

Private Investigations: Hard-Boiled and Soft-Hearted Heroes

The first story ever to feature a detective as hero was written by an American author and published in 1841. The story was “Murders in the Rue Morgue” by Edgar Allen Poe, who based his hero – Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin – partly on the first real-life detective, Eugene Francois Vidocq, a former criminal who became the first chief of the Surete in 1811. Vidocq attributed his success in solving crimes to his first-hand knowledge of the criminal mind. Like Vidocq, Dupin is a Frenchman, and his method of solving crimes is primarily an intellectual process.

Although Poe was an American, his detective stories are the prototype of the ratiocinative or classic detective story perfected by British and European authors. The eccentric genius Dupin is the prototype of Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot (who exercises the “little gray cells” to reach his remarkable solutions). The main requirement of the classic detective story is the rational, logical solution of a crime based on available clues.

Still, the detective story is an American invention; and in the 1920s and 1930s, American authors invented a kind of detective story which was uniquely American. Partly as a reaction against the rules and formulas of the “Golden Age” of detective fiction which defined and codified the classic ratiocinative detective story, and partly as a reflection of a society in turmoil and transition due to war, Prohibition, and the Great Depression, writers like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler introduced the hard-boiled detective. This new hero is a professional, not an amateur, detective. He solves crimes because it is his job to do so, his means of earning a living. The hard-boiled detective is a man of action. His job often involves him in physical violence and requires him to play his hunches, as scene-of-the crime clues aren’t always available to him. Following his hunches, the hard-boiled detective is fallible, and his mistakes can lead to more trouble and unexpected twists of plot. He doesn’t have the luxury of relying on the “little gray cells” and solving a crime while sitting comfortably in his study. Despite his hard-boiled, no-nonsense attitude towards his profession, however, the detective frequently goes above and beyond the call of duty, often jeopardizing his career and forfeiting any financial reward.

In “The Simple Art of Murder” (1944), Raymond Chandler credits Hammett for first applying the tradition of American literary realism to the detective story, thereby elevating detective fiction from formula writing to art. In his own definition of art, Chandler tells us what motivates the hard-boiled hero:

“In everything that can be called art there is a quality of redemption...down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero; he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor – by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it.”

It is the detective hero's sense of honor that causes him to dig for the roots of evil long after the official case is closed. It is the detective's sense of honor that enables him to circumvent the law, engage in cover-ups, protect the guilty if he sees they are infirm. It is the detective's sense of honor, untarnished in a corrupted environment, that allows him to be a hero.

Many scholars of detective fiction see the hard-boiled detective as a Western hero (like Shane) functioning in an urban environment. The hard-boiled detective is the last “rugged individualist,” an honorable person functioning in a society that values more tangible assets. As a result of the tension between the hero's inner values and those espoused by the society in which he lives, the detective hero is usually an isolated and bitter person, a loner, and a cynic. As an outsider, the detective hero can provide the reader with scathing social commentaries. Frequent targets of his bitterness are the rich, the legal system, organized crime, women, and homosexuals. The figure of speech most often employed by the cynical detective hero is the hyperbolic simile – “...her face fell apart like a bride's pie crust” (*The Big Sleep*) – and he is given to ironic understatement. The detective hero often has difficulty maintaining long-term relationships, and his tendency to “crack wise” often inhibits even casual friendships.

Considering the negative qualities of such a character, how can we call him a hero? Why do we read hard-boiled detective fiction? Psychologists, literary critics, analysts of popular culture, and writers of detective fiction themselves have suggested several motives for reading such fiction. We read it to escape hum-drum ordinary life. We read it to fulfill our craving for sensationalism, much as we would read the *National Inquirer*. We read it because we need a hero with whom we can identify – a hero who is “a common man” oppressed by the system, but who still manages to outmaneuver it. We read it because the detective hero takes the abuse for us, yet he is able to inflict some well-placed abuse himself.

The most popular of the hard-boiled writers have created heroes who appear again and again in a series of novels. When we read series detective fiction, we read the sense that the story isn't over. Even the most violent stories are tamed by the familiar presence of

the detective hero. If the detective ages, changes, forms attachments, faithful readers of a series are rewarded with the anticipation of a life story fulfilled – the hard-boiled detective himself may be redeemed in the end. But if the detective hero of a series remains ageless and static, the reader is cheated.

The hero invented by Hammett and Chandler has been cloned by many authors. Chandler himself was aware of the dangers of slavish imitation: “The realistic style is easy to abuse...It is easy to fake; brutality is not strength, flipness is not wit, edge-of-the-chair writing can be as boring as flat writing; dalliance with promiscuous blondes can be very dull stuff when described by goaty young men with no other purpose in mind than to describe dalliance with promiscuous blondes” (“The Simple Art of Murder”). However, many authors have used aspects of the hard-boiled tradition to create engaging heroes and variations on the theme. Some of the new hard-boiled heroes represent the women, homosexuals, and racial minorities that the original hard-boiled dicks sometimes scorned.

All of the novels in this series have in common detective heroes who are hard-boiled about their tasks and cynical or critical about their society, but who possess a soft-hearted core of romantic idealism, a sense of honor, and a resulting vulnerability. Each novel deals with the moral dilemmas of a changing world, and in each novel the settings themselves function as definers of character, motive, and outcome. As in all the best of hard-boiled American detective fiction, the main interest in these novels does not lie in arriving at a solution, in answering the question, “Who done it?” What engages us in these novels is the development of character, the analysis of social issues, the description of a real world, and the interactions between individuals and their social and physical environments.

The Big Sleep

by Raymond Chandler

On the first page of Raymond Chandler’s first novel featuring private detective Philip Marlowe, the detective muses on a stained-glass panel above the entrance doors of his client’s house, “showing a knight in dark armor rescuing a lady who was tied to a tree...I stood there and thought that if I lived in the house, I would sooner or later have to climb up there and help him.” In fact, Marlowe’s client, General Sternwood, hires him to come to the aid of his daughter, Carmen. But Carmen is no lady, and Marlowe learns that “Knights had no meaning in this game.” Marlowe’s “game” is chess, which he plays by the rules; but the games of his wealthy clients include pornography, drugs, gambling, and – ultimately – murder and blackmail. Their games are run by more or less organized criminals and ignored by the police.

We learn of Marlowe that he is “thirty-three years old, went to college once and can still speak English if there’s any demand for it.” Rich people and women make him sick, but – misplaced knight that he is – he admires honorable behavior in anyone, such as Harry Jones’ fidelity to Agnes and Silver-Wig’s loyalty to her husband, Eddie Mars. Marlowe’s own sense of honor is complex and perverse. Once the problem of the gambling debts is solved, Marlowe decides that the real case is to find Rusty Regan, General Sternwood’s missing son-in-law. When called on the carpet by Sternwood – five corpses later – Marlowe justifies himself:

“When you hire a boy in my line of work it isn’t like hiring a window-washer and showing him eight windows and saying: ‘Wash those and you’re through.’ **You** don’t know what I have to go through or over or under to do your job for you. I do it my way. I do my best to protect you and I may break a few rules, but I break them in your favor. The client comes first, unless he’s crooked.”

The Big Sleep has twice been made into a movie – in 1946 with Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall and in the 1970’s with Robert Mitchum. The 1970s version was not a success, partly because the movie’s setting was in England rather than California. Much of what distinguishes Chandler’s work has to do with his depiction of Los Angeles and its environs. In 1991, Robert B. Parker published a sequel to *The Big Sleep*, *Perchance to Dream* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1991).

The Long Goodbye **by Raymond Chandler**

The Long Goodbye is a novel about friendship, loyalty, love, and betrayal. Philip Marlowe is now forty-two years old, living in a furnished house in Laurel Canyon, and still playing chess with himself. Early in the novel Marlowe befriends the mysterious Terry Lennox, a man whom Marlowe imagines to be somewhat like himself, a man of honor. Marlowe’s identification with Lennox convinces him to help Lennox flee the country and to keep silent on the question of Lennox even if it means spending time in jail. Marlowe, characteristically, justifies himself: “Maybe I’m obstinate, or even sentimental, but I’m practical too. Suppose you had to hire a private eye...Would you want one that finked on his friends?” Marlowe’s loyalty leads to his involvement with Roger Wade who is, ironically, an author of historical romances, although his behavior is reminiscent of Hemingway.

In *The Long Goodbye*, Marlowe’s one-liners have evolved into monologues on disturbing aspects of society – from varieties of blondes to the relationships between the law and justice. In his pursuit of the truth about Terry Lennox, Marlowe reveals himself to have more in common with Miles Coverdale and Nick Carraway than with Miles Archer or

Nick Carter. His “long goodbye” to Terry Lennox begins with the conviction that Lennox is motivated by love and honor and ends with disillusionment.

The novel also ends with Linda Loring’s less-than-romantic marriage proposal to Marlowe as does Chandler’s last completed novel *Playback*. When Chandler died in 1959, he left four chapters of a final novel in which Marlowe is married to Linda Loring. *Poodle Springs* was completed and published by Robert B. Parker (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1989).

Death in a Tenured Position

by Amanda Cross

Superficially, Kate Fansler seems to be a far cry from the hard-boiled Philip Marlowe. A professor of Victorian literature at a major university in New York City, Fansler is a member of the wealthy, privileged class that is so often the target of Marlowe’s contempt. By the third Kate Fansler novel, she is married to the sophisticated Reed Amhearst, an assistant district attorney whose expertise and intervention often smooths her way through official legal channels.

We might also expect a professor involved in solving crimes to rely on ratiocination and to resemble Sherlock Holmes more than Marlowe. In reality, a scholar whose life’s work consists largely of research and verification of obscure facts and scholarly hunches is a natural for the role of amateur detective. (And Philip Marlowe actually makes use of the library more often than Fansler in the course of solving crimes.)

Kate Fansler’s attitudes towards crime and criminals, her “clients,” and the complexities of contemporary life resemble Marlowe’s in many ways. In *Death in a Tenured Position*, Kate Fansler admits the advantages of wealth associated with her family, but rejects the opinions and conventions associated with the wealthy. Her marriage to Amhearst is not unlike that proposed by Linda Loring: “Late in life...she had married a man who offered companionship rather than dizzy rapture; they had neither of them chosen to view marriage as an unending alteration between lust and dinner in the best restaurants.” Fansler is hard-boiled and cynical about many aspects of society – the abuse of language, the assumptions of the wealthy – but she is also capable of tolerance and change, as is evident in *Death in a Tenured Position*.

In this novel, Fansler is asked to help an acquaintance from graduate school (who subsequently and briefly was married to Fansler’s first lover) who has the dubious honor of being the first woman selected as a tenured full professor in the English department at Harvard University. The dangers of academic politics, with which Fansler is familiar,

are complicated by the perils of the women's movement, with which she comes to sympathize. The crime in *Death in a Tenured Position* is ultimately society's crime.

The Ghostway

by Tony Hillerman

Tony Hillerman's detective novels featuring Navajo Tribal Police Officer Jim Chee and Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn define the detective literally as a marginal man, an American Indian who must deal regularly and officially with white culture while maintaining his Navajo identity. Jim Chee, in particular, must juggle both worlds, acting as a Navajo policeman while learning to be a singer and traditional healer for the Navajo people. *The Ghostway* reveals the conflicts within Jim Chee between the white and Navajo worlds as he tries to decide what to do about Mary Landon – the white woman he loves – while solving a crime only he perceives because certain details are out of harmony with the Navajo way of viewing the world.

Chee's attention to harmony and his excellent memory are portrayed as Navajo qualities which make him an investigator far superior to the FBI agents also involved in the case. Like Philip Marlowe on the trail of a solution, Chee sacrifices vacation and sick leave to pursue the case where his instincts lead him. They lead him to Los Angeles where he encounters two L.A.P.D. arson squad detectives. Wells and Shaw are policemen straight out of Raymond Chandler's novels, yet Chee recognizes his common bond with them.

Chee's observations of Los Angeles illuminate the most striking contrasts between the white and Navajo worlds and show his cynical, hard-boiled side, in particular in his response to the Silver Threads nursing home: "This was a side of white culture he'd never seen before. He'd read about it, but it had seemed too unreal to make an impression – this business of penning up the old. The fence was about six feet high, with the topmost foot tilted inward. Hard for an old woman to climb that, Chee thought. Impossible if she was tied in a wheelchair. Los Angeles seemed safe from these particular old people.

Although Chee is still vacillating between worlds at the end of the novel, the lesson to be learned from the crime and the criminals is that compromise – trying to live in two worlds inevitably leads to disharmony and corruption.

Killing Orders

by Sara Paretsky

Sara Paretsky's Victoria Iphigenia Warshawski is as hard-boiled as they come yet distinctly feminine. Although a careless housekeeper, she is a good cook, has a fair singing voice (her mother had trained to be an opera singer), and likes nice clothes.

Trained to be a lawyer, V.I. (as she prefers to be called) left the public defender's office to become a private investigator: "I guess the payoff is you get to be your own boss. And you have the satisfaction of solving problems, even if they're only little problems most of the time." She is divorced and, because she prefers to solve her own problems, doesn't "plan to turn into a clinging female who runs to a man every time something doesn't work out right," as she tells Roger Ferrant in *Killing Orders*.

Yet the "payoff" also requires that she pay the price, as V.I. learns in *Killing Orders*. Responding to a plea from her detestable great aunt Rosa (a legacy from V.I.'s dead mother) leads to the death of an old friend, her own endangerment, the destruction of her home, the near-destruction of a valued friendship, and the revelation of a family secret that leaves V.I. shaken and vulnerable.

Killing Orders takes as its starting point real-life news stories about financial scandals relating to the Catholic Church, but the novel is also about the disintegration of the American family due to adherence to worn-out conventions and the lack of honest communication. Although an orphan, V.I. has the potential to create her own family (Uncle Stefan, Lottie, and Roger) based on bonds and ideals that, for her, go back to her college days in the early '70s:

"I'm not going to try to describe to you what it felt like in those days – you don't have much sympathy for the causes that consumed us. I think sometimes that I'll never feel so – so alive again...Then the dream started falling apart. We had Watergate and drugs and the deteriorating economy, and racism and sexual discrimination continued despite our enthusiasm. So we all settled down to deal with reality and earn a living. You know my story. I guess my ideals died the hardest. It's often that way with children of immigrants. We need to buy the dream so bad we sometimes can't wake up."

The murder of her college friend rekindles V.I.'s ideals and enables her to take on the Catholic Church, the Mafia, and one of Chicago's most prestigious families in order to uncover the truth, regardless of the price she must pay.

For further reading:

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The “Private Investigations” theme was developed by Dr. Jennifer Kidney.

