

Reading the Op stories is such a treat. It becomes very clear to see the path from Hammett to Chandler to Parker. And the branch path from Hammett to Ross Macdonald. Thus, I have decided to bring all of you along. I will post my thoughts on Hammett's creation of America's contribution to literature -- the American Detective Novel! Ready? The trip starts now!

Hammett and the Creation of the American Detective, Part 1:



In October of 1922, Dashiell Hammett achieved his goal of publishing a work of fiction in *The Smart Set* magazine. For a guy that left school at 13, and now approaching 30 with numerous career choices abandoned behind him, his hubris seems unwarranted. Luckily, Hammett didn't know that.

The Smart Set was a trendsetter and a leading place for edgy fiction in this heyday of magazines as influencers in America.

Hammett will place three more pieces with them in the coming year, including "From the Memoirs of a Private Detective," based on his on again – off again work with Pinkertons.

A more important anniversary, however, comes hard on the heels of this first sale.

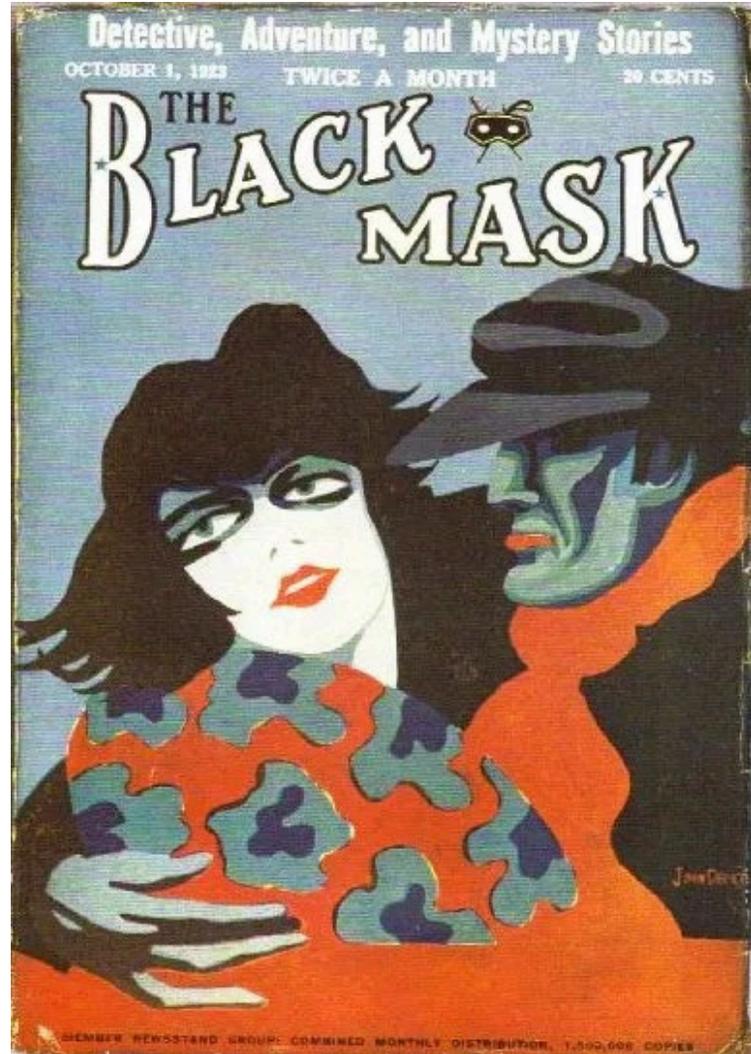
In the December 1922 issue of *Black Mask*, Hammett, using the name Peter Collinson, publishes "The Road Home."

It is in October of 1923 that he places in the pages of *Black Mask* "Arson Plus" - the first Continental Op adventure, told in first person narrative that commands your attention. We see it all through the eyes of a thirty-something operative for the Continental Detective agency, a man whose name we will never know. We see every case unwind, and feel not only the excitement of the chase but also the Op's sore feet. Along the way, this honest if overweight op will win over the readers with smart decisions and keen observations. The Op will go on to star in 28 stories and two novels!

With "Arson Plus," "Slippery Fingers," and "Crooked Souls," all following in quick order in the pages of **Black Mask**, Hammett begins to create a new wholly American detective story, with new rules, new expectations, and new style. Within a year, he is already the accepted master of this new genre.

By 1924-1925, as he practices with the idea of pacing and stories for a novel, his short magazine stories are growing longer. To sustain that growth, he then jumps to the next big idea - writing 'linked' stories that feature the same protagonist and perhaps the same villain. More importantly, it links the reader to the people in the previous story, and makes the whole greater than the sum of the parts.

"The House In Turk Street" and "The Girl with the Silver Eyes" linked in this way, make a splash, and "The Big Knock Over" and "The \$106,000 Blood Money" do the same. His stories are growing to near-novels, and in the process, he is making the first step on a path that will see him literally write the rules on how detective fiction should work.

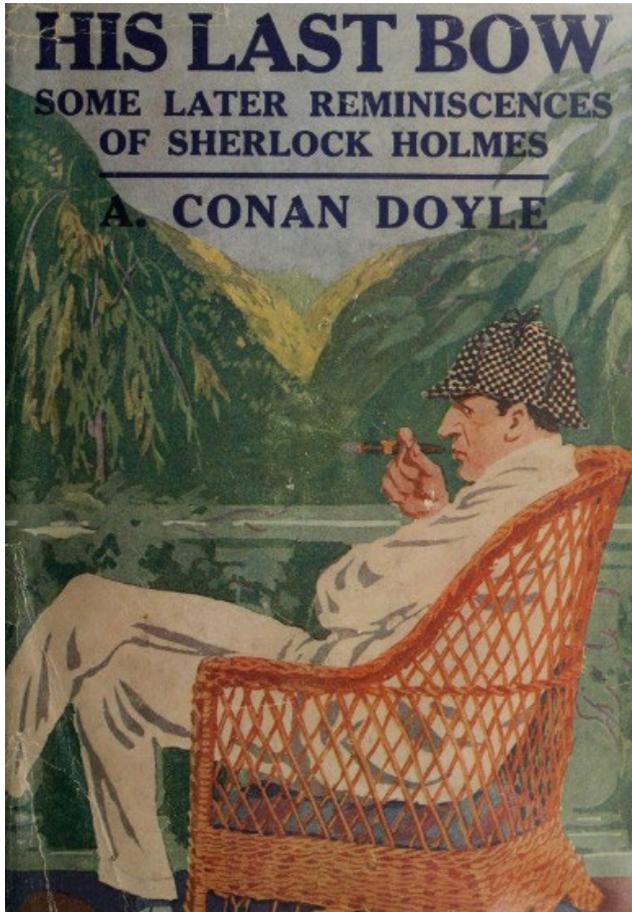


With this celebration of the 1922 anniversary of Hammett's arrival in **Black Mask**, and the first stories of the Continental Op in 1923, we will examine how Dashiell Hammett created the uniquely American version of the Private Detective!



Hammett and the Creation of the American Detective, Part 2:

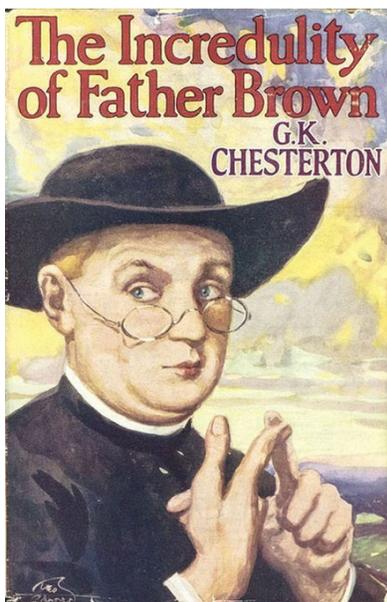
Hammett is widely credited with creating the 'hard-boiled' American Detective, a clear change from the 'drawing room' British detective that had come down to us following the successes of Sherlock Holmes.



Remember, by the time Hammett begins writing, Holmes is still in business! But beyond that, in the 35 years since *A Study in Scarlet* Holmes had spawned dozens of imitators. By the early 20th century, detectives were often idiosyncratic pursuers of logic, in quiet British countrysides, solving surprising murders that befall kindly old gents in their drawing rooms. These murders came as a surprise to everyone - especially the old gentleman themselves.

In the hands of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, those stories were great, but 30 years on, the style had devolved to be about the quirky old gents that quietly solved the murders, much as one would solve a chess match or put together a picture puzzle. Action was not a verb to describe the solving of these murders.

True, there were some exceptions - the Fu Manchu stories were clearly a throwback to early Holmes adventures - but many of the early stories happened on the grounds of the household of the targeted gentleman, befitting the drawing room style as well.



As time would continue, the people at the forefront of these cozy drawing room mysteries would be bumbling beekeepers, parish priests, old maid matrons, and sharp-eyed but slow-footed country policemen. It was their situations that drove the stories, with their personalities front and center - usually fatherly or fastidious teetotalers - not their methods or their practices.



But the 1920s are a time of change in America. The post-war world is completely different than everything that had come before. And the cozy drawing room did not match America's experiences.



The Wall Street explosion of September 16, 1920 is a harbinger of things to come - wholesale and indiscriminate murder on the streets of a great city. The first terrorist action on American soil?

But the Flu epidemic and the Great War had already upset the natural order of things.

Widespread Denial – But Reality Is Stark

- a quarter of the population caught the virus
- 675,000 died
- life expectancy dropped by 12 years.

FLU CONTINUES SPREAD
IN CITY OF CHICAGO

Over One Thousand Cases of Disease Are Reported—The Death Rate Is Very Low.

Chicago, Jan. 17.—Another big increase in the number of influenza and pneumonia cases, but a continuance of the small death rate was recorded today by

The rise of the Lost Generation, who felt the best of their generation had gone into the Great War at the lead, and died. This feeling already changed things for the coming generation.

The Lost Generation

- The belief that the best had gone first, and fallen.
- Those left were aware that the concept of honor and bravery meant little to a machine gun bullet, or a bomb fired 30 miles away.



As we know, Hammett had joined the Army in 1918, and in July was assigned to a motorized Ambulance company. In October he would become ill with flu-like symptoms, and eventually be released from the service.

(In the photo attached, these are all people who served in the ambulance corps in the Great War. Not named, but pictured, is Walt Disney.)

Names from The 1920s

What do these people have in common?

Ernest Hemingway
John Dos Passos
Gertrude Stein
Archibald MacLeish
Somerset Maugham
Ralph Vaughan Williams
Maurice Ravel



It is the era of the Jazz Age in America. The Roaring 20's are a change in direction, a change in observed morality, and in mischief. But the stories of murder fill the newspapers in America. Hammett's stories tell this tale, stories set in cities. This is all happening at the moment when the

cities suddenly leap in population. It was a time when jobs, and opportunities began to draw more and more people from their rural towns. The cities changed in character under this new influx of people. Did cities change the character of people? Oh yes, said those left behind in rural America. Cities are evil.

The Jazz Age



"Bix" Beiderbecke



Prohibition jump-started the Jazz Age. The 1920s came in *"with a bang of bad booze, flappers with bare legs, jangled morals and wild weekends."*

And music met the tempo of the times.

Prohibition

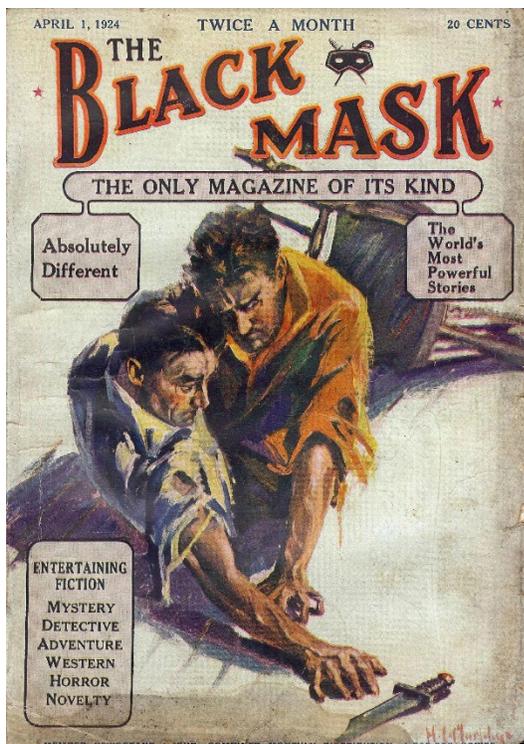


"I'm simply a businessman, supplying my customers with what they need."

Much of that of course, is that cities also had foreigners, always suspect to rural America. But too, there is some truth that cities exert a bad influence. These giant cities flouted the prohibition laws and gambling laws. Corrupt politicians and drug users were notable. Also stories about of women falling prey to money gun molls, and prostitutes. To all, it showed money was the root of all evil, and it was there to be had, if one ignored the legalities. But honest work, for someone in bad health, is difficult for to find for Hammett. He is approaching 30, and not much for prospects. Where does he turn?



While he works for Pinkertons Detective Agency, he determines that the new world of advertising copywriter might be his direction. With the explosion of magazines and newspapers, and the growth of marketing as a mainstay of these periodicals, Hammett is in the library every day, reading, reading, reading. But in the process, he decides he could write a better story than what he was reading.



Dashiell Hammett was correct. He could write a better story. And he finds a ready market for his work in **Black Mask** magazine. Thus in 1923 Hammett's breakthroughs begin.

The Black Mask magazine is also part of this revolution. It was created in 1920 to help offset the expenses of **The Smart Set** magazine, all part of the revolution of reading as recreation as unions fight to increase wages and limit work hours. Magazines boom in this era of changing realities as a new middle class began to be formed. While **The Smart Set** was aimed at defining trends and shaping opinions of a more elite reader, trying to be a trendsetter meant the expenses were higher. Thus, the creation of a magazine aimed at a wider market might help, especially if the costs were lower. One answer: use cheaper pulp paper. This choice would give the stories that appeared in such magazines their name.

It is within these pulps that Hammett brings murders back to the mean streets of the modern American metropolis. These murders are not fastidious events, but often spur-of-the-moment actions practiced by rough-edged criminals with fast knives and faster guns. But Hammett's stories would transcend the pulps.

Another big part of the Hammett story, and very much a drawing feature, are the even faster women of the era. Many are neither bashful nor blushing.



Style



F. Scott Fitzgerald: *"The parties were bigger...the pace was faster...and the morals were looser."*



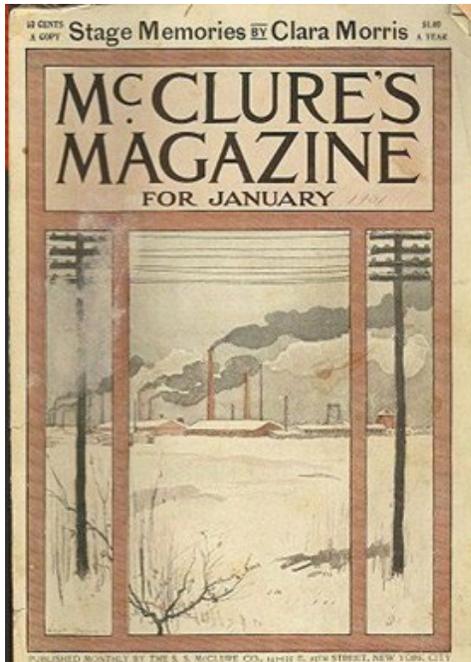
These women may be victims, but equally often, they are either a leading cause for the event - or the perpetrator themselves.



But be they the "femme fatales" or not, they are *all* dangerous dames.

In this world, in this reality, the only way an Operative striving for an honest answer can succeed, or hope to survive, is if he is equally hard-hearted.

Thus, 100 years ago, Hammett creates the modern 'hardboiled' private detective genre with his stories - stories treading hard on the heels of the last of the Sherlock Holmes stories. There is something fitting that the end of Holmes will coincide with the start of this new breed of investigators - the hardboiled detective.

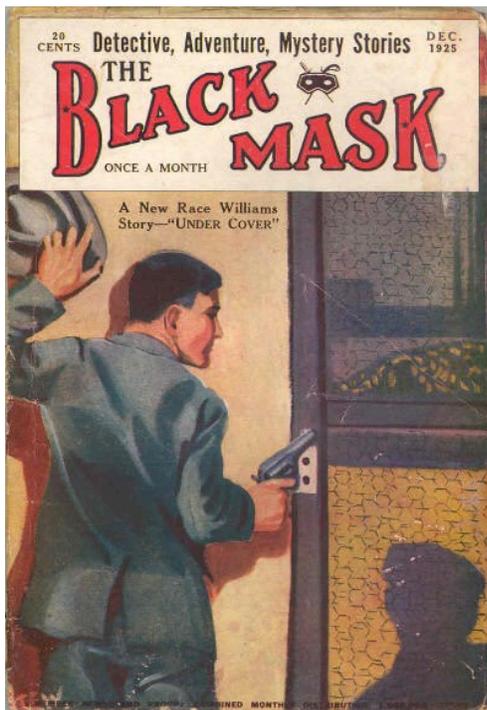


Magazines

- With the growth of magazines, longer form stories could be written.
- Also, magazines could be tailored to specific tastes

An interesting thing to consider: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and his creation Sherlock Holmes, remains exceedingly well known all these years after the initial story in 1887. We are all aware that Holmes had 56 short stories, and 4 novels.

Yet consider this: The Continental Op had 28 extremely popular short stories and 2 novels. That certainly is no small feat and puts him in a similar range with Holmes. Yet few know the Op. Certainly, far more people know Sam Spade than the Op, and Sam had ONE novel, serialized over 5 months in *Black Mask* magazine. Spade only had 3 short stories, all in 1932. (Two in *American* magazine, one in *Colliers*.)



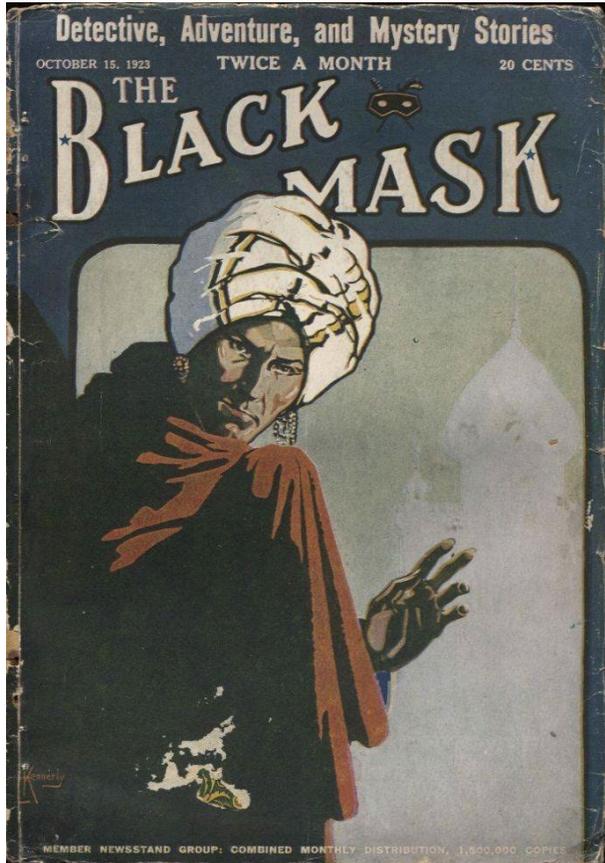
An important side note: Some credit Race Williams as the first P.I. as Carroll John Daly reached *Black Mask* magazine with his Private Investigator ever-so-slightly ahead of Hammett's first offering. While Daly certainly deserves a tip of the hat, Race Williams, while long on action, was actually a vigilante. This is another attribute of the 1920s populist rebellion against the immorality of city life, and the racial violence in Chicago, Tulsa, and elsewhere, with the rise of the Klan in the 1910s and 1920s.

Williams is certainly hard-boiled, but his primary style is a snarl. His gun throws lots of lead around, and he comes close to creating the "kill them all, and let God sort it out" style that we will discuss in the chapters on Mickey Spillane. Daly's Race Williams is easily seen in his influence on Mike "My Gun is Quick" Hammer.

But as we will see, Hammett brings an entire style and process to the detective's character, which sets his stories apart. It is this prolonged influence on later writers that we see a century later that makes Hammett so important. The creation of the actual Private Eye genre clearly belongs to Dashiell Hammett.

Hammett and the Creation of the American Detective, Part 3:

When the Op made his bow in *Black Mask* in October of 1923, it would be May 1924 before the magazine went a month without a Continental Op story! And he would be back at work in June, September, and November. He placed 13 Op stories with *Black Mask* in that first 15 month period. He also placed a story in the new *True Detective* magazine. (The magazine started publishing in 1924, and would continue until it closed in 1995.)



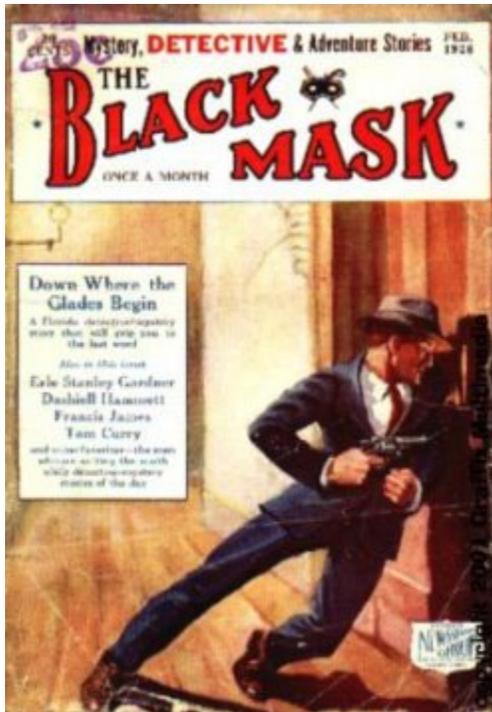
It was a frenzied pace for Hammett, but he had space and time. The wife and daughter he had acquired in mid-1921 went to live with her family in Montana for 6 months. During that time, he used the space to pour effort into his writing, and his work grew in skill and style. The stories take on greater depth. He gives us "*The Tenth Claw*," the heavy "*Dead Yellow Women*", the snappy "*The Whosis Kid*", and the amazing "*The Scorched Face*." The Op, who appears to age with the real-time calendar, also grows as a sharper character, and we come to appreciate the weight of the job as he pushes through the pages.

At the same time, Hammett's sparse writing is still sparse, but his lines deliver a snap as he relates the scenes through the Op's eyes. He doesn't tell us the Op is upset - he lets the frantic pace of the Op's dialogue tell us that. He doesn't tell us someone is dead, he describes a body when his car lights find it laying where he'd last seen it on the cold road, "huddled on his face, with one knee drawn up under him," the eyes still open.

He lets his characters tell us how they feel. "Then she began to talk very rapidly - as people talk when they fear interruptions before their stories are told - and she sat leaning slightly forward, so her beautiful oval face was very close to mine. Her voice died as she shivered a little. The robe I had given her had fallen away from her white shoulders." The Op shivers as well.

Hammett had a style similar to Hemingway. And Hammett had it from his first stories - where that is not apparent in Hemingway's early short stories.

But short stories are just a station along a speeding train Hammett is riding. His goal was already to write novels. As mentioned, it is this long year from October 1923 to 1925 that he begins to experiment and learn the trick to sustaining a longer storyline. And his efforts are a work of genius. He began to link stories with a later story bringing the Op once again into contact with a returning villain or femme fatale. In the earlier stories, he has established the Op and his friends, his methods, and his reasoning. In those 1924 stories, after giving a solid character to the Continental Op as a guy that is cautious yet still able to be bold, he wrote a crackling story that starts the Op's quick climb to popularity.



"The House in Turk Street" finds him trapped and at risk in a story that could be a cross between a throwback Fu Manchu thriller and yet fresh enough to be a plot line of a modern Hawaii Five-0 story. He followed that one with the linked "Girl with the Silver Eyes" where he realizes he knows one of the people involved - and the fuse is lit on a long chase with lots of fireworks. You are never sure which way the plot will turn - not due to fake manipulation, but due to the realistic character motivations of every person in the story. Which way WOULD they turn?

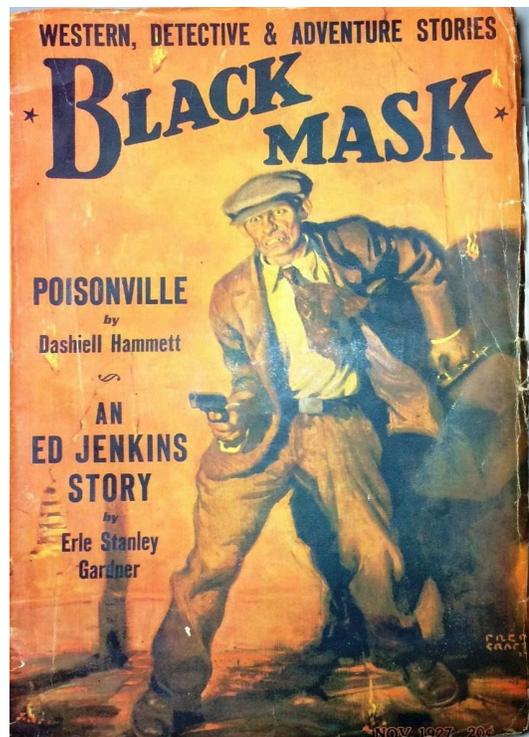
The concept went over well with the readers, and with good reason. These stories are as fresh today as they were almost 100 years ago – and that is a rare feat. His next linked stories were "The Big Knock-Over" and "\$106,000 Blood Money." While not as good, reading them, you recognize belatedly the long influence Hammett has over the years. It becomes obvious just how these stories inspired later detective writers. In fact, Robert E. Parker has at least two novels that draw their inspiration from these stories – perhaps almost as

an homage - and that explains so much as the situation had certainly seemed an odd one for Spenser, or Hawk, or Jesse Stone to find themselves. But realizing that 50 years later these books went on to be best sellers shows the power and originality of Hammett.

By now, though, Hammett is ready for the big leap into novels. He will leverage the linked story concept, and his first effort serializes four novelettes starting in the November of 1927 issue of *Black Mask* pulp magazine. The first part, "The Cleansing of Poisonville," continues each month to February 1928, but each is given a different name. The four parts would be pulled together and offered as a novel to Knopf publishers in 1928, who accepted it with revisions.

Knopf would release this novel as *Red Harvest* in 1929. The Op stars, and he shines in this effort. For my money, he also hits his peak in this set.

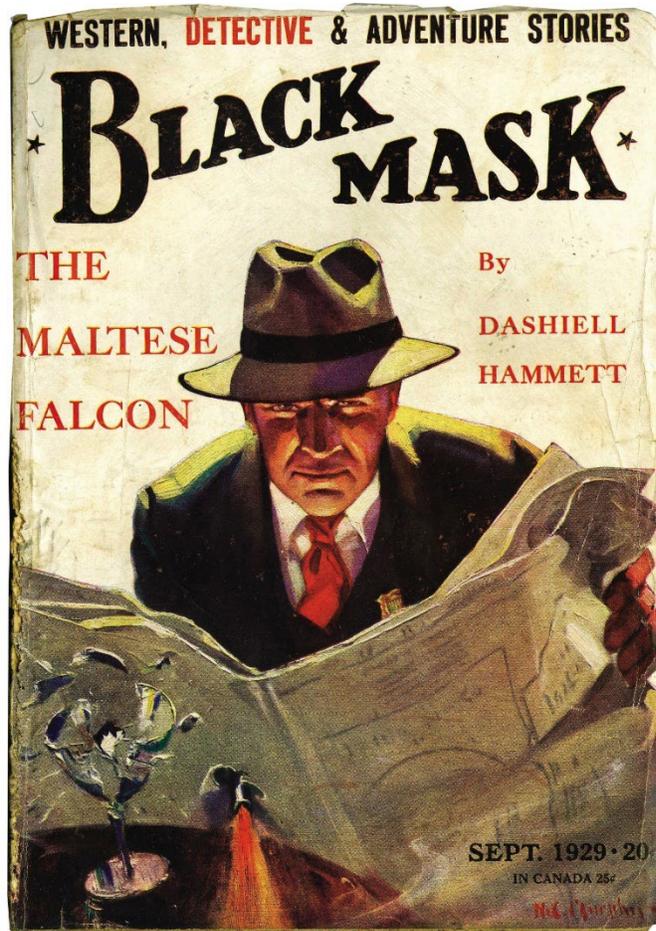
Though it may be that the creator of Jack Reacher never read Hammett's original, one can see some similarities between Reacher's first story to this one. The Op, not being superhuman in speed, strength, and fighting ability, has a harder time with the town - but you will admire his style - and note that Reacher used a few of the same tricks to make headway.



The Op will be back in the pages of the *Black Mask* a year later, this time with 4 connected novellas that will become *The Dain Curse*. As a novel, the linking process plays hell with this one. Each is really a

stand-alone story, so the structure which works so well as a monthly magazine with each segment now seems annoying. Once you understand they were written in sections to stand alone each month in the magazine, the four interrelated stories make the odd structure of the final novel version much more understandable.

Again, Knopf will agree to publish this novel, supposedly with more editorial requests than before. Hammett's powerful writing, while avoiding profanity in any form, leans into America's interests in religious cults, quacks and charlatans, love affairs gone awry, and women on the run. Yet the Op is up to the challenge, though at times, you might wonder.



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But the next story needs no help, and no apology. It is called **The Maltese Falcon**, and this time, it is really a novel, that happens to be split into five parts to be serialized in *Black Mask*. Finally, Hammett has found the character who can walk down these mean streets.

This five-parter runs from September 1929 to January 1930. But unlike the others, this time Hammett had already written, submitted - and sold! - the novel rights to Knopf the previous June. In a major change, the hero is not the aging Continental Op, but Sam Spade, a man that might be considered almost ruthless by some. It is also a third-person narrative.

The story reads very much like the movie we know best with Humphrey Bogart, except Bogart does not play Spade as ruthless, but determined. In the book, the emphasis is certainly on ruthless. Also the Maltese Falcon movie, is being filmed a second time in 1941 after the newly established Hollywood Production Code for movies prevented Warner Brothers from re-releasing the 1931

movie of the same name. Why? Well, the code gives us a less tantalizing version of the women involved, as well as their methods of achieving their successes. (Yes. it is actually the third movie version of The Maltese Falcon, but no one counts the second one as anything but poorly done.)

The new movie keeps most of the book's dialogue. Only a few scenes are left out. But both *Black Mask*, and Knopf wanted the "to bed" and "homosexual" parts toned down. Hammett lobbied to keep them, as he felt they had never been seen in a Detective novel to this point, and why shouldn't they be? At issue: In the book, from the very start, Joe Cairo is clearly seen as gay, or queer, in terms of the era. His attention to the young gungsel Wilmer after Spade targets him as the 'fall guy' shows the relationship clearly. As for the 'to bed' aspect? Well, Brigid O'Shaughnessy literally leads Spade to bed to seal the

agreement in the book. To prevent readers from having any doubts, in the novel Spade wakes up with Brigid the next morning. All this is important for the impact of the ending of the story.

This story, with the help of the 1941 movie, would enshrine Dashiell Hammett and Sam Spade into the American lexicon of great authors and great detectives. With good reason.

But it is Hammett's ability to write that makes all the difference. And Hammett's **The Maltese Falcon** is the Gold Standard for all American Detective novels that follow. We will see that as we finish with the novels in our next installment.

Hammett and the Creation of the American Detective, Part 4:

Except for the final coda of his career, **The Thin Man**, in those short years of extreme productivity, Hammett had created the basis of the private detective and revolutionized the mystery genre with the completion of **The Maltese Falcon**.



Sam Spade, loner, with a temper that rides the edge, whose efforts to skirt rules and regulations give him a contentious relationship with the police. It isn't just laws, but ethics too - among things, he does chase skirts. Bedding clients is not beyond him - but then again, he and the partner also seemed to both

intend that outcome for this newest client. As soon as they could also ensure enough work to separate that client from the additional money they spied in her purse. Money does have value to Sam.

Then again, the partner Miles Archer at that point didn't know Spade was also bedding Archer's wife. And while she seems to think she and Sam are on track to get married, Spade certainly doesn't have that idea anywhere in his future plans.

Yet, here is the conundrum of the independent and prickly personality needed to be a successful Private Eye. For all these indiscretions, Sam has earned the loyalty of numerous friends, like his buddy on the police force who tried to protect him; his lawyer - who continues to back his plays despite the taunts and tweaks; and his secretary - who is clearly aware of his methods and his other conquests. Plus Spade has the loyalty of his clients, and he holds their interests high - something all following detective fiction will acknowledge as sacrosanct.

As we see Spade in this third-person narrative, we are never certain throughout this book what his real motivations are, nor where he might be heading. Is he selling out his client? Or is he protecting her? Is he as crazy and foolhardy as he seems to be when facing Wilmer's anger or Joe's gun? Is he as bought as Guttman thinks he is? Or is he still really partners with Brigid? Are those visions of bills dancing in his head clouding his vision, or driving his decisions? Or is it something else?

The total defining motivation for Guttman, for Brigid, for Joe is the wealth represented by the Black Bird. All of them are motivated by cold cash, it seems. Spade humiliates Brigid by stripping her naked for cash - a scene author Donald Hamilton will use twice with his equally cold tough guy Matt Helm. In fact, many of the scenes we see in this single novel, dashed off by Hammett in a busy half year at most, will return again and again as touches in the books of others, which is the ultimate form of flattery. (Unlike all the movies that will use these pieces over and over and try to tell everyone it is an homage.) Still, we get some confusing hints. Told of the value, Spade agrees, and while he kicks at the process of chiseling his price, he still delivers the package to Guttman. While Spade acts like he is equally mesmerized... is he? "I've got your dingus," he tells Guttman, dismissing it as nothing vital or important. Perhaps Sam has a bigger goal in mind? Or is he just feinting indifference?

By the end of the book, Hammett, via Spade, has established the template of the future of the Private Detective for American readers: A man unafraid to tread in dark alleys, police stations, of the homes of the millionaire. He is able to handle himself in all types of environments, meaning he is not only tough, but intelligent. (In this, he clearly inspires Fleming's character of Bond.)

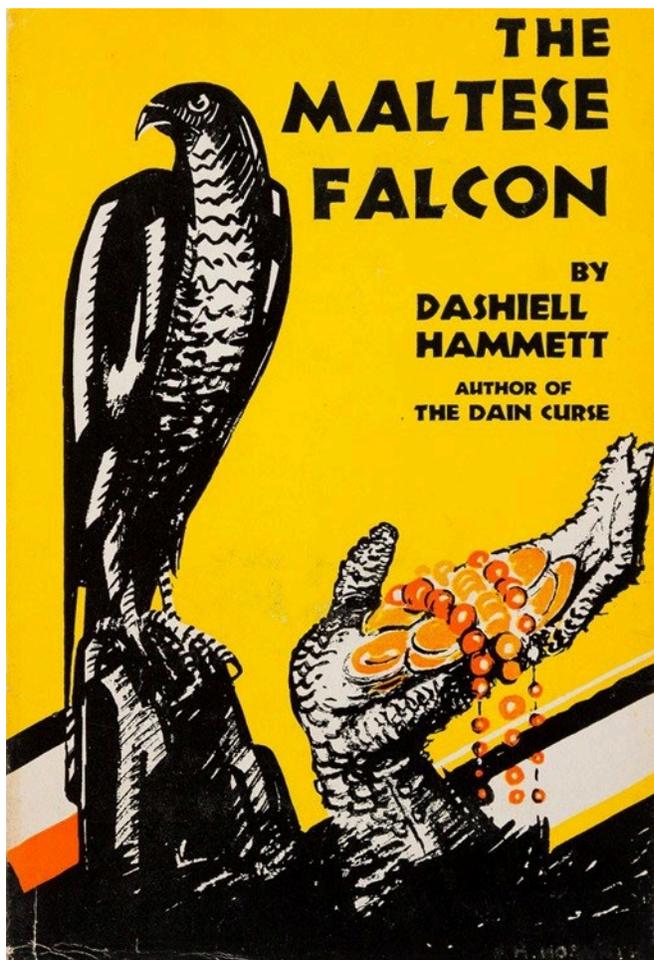
Spade may not let on how smart he is, and he may seem to have zero ethical values, but that is not true. He is not perhaps chivalrous to women, but he does have a code of ethics that he will hold true to for himself. (In this we clearly see the influence on Hamilton's Matt Helm, who is supposedly given orders that he is simply to carry out and kill someone. Helm spends more time figuring out what is wrong with the picture he is given, obeying not the specifics of the orders but the intended result of the orders. Helm, and Bond, function far more often as investigators than as assassins.)

Spade's code is one of loyalty - even if he does not like the person, or the results. But it has a higher purpose, and a higher value, than his personal feelings or his own reward. In that, money causes corruption, and while he values money, it is a vice The Op does not have, and Spade's immunity to it is unclear. While in the post-world war world, and as a hard-boiled operative in the era of the Lost Generation, Spade refuses to charge at the sound of the bugle to right all wrongs caused by people

chasing dollars or drugs. But he also will not participate in the corruption of others, nor will he avoid upsetting someone else's corrupt game if that is required to serve his client's needs. In this, he is clearly seen in Ross Macdonald's *Lew Archer*.

Of course, all these are taken to heart by first Raymond Chandler, though as a first-person unreliable narrator, Philip Marlowe is FAR more romantic toward women than Hammett ever is. And of course, it is Spade filtered through Marlowe that inspires Parker's wildly successful Spenser. Of course, one could argue Parker is putting Marlowe and Spade together in most of his books, starring Spenser as Marlowe and Hawk as Spade.

Of course, Parker is not the first to do that. We may wonder about Archie Goodwin and Nero Wolfe also splitting up these characteristics between them.



Much of all the methods had been arrived at via the Op, with a nod toward reality in those books. That added another factor to the books, clearly seen in the Op books - the City he is in is a character in the books. Now in the Continental Op stories, it is an amalgamation of the PEOPLE in that city he is visiting, and it is usually a small enough town that the multitude of sinners gathered in that town drive the weaknesses of the people the Op deals with.

But with **The Maltese Falcon**, we meet the mean streets of San Francisco, and we like it. We like it a lot, with the dense fog and the steep streets, the oddball architecture, and the ghostly gas lamps. And this atmosphere - perhaps picked up from Conan Doyle's London, will become another Hammett trope for up-and-coming writers to mimic, specifically Fleming.

But it is the change from the Op to Spade that brings us the true 'hard-boiled detective.' While the Op is unsentimental, he is aware of his weaknesses with women and avoids testing his resolve too much. But as he reaches 40, he

is far less sentimental and pushes that limit sometimes. And it is the next book that introduces Sam Spade, who has fewer weaknesses: at least, that is how it seems. As it is no longer a first-person point of view, this allows Spade to hold his cards closer to his chest. Is he really that hard-boiled? Or is it an act?

That ambiguousness allows the writer room to work, and Hammett uses all of it without drawing the reader's attention. The result is a surprising ending that caused world-wide attention for Hammett and his skills. The *London Times* said, "**The Maltese Falcon** is not just the best detective story we have ever

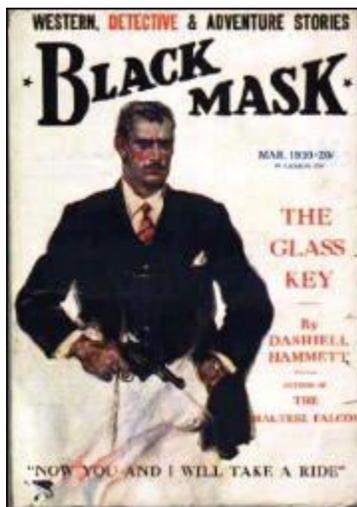
read, it is an exceedingly well-written novel." The *New York Times* said, "Hammett's prose is clean and entirely unique. His characters are as economically and as sharply defined as any in American fiction." Hammett has much to live up to. And he has two more novels in him. It might also answer the question of the impact of the availability of money.

Tomorrow - the Wrap Up!

Hammett and the Creation of the American Detective, Part 5: The Wrap Up.

Dashiell Hammett had entered the 1930's with the incredible success of **The Maltese Falcon**. The novel hit bookstores as quickly as the serial finished in *Black Mask* magazine. Thus with both Continental Op novels arriving in 1929, and **The Maltese Falcon** flying off store shelves in 1930, Hammett's star rose very quickly.

His next book, published 1931, diverges from his established route.



The subject is neither the Continental Op, nor the Private Eye Sam Spade. This time, we find ourselves on the other side of the gambling table with the top lieutenant of a very successful political fixer. But from the first exchange, we know things are sliding away from the control of these two friends, but neither knows how to fix this. The story is titled "**The Glass Key**" signifying everyone knows where the lock is, and the door they need to pass through, but the key, though it fits the lock, will shatter rather than let them pass.

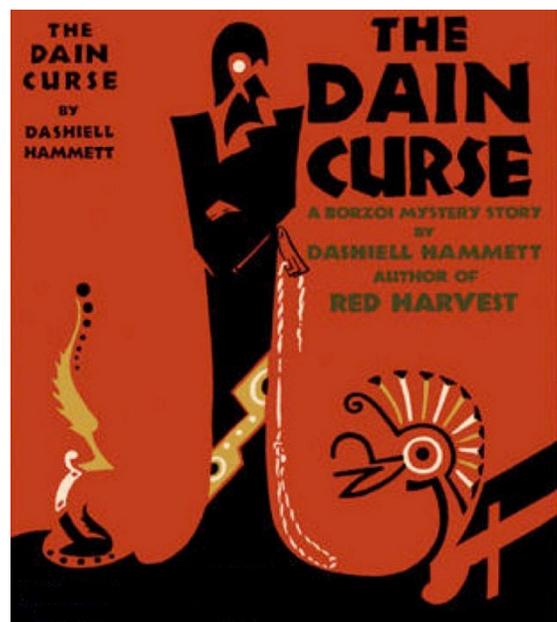
The Glass Key novel did not click with me when I read it fifty years ago, and I was hoping at this far more advanced age, I would find more to like.

There is a lot to like in the book – but it is that example of an author we have all come to know –

the one that keeps trying to grow, to learn, to do MORE with his writing, while we the clamoring public holds him back, demanding more of the same.

As everyone from Stephen King on down has found since the 1970s "don't mess with success." Your public wants what they want. And though **The Glass Key** sold well, it did not sell as well as the previous two books. Go figure. **The Maltese Falcon** went through seven printings in the first year. Few books sell that well.

There should be no surprise here that it would not do as well. After the great story and heavy action of **Red Harvest** and the twists and turns of **The Dain Curse**, followed by the completely engaged quest story of **The Maltese Falcon**, what could do as well?





The Glass Key does have plenty of action – but little to anchor it. There are plenty of twists and turns here, too – it is just hard to care about the characters. Other than the lead, they are not that likable, or it might be better said – they are too much like real people we all know. Meaning, Hammett wrote exactly the book he set out to write. We the public just didn't want that book from him.

As the novel rounds the last turn heading for home, you find you do care, and you are rooting for them to ride it home as a winner. And they do. But again, as in life, it isn't the win you wanted. There is also a little of the ending which seems to echo across the years. We will see a touch of it in the movie *The Big Sleep*, and again in *Chinatown*. That "you won, but you lost" feeling. As I said, a little too true to life to be completely popular.

The bottom line is simple: **The Glass Key** feels like Hammett's effort to write a 'serious' fiction work. Is that in response to the success of Ernest Hemingway's books about the same time? There might be a good reason. One can argue endlessly who inspired whom, but Hemingway's

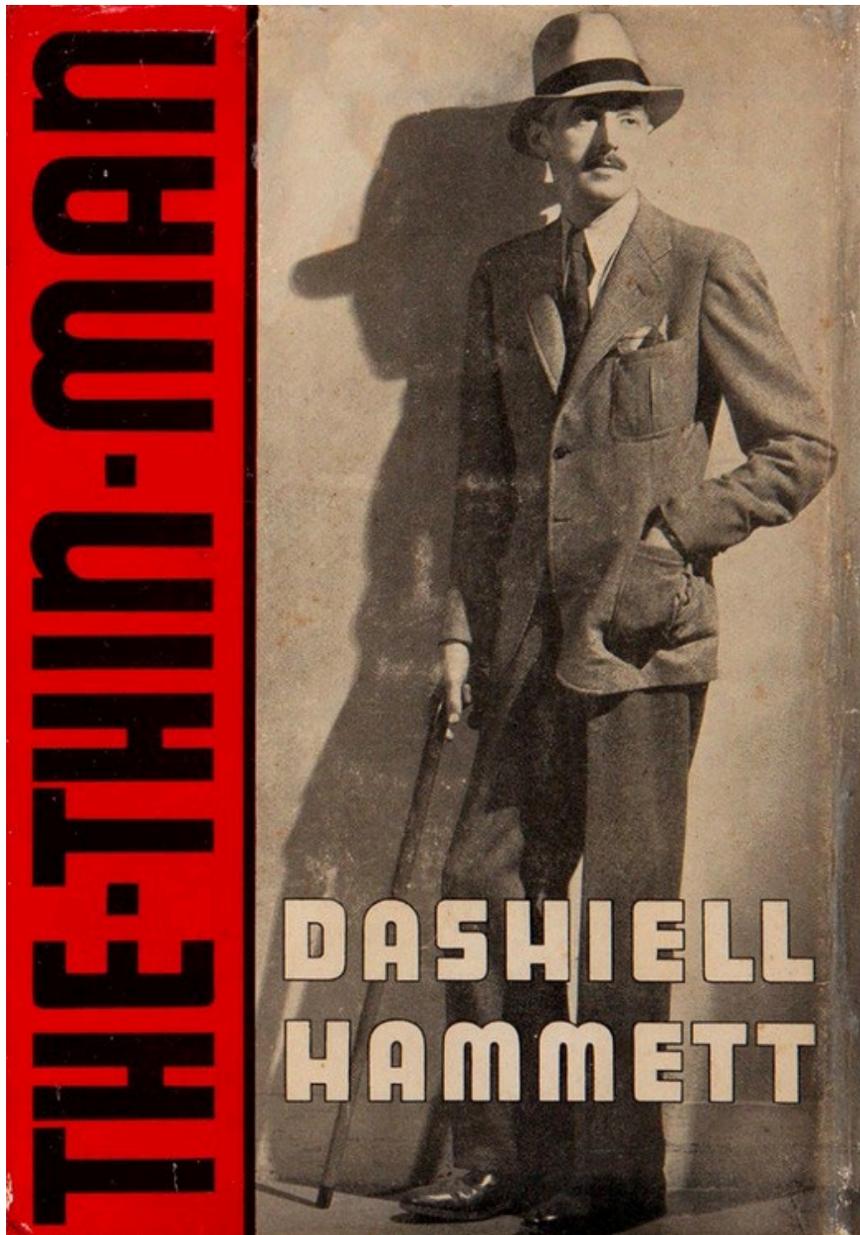
terse style is certainly not unlike Hammett's. And the difference is, that terse style has always been there for Hammett. It was present in Hammett's short works – and it isn't in Hemingway's.

Again, we will see author Robert Parker attempt the same thing 40 years later when he is a popular success with Spenser. Parker pens **All Our Yesterdays** about a family of people we don't care much about - in an effort to be seen as a "real writer." John D. MacDonald does the same with **Condominium**. As with Hammett and Parker, and John D. MacDonald, the books would sell, but were considered nothing special or important. Both Parker and Hammett would remain rich men but were dismissed as pulp or genre or 'popular' writers – not 'serious' talents. I hope they laughed all the way to the bank – but it seems to have bothered Hammett.

Hammett, of course, did not really have to worry about money. He was doing well. But in addition, he had another outlet reaching out to call him away from his work. When the first film of **The Maltese Falcon** was created, the snappy dialogue was recognized as perfect for the screen. (The joke is when they did the second version with Bogart, John Huston didn't bother with a screenplay – he simply gave the typist a copy of the book and said "Drop the narrative and change the margins." And watching the movie, that really is what they did.

Thus it was that Hammett, like Chandler after him, would find himself in a well-paid job writing for the movies. The results would also be similar. A period of great success, but too much money, too much time, and far too many parties offering too many willing distractions.

This period would become a time of upheaval for Hammett. The parties, the drinking, and the numerous affairs would make writing difficult at best. It is in this period that he meets and forms a lasting bond with Lillian Hellman, which helps both of them, and has the strength – and the flexibility – to survive.



As we are here to discuss the art, and not necessarily the artist, it is from this maelstrom that his last work emerges. It is a 'comedic novel.' It may have been intended as a parody but the witty dialogue, the charming characters, and the oddball story threaded the needle of the times perfectly. The novel, of course, is *The Thin Man*.

Hammett had started this novel as a straight detective mystery a year or so before, but gave up after 85 pages. When he returned to it, only the most basic part of the story remains in the new version.

But that new version crackles with energy generated by a host of heaven-sent characters supplied with Hammett's wittiest barbs and retorts. In a clear shot at Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* the people in *The Thin Man* never stop drinking! A few never tell the truth, and most never tell the same story the same way twice. In short -- they are smashed!

There are lovable tough guys and loathsome kids; there are best friends that backstab and strangers that save your life. Yet all of it sounds and feels as true as anything else Hammett has written! The story for *The Thin Man* is a work of art in storytelling – but at the same time, the mystery is PERFECTLY executed.

It is here we see Hammett has given us the third part of the American Detective:

1. The first was the rather realistic Op, with little physical action and **a lot of step-by-step attention to detail**. Numerous stories and lots of TV shows will follow this formula to the top, from *Dragnet* to *Law and Order*.
2. The second is the more action-oriented Sam Spade, **the detective with an attitude and a clue**. Spade pushes, picks at, and PO's everyone until they make their slip in anger or in haste. And he

counterpunches with the best of them. But **he also delineates the formula of the private eye – loyalty and a sense of a personal code that transcends the laws that too often are bent by money and or power. He is also smart**, and doesn't always choose to broadcast it.

3. And the third is **the husband and wife team of detectives, with witty dialogue and snappy comebacks, surprising twists, and last-minute saves.**

The Thin Man would inspire 5 movies, at least one of which came from Hammett's pen. While none capture the "lightning in the bottle" of the original *Thin Man*, almost all the movies are good, and the characters become the archetype for TV shows for the rest of the century – from *Mr. And Mrs. North*, *Moonlighting*, *Remington Steele*, *Scarecrow and Mrs. King*, and on and on. Of course, TV will use the original characters in *Nick and Nora Charles*,



This is the high time of Hammett's writing career. He would be well known for other exploits, including re-enlisting for WWII, and becoming the face of an idealized communist sympathizer. It was the overreach and overreaction of the McCarthy era, but Hammett would serve a short jail sentence for his refusal to testify, thus earning a contempt of court citation.

But his art transcends time. There is no political message in his writing. But there is much life in it, and he passed that magic down the line first to Chandler, who used parts of it to create Philip Marlowe, and to Ross Macdonald, who used different parts to create Lew Archer. Robert Parker wrote his doctoral thesis on all three of these writers, and then began writing Spenser's first novel, **The Godwulf Manuscript**. That would beget another 39 Spenser stories by the time Parker passed – all bestsellers. Not to mention all the other characters who owe a debt to Hammett. I have noted the spy world's lineage to Bond, to Helm, and to the no-name operatives created by Len Deighton.

But beyond that, even when the characters are nothing like Hammett's operatives, we can still find in most of the successful private investigators' DNA the source code for the rules on how a P.I. acts, the idea of honor, of loyalty, the ability to ignore the draw of cash, or if necessary, a woman. This all traces back to the original source – the writings of Dashiell Hammett.

Summing Up

As Chandler noted, Hammett rescued the detective from British drawing rooms and put murders back where they belong, on the streets. He also showed us the people who inhabited those streets, and how they lived, how they talked, and how they died. And what the murderers were really like.

Hammett's characters were people. People who talked with odd accents, had problems, and generally thought with their fists.

Hammett also gave us an operative, or a detective, who was not afraid to walk down those mean streets. And he made the city and the community as much a part of the story as the people.

In doing all this, he inspired others, from Chandler, to MacDonald, and oh-so-many others, including Parker – much to our good fortune.

He did it all in less than 10 years.

Not a bad legacy to leave behind.

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Keeping the Home Fires Burning:
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Thursday, April 29; 7 p.m.
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Siouxland: Ground Zero in the Great Depression
by Russ Gifford
October 29; 7 to 8:30 p.m.

BOOMER CLASSICS:
Words that Changed the World
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Next time: *The subject is Raymond Chandler, the creator of Philip Marlowe. A later bestselling detective writer said Chandler writing detective fiction was like a 'slumming angel.' Chandler builds on Hammett's foundation, and Philip Marlowe joins Sam Spade in the competition for the best known American PI. Yet, who is Marlowe? How did Chandler create this character and what is the difference with Spade, and to detective fiction. And what are the qualities of Chandler's writing that many still say he is the best detective author of all time? Join me for the next series of discussions of this uniquely American contribution to literature - the American Detective!*