Dashiell Hammett

Dashiell Hammett (1894-1961) was a seminal figure in the development of the peculiarly American contribution to crime fiction—the hard-boiled detective story.

Samuel Dashiell Hammett was born of English and French descendants on May 27, 1894, on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, the second of three children. His formal education was limited—he attended Baltimore Polytechnic Institute for just one year, leaving at the age of 13 to help his father run a small business. He worked in his teens as a newsboy, freight clerk, railroad laborer, messenger boy and stevedore.

From 1915 to 1921 Hammett worked on and off as an operative for the Pinkerton detective agency, serving on the scandalous Fatty Arbuckle rape case and on the 1920-1921 Anaconda copper mine strike. Hammett's Pinkerton tenure, which was to provide the material for much of his fiction, was interrupted several times, first by his brief World War I service as a sergeant in the Motor Ambulance Corps, where he contracted tuberculosis, and then by the disease's recurrence a few years after the war. Throughout his life Hammett was to be plagued by poor health, aggravated not only by his heavy drinking and smoking.

In 1920, while a hospital patient, Hammett married his nurse, Josephine Dolan, by whom he had two daughters, but their collaboration was only occasional. Much of the time, to avoid the danger of infecting her or the children with his highly contagious disease, Hammett occupied a separate room of their apartment and, at times, lived apart from the family in a hotel.

The Writing Years

Hammett's writing career began in earnest in 1922 with a story printed in The Smart Set; until then he had published only a handful of poems. In 1923, in the pioneering crime fiction magazine Black Mask, Hammett's story "Arson Plus" introduced a character later to become famous in two of his novels—a nameless San Francisco detective agency operative (based on an actual Baltimore Pinkerton agent) referred to only as "the Continental Op"; his persona ran counter to the familiar fictional detective types because he was neither a genius nor a dandy but a fat, fortyish, low-keyed professional matter-of-fact doing his unglamorous job.

Hammett's stories are less artistically successful than his novels. They display a sure hand at characterization, dialogue, and setting, but the plots tend toward an over-complexity which then require too much authorial explanation in the wrap-up.

Hammett ground out a precocious living in the 1920s, supplementing his income from fiction by book-reviewing; in 1924 and 1925 he wrote three reviews for Forum, a prestigious literary journal; from 1927 to 1929, more than 50 mystery novel reviews for the Saturday Review of Literature; and in 1929 and 1930, 85 mystery novel reviews for the New York Evening Post.

The first Continental Op novel, Red Harvest (1929), was originally serialized in four parts in Black Mask. Anaconda, Montana, familiar to Hammett from his Pinkerton days, served as the model for its setting, Personville, which its cynical inhabitants pronounce "Poisonville." The novel is primarily a thriller but offers a big sociological bonus in its scathing dissection of small-town American corruption.

The Dain Curse (1929) was the second and last Op novel, although three more Op stories appeared later. It is a broken-back novel, the plot of which seems exhausted a third of the way in but is then surprisingly reopened. It is less sociological than Red Harvest but even more sensational. It involves multiple murder (eight in all), madness, morphine addiction, sexual phobia, and religious cultism. Its theme is heroic: beauty and innocence introduced by evil but finally redeemed by a savior (the Op).

The Maltese Falcon (1930) was perhaps Hammett's masterpiece. A new hero-detective, Sam Spade, was introduced but, unlike the Op, he does not serve as the narrator of the novel, which was written in the third person. In his introduction to the 1934 Modern Library edition Hammett said of Spade: "He is a loner, operating outside of agencies and outside of the law, but has the same code as the Op—a personal sense of right which supersedes civil law." Also, like the Op, Spade is street-wise, and both "have the calloused emotions needed to do their jobs effectively." Sam Spade, more than the Op, served the prototype for hundreds of tough, wise-cracking fictional detectives; the influence at its best resulted in Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe and Ross MacDonald's Lew Archer; at its worst it resulted in Mickey Spillane's sex-and-violence caricature, Mike Hammer.

The Maltese Falcon's theme is the destructive power of greed and the illusory nature of wealth, which is expressed through a superb symbol: the much-sought-after jewel encrusted object never appears—all the scheming and killing, ironically, are done for a worthless imitation. The novel was a huge success, reprinted seven times in its first year, and the movie rights were sold to Warner Brothers. A later remake (1941) starring Humphrey Bogart, Mary Astor, Sidney Greenstreet, and Peter Lorre became a cult classic and is unquestionably the finest of the many film adaptations of Hammett's novels.

The Glass Key (1931) was Hammett's favorite among his novels. Written in one continuous writing session of 30 hours, it is a hard-boiled variation of the traditional love triangle, of two friends in love with the same woman, played out against a backdrop of political manipulation, upper-class decadence, and murder. Its theme is the dehumanizing effect of social and political power. The book is a model of novelist's objectivity: there is no sentimentalizing, no character evaluation, and no social editorializing. Hammett dedicated the book to Neil Martin, with whom he lived in New York from 1929 to 1931.

In the 1930s Hammett spent five years on Hollywood payrolls doing very little movie writing but living lavishly and flamboyantly, and occasionally involving himself in left-wing political causes. He also wrote stories for the better-paying slick magazines such as Collier's, Liberty, Harper's Bazaar, Esquire, and American Magazine. Although he was one of the highest-paid writers of the 1930s, his expenses usually exceeded his income. It was in Hollywood that he struck up an enduring friendship with playwright Lillian Hellman, whose work he encouraged and even occasionally revised; although a romantic legend sprang up around their love affair, Hammett remained a much loner all of his life and lived apart from Hellman much more than with her.

The Thin Man (1934), Hammett's last novel, was banned in Canada and was labeled "amoral" by a number of magazine editors who refused to serialize it. Nick Charles, an ex-private detective who retired after marrying into wealth, reluctantly investigates a man's disappearance and some related murders. Nick's investigative style is passive: he doesn't go out in search of anyone or anything—it all
Further Reading

The Maltese Falcon (Book), The Thin Man, and The Fat Man (Caspar Gutman from The Maltese Falcon). The characters who populate the novel mark a reduction in Hammett's customary energy level, but it is still an engaging, well-plotted suspense tale. Ironically, though it was perhaps artistically the weakest of Hammett's novels, it was by far his greatest commercial success. Earnings from the novel, its characters, and spin-offs from 1933 to 1950 totaled about $1 million. An interesting sidelight was the public confusion as to the identity of "the thin man," which was compounded by the photograph of the tubercularly thin Hammett on the novel's dust jacket and by the film persona created by the elegantly slim William Powell. Actually, the sobriquet applied not at all to Nick Charles, but to the missing man that Charles was seeking.

The Later Years

Perhaps a bigger mystery than any Hammett created was the virtual end, at age 39, of his career. Undoubtedly poor health exacerbated by dissipation was part of the story, but another part was his temperament. Hammett never took fame seriously, nor did extremes of poverty and affluence ever seem to affect him deeply. Above all, he seems not to have been at all ambitious.

"Dash," as his friends called him, was a prematurely gray-haired, nattily-dressed, slender six-footer who was (despite his fondness for privacy) universally well-liked. He was a "night writer," one who preferred writing in the wee small hours. He was also an inveterate reader who especially admired the work of Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Ben Hecht, Robinson Jeffers, and William Faulkner; the last, in fact, became a good friend and drinking companion.

During World War II, at the age of 48, Hammett enlisted as a private in the Army and edited an Alaskan army camp newspaper, The Adakian, from 1944 to 1945. He was honorably discharged as a sergeant in 1945 and began teaching writing courses at Jefferson School of Social Science, a Marxist institute in New York City. In the late 1940s Hammett was earning $1,300 a week for three weekly radio serials using his fictional characters Sam Spade, the Thin Man, and the Fat Man (Caspar Gutman from The Maltese Falcon).

In 1951, however, Hammett's fortunes took a downward turn. He became one of many victims of the super-patriotic hysteria that characterized post-war American political life. Hammett had for some years been president of the New York Civil Rights Congress, and when it posted bail for a group of Communists on trial for conspiracy, four of whom jumped bail and disappeared, Hammett was subpoenaed. His subsequent refusal to reveal the sources of the bail fund resulted in a contempt citation, the cancellation of his Sam Spade radio series, and imprisonment. The irony of his political victimization was striking: Hammett's active connection with the Communist movement was, by all accounts, very slight. Lillian Hellman, in fact, later said that as far as she knew Hammett had never once been to the congress' offices and hadn't known the name of even one contributor. But he had told her, "If it were my life, I would give it for what I think democracy is ... (but) I don't let cops or judges tell me what I think democracy is."

After serving five months in prison he was released but then immediately charged by the Internal Revenue Service with $100,000 in back taxes. In 1953 he appeared as a polite but unsympathetic witness before a Senate committee investigating pro-Communist books on overseas library shelves; the committee, headed by the infamous Joseph McCarthy, branded Hammett's books as "subversive" and recommended their removal!

Money and health gone forever, Hammett spent his last years in alcoholic seclusion, living in a small rural cottage in Katonah, New York, and spending his summers at Lillian Hellman's house on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. Here he suffered a heart attack in 1955. He died on January 10, 1961, at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City.

Associated Works

The Maltese Falcon (Book), The Thin Man

Further Reading


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