



THE STUFF THAT DREAMS ARE MADE OF

Kevin Gough-Yates

The private detective story is a modern phenomenon, born on the pages of pulp magazines in the aftermath of the first world war, during prohibition and economic depression. Whilst its roots can be traced back to the autobiographical fictions of Eugene Francois Vidocq, the world's first private detective, and Alan Pinkerton, the founder of America's first detective agency, it really begins with the writings of Dashiell Hammett in *Black Mask* who had himself been a Pinkerton agent.

The private detective in fiction is an ambiguous figure. William Ruehlman describes him as the saint with a gun, a demon so convinced of his mission that he dispenses justice himself rather than allow the legal system to take its generally ineffective course. The most famous private detective, Sam Spade, is described in the first page of *The Maltese Falcon* as a 'blonde Satan'. The peeping or looking that the detective does reflects his own secretiveness which is sometimes a device for disguising his confusion, and sometimes reveals his

own anxieties about being himself watched or followed. He investigates but himself feels investigated. A gun will come 'into focus like an eye' or a torch will watch the detective like a 'yellow suspicious eye'.

He rarely kills, preferring to set the scene so that others carry out the work for him. Having frightened a criminal into divulging information, he may spread the word and let the criminal's friends take care of him. The theme of the detective dispensing his own punishment is taken to its limits by Mickey Spillane through his detective, Mike Hammer. *I, the Jury* brings together, even in its title, the view that the private detective is justified in taking the law into his own hands when his conviction is firm enough. He is jury, judge and executioner.

The novels are sometimes difficult or impossible to follow. There is a famous story about the making of *The Big Sleep* where no one on the film could work out who killed the Sternwoods' chauffeur. Raymond Chandler, when asked, not only failed to provide an answer but indicated that the question

had not previously occurred to him. In fact, the private detective himself, who is generally the teller of the tale, also finds the plot unfathomable. The first film version of *Farewell My Lovely* starring Dick Powell as Philip Marlowe, begins with the bright glare of a lamp on his blindfolded face in a police station. As he narrates his story, it becomes clear that he remains as confused as the opening sequence suggests.

The development of these stories is invariably the same. The detective is called in to find a jade necklace, a child who has run away, or to retrieve some stag movies. In themselves, these projects are not central to his quest but they are expressions of power and wealth and the ways in which they can be exploited. *The Maltese Falcon* is exactly that, an object that will provide untold wealth and happiness. People will bribe, blackmail, murder or try to buy it. The sums they offer are nominal considering it is said to be priceless, but, in the end, it turns out to be a fake. It is no more genuine than the characters in the novel who live lives of deception. When, in the film, Sam Spade describes it as 'the stuff that dreams are made of he knows that it represents a wish that cannot be satisfied. In *Farewell My Lovely*, the jade necklace that Marlowe is called in to help recover, turns out not to have been stolen at all and he finds himself in a web of intrigue in which an ex-prostitute has risen in society through marriage and wants to eliminate traces of her past. Such people live, however, in a world in which the criminals rule, in which the politicians and police themselves are in their pockets. There is no way in which the past can be washed away; they are permanently in debt to those who raised them to their present positions.

This is a prevailing theme in the novels of Ross Macdonald, in which Lew Archer invariably finds himself drawn into an emotional tangle in which the sins of the parents return to them, often via the children. In *The Drowning Pool*, the daughter is driven by the curse of her illegitimacy to cause her mother's death. As with *The Big Sleep*, the story takes place within a framework of great and established wealth; the parents, now respectable, have offspring whom they cannot control.

The ways in which crime and politics in American society interrelate in these works is more pronounced in the novels of Dashiell Hammett and Andrew Bergman and films like Roman Polanski's *Chinatown*. The operative of Hammett's *Red Harvest* describes his arrival in a totally corrupt town presumably typical of America in the twenties. There is only one way to clean up



Personville (or Poisonville) and that is to destroy the social and political fabric in which the police, the politicians, the union bosses, the criminals are all in collusion. Hammett's private eye, the Continental Op, stirs things up and sets group against group until they kill each other. The detective reaps his harvest with a bloodbath and cleans out the town. There is, however, no long term hope for it and no indication that, revitalised, it will not re-establish itself as it was previously.

The corruption that Hammett describes in *Red Harvest* is a central thread that runs through the novels and films. In Andrew Bergman's *The Big Kiss-Off of 1944*, written thirty-seven years later, Jack Le Vine is asked to retrieve the prints and negatives of some pornographic films in which a minor actress has appeared. She is being blackmailed by a gang of psychopathic military figures, paranoid at the possible defeat of

Franklin Roosevelt by Governor Dewey in the forthcoming presidential election. They plan to stop Dewey's campaign by cutting off his main supply of campaign funds which happens to be the father of the actress, for how could an anti-corruption candidate accept money from such a source? In *Hollywood and Le Vine*, there is a similar scenario in which the investigator is attempting to discover why a studio is trying to reduce the salary of one of its most successful screenwriters. Le Vine finds himself drawn into secret confidence in a dirty disused building with Congressman Nixon (a member of the House Committee on Un-American Activities) who calls upon Le Vine's patriotism to help him dig out enemy agents in Hollywood. Le Vine, like other private eyes before him, sees his role as correcting injustice and not contributing to the vested interests of particular groups.

The criminals of these novels have a Utopian vision. They want to capture the dream in the present and eliminate all threats to it. When the monstrous Noah Cross introduces himself to the police in the film *Chinatown*, he does not forget to mention his wealth. He not only owns the city's water supply, 'he owns the police'. When asked the motive for his attempts to illegally acquire land around the city, he says it is to buy 'the future'. He is a reincarnation of the evil figure of Caspar Gutman in *The Maltese Falcon*.

The detective stands outside the law and is suspiciously incorruptible. He is a constant and irritating reminder to the police that

they either will not or cannot carry out their duties properly, either because police bureaucracy prevents it or because they are, themselves, complicit in the conspiratorial structure of society. This division in attitude is generally shown by splitting it between two policemen, one ambitious and corrupt, the other solid and reliable but unsuccessful at all levels.

It is reasonable to question the objectivity of the detective himself in these, generally, first person stories. When Marlowe describes the way in which women fall into his arms there is always the sense of an unjustified boast. There is invariably the possibility that he is hiding something from the reader, afraid lest the truth about himself will emerge. Hence, in a film like *Night Moves* where Gene Hackman as the detective turns his own gaze inwards on his own marriage, he finds the revelations shocking and unpleasant. He has hidden himself behind his role as private investigator. He often looks and doesn't hear and hears whilst failing to see. The attempt to resolve the problem of his marriage runs parallel to an increasing incapacity to be a good detective and the film ends with him wounded in a motor launch going round in circles, less certain, more confused than when the investigations began.

Before Dashiell Hammett, crime in fiction took place in what Raymond Chandler called a 'Venetian vase', or the English country home with its set characters. After Hammett, crime was given back to those who actually committed it. The private eye always fights a losing battle; he solves a crime but he cannot resolve problems fundamental to American society. Like the monster in horror films, the villain is indestructible. The private eye's posture as a conscious arbiter of morality makes him into a confessor, absorbing the guilt of society and its members and consequently guilty himself.

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