

Chandler

I hate Raymond Chandler, yet I've read him and reread him so many times. He's a fascist, and I mean this in a precise sense. He represents the small businessman being trampled by outside forces. Each of his novels has an openly racist section. But of course, you care about the writing, and you end up forgiving things that really aren't forgivable. Chandler was a strange guy. He's buried a mile from here.

[Interviewer:] Have you been to Chandler's grave?

Yeah. It's right next to our Home Depot.

Mike Davis interviewed by Lois Beckett, *Guardian*, August 31, 2022, [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com).

1888	b. Chicago
1895–1905	lives in England, goes to Dulwich College (fancy)
1912	returns to US, becomes accountant in LA
1920–32	works for Dabney Oil Syndicate, becomes VP, fired
1933	“Blackmailers Don't Shoot,” <i>Black Mask</i> 16, no. 10
1934–37	more pulp publications
1939	<i>The Big Sleep</i> (New York: Knopf)
1940	<i>Farewell, My Lovely</i> (Knopf)
1942	<i>The High Window</i> (Knopf)
1943	<i>The Lady in the Lake</i> (Knopf)
1944	<i>Double Indemnity</i> (screenplay for Billy Wilder film)
1944	“The Simple Art of Murder,” <i>Atlantic Monthly</i>
1946	<i>The Big Sleep</i> (dir. Howard Hawks, screenplay by Faulkner, Brackett, and Furthman)
1953	<i>The Long Good-Bye</i> (London: Hamish Hamilton)
1959	d.

Sources: “Raymond Chandler,” in *Gale Literature: Contemporary Authors* (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2007), [Literature Resource Center](#); “Chronology,” in *Stories and Early Novels*, ed. Frank MacShane (New York: Library of America, 1995).

Wandering up and down the Pacific Coast in an automobile, I began to read pulp magazines, because they were cheap enough to throw away and because I never had at any time any taste for the kind of thing which is known as women's magazines. This was in the great days of the *Black Mask* (if I may call them great days) and it struck me that some of the writing was pretty forceful and honest, even though it had its crude aspect. I decided that this might be a good way to try to learn to write fiction and get paid a small amount of money at the same time.

Letter to Hamish Hamilton [his British publisher], November 10, 1950, in *Raymond Chandler Speaking*, ed. Dorothy Gardiner and Kathrine Sorley Walker (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), 26, [ACLS Humanities EBook](#).

I learned to write a novelette on one of yours....I made an extremely detailed synopsis of your story and from that rewrote it and then compared what I had with yours, and then went back and rewrote it some more, and so on.

Letter to Erle Stanley Gardner [the best-selling mystery writer], May 5, 1939, in *ibid.*, 73.

I had to learn American just like a foreign language. To use it I had to study it and analyze it. As a result, when I use slang, colloquialisms, snide talk or any kind of off-beat language I do it deliberately. The literary use of slang is a study in itself. I've found that there are only two kinds that are any good: slang that has established itself in the language, and slang that you make up yourself. Everything else is apt to be passé before it gets into print.

Letter to Alex Barris, March 18, 1949, in *ibid.*, 80.

THE SIMPLE ART

In her introduction to the first *Omnibus of Crime*, Dorothy Sayers wrote: "It [the detective story] does not, and by hypothesis never can, attain the loftiest level of literary achievement." And the reason, as she suggested somewhere else, is that it is a "literature of escape" and not "a literature of expression." I do not know what the loftiest level of literary achievement is: neither did Aeschylus or Shakespeare; neither does Miss Sayers....It is always a matter of who writes the stuff, and what he has in him to write it with....

I think that what was really gnawing at Miss Sayers's mind was the slow realization that her kind of detective story was an arid formula which could not even satisfy its own implications. It was second-grade literature because it was

not about the things that could make first-grade literature. If it started out to be about real people (and she could write about them—her minor characters show that), they must very soon do unreal things in order to form the artificial pattern required by the plot. When they did unreal things, they ceased to be real themselves. They became puppets and cardboard lovers and papier-mâché villains and detectives of exquisite and impossible gentility. (56–57)

Hammett gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse....The realist in murder writes of a world in which gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities.... It is not a fragrant world, but it is the world you live in, and certain writers with tough minds and a cool spirit of detachment can make very interesting and even amusing patterns out of it. (58–59)

In everything that can be called art there is a quality of redemption. It may be pure tragedy, if it is high tragedy, and it may be pity and irony, and it may be the raucous laughter of the strong man. But down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man.... He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor...I do not care much about his private life; he is neither a eunuch nor a stayr; I think he might seduce a duchess and I am quite sure he would not spoil a virgin; if he is a man of honor in one thing, he is that in all things. (59)

CHERCHEZ LA FEMME

The misogyny of these books has become a critical commonplace. Largely ignoring the material social and economic context of this misogyny, these critics have invoked the figure of the New Woman as a particular threat to masculinity.... In my view, however, the bourgeois New Woman has less to do with hard-boiled misogyny than the transformation of working-class communities as a result of the de-skilling of craft work, the entry of young, single women into once all-male jobs, and the rise of consumer culture.

Smith, *Hard-Boiled*, 157–58.