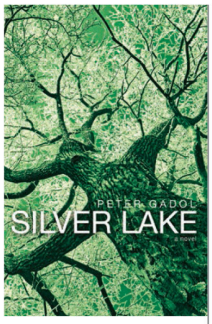
A slew of tomes sheds a cold light on L.A.'s dark side

In what other city do self-indulgence and self-destruction go together in such train-wreck fashion? Three hardboiled novels, a non-fiction work and a warts-and-all memoir explore the less-than-holy underbelly of the glam City of Angels, with plots that range from death, drugs and rock 'n' roll to the inner workings of the mob. Retouchers need not apply.



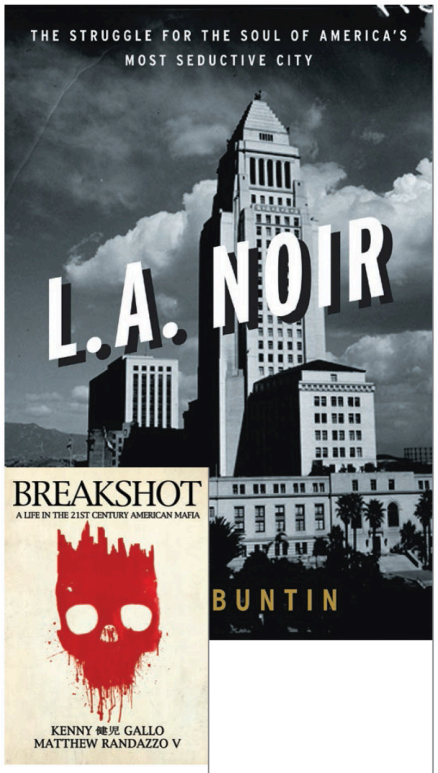
Inherent Vice

By Thomas Pynchon
(Penguin Press, $27.95)
THE BOOK The king of complexity showers cultural commentary on "Summer of Love"-era movers, shakers and moneymakers. Notorious to undergrads for his artfully evasive prose, Pynchon cues the L.A. haze this time around, casting the city as a murky playground for psychedelic shenanigans and razor-sharp dialogue. Fueled by lust and mystery, the novel follows a private-eye hippie protagonist who can't stop hitting the reefer. Groovy.
THE PROSE "No lights, either incandescent or cathode-ray, showed in any of the apartment windows. The whole place might have been deserted. The traffic on Santa Monica was scarcely audible. The moon rose."
–Sophia Mossberg



Silver Lake

By Peter Gadol
(Tyrus Books, $24.95)
THE BOOK Didn't anyone tell architects Carlo Stein and Rob Voight not to open the door for strangers? In Peter Gadol's latest, this Los Angeles couple struggles to keep their once pleasantly mundane marriage afloat when a series of lies, infidelities and acts of vandalism ensue. Just what exactly led that handsome man with a sideways smile to come a-knockin' at their Silver Lake home?
THE PROSE "It didn't take long before he returned with what could have been a shoe box. Although there weren't shoes in the box, but rather, fitted into a foam bed, a fat, square, silver L of metal, pug-nosed, unfed, brutish: a gun."
–Kamilla Rifkin

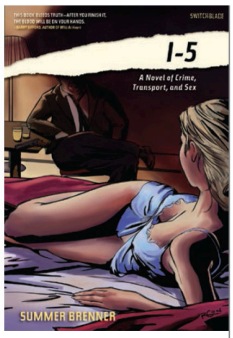


Breakshot: A Life in the 21st Century American Mafia

By Kenny Gallo and Matthew Randazzo V
(Phoenix Books, $24.95)
THE BOOK In the '80s, O.C.'s reigning prince was Kenny "Kenji" Gallo, who after a stint as porn actor Peter North's personal coke dealer, aligned himself with Pablo Escobar's drug cartel, becoming one of the Orange County's top cocaine dealers all before age 21. This memoir follows his rise through the American Mafia. Gallo reaped millions via credit fraud, gambling and extortion before making a deal with the FBI and helping put away some of the mob's most dangerous criminals. THE PROSE "I never rushed violence. I took my time to make sure it was special."
–Nairi Najarian

L.A. Noir: The Struggle for the Soul of America's Most Seductive City

By John Buntin
(Random House, $26)
THE BOOK Midcentury L.A, despite the glam of the rising film industry, was a battleground between LAPD chief William H. Parker and the city's underworld boss, Mickey Cohen. Buntin's narrative explores the far-reaching implications that the cop-gangster rivalry had on L.A.'s history and traces how each man's life was dominated—and united—by the goal of destroying the other.
THE PROSE "Chief Parker was right to be worried. Mickey Cohen was looking for a way to get rid of him. But not with a bullet. He needed something subtle."
–Jenna Hootstein



I-5: A Novel of Crime, Transport, and Sex

By Summer Brenner
(PM Press/Switchblade, $15.95) THE BOOK Noir turns positively brutal in this fictional look at the sex trafficking trade, making the average Angeleno's commute seem like a drive through the wine country. As Anya travels under lock-and-key along the I-5 from L.A. to Oakland with her "manager," a series of twists and turns unfolds involving murder and a truck full of human eyeballs. THE PROSE "She's a sex-worker. That's her job title. It implies earnings. It carries benefits. For a professional, there's no emotional resonance. It's business."
–Caitlin Berens

BOOK COVERS COURTESY OF PUBLISHING HOUSES