

# SOME PRIVATE EYES

By Russ Jones

Tracing back the history of the hard-bitten, cynical private eye, one finds the roots firmly grounded in the popular works of Dashiell Hammett.



The *Maltese Falcon*, Hammett's best seller, became a classic film with Bogart, Peter Lorre and Sidney Greenstreet.

## DASHIELL HAMMETT

In the 30s and 40s the private eye reigned supreme both in the pulp magazines and in hard-cover editions. But when Hollywood got into the act, something happened. And that something for the most part was not good.

Tracing back the history of the hard-bitten, cynical private eye, one discovers that the roots of the genre were perhaps grounded in the popular works of Dashiell Hammett who created the legendary character of Sam Spade as well

as the high living Nick and Nora Charles.

*The Maltese Falcon*, one of the Sam Spade books, was a best seller for Hammett, and Warner Brothers' seeing the potential as a movie for the book, produced their first version of the tale in 1931. The first "Falcon" starred Ricardo Cortez as the redoubtable Sam Spade and Bebe Daniels as the mysterious, pathological Miss Wonderly. The film was not a great success, however.

Warners was not one to give up on a good property, though, and a

new version was filmed in 1936—this time with the title of *Satan Met a Lady* and starring Bette Davis and Warren William. Again the film was doomed for the cinema wastelands.

In 1941 *The Maltese Falcon* returned, but this time it returned on wings of pure gold. John Huston had always liked the story, and chose it for his directorial debut. The team of Humphrey Bogart and Mary Astor set the screen ablaze. The film was Bogey's second big break in Hollywood. (Both happened in 1941. His first was the

role of killer-on-the-run Roy Earle in *High Sierra* after George Raft, Edward G. Robinson, James Cagney and Paul Muni turned down the role, George Raft also turned down the role of Spade in *Falcon*.) The 1941 version presented Sidney Greenstreet in his motion picture debut at the age of 63.

The dialogue of Huston's *Falcon* followed Hammett's snappy style, and the scenes with Greenstreet and Peter Lorre are regarded by some film historians as classic. One can say that the 1941 *Falcon* is, to this day, the definitive private eye film.

In his booklet, "On Crime Writing," written for the Capra Chapbook series, Ross MacDonald—the currently most esteemed writer of detective fiction—has expressed this view of Hammett and Raymond Chandler: "Hammett was the first American writer to use the detective story for the purpose of a major novelist, to present a vision, blazing if disenchanting, of our lives. Sam Spade

was the product and reflection of a mind which was not at home in Zion, or in Zenith. Chandler's version is disenchanting, too, but in spite of its hallucinated brilliance of detail it lacks the tragic unity of Hammett's."



## RAYMOND CHANDLER

Very little is known about Raymond Chandler's early life. He worked with a large oil company until the time of the Depression, but whether he quit or was fired is uncertain. It is also known that Chandler lived with his mother until he was 36 years old. Shortly after his mother's death, the author married a woman many years his senior. It is strange that so little is known of Chandler's early years; it is as if he covered his background as carefully as he plotted his stories. It is amazing that, to this day, no one who knew Chandler during those years has ever written so much as one word on the subject. In a way, Raymond Chandler was reborn in 1939 with the publication of *The Big Sleep*.

*The Big Sleep* was an astonishing piece of writing. Chandler's skill in conveying atmosphere, especially of a claustrophobic kind, is apparent in the very first chapter when Marlowe takes on an assignment from old General Sternwood



Raymond Chandler (above) authored *The Big Sleep*, which starred, in the movie version, Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. It was scripted by William Faulkner, Leigh Brackett and Jules Furthman. It was reported that too many writers spoiled the plot.

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*Farley Granger and Robert Vaughn starred in the suspense filled, Strangers On A Train which was scripted by Raymond Chandler in collaboration; Chandler had written for ten years before receiving a movie writing contract.*





The Blue Dahlia starred Alan Ladd and Veronica Lake. The film still holds up, but is creaky in many places and the dialogue that worked so well in the books and stories sounds rather glib and trite when spoken by actors.

in an overheated, orchid-filled greenhouse, where the plants smell "as overpowering as boiling alcohol under a blanket." And the dialogue fairly fizzes with excitement and black humor. One exchange in particular shows how perfectly Chandler honed and timed his jokes. Marlowe has been reluctantly forced to bash a girl on the head, the kind of girl who always picks the wrong man and inevitably gets left on the sidelines. "Did I hurt your head much?" he asks solicitously. She replies: "You and every other man I've ever met."

*The Big Sleep* didn't exactly make Chandler famous, but the next three books in the next four years did. They all had the same quality: crackling dialogue, shaky plotting ("I do my plotting in my head as I go along, and usually I do it wrong and have to do it all over again"), tremendous pace and

excitement—and, of course, Marlowe, the slightly shabby man of integrity moving through the corrupt California scene. Marlowe had charge of Los Angeles; Sam Spade watched over San Francisco.

Chandler is fun to quote. In just about every story there are at least a dozen lines one will remember. Like: "She wasn't scared... she was paralyzed." Or: "I kept watching the guy on the floor... looking deader and deader and deader."

The film version of *The Big Sleep* also starred Bogart. It was scripted by William Faulkner, Leigh Brackett and Jules Furthman. It was reported that when the picture was completed, none of the writers knew what the hell it was all about. The film does get a bit swampy but Howard Hawks' direction pulls it off. A lot of Chandler's snappy dialogue stayed

intact. When General Sternwood asks if Marlowe met his youngest daughter, Bogart answers: "Yeah, she tried to sit in my lap when I was standing up."

(*The Big Sleep* was edited by Chris Nyby, who science fiction fans will recall went on to direct the "classic" *The Thing*.)

Chandler went to Hollywood to work. He became, as he put it, not rich but far from poor. Noting that he would have to pay \$50,000 in income taxes for 1945, he observed: "This is pretty awful for a chap who was gnawing old shoes not too many years ago." He never talked in detail about those days.

Chandler went on to script such films as *The Blue Dahlia*, *Double Indemnity* and *Strangers on a Train*. The two later scripts were done in collaboration. *The Blue Dahlia* starred Alan Ladd and Veronica Lake. The film still holds up,

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Howard Duff was Sam Spade as well as Marlowe via the airwaves.

In the late 50s Phillip Marlowe made it to television. The show lasted for only one season however. It came in the wake of the private eye shows such as *77 Sunset Strip*, *Hawaiian Eye*, *Richard Diamond*.

Marlowe was played by Phil Cary, who did an adequate job, but setting Chandler's hard-bitten detective in the 50s did not make it. Marlowe was very much a product of a generation before, and the slick private eye with tons of

money and a fancy car was the new image.

The movies gave Marlowe another try in 1969, with James Garner in the title role. It was based on Chandler's *The Little Sister*. Garner tried to follow in the tradition of Bogart, Dick Powell, and Robert Montgomery as the world-weary detective. But Garner played it light, and the script was on the border line of being incoherent. It was definitely not the Marlowe we had known and loved.

Robert Altman gave the Marlowe legend a try in 1972 with *The Long Goodbye* which starred Elliott Gould. After several previews the film was sent back for a re-edit. It never got a break distribution wise. What is notable about *The Long Goodbye* is that it was scripted by Leigh Brackett, who co-wrote the screenplay for *The Big Sleep*. Overall, the picture

does not measure up to Altman's other films. The private eye of the 40s does not function in the 60s or 70s.

Today, paperback editions of the Chandler and Hammett stories are doing very well, and revivals of *The Big Sleep* and *The Maltese Falcon* always pack them in, even though both films appear on television with planned regularity.

It should be noted here that a new (rather different) version of *The Maltese Falcon* is before the cameras now. This time Sam Spade is being played by George Segal. It will be interesting to see how the fourth version of the classic Hammett tale fares, since when most people think of Spade or Marlowe they see Bogart. It is strange to note however, that Raymond Chandler pictured him as Cary Grant. I guess Hollywood never saw it that way.

