

# MIKE HAMMER'S MASTERMIND

By Ron Fry

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*"I snapped the side of the rod across his face and opened the flesh to the bone. He dropped the sap... with a scream starting to come out of his throat only to get it cut off in the middle as I pounded his teeth back into his mouth with the end of the barrel. The big guy... got so mad he came right at me with his head down and I took my own damn time about kicking him in the face. He smashed into the door and lay there bubbling. So I kicked him again and he stopped bubbling...."*

In 1952, Mickey Spillane was the undisputed master of detective fiction and his star—Mike Hammer—the latest great American hero. In five short years, Spillane's Hammer thrillers sold more than 11 million copies in English and had been translated into French, Portuguese, Finnish, Danish, Swedish and Dutch. His five novels went through 72 printings, more than one a month.

Mike Hammer is not exactly what you would expect in an all-American hero. He's loud, pushy, very violent, a paradigm male chauvinist—and not a little insane. He is not the most gentle of men when crossed, attacked or even remotely displeased. In fact, he might just pummel you for the hell of it if he decides to go, as he put it, "a little kill crazy." Heroes can be strange at times.



*Mickey Spillane in 1953; at the time his five novels sold 11 million copies.*

Mike Hammer has been trying to clean up New York since 1947, as a self-appointed dispenser of crude justice. In his first appearance (*I, The Jury*) he belatedly discovered that his then-current girlfriend murdered his best friend. His anger—never held in check, for very long—led him to quietly shoot her in her stark naked belly (just a little above the belly button) as she plaintively whimpered, "Mike, how e-could you?" His classic answer: "It was easy, baby."

That one scene should have told us something about the way Mike Hammer does things. In the five books published up to 1952, he

eventually managed to manhandle more people per chapter than any fictional character in history (and remember—he's on *our* side!). It wasn't until *The Big Kill* (1951) that he eventually uncovered a trustworthy ally—a year-old baby who blasted the killer with a .45 that just happened to be lying on a low table.

Although the Spillane novels were originally published in hardcover by E.P. Dutton and Co. (with respectable sales), it was the 25¢ Signet releases from New American Library that made both Mike Hammer and Mickey Spillane household words.

A great many explanations have been advanced for Spillane's astronomical success, but the key ingredients remain: sex and sadism. Spillane, of course, points to his imitators and comes up with a different explanation: "(They) can't succeed because they write for *today's* market instead of *tomorrow's*." As for sex, he really doesn't think his books have been very sexy, when compared to other writers. "What kind of sex is there in *I, The Jury*? So a girl takes off her clothes and gets shot. That's sex?"

The girls don't always get shot right away, but their luck with Mike Hammer isn't going to make them wealthy. Two of the first five novels open with a chance meeting between Hammer and a woman. Both women die immediately, one

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# Mickey Spillane THE BIG KILL



SIGNET-451-Q6196-95c

# Mickey Spillane THE BODY LOVERS

*The scorching blockbuster featuring Mike Hammer*



A SIGNET THRILLER • P4112 • 60c

# Mickey Spillane MY GUN IS QUICK

*Over 5,000,000 copies sold!*



SIGNET-451-Q6346-95c

# Mickey Spillane I, THE JURY

*Spillane's greatest! Over 6,000,000 copies sold!*







A scene from *My Gun Is Quick* (1957) with Robert Bray as Mike Hammer.

by murder and one by suicide. Of the seven intimate encounters he has, six end in murder (three shootings, one strangulation, one drowning and one slit throat). Of the three he *really* likes, he shoots two, (one of whom turns out to be a man) and the third is shot for him.

The only significant female character who manages to stay alive in the novels is Mike's secretary, Velda, for whom he maintains a constant but furiously restrained affection. The only book in which he treats her at all tenderly, has her kidnapped by Communists, stripped, hung up by her wrists and beaten with a knotted rope. Luckily she has been spared Mike's lovemaking.

Mike kills 48 people in five novels. Yet statisticians who have made a kind of box score of his kills have concluded that of these 48 people, 34—all innocent of the original crime—would have probably survived if Mike had stayed out of their way. Spillane's lightning storytelling technique manages to cover up the ineptitude of his man. But his readers don't seem to mind.

The astonishing thing about Hammer's success is that nobody likes him but the public. No major book reviewer anywhere has *ever* had a kind word for Mickey Spillane. He has been called "an inept vulgarian" (by the now-defunct New York *Herald Tribune*), and his hero has been called every-

thing from a slightly insane paranoiac to a completely insane sadomasochist... but no one ever compared him to Thomas Wolfe, which is why he remarked, "If Thomas Wolfe sold, I'd write like [him]".

Spillane often proclaims that he writes only for money—and only when he needs it. With his sales approaching the 60 million mark, he obviously doesn't need it very much.

Despite his millionaire status, Spillane goes out of his way to prove to friends that success has not spoiled him. He owns only two suits and two pairs of shoes—he orders the \$12 kind out of catalogues. He is quite content with fifty-cent ties.

A bantam-sized, slightly educated, self-professed roughneck, Spillane is not the epitome of your common, everyday author. Although he now owns a farm in South Carolina and a townhouse in New York City, he grew up in Brooklyn—and still talks like it. A one-time lifeguard and trampoline artist (for Ringling Bros. Circus) Spillane is proud of his muscles and usually wears T-shirts and tight-fitting jeans to show them off. In contrast to the brooding, ominous appearance he presented as the model for the book jacket of *The Big Kill* (mouth set, eyes squinted, biceps swollen, gun cocked), Spillane in person gives an impression of eager, nervous affability. He resembles a high-strung fox

terrier behind whose amiable bark lurks a strong urge to bite.

Spillane started writing in high school, but had little success. He spent the late 30s doing odd jobs, drifting west in 1939 for a brief flirtation with Hays State College in Kansas.

The turning point in his career, however, came not at college but in Gimbel's basement in the fall of 1940. There he met Joe Gill. The two were quickly drawn together by a mutual fondness for beer. Joe soon introduced Mickey to his brother, Ray, who was then an editor of *Funnies, Inc.*, a group that produced freelance comic books for a variety of publishers. Spillane soon left Gimbel's and went to work for Ray, soon producing one eight-page comic story per day; most authors, according to Ray, took a minimum of three days, others a week.

After a stint as an instructor in the Air Force (it always irked him that he never got overseas to see action), it was natural that Mickey would drift back to Joe and Ray. This time the three started a larger comic book factory and made it successful in record time.

But Spillane wasn't happy, and one day, in the spring of 1946, he walked into the factory and announced, "I'm going to write a novel." It took him just 19 days, working in the hurly-burly of the factory, to complete *I, The Jury*. He invented the name Mike Hammer (women love the name Mike, he's certain), but most of the other characters were named for actual people, a practice he never discontinued.

The manuscript eventually found its way to E.P. Dutton Editor-in-Chief Nicholas Wreden, who recalls telling the first editorial conference, "It isn't in the best of taste, but it will sell." That's a bit of an understatement to say the least. Of the top ten fiction best sellers in the last *fifty* years, seven belong to Spillane. He is second only to Erle Stanley Gardner in total sales. When a booth was set up by Signet at a meeting of the Modern Language Association, professors would often stop to complement their publishing of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, then ask: "Do you have a Mickey Spillane I could read on the train?"

Many fans worried in 1952 when Spillane announced his conversion

Bantam-sized, slightly educated, a self-professed roughneck, Spillane was not the epitome of a common, everyday author—and success did not spoil him.



Spillane, himself, played Hammer in *The Girl Hunters* (1963) above. Below, L. Biff Elliot played Hammer in *I, The Jury* (1963). R., Spillane in 1973.



to the Bible-thumping Jehovah's Witnesses sect. Despite his disclaimer—"I'll continue to write. More Mike Hammers are in the works"—his fans waited nine years until his eighth book, *The Deep*, was published in 1961. They needn't have worried. Eleven books have been published since, including *The Erection Set* (1973) which featured his second wife, Sherri, on the cover—nude. ("That can't be Mickey Spillane's wife!" gasped an on-the-air Dick Cavett. "Why not," said Sherri. "I told him I wanted to be naked on his next book.")

With so many best sellers behind him, most of which have already been made into movies (or were profitably optioned out), Mickey Spillane doesn't have to worry about writing another book for the money. Maybe he'll just sit on the South Carolina beach and wait to catch up to Erle (135 million sales) Stanley Gardner. And maybe he'll iron a T-shirt.

Not bad for a 57-year old comic book writer from Brooklyn. 

