A wild surge of guilty passion

By ron hansen

(Scribner; 256 pages; $25)

"I have two beings inhabiting my skin," Judd Gray, a corset and brassiere salesman, tells Ruth Brown Snyder, his lover. One side of him, a married man who dotes on his daughter, acts normally, while the other seeks out forbidden pleasures: "We have known each other for only a year and a half, and by whatever measure you choose, my life is in what the biplane pilots call a 'death spiral' ... I have no idea how this story ends."

But we do. Ron Hansen begins "A Wild Surge of Guilty Passion," a novel based on a "crime of the century" committed in 1927, with the murder of Albert Snyder, Ruth's husband, and the unraveling of clumsily concocted alibis. Hansen manages, however, to sustain the suspense, for a while at least, looking through a glass darkly at erotic attraction and sexual destruction in middle-class Manhattan. Splendidly written, his novel is this summer's not-at-all-guilty pleasure.

"A Wild Surge of Guilty Passion" makes the most of its "perps," who, let's admit it, fit snugly into noir stereotypes. Hansen's Ruth Snyder is a seductress, who has "been on more laps than a dinner napkin." And she's a sociopath. Ordered to the precinct for questioning, she shocks the police officers at the crime scene by removing her nightgown and standing before them, "stunningly naked." On the way to Sing Sing Prison, she asks her guard to stop by a roadhouse in Sleepy Hollow so that she can order a lobster dinner.

Left to his own devices, Hansen's Gray is affable and ingratiating, ignoring slights and forgiving wrongs, making friends even with strangers, anything but "the type to lash out in fury, let alone kill." A weak man, he allows circumstances - and his gonads - to get the better of him. Only when he's Ruth-less will he get right with Jesus.

Ingeniously and insistently, Hansen - a professor at Santa Clara University perhaps best known for his novel "The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford" - details how, step-by-seductive-step, Ruth draws Judd into her scheme. When she asks him to make Irving Berlin's "Always" their song, Judd sings, in a boozy baritone, that when the things she plans need a helping hand, he will understand, always. And then, during a tryst at the Stuyvesant Hotel in Kingston, N.Y., Ruth confesses that whenever Albert climbs into bed with her she feels like killing him. Judd's thoughts, Hansen writes, "hung like his cigarette smoke. She could feel his sentences forming but in his hesitation they soon deteriorated."

Ruth doesn't give up, of course. Uncertain of the moment when he agreed to do it, Judd recalls mentioning chloroform on the Wednesday afternoon before Thanksgiving, as Ruth lowered her head into his chest, "her right hand gently arranging his sleeping penis." She grins, and asks, "Would you get some for me?" Judd hears himself say yes. Two days later he calls to tell her he has changed his mind. "Oh, that's fine," Ruth replies, switching the topic to her household chores. "She knows me so well," Judd realizes.

In an artful account of the night of the murder, Hansen captures the essence of his subjects and the serendipity of life and death. Judd slips into the side door of the Snyder home and finds a pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes - Ruth has not remembered that his favorite brand is Sweet Caporal - her sign that the family is still out playing bridge. Hiding in an upstairs bedroom, waiting to kill a man "whose first name he could not then remember," Judd decides to flee.

But when he reaches the landing, he sees the high beams of a car through the dining room window, and "stumbles back up the stairs in a panic." A short time later, Ruth appears, and takes him "by the hand, like a child," to Albert's room. The murderers don't know that he is so drunk that had there been no foul play he might have died in his sleep.

The aftermath of the crime, which makes up one-third of "A Wild Surge of Guilty Passion," is anticlimactic. Hansen's "just the facts"
Joe Friday narrative, designed to appear more journalistic than novelistic, at times succeeds too well. And familiarity with the characters begins to breed detachment.

Playwright Willard Mack, Hansen reports, yawns at a trial in which the plot is thin, the direction is pitiful, and the principals are dumb. Whether or not Mack actually said it, he was/is right, for the proceeding that took place in 1927 and Hansen's rendering of it.

When someone shouts, "It's over! It's over!" - and Ruth and Judd are side by side, "silent. Dispassionate. Loved." - readers, in all likelihood, will acknowledge that the ride to hell and back has been stimulating. And that they're ready to move on to the next "crime of the century."

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