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# The Demise of Dashiell Hammett

BY DANIEL J. DEMERS

Dashiell Hammett wrote only five detective novels in his lifetime. Through them he introduced readers to the “hard-nosed detective.” Considered one of America’s greatest writers, he is credited with creating a new detective mystery genre. His literary works were a major departure from the cerebral sleuths of literature like Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes or Agatha Christie’s Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple.

Hammett’s most famous private investigator was Sam Spade. The two movie adaptations of his novel *The Maltese Falcon* were box-office hits. They graced the big screen with the era’s biggest box office stars—Humphrey Bogart, Sidney Greenstreet, Peter Lorre, Mary Astor. et al. His novel *The Thin Man* evolved into six major box-office hits starring William Powell and Myrna Loy as the cynical hard-drinking Nick and Nora Charles. A third novel *The Glass Key* was another box office hit starring Bryan Donlevy, Veronica Lake and Alan Ladd which was a remake of an earlier version starring George Raft.

In developing the Spade character—a hard drinking, chain smoking, fist punching, ruthless adulterer—he was in many ways writing about himself (Hammett’s first name was Samuel). He had been a Pinkerton detective off and on for seven years. As to *The Thin Man*, Hammett was 6’2” and was always slender. His weight never exceeded 160 lbs. The well-to-do atmosphere of Nick and Nora Charles mimicked his own rich and famous lifestyle which was afforded him by royalties from *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Glass Key*. Hammett, the writer, loved Scotch whisky, had his share of girlfriends and prostitutes before finally settling into a thirty-year relationship with Lillian Helman, an award-winning playwright. Before Helman, he had more than one bout with venereal disease.

As a union-busting Pinkerton, Hammett was once offered a thousand dollars to kill a union

leader—an offer he declined. He served in the army during both world wars. During the first, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis (the disease that killed his mother) and was medically discharged. Residing in San Francisco, he was forced to live alone while he supported his wife and two daughters. Absence didn’t make the heart grow fonder and the marriage fell apart.

Hammett held deep-seated socialist beliefs. He quit school at thirteen in order to help his economically failing family. His father was a philandering drunk whose businesses seemed to fail. Like so many of his era he saw firsthand the human grief caused by the Great Depression when a basic social welfare system simply didn’t exist. There was no unemployment compensation, Social Security, food-stamps, Medicaid, Medicare or disability insurance. When a bank went under, there was no bank deposit insurance—depositors just lost everything. While primitive medical insurance policies existed, working class families couldn’t afford them. As to higher education, only the wealthy could afford a college diploma.

As an undercover Pinkerton union-buster in Butte, Montana, he was appalled at how the system worked against mine workers who were considered expendable by mine owners. There was no OSHA or system of mine safety regulations. As a result, cave-ins, fires, explosive mishaps and failing equipment killed thousands of mine workers annually. Strikes brought on by workers and their attempts at collective bargaining to improve working conditions and wages were met with brutal military, police and private union-breaking thugs—many supported by local, state and the federal government. It was this gritty society that was the backdrop for his beliefs and detective novels.

In the 1920s and 1930s, many saw the Russian Revolution as the panacea to the pains of the downtrodden. A big part of the western press praised and glorified the new Soviet regime. Stalin’s purposeful starving of ten million Ukrainians to death and his Siberian death camps were hidden from the world by the same press. As a result many,



like Hammett and Helman, became members of the American communist party. It was the chic thing to do.

By 1950 one Congressional Committee estimated that 60% of all writers in America were communists—including specifically Dashiell Hammett and Lillian Helman. That same year he was a vocal opponent through his affiliation with the Civil Rights Congress [CRC] of the execution of the Martinsville [VA] Seven for raping a white woman. The seven black men had been convicted by all-white juries. There were questions about their confessions and police involvement in obtaining them. Regardless, the seven young men were all electrocuted in February of 1951 in fifteen-minute intervals. Between 1908 and 1951, only black Americans were executed in Virginia for rape.

By April, Hammett came under increasing scrutiny by congressional investigators. It was the second “Red Scare” in U. S. history—the first being at the end of WWI. As the McCarthy communist-hunting era emerged, Hammett would become a prima-





ry target for his leftist leanings. The House of Representatives Un-American Activities Committee fingered him as a supporter of Russia's efforts for a new world order. Other prominent Americans accused included Linus Pauling, the future Nobel Prize winner, and the actor Jose Ferrer, the husband of Rosemary Clooney–George Clooney's aunt and uncle. The group was infiltrated by the FBI and in one instance the G-men surreptitiously broke into CRC's Chicago offices as part of their investigation. The FBI also maintained a bevy of paid informants, many who admittedly lied to get a check.

The Civil Rights Congress drew the government's ire when four convicted communists jumped bail instead of reporting to prison. They had posted \$20,000 bail for each and in July, government prosecutors demanded to know who the "money-men" were behind the bail fund. Hammett, along with three other trustees, refused to identify the CRC's bail money sources. He was found in contempt of court and sentenced to a six-month jail sentence. Simultaneously the IRS levied a \$100,000 tax lien against him for unpaid taxes from 1943-1945. According to the government "it was the first such action...against anyone [involved] in subversive activities."

Hammett appealed his contempt of court sentence all the way to the Supreme Court and lost. He did his time. After his incarceration he was called before McCarthy's Subcommittee on Investigations. He pleaded the fifth.

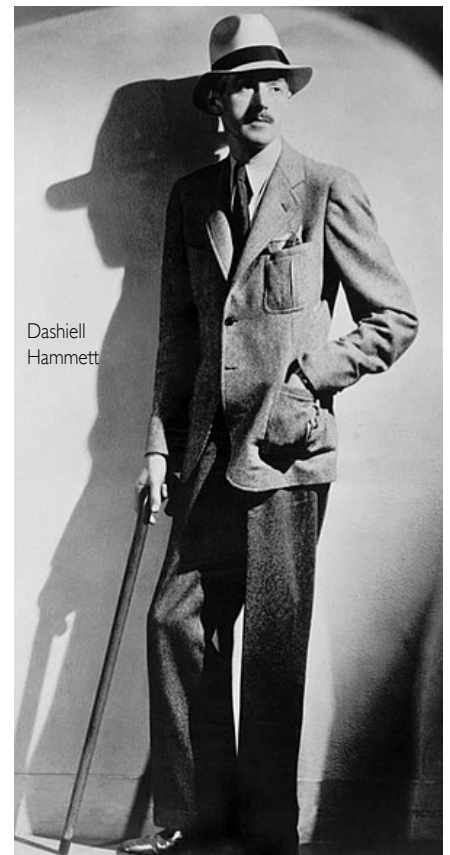
But McCarthy wasn't through with Hammett. In 1953 the senator, as chairman

of a subcommittee investigating the state department's overseas library program, identified 300 of Hammett's books as being in state department information centers across the globe. By mid-year Senator McCarthy was demanding over 30,000 books located in State Department overseas libraries be removed, including Hammett's and his par amour Lillian Hellman's. 181 Hammett books were actually removed.

It would be President Dwight "Ike" D. Eisenhower who would come to Hammett's rescue. An avid reader of detective mysteries, Ike publicly stated "it should be the content and not the political views of its author" that sets the norm for inclusion. The books were returned to the library shelves. At the urging of the government, he was black-listed in Hollywood. His income depended on Hollywood where he wrote and collaborated on screenplays. Additionally, several income-generating radio shows based upon Hammett's characters were canceled. A newspaper cartoon character was also canceled. His income dried up.

Not yet through, the government then filed suit against Hammett in 1956, seeking a judgment for the back taxes. He was unable to pay them. The government directly and indirectly had conspired to cut off his income. By then the destitute author was living in a caretaker's cottage in New York.

Having suffered through life with tuberculosis, then emphysema, the heavy drinking chain smoker succumbed to lung cancer in 1961 at the age of 67. Lillian Hellman summed it up best saying "jail had made a thin man thinner,



Dashiell Hammett

a sick man sicker...I knew [after his release] he would now always be sick."

Sound familiar?

If you're ever in San Francisco visit John's Grill on Ellis Street. It was there that Hammett wrote portions of *The Maltese Falcon*. A replica of the statue can be seen on the second floor. The original had been there but was stolen a couple of decades ago. **PI**