



Little Elvise

Timothy Hallinan

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JUNIOR BENDER UNTANGLES ONE OF THE WEIRDEST MYSTERIES IN TINSELTOWN

LA burglar Junior Bender has (unfortunately) developed a reputation as a competent private investigator for crooks. The unfortunate part about this is that regardless of whether he solves the crime or not, someone dangerous is going to be unhappy with him, either his suspect or his employer.

Now Junior is being bullied into proving aging music industry mogul Vinnie DiGaudio is innocent of the murder of a nasty tabloid journalist he'd threatened to kill a couple times. It doesn't help that the dead journalist's widow is one pretty lady, and she's trying to get Junior to mix pleasure with business. Just as the investigation is spiraling out of control, Junior's hard-drinking landlady begs him to solve the disappearance of her daughter, who got involved with a very questionable character. And, worst news of all, both Junior's ex-wife and his thirteen-year-old daughter, Rina, seem to have new boyfriends. What a mess.

From the Hardcover edition.

Little Elvises Details

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From Reader Review Little Elvises for online ebook

Susan (aka Just My Op) says

The good guy in this story is a bad guy, a burglar who has to solve one crime so a cop doesn't frame him for another crime. But this bad guy is thoroughly likable, well aware of his own numerous shortcomings, most of the time anyway. And he just keeps trudging on anyway.

There is gore in this story, but not huge, gross, horrible amounts of it. Well, except for Fronts - a pretty interesting character in his own right. Three different mysteries are intertwined, well, three main ones anyway. Some surprises, some terrific writing, some funny bits.

"Jesus. Vinnie, Paulie, Popsie. Where are Vito and Sonny? Why not just hang some neon sign in the window, Mobs R Us?"

"For a while, he'd worn bangs, but he had a natural curl in his hair, and the bangs flipped up at the ends with a twee effect that made him look like a hitman for the Campfire Girls."

I have not read the first book in this series but I'm definitely going to have to read it and then keep my eyes out for the next one.

Great characters, fresh and funny writing, an entertaining plot add up to 4 stars overall, 5 for this genre.

I was given a copy of the book for review, for which I am grateful.

Maddy says

PROTAGONIST: Junior Bender, Burglar

SETTING: California

SERIES: #2 of 3

RATING: 4.5

Junior Bender is a professional burglar who has at times acted as a private investigator for some of his friends on the wrong side of the law. Unfortunately, Detective DiGaudio is using this information against him. In exchange for not being accused of a robbery he did not commit, Junior must prove that the cop's uncle, Vincent Di Gaudio, did not murder a slimy tabloid journalist named Derek Bigelow. Back in the 1960s, Vinnie was the manager for a series of young pop stars known as "Little Elvises". Each of the boys would be in the limelight for a short while and then replaced when their popularity waned.

Things quickly get complicated. While he is investigating the murder, he meets the writer's wife and finds himself falling for her. He knows that this is probably not a good idea, since it doesn't appear that she is not somehow involved in what happened to her husband. At the same time, his landlady's daughter goes missing and he feels compelled to try to find her. And then there's the drama on the home front—his ex-wife has a live-in boyfriend and his 13-year-old daughter, Rina, is trying to figure out which parent she will choose to live with in the future.

Rina proves to be invaluable in working on Vinnie's case. She has deep background knowledge of the music industry and aids Junior in understanding the Little Elvies situation. There are a few of the Elvies who stood out, some for their talent and some for other reasons. "Giorgio" falls into the latter category; he is completely beautiful but doesn't have an ounce of talent. Eventually, he becomes a movie star; later, he completely disappears from the life and is presumed dead.

In addition to a nicely complex plot, Hallinan has peopled LITTLE ELVIES with a wide variety of unforgettable characters. He has an uncanny knack for inserting humorous observations into a narrative that is by turns amusing or suspenseful without ever going over the top. I did wish that Junior would balance his private investigation duties with his trademark robberies—those are always very entertaining. But that's a minor issue in a series where the lead character has so much heart, despite his career choices.

Kaycee says

I listened to the first 2 of 9 parts and just wasn't involved or interested. Perhaps it is the hangover from the last book I listened to or my overall mood but I just didn't want to continue.

Carolien says

The plot focuses on an interesting sub culture that existed in the post-Elvis days where music promoters focused on churning copies through the American music scene. Junior Bender remains one of my favourite characters as burglar extraordinaire with education and family issues. I enjoy the pace and humour of this series and highly recommend it for fans of Robert B. Parker or Robert Crais.

Patrick says

There are four of these Junior Benders, and as usual I started in the middle because someone gave the book to me.

The story is insane, the characters memorable (and insane), and the dialogue and narration is absolutely first-rate. Hallinan is the king of "Snappy Things I Wish I'd Thought Of."

Sometimes it seems everybody in the book studied at the same Snark Seminar, however. And the second strand of the plot is tied up in what seems to me a rather cursory manner.

But these are quibbles. I laughed out loud a dozen times, and even subjected others to the hideous experience of me reading aloud.

If you like Westlake or Hiassen or comic capers in general then snap up this and the other three as well.

Trish says

One picks up a book by Tim Hallinan to have fun. There's a little murder, sure...sometimes *a lot* of murder...but it's usually the bad guys that "get it" and we rest easy, knowing there is someone out there who'd rob us blind if he could, but who won't take more than we can afford to lose.

Hallinan's creation, Junior Bender, is the kind of guy you might ask back to your house for a party, after he'd robbed it, just to ask how he did it. He's that amusing.

The Junior Bender series of books is based in Los Angeles and captures the vibration of southern California precisely. If you've ever found yourself missing the place, you might want to pick up one of Hallinan's books for a cure. Hallinan lasers in on defining characteristics, and picks up those things we thought we'd fixed with botox, or managed to hide with designer advice. He is brilliant at describing environments, in this case an old art deco apartment building with a view of the city purchased by crooked Koreans. Crumbling and unkempt on the outside, it is gloriously restored on the inside, with secret escapes and hidden garages, just perfect for hiding ill-gotten gains or for a man on the run.

Junior has a code of ethics that is not taught in any religion, but like many southern Californians, is just something he created out of whole cloth and "evolved" into. But we like this code, just as we like him. He is a thief, yes, but his heart is in the right place. Everyone wants his help at some time or another, even the cops, and if they don't, well, mostly they want to lock him up or kill him. Which keeps Junior on his toes.

Junior has a family, and in this episode, his thirteen-year-old daughter, Rina, shows she is growing up into someone he can admire. Do I need to say she has computer skills that put her father to shame? And while she is not old enough to have a boyfriend, she has a friend that is a boy who is as special and interesting as everyone else in the family. We yearn to see more of him, and watch him grow.

Hallinan writes crime novels that defy the type. One can imagine finding a sprung-binding massmarket paperback of his with its delicious, distinctive single-color cover and woodcut silhouettes and opening to the first page...only hours later surfacing to reflect that one had found gold.

Michael Sherer says

Elvis may have left the building, but Timothy Hallinan is still very much in residence with *LITTLE ELVISES*, the second in his new Junior Bender series. Unlike the four-chord, imitative 60s rock and roll he writes about in this outing, Hallinan is a virtuoso who plays with words the way the real Elvis played with his audiences.

With a hip swivel here, a nostril-flaring sneer there, Hallinan takes us through the seamy underbelly of a little corner of the music business—the "little Elvises" that initially followed in the wake of The King, churning out songs and performing in front of squealing throngs of teenage girls. In many, if not most, cases, these flash-in-the-pan musical Lotharios were managed and produced by the unscrupulous. And in some instances, as is the case here, the unscrupulous had connections to the mob.

Caught between a rock and a hard place, Junior has to clear one of these types of murder. And, for something

to do in his spare time, he also looks into the disappearance of the motel owner's daughter where he's staying. Junior's a crook with a heart not quite of gold—perhaps slightly tarnished brass—but a pragmatic one, and he exercises the type of care evident in a professional who takes pride in his work.

And work it is, as Junior spends most of his time sleuthing as opposed to stealing or burgling, and like a good P.I. employs stringers who help with the grunt work and pays them with stolen money. It's fascinating to watch all of these “self-employed” characters on the wrong side of the law work harder than most Joe Six-Packs and take greater pride in what they do.

Hallinan keeps both stories on track and clipping along, and at the same time does a terrific job of elaborating on Junior's personal life, some of which we learned about in CRASHED. Of particular note is the way in which Hallinan handles Junior's relationship with his teenage daughter Rina. Brighter and perhaps more articulate than most teens in real life, Rina rang emotionally true for me as a parent of two daughters (and, full disclosure, two older sons).

Hallinan also gives Junior a little more insight into his own motivation for living the life he does. The conclusions Junior comes to are good news for readers, as they promise many more adventures to come, and the potential for rich conflict in Junior's personal life as he establishes a life after divorce and an ongoing relationship with Rina.

This is a terrific series entry, with a thrilling dual-plotline rife with nasty characters and danger along the way, and rich with details both pertinent to the story and character development that will keep readers coming back for more.

Lynn says

I loved this story and these characters -- five stars. It's so rare to find a character like Junior who is funny and dangerous at the same time. I've read a lot of mysteries and it's lovely to find a well-adjusted, intelligent person with a sense of humor. I read several Bernie Rhodenbarr books and they were fun (but kind of dated). I was reluctant to take up with another burglar, but Junior Bender is light years more plausible somehow. Funny and exciting.

Hallie says

Junior Bender, the crusty, loveable hero of Timothy Hallinan's "Little Elvises," is a career burglar who does "detective stuff" for criminals. But this time his client is a cop, and Junior's reward will be avoiding a jail sentence for a heist he didn't commit. His assignment is to keep the cop's uncle, an aging music industry mogul who promoted a string of '60s pop stars known as the "Little Elvises," from going down for a murder he didn't commit. To clear the uncle, Junior has to figure out who killed a tabloid journalist whose body was dumped, tellingly perhaps, on the Hollywood sidewalk star emblazoned with the name of one of the Little Elvises, one who was killed in a fire.

Meanwhile, Junior proves a mensch. He's got an ex-wife he still regrets losing, a spunky computer-whiz daughter he adores, and a girlfriend who finds him irresistible. He's got a soft spot for elderly Marge who

runs Marge 'n Ed's North Pole, a seedy Christmas-themed motel in North Hollywood where he's staying, and she talks him into finding her daughter who's disappeared with a creep.

There's a lot going on in this book with a teddy bear of a main character and laugh-out-loud dialogue -- though I couldn't help noticing, even the dumbest characters seem to crack awfully wise, and some villains feel as if they've been hauled out of the Marvel Comics crypt.

"You want to be funny," says one of Junior's sidekicks, "hire a writer." For that, Hallinan's your man.

(Review originally published in The Boston Globe)

Gloria Feit says

A pattern seems to be developing in the Junior Bender series. In the debut novel, "Crashed," Junior, a professional burglar, was blackmailed, indirectly, by Trey Annunziato, the female head of a crime family, to steal a Klee. In this, the second book in the series, he is blackmailed by a detective to try to protect his uncle, Vincent Di Gaudio, from a murder rap. I guess we'll have to wait for the third installment, expected in June, "The Fame Thief," to find out whether the trend continues.

Be that as it may be, there are two stories in the present novel. First is the murder of a gossip reporter, for which a prime suspect is Vincent DiGaudio, known for finding and promoting various boys known as the "Little Elvisses" during the 1950's. Then the owner of the motel in which Junior is living asks him to find her daughter, from whom she has not heard for some time. Apparently she was living with a man suspected of murdering several women. Just to add an additional touch of complexity and humor to the novel, Junior becomes involved with the journalist's widow, while his ex-wife and 13-year-old daughter each have new boyfriends, complicating his life further.

A hallmark of a Timothy Hallinan mystery novel are unusual situations and characterizations, and a whole lot of humor. "Little Elvisses" is no exception. Junior continues to evolve in this book, and we find him becoming softer and more human, despite the bizarre confrontations he gets into. It's a worthy follow-up, and we look forward to the next chapter in his life.

Recommended.

Spuddie says

I have to preface this by saying that over the past few months I have found myself "going off" mysteries. Even several previously favored series and authors have been causing me to either gnash my teeth in frustration or yawn with boredom. I keep finding hideous typos and proofreading errors and wrong forms of words being used (peace/piece, taut/taught, do/due, etc.) which annoys me enough to pull me out of the story. I'm just finding little care or attention to detail in many series books these days...and I'm sick of it! There are so many books that seem to be written by automatons, formulaic rehashings of previous books and so on.

I never have to worry about these problems with Tim Hallinan. Why? Because this guy can write! He's not only got a good story to tell, he knows how to tell it. The way he strings words together, the phraseology, the characterizations...just the whole package, really...make his books a delight to read. The passion he has for his characters and their stories shine through very obviously. I find myself often grabbing my book journal, in which I jot quotations from books I'm reading, when I'm reading a Hallinan. He has a way with words, so he does.

In this second installment in the Junior Bender series, we find Junior--a burglar--roped into assisting an aging mobster beat a murder rap. I thought I wasn't going to like him much when I started the first book but I'm now firmly in Junior's corner and cringe with all the troubles that befall him as the story unfolds. I did figure out part of the mystery, but there are always a few surprises in store. All I can say is, read the book...but if you haven't yet read the first in the series, start there. You won't be sorry!

Lance Charnes says

Fictional burglars who end up starring in their own novels have to be multi-talented. The ones whose stories I've read generally have to be detectives, guidance counselors, therapists, AA buddies, and diplomats. In fact, they rarely have time to ply their primary trade when they're driving a story; *The Hot Rock* notwithstanding, publishers seem to think that readers won't put up with a plot that consists entirely of the lead character stealing things all the time.

So it goes in *Little Elvies*, Junior Bender's second outing in the series named for him. Junior's a burglar in Los Angeles, at least when he's not onstage. This time around, a crooked cop coerces him into trying to clear the cop's uncle of murdering a low-rent tabloid freelancer who left behind a long line of people who might want to delete him permanently. At the same time, the manager of the cheap motel Junior lives in (he moves from motel to motel to make himself hard to find, though everyone manages to find him anyway) wants Junior to track down her missing daughter, who may be consorting with a psychopath.

Junior's good at what he does -- both burgling and detecting -- knows the ecosystem in which he lives, and is generally far more competent at life and work than, say, your typical Scandinoir protagonist. He's quick with a *bon mot*, describes people and places in a clear if sometimes offbeat way, and doesn't ruminate at unseemly length. In this episode, we see more of his ex-wife and teen daughter than we did before, in ways that add to the plot rather than distracting from it. You won't mind following him around -- at least you'd best not, because he's telling the story and he's on every page.

The various plotlines develop organically and follow their own internal logic. Junior has to apply actual brainpower (his own or other people's) rather than magic or coincidence to sort them out, a bonus.

The members of Junior's repertory company continue their Runyonesque personas from the first book without much noticeable development. The new supporting characters fall into varying types, some more successfully than others. The crooked cop comes off like a refugee from a 1970s *Serpico* knockoff, while the dead writer's inexplicably hot widow is mostly a collection of quirk. On the other hand, an old-school political/criminal fixer is suitably menacing without becoming a supervillain. All of them are wiseacres to one extent or another, which leads to some funny lines at the expense of tonal consistency or real-world grounding; you'll have to decide if this is a feature or a bug. This is what happened to the fifth star in case you're keeping track.

Little Elvises is a comedy of criminal manners wrapped in the skin of a dark-side detective story. If you're looking for wry rather than wacky or grit rather than lip gloss, this may be the ticket for you. Don't take any of it too seriously -- the characters don't -- and you may have some quick, kicky fun.

Nancy Oakes says

Little Elvises has one of those very cool storylines where the past returns to bite people in the butt in the present. Like its predecessor, it's very funny, peopled with a lot of odd duck characters and really hits the nail on the head with the Los Angeles feel it conveys. Also as in the previous book, Junior is once again being blackmailed into something he doesn't particularly want to do.

A Detective DiGaudio tells him that the cops can make him for a crime that could put him away for twenty years even though he and Junior both know he didn't do it. Even though he has an alibi, the people he was with at the time of the crime have been imitated by the cops so he can't hope for any help in that arena. As it turns out, diGaudio's uncle Vinnie, who lives with an ex WWF wrestler named Hilda the Queen of the Gestapo and now goes by Popsie, is on the edge of being arrested for the murder of Derek Bigelow, who writes for the tabloids. He's the main suspect because people have heard him say he was planning on offing the guy, but someone beat him to it. The detective wants Junior to get his uncle's name cleared ... or Junior goes down.

Vinnie has a long history with the music industry and in the 1950s and 1960s, he promoted "Little Elvises," who were all the rage on an American Bandstand-type program -- there for their handsome looks rather than for any musical talent. They filled a vacuum between the "raw" -- Jerry Lee Lewis, Little Richard, for example, and the Pat Boone types. These "handsome Italian kids with tight pants and big hair," as his daughter told him in a report she did for school were "churned up to the surface in the wake of Elvis Presley" in Philadelphia, and also according to Rina, the "most pathetic" of the little Elvises was named Giorgio, and one of the better ones, Bobby Angel, just disappeared one day. Having no choice, Junior has to take this seriously, but it isn't long until Junior realizes that someone's after him -- after his first visit to Uncle Vinnie, someone's already shooting at him. Hiding out at the North Pole Motel in the Blitzen room, he enlists the help of Louie the Lost, his friend who gained his name when as a getaway driver he got lost in a Compton neighborhood with a trunk full of diamonds. With the help of his daughter Rina, Junior blazes his way through a very strange case; however, he's actually in for more than he bargained for when Bigelow's widow cozies up to him and when Marge, the North Pole's owner, asks him to find her missing daughter.

You just have to appreciate Timothy Hallinan's whacked imagination in these books. Once again, he's done an excellent job in evoking LA's craziness and its overall atmosphere, which really is like nowhere else if you really get to know it. Junior's character has definitely become a bit more complex since *Crashed*, especially in his interactions with his daughter and his ambivalence about his ex-wife, especially now that she seems to have a new boyfriend. Like the other book, his interactions with the other characters are often hysterical, but in this slice of the world Hallinan has created, make perfect sense. And what characters they are -- crazy as loons some of them. The author notes that he wanted to "play with the idea with the idea of media imitation" here, but there's also a theme that carries over from *Crashed* -- namely, the idea that fame can destroy someone who's not prepared for it.

Once again, I'm floored by how good this book is -- while it may seem a bit complicated at first, as the few initial "aha" moments are reached, things begin to fall into place easily. I also thought the scene leading up to the ending was poignant, in its own way, making this book, like its predecessor, a very human story

underneath all of the fun. Definitely recommended.

Philipc says

The second in the Junior Bender series (the first is Crashed) has Junior up to his neck in other people's plots from the first page. A cop has Junior in a room; the cop tells Junior that he, the cop, has two problems, and Junior can help with one of them, whichever he chooses. If he likes, he can help the cop's uncle out of a spot of bother; if he doesn't like, he can take the rap for a recent burglary during which a judge's wife was pistol-whipped. Yes, says the cop, we know you didn't actually do it, but we won't let that stand in our way.

Junior opts to help the cop's uncle. Uncle's problem is that he looks like the perfect candidate for helping the cops with yet another recent crime, a murder to be exact, in which a slimy Limey played a key role (he was the corpse). Uncle has an waterproof alibi, but refuses to use it. In fact he's not even very cooperative. Why not?

Get in the car, Junior, get in the goddam car and drive. (This is LA - Junior spends more time in that car than he does in bed).

Meanwhile, in a parallel plot, Junior's landlady at the North Pole (it's a themed motel, as seedy as the dead Brit) has another problem: her daughter is missing. Daughter's married a sociopath, a man who's no danger to other men but very probably responsible for the disappearance of several women in the LA area.

Meanwhile meanwhile (the English language surely needs a word for the attempt to tell a three-strand plot), Junior has a daughter/ex/girlfriend problem, involving ... oh hell, just read the goddam book!

(P.s.: No dogs come to any harm in the course of this book)

Sx3 says

I haven't read any of Timothy Hallinan's Junior Bender mysteries. Little Elvises was my first and I had a very push-pull moody reading experience with it.

I couldn't make up my mind if I liked it or disliked it while I was reading it.

Bender is an LA burglar. A good one. Never been caught, charged, nothing. He's 37, divorced, still might love his ex-wife who has new boyfriend, has a genius 13 year old daughter named Rina who may have a boyfriend too.

In order to keep his record clean, a police detective named Paulie DiGaudio wants Bender to help keep his uncle Vinnie from being tied to a murder of a sleazy coke addicted British tabloid writer.

Problem is: Vinnie may have done it. Brit tab writer Bigelow was found on the Hollywood star of one of Vinnie's most famous Little Elvises (pretty boys who could only marginally sing but looked a bit like Elvis back when Elvis was serving for the US Army). Giorgio was a Lucky Star. Incredibly beautiful. Terrible singer. Not much of an actor either. Apparently he meets an untimely death after walking off the set of his

fourth movie and he gets a star on the Walk of Fame.

Anyway, Bender figures this may not be so bad. Find an alibi and old uncle Vinnie is in the clear. But of course, at 343 pages, it isn't going to be so easy.

Of course.

There's also a substory of Bender's new landlady Marge's daughter who may have run off with a serial killer.

I'm still not sure if the Doris story was really needed but I really liked Marge so I'm not going to quibble too much over it.

There was a lot I liked about the book. The mystery itself was pretty darn good. It kept me guessing throughout. Who the fck is Giorgio? What is Vinnie's problem? Who is Nessie? Is Popsie really a former female wrestler?

But there were so many distractions too. The dialogue is so hyper stylized and over padded. It was like, "Get to the point already!" And there was too much description at times. And then there was the Widow Bigelow who was the worst kind of character: useless, unneeded, the 1/2 inch of icing that everyone skims off the cake at the company party because it is just too much.

That's Ronnie Bigelow. Unneeded icing.

I'd have traded her in for more Marge.

Book is at its best when Bender is with Louie as he and Louie have some great back and forths that move the story forward. Best scene is with Dressler though. Seriously good stuff in that scene. I liked Rina but she was a bit too precocious at times but I'd take her over Ronnie any time.

Overall, I guess I can say I liked it. But I probably won't be reading another Bender mystery. Not unless it is 100 pages less than this one because this one was 100 pages too much.
