The Hero Is Hard-Boiled

'The Big Sleep' introduced Philip Marlowe and a new kind of mystery novel

By LEONARD CASSUTO

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Raymond Chandler was the rare mystery writer who didn't care whodunit. "The Big Sleep," his first novel, appeared in 1939 and introduced Philip Marlowe, a detective who shows at least as much talent for wisecracks as for sleuthing. Marlowe's weathered dignity set the course of American detective fiction for generations.

When Leigh Brackett collaborated on the screenplay for "The Big Sleep" in 1946 with William Faulkner (yes, *that* William Faulkner), the two found themselves so stymied by the plot turns that they couldn't tell who had murdered the chauffeur. Director Howard Hawks sent Chandler a telegram asking him who knocks the character off. "No idea," Chandler cabled in response.

A grimy story involving pornography, drugs, and a particularly nasty hired killer in the employ of organized crime, "The Big Sleep" offers none of the clean, cathartic redemption that typically ended detective stories. "Crusts and fragments of greasy newspaper" litter Chandler's Depression-era Los Angeles, along with used condoms and "oil-scummed water." Marlowe solves the murders, more or less, but the solution doesn't leach the "hidden sadism" (as Chandler later called it) from his surroundings.

A sordid mystery with a plot so incoherent that you can't tell who killed whom would not appear destined for classic status. In fact, "The Big Sleep" had a rocky debut. Though issued by the prestigious publisher Alfred A. Knopf, the novel sold a meager 12,500 copies in the U.S. during the year of its debut. Chandler's second and third novels fared no better, leaving the author living in one low-rent apartment after another, continually scrounging for money.

It took a while for readers to figure out that Chandler was trying to write a new kind of mystery novel. Unlike most detective fiction, which is plot-driven and works backward from the surprise ending, Chandler's novels were character-driven and moved forward scene by scene, just like so-called literary fiction.

Chandler's stories stay in memory not for plot twists or exotic settings, but rather for sharply staged scenes like the one that opens "The Big Sleep," when the invalid General Sternwood meets Marlowe in a greenhouse and invites the detective to drink and smoke so that the old man can enjoy "by proxy" his old pleasures now denied him.

But Chandler's reputation finally rests on his principled, hard-boiled hero, Philip Marlowe. The hard-boiled style -- which was transforming the American crime story in Chandler's time -- features a tough

and laconic protagonist with a sense of duty arising, as Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade puts it, because one is "supposed to do something." Chandler goes Hammett one better, forging duty with honor. Motivated by a "personal conscience" (as opposed to a social conscience, Chandler explained in a letter), Marlowe begins "The Big Sleep" by working for money. But when he's faced with an opportunity to pocket his fee and "forget the whole mess," he instead continues to investigate on his own nickel because he wants to save General Sternwood's pride.

General Sternwood hires Marlowe because his daughter Carmen is being blackmailed. It soon becomes clear that both of Sternwood's daughters keep company with thieves, gamblers and racketeers, and Marlowe descends into the L.A. underworld in search of information about who the Sternwood women know and why. Marlowe learns a lot, but the detective winds up keeping more information from General Sternwood than he gives him. The emotional bond that Marlowe feels with the old man finally trumps the traditional scene of revelation and justice that's supposed to cap a detective story.

With his story of a "shop-soiled Galahad" trying to rescue a wasted father's wayward daughters, Chandler drew the blueprint for one of the ur-plots of crime fiction, in which the detective arrives to fix the broken family. When Marlowe goes beyond the call of duty to try to repair the Sternwoods in "The Big Sleep," his actions show Chandler in pursuit of a family ideal threatened during the Depression, when financial hardship broke many families apart and the government assumed a new role in the social order. Marlowe's efforts to reform the Sternwood household suggest that the novel's world of murder arises from a familial center that has failed to hold.

Poet W.H. Auden says in a 1948 essay that mystery readers repeatedly enact "a fantasy of escape" to a world where innocence will be restored, but he pointedly excludes Chandler's "powerful but extremely depressing books" from his classification, describing them instead as "works of art." Chandler's artistic impulse turns on his rejection of the puzzle mystery. In handing "murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons" (as he put it in an essay written after he became famous), Chandler rejects the puzzle whodunit not only because it's unrealistic, but also because it's too intellectual to activate the power of sympathy.

Chandler's Marlowe does his detective work because he gets attached to the people involved, not because he wants to know how a corpse got into a locked room. Because Marlowe feels, Chandler's novels engage the emotions even though the hero usually keeps those feelings to himself.

Only after Knopf relaxed its longstanding opposition and allowed "The Big Sleep" to come out as a 25-cent paperback in 1943 did the novel finally find an audience. The book immediately sold nearly half a million copies, and the critics belatedly recognized Chandler as an innovative master of the genre. He became the dean of American crime writers, and one of a small number of mystery writers whose reputation transcended the genre. Marlowe, the tough yet sentimental "complete man" at the center of Chandler's degraded world, continues to compel legions of readers and writers -- even if no one has yet figured out who killed the chauffeur.

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