

Mickey's Mantle

Suspended Sentences

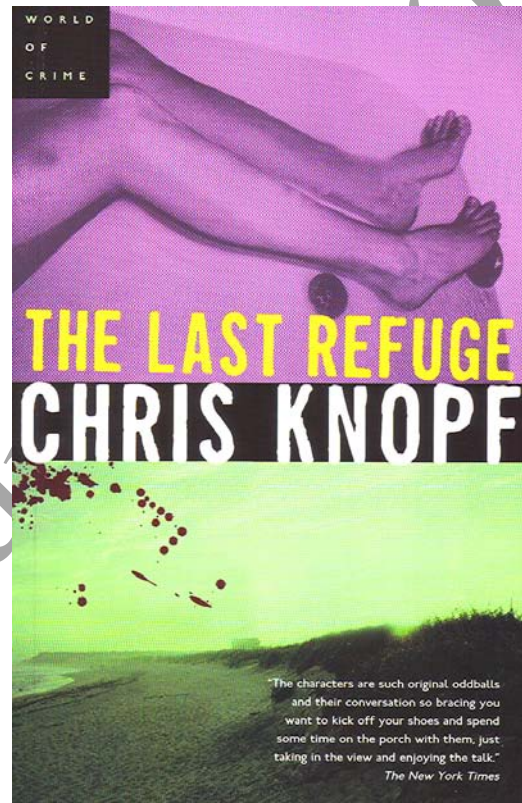
by Jim Napier

Last month, Mickey Spillane died. In the annals of American crime fiction, it might not have been the end of an era, but it was surely the passing of a giant. For over fifty years Spillane's tough-minded novels of big-city crime have endured, entrenched in such classic works as *Vengeance is Mine*, *The Big Kill*, and *Kiss Me Deadly*. His influence can be found today in the writings of such best-selling authors as Robert B. Parker, whose hero Spenser bears a more-than-passing resemblance to Spillane's protagonist, Mike Hammer, and in the *Dirty Harry* films of Clint Eastwood. It is a genre that is distinctively American, though it has been copied around the world.

With their explicit language, graphic violence, and overt sexism, Spillane's novels took a big hit from the defenders of political correctness and good manners. But he refused to make nice with his critics, saying, "I have no fans. You know what I got? Customers."

In a future column I will explore Spillane's novels, and consider just what causes their enduring popularity. But although Mickey is no longer with us, the genre of hard-boiled crime fiction is far from dead. Among its more talented practitioners, Chris Knopf stands out with his debut novel, *The Last Refuge*, published earlier this year. Knopf has already shown himself to be a worthy

successor to inherit (if you'll forgive the pun) Mickey's mantle.



Chris Knopf

Chris Knopf has an improbable background for a writer of hard-boiled crime novels. Born in Philadelphia, and educated in London and the U.S., he is Chairman and Executive Creative Director of the media marketing agency, Mintz & Hoke. Knopf and his wife, Mary Farrell, divide their down time between homes in Avon, Connecticut and Southampton Village, Long Island, where Knopf writes on his front porch, accompanied by his two wheaten

terriers. *Two Time*, his second novel featuring Sam Acquillo and his dog Eddie, was released earlier this month.

The Last Refuge
(Vintage Canada, 2006)

Ex-boxer and corporate dropout Sam Acquillo has made peace with his demons and carved out his own small bit of paradise in a run-down 1940's cottage built by his father in what has become a leafy retreat for the rich in Southampton, Long Island. The middle-aged recluse spends much of his time sitting on his screened-in porch overlooking the bay, with his rescued pound-dog Eddie, a bottle of vodka, and a packet of Camels for company. It is an existence he can live with: as Sam explains it, "I had a bargain going with Nature. She was supposed to let me do this long enough to get my fill, before shutting down all my internal organs, and I was supposed to worship her greater works, like the saltwater taffy hydrangea at the edge of the lawn, the fishy, smelly flavor of the breeze and the gaudy red-purple sky that shattered into a billion shards as it played across the Little Peconic Bay."

But as in the original Eden, there are snakes at work. After finding his next-door neighbor, Regina Broadhurst, dead in her bathtub, Sam takes on the job of administering her estate. The police are satisfied that the elderly woman simply slipped, hit her head, and drowned; Sam isn't so sure. In the process of settling her estate Sam discovers that Regina didn't own her cottage, located on a pricey bit of shoreline adjoining the bay, but had lived in it, rent-free, for decades. Sam's curiosity is piqued, and he pokes his nose into the labyrinth of banks, trusts, and holding companies that shape the Southampton financial landscape.

What he finds will unearth old family secrets and set in motion new acts of violence, as Sam relentlessly applies his own morality to achieve justice for a forgotten old lady who died alone.

An impressive debut

Sam Acquillo is an engaging anti-hero, with a strong personal ethic that often finds the world around him lacking. Knopf writes with a fresh voice, and skillfully juxtaposes the exquisite natural beauty of his setting with a hard-hitting tale of greed and corruption. *The Last Refuge* is an impressive debut novel, marked by original characters, crackling dialogue, and an all-too-believable plot. If you cannot find it in your local bookstore, ask them to order it. You won't be disappointed.

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