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# 'Baseline Road' crime novel set in early '70s Claremont

Claremont, self-proclaimed "city of trees and Ph.D.s," is not the most likely setting for a detective novel. But then, Kem Nunn's "Pomona Queen" is set in Pomona, Jonathan Lethem's "The Feral Detective" in Upland and vicinity. An anthology of detective fiction is titled "Palm Springs Noir."

Sunny towns cast long shadows, in other words. Orlando Davidson explores some from his own past in his first novel, set in Claremont in the early 1970s. Title: "Baseline Road."

Not Foothill Boulevard, which doubled as Route 66, but the relatively unsung east-west road that parallels Foothill to the north through the foothill cities all the way to San Bernardino.

As the novel's narrator, sheriff's Sgt. Jimmy Sommes, puts it at one juncture:

"Baseline Road had been envisioned as and built to be the main drag between Pasadena and the desert. The landscape was a mix of scrubby desert, pre-war wooden frame homes with citrus and avocado trees in the front yards, small grocery stores that still had gas pumps in front, and even a fruit stand or two."

Action begins with a 1970 bombing at the Claremont Colleges to protest the Kent State shootings. In the novel, it's the second bombing in two weeks, the first one injuring someone, the second killing a professor.

Somes is a sheriff's homicide investigator who plays in a country-rock band. (More homicide investigators should play in country-rock bands.) At a gig he gets a tip from a local acid casualty that the FBI arrested the wrong man. The second

bombing, it turns out, was actually a targeted hit that used campus radicalism as a cover.

While the murder is fictional, the springboard is real. Davidson was a student at Claremont Men's College, now Claremont McKenna, in that era and remembers.

"There was a bombing at Pomona College in 1969 connected to

Black power," Davidson told me over coffee recently. "A woman at Carnegie did get part of her hand blown off." But there was no bombing, as in the novel, after Kent State; protests "were peaceful," he writes in an author's note, "but also highly disruptive to the status quo."

We were talking because Davidson, 72, was visiting from his home in Portland, Oregon — and carrying a book bag from Powell's — to celebrate his book's launch with friends and family in Claremont. Returning to the scene of the crime, as it were.

The late '60s and early '70s were a tumultuous time — Vietnam, Cambodia, Nixon — even in the Claremont that Davidson called "idyllic."

Endless discussions took place on campus about violent vs. nonviolent protest, Davidson said, especially after Kent State, in which National Guardsmen at the Ohio college opened fire on students and killed four.

"I got caught up in the Kent State protests enough to get put on conduct probation by CMC," Davidson said. He took a year off to take a deep breath and mature — "it kind of worked," he said wryly — before returning and getting a bachelor's in American history in 1973.

That summer he tended bar at Bodene's and Marie Callender's, two bars on Foot-



Orlando Davidson set his novel in and around Claremont in the early 1970s, the period in which he was a college undergraduate caught up in protests against the Vietnam War. That provided the springboard for "Baseline Road," which begins with a campus bombing.

hill Boulevard, before going to law school, eventually relocating to Honolulu to practice law. Most of his Claremont memories are from the 1960s and '70s.

After retiring to North Carolina he had time to take up a new interest, writing. At workshop classes at the Great Smokies Writing Program, he learned about the craft of writing fiction and got feedback from teachers and fellow students.

"It got me focused on what I ought to be writing about," he said, which meant abandoning his first novel, a coming-of-age story on which he'd spent three years, and instead combining his love of mystery fiction with a vivid time and place in his life.

He sent portions of his draft manuscript to a half-dozen writer friends for their feedback and found a small publisher, New Mexico-based Artemesia, via a conversation with a friend of his wife's.

"Baseline Road" is told by Sommes, who works out of the sheriff's Alta Loma station and gets permission to

cross the San Bernardino County line to investigate the 1970 bombings of two years earlier. He partners with his best friend, Carol Loomis, a Claremont police detective and the brains of the duo.

Along the way, they meet for meals at Walter's, La Paloma and the Village Grill, keep appointments on Yale Avenue and travel on Padua Hills Drive, Arrow Highway and, yes, Baseline Road. Pursuing leads to the east, they talk with a biker at Fontana's Drag City and make stops in Redlands and Yucaipa.

Most of the 1972-era places really existed, as did the vanished spots that Sommes reminisces about, like the Orange Julius across from Claremont High.

Davidson says much of his Baseline Road geography is imaginary, including the country-western bar named the Corral where the novel begins.

While Baseline Road is only locally famous, the name does seem evocative when emblazoned on a book cover.

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# Allen

FROM PAGE 3

“It’s got a vibe to it,” Davidson agreed.

One true-to-life phenomenon is invoked: the dips. Those were the undulations that teens and indulgent parents loved to drive back before the road was smoothed out.

“Driving west toward

the setting sun, I guided my Charger through the Baseline Dips, going fast,” Sommes relates. “The car held the surface until I hit 55, then it went airborne for brief blissful moments, like Steve McQueen’s Ford Mustang in ‘Bullitt.’”

“Baseline Road,” the prose version, is a fun ride too.

## **br|Efly**

Ace Frehley, a co-found-

ing member of Kiss, headlines a concert Saturday at the Canyon, a club at the shopping mall in Montclair (pop. 38,000). A friend who grew up in neighboring Upland is attending for the novelty. “As a 10-year-old Kiss fan,” he confides, “I never would have thought that I would one day see Ace Frehley in Montclair — and at Montclair

Plaza.” My friend adds: “He should sing ‘New York Groove’ but change it to ‘Montclair Groove.’”

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