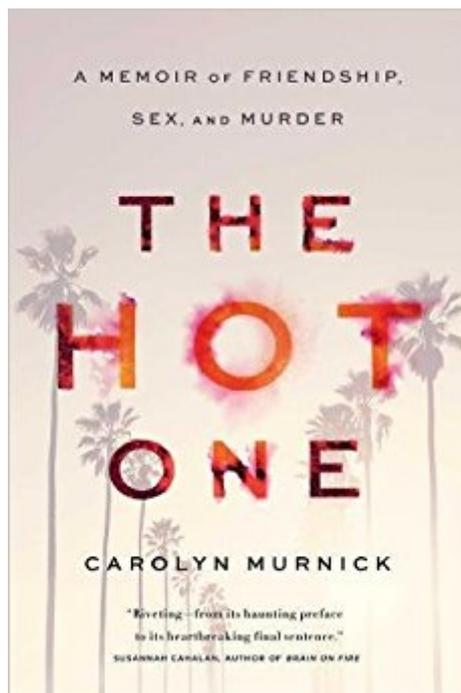


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# The Hot One: A Memoir Of Friendship, Sex, And Murder



## Synopsis

A gripping memoir of friendship with a tragic twist—two childhood best friends diverge as young adults, one woman is brutally murdered and the other is determined to uncover the truth about her wild and seductive friend. As girls growing up in rural New Jersey in the late 1980s, Ashley and Carolyn had everything in common: two outsiders who loved spending afternoons exploring the woods. Only when the girls attended different high schools did they begin to grow apart. While Carolyn struggled to fit in, Ashley quickly became a hot girl: popular, extroverted, and sexually precocious. After high school, Carolyn entered college in New York City and Ashley ended up in Los Angeles, where she quit school to work as a stripper and an escort, dating actors and older men, and experimenting with drugs. The last time Ashley visited New York, Carolyn was shocked by how the two friends had grown apart. One year later, Ashley was stabbed to death at age twenty-two in her Hollywood home. The man who may have murdered Ashley—an alleged serial killer—now faces trial in Los Angeles. Carolyn Murnick traveled across the country to cover the case and learn more about her magnetic and tragic friend. Part coming-of-age story, part true-crime mystery, *The Hot One* is a behind-the-scenes look at the drama of a trial and the poignancy of searching for the truth about a friend's truly horrifying murder.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Riveting...A thoughtful examination of how we grow up and apart." —COSMOPOLITAN

"Murnick is an engaging writer and her story of the seamy side of young Hollywood sucks you in like a link to TMZ." —USA Today "While the specific story is tragic and interesting in its own right, the

central themes of friendship, and of how you can share a childhood with someone, then come to hardly know them at all will resonate with many." --NEW YORK POST "Darkly beautiful...Poetic and riveting." --INTERVIEW "Murnick's memoir will shock and fascinate." --BOOKLIST "Original and engaging." --KIRKUS REVIEWS "This fusion of memoir and procedural should be welcomed by readers of autobiography as well as true crime." --LIBRARY JOURNAL "Carolyn Murnick's insights into the freighted complexities of youth, beauty, and sexuality, and how these forces collide within long, close female friendships, turn an already affecting murder mystery into a story for our time. Never morbid or sentimental, always honest, *The Hot One* is a wholly original memoir that explores and unpacks the often vexing reality of what it means to be a young woman in the 21st century." --Kate Bolick, bestselling author of *SPINSTER: Making a Life of One's Own* "A journalist's investigation into her childhood friend's murder is so much more in writer Carolyn Murnick's hands." Murnick exposes the sticky complexity of female friendship and identity. She questions what our debts are to the dead and forces us to look at ourselves. Three pages in and I knew that I wouldn't get anything else done." I inhaled *The Hot One* in 24 hours, riveted from its haunting preface to its heartbreaking final sentence." --Susannah Cahalan, bestselling author of *BRAIN ON FIRE: My Month of Madness* "Carolyn Murnick's *The Hot One* is as suspenseful as it is heartfelt and honest an affecting, revealing investigation into the mysteries at the heart of young friendship." --Robert Kolker, author of *LOST GIRLS: An Unsolved American Mystery*

Carolyn Murnick is an online editor at *New York* magazine. She received an Emerging Writer Fellowship from the Aspen Institute in 2014. Her personal essays have appeared in two anthologies: *Before & After: Stories from New York* and *Lost & Found: Stories from New York*. She lives in Brooklyn.

I couldn't put it down! On its face *The Hot One* didn't strike me as my genre -- but it's so much more than a murder mystery, due in large part to the author's uniquely incisive, probing and authentic voice. Hard-boiled but not snarky, straightforward but not simple, open-minded but not naive, she skillfully melds suspense and personal reflection as the journey to uncover the complete picture of her childhood best friend's murder unfolds. As she poses questions and examines assumptions about how we value ourselves as girls and women, the constraints our society imposes on how we define ourselves, and the ways in which those stories become (sometimes tragically) self-fulfilling,

you get to know a compelling and emotionally brave character in her own right. I highly recommend.

Susannah Cahalan describes Carolyn Murnick's *The Hot One* as "riveting" on the cover copy, and I can't think of a more apt description. A memoir more than anything conventional True Crime, *The Hot One* spans the years from Carolyn's childhood friendship with victim Ashley Ellerin to her untimely, violent death and beyond. What happens when best friends drift apart? When you can't take back whatever caused the rift? When you wonder who someone you were once inseparable from became in the year before she died? How do you reconcile a nine-year-old pianist with a twenty-something stripper at a low-rent club in Vegas? How do you honor someone after you've disconnected? And how do you move on? First and foremost, I have to commend Carolyn's writing. She's a seasoned industry veteran and her skill and talent are apparent. I purchased *The Hot One* after reading a passage posted on a blog. The voice hooked me immediately. The only criticism I have is the constant recycling of the phrase "bearing witness." It's overused and while it may be the purpose of Carolyn's writing this book (though I'm sure not the only one), the phrase becomes quickly redundant. As for the True Crime aspect of the book, Ashley's murder is covered as is the alleged killer identified, but this isn't a "follow the clues" kind of story nor is there a resolution as the trial is ongoing. More is said about who Ashley was from the viewpoint of others and through Carolyn's final time with her a year before her death when it seems clear these were not the childhood friends detailed in the early chapters but two young women who grew irreparably apart. It is inherent in writers to write from the heart, and Carolyn's feelings may be what makes this book unputdownable but I'd be remiss if I didn't mention that the whole thing doesn't feel so much a platform to give Ashley an identification outside of her impressive Hollywood circles as it feels a little self-serving. If Carolyn's intention was to humanize and endear Ashley as a victim, she has perhaps only driven home that Ashley's role as the "Party Girl" and her behavior contributed in unfair ways to her death. Throughout the trial everyone in Ashley's life during her last year was questioned extensively about the extent to which Ashley partied. Drugs. Sex. LOTS of sex, and sex work at the Cheetah (made famous by the scandalous *Showgirls* movie of the 90s). There should be no cause-and-effect of too

high heels or even working in a P&P (pasties and panties) bar as a dancer and one's victimhood in a perfect world, but this isn't a perfect world and risk is risk. To call this a proper homage when even the childhood stories refer to near-nude photographs might be an overstatement. Sex sells, I get it, but the sex in this story is front and center at the expense of what kind of woman Ashley might have been in Carolyn's absence. Was she kind? Generous? What were her interests? Her goals? Did she want a family one day? What endeared her to those who spoke at her trial, the friends she had made in LA? I don't mean to detract from Carolyn's travel, time, effort and research, or even her grief but this story is written with a measure of reserve, of distance, and I wonder if there isn't an unexplored facet that is the "real Ashley" (which I don't factor into my rating because this is an excellent book even if I feel a bit exploitative enjoying it). For this young woman I will never know I am sad that more isn't made clear about her life other than her being, even in death, The Hot One.

Time and time again, Murnick chooses to make this book all about herself. She even states her theme outright: "There but for the grace of God, go I," bladdity, bladdity, blah, which to her means (as she brings up over and over), "Oh, my God. It could've been ME!" But, she fails to recognize that what she is also saying is that Ashley received no grace; so, what does that honestly tell us about Murnick's view of Ashley? The author makes horrid and insensitive jokes such as when she describes the technique that the killer used to mutilate her friend and imagines herself on Jeopardy saying, "Alex, I'll take Piquerism for \$200." Really? How did anyone sign off on that? She is obsessed with seeing the photos of her friend's destroyed body, and she constantly insinuates herself into the circle of Ashley's actual friends and covers the country gawking at every place Ashley had been under the guise of "finding out what happened" and nobly "bearing witness." Murnick spends 15 years after the killer is incarcerated, working her butt off to be a part of this story, and she finally gets her wish: She gets to be a witness in the penalty phase of the trial! Finally, she gets the stage so that she can show everyone that she is the smart one AND the "hot" one now, too! The title is offensive and meaningless except in Murnick's own self-indulgent mind. She posits several times that she and Ashley (who were best friends when they were nine-year-olds) formed their own self-worth in judgment of each other because someone once remarked that Ashley said of her, "She's smarter than I am." So, obviously because Ashley was the "hot" one, Ashley measured herself against Murnick's intelligence and found herself lacking. Murnick never finds out any

significant truth about her friend as a young adult, and it's evident that she was never sincerely trying. She was simply researching a book. She even receives the idea and the "blessing" to write this book from Ashley's spirit as it hovers around the house where the murder occurred (according to the in-tune woman with Murnick). Ohhhhh. So, that's why Ashley was murdered! It was all orchestrated so that Murnick could pen her first book! The last time she saw Ashley, Murnick turned up her nose at Ashley's "stripper" attire and Ashley's confidence in her own body and how easily Ashley snagged the man Murnick wanted. Ashley knew that she was "hot" and used it to her financial benefit. Murnick feigns anger at the lawyer for the accused for trying to make Ashley out to be a "slut," and that's just what Murnick has accomplished with this thin excuse for a story about "friendship, sex, and murder." Most of us had childhood friends whom we loved and from whom we became estranged as we left elementary school. And, of course, we'd probably feel horror and sadness and loss if one of those friends ended up brutally murdered. It's even true that many of us would feel that "It could've been me" thing that kicks in when the car in front of us gets T-boned. So, if what you want to do is to write a book about how awful someone else's tragedy is for YOU, at least own up to it so that readers know what's really between the covers.

This is an excellent book -- part memoir, part true-crime page-turner. As a memoir, it offers insight into the nuances of female friendship and the foundational role that such friendships can play in early life, when girls are figuring out how to navigate a world in which they will be judged and ranked according to their physical appearance. As a true-crime story, it digs into a string of murders by an alleged serial killer -- how he got close to his female victims, what he allegedly did, and how he avoided being caught. *The Hot One* is a book about coming of age, female friendship, murder, and loss, beautifully and sensitively written.

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