

RAYMOND CHANDLER'S LAST
NOVEL: SOME OBSERVATIONS
ON THE "PRIVATE EYE"
TRADITION

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At one moment in that popular "private eye" novel of 1942, The High Window, the hero refers to himself as a "cockeyed, careless, clubfooted, dissipated investigator." Philip Marlowe knows that the odds are against him. "See me and you meet the best cops in town," he muses. "Why despair? Why be lonely? Call Marlowe and watch the wagon come."

The frustration implicit in such name-calling of one's self is, however, a passing mood. Marlowe knows that he is not so hopeless as all that. He knows it because he knows who he is, and what he believes in. His ethics are consistent and an awesome thing to watch, because this cock-eyed and careless investigator succeeds where the police fail, and does so because, being true to himself, he cannot then be false to any man. When he lectures a cynical Detective-Lieutenant, Jesse Breeze, his anger flares up: "Until you guys own your own souls you don't own mine. Until you guys can be trusted every time and always, in all times and conditions, to seek the truth out and find it and let the chips fall where they may--until that time comes, I have a right to listen to my conscience, and protect my client the best way I can. Until I'm sure you won't do him more harm than you'll do the truth good. Or until I'm hauled before somebody that can make me talk."

Philip Marlowe, the legitimate heir of Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade, talked like that in a series of fast-moving, tightly-plotted novels: The Big Sleep (1939), Farewell, My Lovely (1940), The Lady in the Lake (1943), The Little Sister (1949), and The Long Goodbye (1954). To these has been added a sixth, and final adventure: Playback (1958). About this, more shall be said soon. But Marlowe was always an island of decency in a world of stormy seas, a conscience. In the disintegrating world of the late 1930's, in the terrible years of crisis of the 1940's, he moved steadily ahead, setting in order whatever might be salvaged from the mess people persisted in making of their lives.¹

Raymond Thornton Chandler, who created him, was the son of Quaker parents, one Anglo-Irish, the other Pennsylvanian, who divorced each other while he was still a child. His mother returned to England and became a British national, although he retained his American citizenship. He re-

ceived his education in England, France, and Germany, and only a lack of money prevented him from becoming a barrister (although he never gave up the desire). He free-lanced as a journalist in London. It is hard to think of Chandler publishing poetry, but so he did, until the first World War, when he served as a member of the Canadian forces and in the Royal Air Force, after which he worked in an English bank in San Francisco. He was developing his capacity to hate. Of this period he later wrote: "...I think I then, for the first time, began to dislike the kind of English who don't live in England, don't want to live in England, but bloody well want to wave their Chinese affectations of manner and accent in front of your nose as if it was some kind of rare incense instead of a distillation of cheap suburban snobbery which is just as ludicrous in England as it is here." An executive in an oil corporation until the Day of Wrath (1929), he returned to a literary career in 1933. Within a few years he had found his message.

The elegant stylization of the Marlowe novels is worth considering before we turn to Playback. What, then, are the conventions?

First: the dialogue is tough, the men are tough, the women are tough. "Toughness" means, simply, that the characters assume a great deal about the nature of society and the sinfulness of the individuals who compose it; they take so much for granted that they have no time for small talk. "I don't like your manners," a man named Kingsley says (The Lady in the Lake). Marlowe's answer is calculated to worsen relations: "That's all right. I'm not selling it." Gentle people would disintegrate in this world. Hence, there are few gentle people around.

Second: nobody ever tells the whole truth. In the old-fashioned detective story, characters would tell the truth: at least to the extent that they understood it. But Marlowe's client will not confide in him, those who have something to hide from the law will not be honest with him, and those who don't have anything to hide can hardly trust a man who operates in an ambiguous relationship to the forces of established law. Marlowe must fit in pieces and ends as best he can.

Third: The police are brutal or corruptible, or both; or stupid. Since the recognizable locale of Raymond Chandler's novels is Los Angeles, readers who live in that area must have felt uneasy for years about accidentally running afoul of the law. When Marlowe, on one occasion, admits to being a private operative, a policeman groans, "Cripes, that means everything will be all balled up." Marlowe, delighted that the cop has made a sensible remark, grins at him affectionately. His relations with the police are never easy. He discovers dead bodies under suspicious circumstances; he usually knows more than he tells; even if the police are unable to hang murder raps on him, they are not averse to trying to beat the truth out of him. They believe that the shortest distance between two points would be a straight line if only Marlowe did not interfere. Their theories about motivation and char-

acter are uncomplicated and simple-hearted. As mean-tempered men of action, they resent the intellectual approach to crime. Marlowe delays as long as he can any cooperation with the law. And he is never surprised by a policeman's delight in sadism.

Fourth: Marlowe cannot be bought. He once reveals why he refuses to spend a five-thousand-dollar bill in his safe (The Long Goodbye): there was something wrong with the way he got it. "I hear voices crying in the night," Marlowe says to Bernie Ohls, who has asked him what he does for eating money, "and I go see what's the matter. You don't make a dime that way. You got sense, you shut your windows and turn up more sound on the TV set. Or you shove down on the gas and get far away from there. Stay out of other people's troubles. All it can get you is the smear. . . ." But Bernie, not understanding, answers: "You know something, kid? You think you're cute but you're just stupid. You're a shadow on the wall." Marlowe will not do anything that he expects to be ashamed of at three o'clock in the morning.

Fifth: crime is a fact of life. "We do not live in a fragrant world -- gangsters can rule cities, perhaps even nations; a screen star can be the fingerman of a mob; the mayor of your town may have condoned murder as an instrument of money-making. . . ." One eats, or one is eaten. The jungle is filled with lions looking for their prey. The night air trembles with the disregarded shrieks of the dying. No man is safe on the streets of a city. Crime is not a disease so much as a symptom, says Marlowe. "We're a big rough rich wild people and crime is the price we pay for it, and organized crime is the price we pay for organization." Knowing that, he can only scrape away at dirt on the underside of the sharp dollar. And he feels contempt for the courts which cooperate with the criminals. "Let the law enforcement people do their own dirty work. Let the lawyers work it out. They write the laws for other lawyers to dissect in front of other lawyers called judges so that other judges can say the first judges were wrong and the Supreme Court can say the second lot were wrong. Sure there's such a thing as law. We're up to our necks in it. About all it does is make business for lawyers. How long do you think the big-shot mobsters would last if the lawyers didn't show them how to operate?" To which his listener -- unsurprised, not disagreeing, but annoyed by the irrelevance of Marlowe's speech to the problem he wants to talk about -- protests, "That has nothing to do with it."

These attitudes make meaningful a great deal of the action, even if Raymond Chandler was in the business of providing entertainment.² Marlowe, a shop-soiled Galahad, says these things because he believes them. Edmund Wilson, in that notorious attack on detective stories, "Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?" correctly identified the subject-matter of Chandler's fiction as "a malaise conveyed to the reader, the horror of a hidden conspir-

acy that is continually turning up in the most varied and unlikely forms." What Wilson saw in Farewell, My Lovely was an American version of the Alfred Hitchcock-Graham Greene spy story. And Chandler himself argued in The Simple Art of Murder (1950) that a crime is not half so important as its effect on the characters, and that the reactions of the people to the crime are what makes the story. His concern was with the meaning of crime.

Playback, however, cruelly caricatures its predecessors. Its toughness is exaggerated and unconvincing. Chandler, some years ago, described how easy it is to fake the realistic style: "Brutality is not strength, flipness is not wit, edge-of-the-chair writing can be as boring as flat writing. . . ." Haste, lack of awareness, inability to bridge the chasm that lies between what a writer would like to be able to say and what he actually knows how to say, contribute to a decadent style. The plot is needlessly complicated, and the truth, even when we learn it, doesn't seem to matter. The murder is less interesting than we had hoped. The means of disposing of the body is tiresomely improbable; a helicopter, and the fact that a prime suspect knows how to fly one, are mentioned for the first time in the next-to-last chapter.

Chandler seems to be uncertain of his subject-matter. The police turn out to be efficient, lovable, honest, and polite. Marlowe even thanks them for the way they treat him. Captain Alessandro says, "We're not tough. We just have a job to do." Really, it is all too much.

Marlowe refuses \$5,000 in American Express checks so many times, this reader lost count; he refuses money from other people for services he has rendered; he spends his own money for everything. But the worst is yet to come: the sex is gratuitous, and Marlowe turns out to be unexpectedly seedy. One chapter ends with the heroine sobbing, "Take me. I'm yours. Take me." It is dreary trash, and the reviewers, understandably, express their dismay. Anthony Boucher complains that after a wait of four and a half years, "It's a mousy labor from such a mountain" (The New York Times); Charles Rolo misses the climate of malevolence and danger, the exotic characterizations, the driving pace and imaginative mayhem that made Chandler's earlier books so interesting (The Atlantic); and W. L. Webb reports that the new Chandler "shows symptoms of a serious decline" (The Manchester Guardian).

The thing that went wrong, of course, is the fact that Marlowe no longer is up to date. Raymond Chandler, when he died on March 26, 1959, had already passed his threescore and ten, and his version of the "private eye" depended upon one's intimate knowledge of the decades of Depression, Fascism, and War. By the late 1950's, the Depression had worked itself out, and Marlowe's occupation, like Othello's, had gone. There is everywhere in Playback the suspicion that private detectives are unnecessary because

the police know how to handle crime. Very early in the novel Marlowe asks a cab-driver to follow the car ahead of him. He is asked to prove that he is a private detective, officially licensed. The cab-driver reports the fact to his dispatcher, who in turn reports it to the Police Business Office. "That's the way it is here, chum," says the hack (all this for a tail job). It is now possible, in short, to see clear lines of demarcation between the criminals and the honest citizens. Indeed, sometimes it is hard to see the criminals because of the crowds of honest citizens. The pale-faced red-head with dead eyes who tries to ambush Marlowe is incompetent, and provides no trouble. The point is worth making more strongly: there is no trouble in the novel worth Marlowe's time.

Raymond Chandler, thinking out loud about the reasons he wrote low-life fiction, said that he refused to look at life as though it were a full-page ad in Collier's or the Post; he had gone to the pulps to study writing, and had been attracted to the kind of story-telling he found there; and third, "and possibly the best reason of all," "this elaborate overtooled civilization of ours" had just struck him that way. "The story of our time to me," he said, "is not war nor atomic energy but the marriage of an idealist to a gangster and how their home life and children turned out." In Playback it is almost as if the children have grown up and are now attending college. One finds it difficult to accept the possibility that Philip Marlowe's adventures are becoming period pieces, but there will certainly be no more of them, and the atmosphere of the 1960's, despite all that we hear about atomic radiation, Cold War, and the population explosion, is considerably more relaxed, considerably more comfortable, for most Americans than the atmosphere of the 1930's and 1940's. A pity. For the "private eye," while he lasted, was one of the most exciting and original creations of our literature.

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Footnotes:

¹"He is everyman's romantic conception of himself: the glorification of toughness, irreverence, and a sense of decency too confused and almost half-ashamed to show itself." John Paterson, "A Cosmic View of the Private Eye," Saturday Review of Literature (Aug. 22, 1953), 31.

² He worked as a Hollywood script-writer: Double Indemnity (1944) and The Blue Dahlia (1946). His battered "op" plays chess. Bright-eyed, sensual, eager women turn up in the most unexpected places. And the jackets of the paperback editions of his novels are appropriately vulgar, suggesting that Chandler may have had doubts about the intellectual abilities of his audience. The Long Goodbye carries the legend, "She had six husbands, money -- and one lover too many."