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Susanna Lee, *Detectives in the Shadows: A Hard-Boiled History*

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Susanna Lee, *Detectives in the Shadows: A Hard-Boiled History*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020, ISBN 978-1-4214-3709-5, \$27.

- 1 Hardboiled and noir fiction critics tend to be divided into two groups. There are the fans, who tirelessly discuss long-forgotten stories and novels in personal or collaborative blogs, edit anthologies from the pulps and dig up historical and biographical facts regarding obscure authors. Sometimes these fans are themselves writers of crime fiction. What distinguishes them is a practical, almost tactile knowledge of the old magazines and paperbacks, a desire to revive a submerged culture and a hard-nosed or hard-boiled aversion to literary theory. On the other side of the fence, there are the academics, who theorize the genre out of a more limited corpus (usually the tip of the iceberg, as represented by Hammett-and-Chandler-and-Ross Macdonald) and sometimes forget the advice given by a tough character in Raoul Whitfield's first novel, *Green Ice* (1930): "Start theorizing—and you'll get lead in your lungs while you're thinking up nice words" (200).
- 2 Susanna Lee's *Detectives in the Shadows*, a thoughtful and thought-provoking consideration of the identity and mutations of the hardboiled detective, belongs to the field of academic books but is thankfully not marred by these academic defects. Without ever sounding labored or pretentious, her study combines a solid grasp of her subject with an original theoretical stance. The gist of her argument can be found in the introduction:

hard-boiled detectives were models and stand-ins not just for the individual reader but also for the country as a whole. And in one historical period after another, a curious thing happened: actual politicians echoed the attitudes and stances of the hard-boiled detectives of their eras. Whether coincidence or not, public figures

from Hoover to Roosevelt, from Truman to Carter and beyond, replicated their vocabulary and manner. (7-8)

Based on this premise, her century-long hard-boiled history unfolds in five chapters arranged in chronological order. These confront the hard-boiled detective's embodiment of American identity and individualism, masculinity, ethics, desire for justice and, ultimately, care for others, with public attitudes on these same issues, as echoed in social movements and in the speeches and gestures of presidents, from Herbert Hoover to Donald Trump.

- 3 Her first chapter deals with three interwar avatars of the hard-boiled hero: Race Williams (Carroll John Daly), the Continental Op (Dashiell Hammett) and Philip Marlowe (Raymond Chandler). She aligns them respectively with three successive historical moments: the 1920s; the early years of the Depression; and the New Deal and World War II. She first reads Race Williams' swaggering persona as dispensing, among other things, a fictional therapy for traumatized veterans. Following Sean McCann's analysis in *Gumshoe America*, she also sees him as cementing an early and almost unshakeable alliance of the hard-boiled "with the concept of racial identity" (20), at a time when the anti-immigration acts and the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan were bringing such "concepts" to the fore. She then looks at the Continental Op as the incarnation of a second historical stage: just as Williams had encoded the conflicting impulses of the Roaring Twenties, so Hammett's Continental Op expresses the mood of the Depression, which "brought with it a great deal of physical hardship, and the Op novels illustrate it" (31). Finally, as the New Deal and World War II rescued the US economy and boosted the nation's power and international prestige, she finds this period's correlative in Chandler's Philip Marlowe, who, she argues, "is like a walking embodiment of Roosevelt's boldest public discourse, both in content and in candor" (38).
- 4 This alignment of the three detectives onto three successive periods, though appealing, is perhaps a little too pat. First, the Continental Op and Race Williams did not follow each other but overlapped historically. The Op first appeared in *Black Mask* in October 1923, only four months after Race Williams, and the vast majority of Hammett's Op stories were written in the 1920s, before the Depression had set in. Moreover, Daly would go on writing Race Williams stories long after Hammett had stopped producing any kind of literature: he was still churning them out for the pulps by the early 1950s, when the very medium was vanishing from under his typewriter keys. Lee therefore seems a little too keen to interpret the very real differences between the two detectives, or between Daly and Hammett, in terms of a changing zeitgeist. These differences, in fact, do not so much express different historical periods as—within the same historical period—different literary ambitions and visions of detective fiction, regarding realism, style, mood, or critical intent. One could also suggest that the two detectives inaugurate two distinct lines, or lineages, in hardboiled detective fiction: the Daly line finds its progeny in exuberant two-fisted detectives who kill without compunction and whose exploits involve more than a slight suspension of disbelief; the Hammett line, the more realistic one, is embodied in more downbeat and alienated protagonists—like Chandler's Marlowe.
- 5 Secondly, Lee's interpretation of Marlowe as a kind of literary stand-in for Roosevelt seems a little forced, as it finesses a central aspect of Chandler's fiction: his world—like that of many *Black Mask* writers—is the world of absolute betrayal, of the universal double-cross. All Chandler's stories are really about the belated, almost Jamesian

realization that the game was up before it even started, precluding the possibility of moving forward, and deepening the protagonist's solitude. The only trustworthy companionship that Marlowe ever establishes in Chandler's novels is with his chessboard, on which he plays lonely games out of books by famous masters. Marlowe's isolation and pessimism, verging on solipsism, seriously limit the parallel with Roosevelt. There is no room for fireside chats when you have no one to talk to, nor for a New Deal when the deck of cards is crooked.

- 6 Chapter 2 moves to the post-World War II world as illustrated by Mike Hammer, the hard-hitting trigger-happy private eye first unleashed by Mickey Spillane, a World War II veteran and Daly enthusiast, in his revealingly-titled novel *I, the Jury* (1947). Lee sees Hammer as representing "America, proud of its recent victories and prepared for a looming confrontation" (55). Her reading is, in this case, more convincing, both because Hammer is a more openly political character (his aggressively populist, anti-Red rhetoric chimes with the language used by Joseph McCarthy and his republican cronies in the Senate, as Lee shows very well, 67), and because she takes into account the dark side of a detective who, as she suggests, simultaneously plays "the roles of American defender and of American id" (56). Although the concept of an "American id" may be open to question, it is certain that Spillane's explosive style and graphic violence stirred echoes in the ids of many a veteran, whose traumas and fantasies would not, at the time, have found expression in Hollywood movies or other avenues of mainstream culture. This may explain the extreme popularity of Spillane's books (as Lee recalls, "by 1980, seven of the fifteen all-time best-selling fiction books in America were Hammer novels," 53). Lee also reads Mike Hammer, persuasively, as an antidote to the frustrations of Organization Man, to male anxieties about feminine sexuality and to the rise of the "commodity self" fostered by the explosion of commercial media: "in a time of forced commercial cheer, Hammer turned out to be a sort of anti-commodity self: someone who didn't care what others thought" (80). But perhaps her conclusion that "Hammer's job would henceforth be to reconcile a celebration of violence with the traditional hard-boiled function of moral exemplarity" (62) is a little off the mark. One could argue that there is no such reconciliation in Spillane's nightmarish novels, but rather an uneasy coexistence between the "defender" side and the "id" side, the latter perpetually eroding the former's pretense of "moral exemplarity." Indeed, the "kill-crazy" (to use one of Spillane's favorite compound adjectives) Mike Hammer is something of a pariah even in his fictional world. And, as a hugely popular cultural phenomenon, he was shunned and detested (like his creator) by the liberal-minded literary establishment of the time, who never saw in him, to quote from a dismayed Malcolm Cowley, anything but "a homicidal maniac with a passion for ripping the clothes from women and shooting them in the abdomen" (Cowley 106).
- 7 Lee's third chapter looks at the hardboiled private eye in the 1960s and 1970s, as he enters a phase of literary decline. This was in part due to transformations in the cultural economy of popular fiction, in part to the Vietnam War and in part (the part Lee chiefly focuses on) to the changing social context and civil rights movement, which brought to a head the ideological contradictions underlying the hero's make-up. In particular, Lee shows that a figure predicated both on the centrality of the white male and on a desire for social justice was becoming increasingly difficult to represent convincingly at a time when the struggle for social justice was chiefly embodied in the civil rights and women's movements. As a result, the new brand of (still white and male) hard-boiled detectives, which Lee analyses through Robert B. Parker's Spenser

novels, would have a tall order to fill: “the job of the 1970s hard-boiled was [...] to be on the right side of justice but not to be a countercultural hippie, drug user, or Woodstock-goer; [...] to support women’s desire to be treated with respect but also to be paternalistic and dismissive when it suited him; to support civil rights but nevertheless operate with the historic entitlements of the white man” (94).

8 There is little wonder that within this shrinking ideological space the traditional hardboiled dick should have found little room to operate. Lee delivers an excellent analysis of the sometimes disingenuous way in which Parker’s politically-correct detective negotiates these conflicting imperatives: as she remarks, “when it comes to balancing civil rights with white entitlement, Spenser tends to have his cake and eat it too” (99). But though Spenser perfectly illustrates her case, it might be objected that Lee overstates his importance (as, for example, when she declares that “Parker’s introduction of Spenser became the main event in 1970s hard-boiled literature,” 94). Other, more diverse detectives showed that the conservative white male paradigm could be successfully countered while retaining a hard-boiled attitude in language and behavior: black detectives like Ed Lacy’s Toussaint Moore (*Room to Swing*, 1957; *Moment of Untruth*, 1964); gay detectives like Joseph Hansen’s Dave Brandstetter (*Fadeout*, 1970); women detectives like Dorothy Uhnak’s Christie Opara (*The Bait*, 1968); drug-using, counter-cultural detectives like James Crumley’s Milo Milodragovich and C.W. Sughrue (*The Wrong Case*, 1974; *The Last Good Kiss*, 1978).

9 But Lee is certainly right when she points out that, in the mid-1970s, the popular hard-boiled detective’s path would turn, almost irrevocably, from literature to television. Of course, there would still be literary avatars of the private eye in the following decades, but the best would often veer towards nostalgia and postmodern pastiche, as in Richard Brautigan’s *Dreaming of Babylon* (1977), Thomas Pynchon’s *Inherent Vice* (2009) or Robert Coover’s *Noir* (2010). The rest would too often be content with reproducing a hackneyed formula. As Donald Westlake noted in 1982:

I know that several people are writing replicas of private eye novels. I know that there is an organization called the Private Eye Writers of America, and that it has about seventy-five members, and that every member has published at least one book or story about a private eye. I think about these things, and I try to inhale, and I don’t sense any air here. (Westlake 13)

10 By the late 1970s, television detectives had stolen the limelight from literary ones, in such shows as *Harry O* and *The Rockford Files* (the latter created by Roy Huggins, a veteran writer of hard-boiled fiction in the Chandler vein), which were first aired in 1974. The date is important: in the context of the Watergate scandal, these shows’ likeable heroes provided “models of frankness and strength” that contrasted with Richard Nixon’s lies and “impacted [...] what Americans would look for in their future political leaders” (106). Thus, as Lee astutely points out, “it is probably not a coincidence that the golden age of television detectives arrived as America underwent a momentous crisis in moral and national authority” (107). She is at her best when reading these shows in the context of the Carter and Reagan presidencies, a time when the small screen had become the common denominator of both hardboiled stories and national politics: “In 1980, what Reagan shared with television detectives was the fact of acting, and the sublimation of human character to television personality was complete” (117).

11 The last two chapters are also dedicated to television. In chapter 4, Lee considers *Law and Order*, *The Wire* and *True Detective*. These recent shows have generated a fair share of

criticism and will be familiar to most readers. Still, her readings of *The Wire* against the background of the second Gulf War (“the sort of dissent that the characters showed to their obstinate bosses replicated the sort of dissent happening around the buildup to war in the Middle East,” 132-133), and of *True Detective* in “the numbing era of the smartphone and the twenty-four hour news cycle” (139) are both original and persuasive. So is her interpretation of *Jessica Jones*, which she considers, in the last chapter of the book, against the backdrop of the Trump presidency and the manifold crisis of the 2010s (“a constitutional crisis, a crisis of American values, of the nation’s place in the world,” 163). She convincingly links *Jessica Jones*’s success to the advances made by American women in the fight for social justice and in the political arena, and also (a favorite theme in her reading of the television detective) with its capacity to “restore the hard-boiled detective to the sort of connectedness that predated the smartphone” (163)—although it may seem ironic that such a nostalgic return to pre-smartphone connectedness should be produced by Netflix, one of the main forces working to uproot and dislocate local capacities and affiliations (as represented for example by the neighborhood cinema) in the world of contemporary media.

- 12 Overall, the main quality of Lee’s hard-boiled history is that it is not an aggregation of dates, names and titles but a *story*: a personal interpretation of how hard-boiled detectives developed in their interactions with cultural, social and political changes over a century. Given the magnitude of the subject and the shortness of the book, it is inevitable that there should remain some gaps (there is a lot more to interwar hard-boiled literature than Hammett, Chandler and Daly, or to the immediate postwar than Spillane) and unanswered questions (what are the differences/intersections between hard-boiled and noir? Shouldn’t “a hard-boiled history” also address characters like police officers, gangsters, criminals?). But these are only the reverse side of Lee’s achievement. She offers a streamlined and compelling history of the hard-boiled detective and demonstrates its cultural and political relevance, in a book that is well informed and fun to read. There is no need to think up nice words when you have, as she does, a point of view.

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