

Play it again, Sam

Hard-boiled novels make a comeback

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Hardboiled crime fiction is distinctively American in origin. Prior to the Second World War crime fiction was dominated by the British, and consisted largely of country-house cozies that focused on solving a puzzle (whodunit, or how); the violence occurred off-stage and off-page. When the criminal was revealed, he or she almost always went quietly, and justice was often delivered at the hands of the law. Befitting this sanitized setting, the sleuth was typically an amateur (think Miss Marple and Lord Peter Wimsey).

The roots of hardboiled crime writing goes back to the First War, with the bulk of hardboiled novels being written (and set) during the period between the wars. But the genre really came into its own following WW II, with the release of popular film versions such as *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Big Sleep*. Post-war disillusionment, prohibition, the Depression, gumshoes and gangsters provided plenty of grist for the crime writers' mill. American in its settings and more jaded in its attitudes toward life, it was dominated by such writers as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler; and later writers such as Mickey Spillane, Robert B. Parker, Sara Paretsky, and Walter Mosley have contributed to its development. The protagonist was invariably a "Private Eye," an investigator for hire who didn't have to (and usually didn't) observe the legal niceties that occasionally bound the police of the

day. Rather than emanating from the courts, justice was often delivered by the protagonist (more often anti-hero than hero) at gunpoint. Like the proverbial egg, he (and in its early days it was almost always 'he') was tough, hence the label 'hardboiled.'



The style of the hardboiled is spare: short sentences, no-nonsense writing with the emphasis on action, not reflection. The dialogue, too, is crisp, with more than its share of in-your-face banter, the street jargon of people used to jockeying for position. What reflection there is, is usually cynical. The

strength of hardboiled novels lies in capturing snappy dialogue among colourful characters, coupled with a strong sense of place and time.

There is a resurgence of interest in hard-boileds these days, as evidenced in the following releases. Collectively they cover a multitude of settings over a wide range of decades. The common denominator is that they're all great reads.

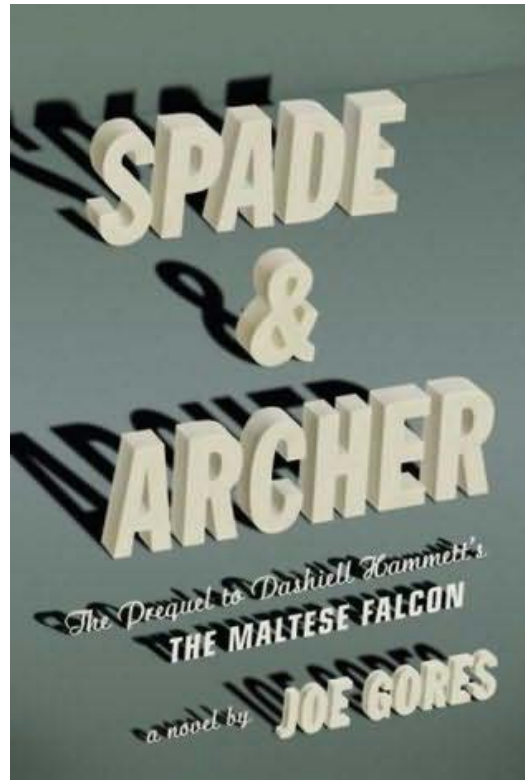
Death Was in the Picture
By Linda L. Richards
St. Martin's Minotaur, 2009

Canadian author Linda Richards has served up a treat in this tale of Hollywood intrigue set in the depths of the Depression. During filming a young actress has died under mysterious circumstances, and PI Dexter Theroux has been hired by a studio bigwig to help prove that leading man Laird Wyndham wasn't involved. Theroux is aided in his efforts by his secretary Kitty Pangborn, who's less than pleased that their client is concealing his own shadowy past.

I reviewed Linda's previous hardboiled, *Death Was the Other Woman*, in June of 2008, and in her latest novel she has only gotten better. Linda Richards absolutely nails life in Depression-era Tinseltown, where appearances are always deceiving and greed and ambition rule the day.

Spade & Archer
by Joe Gores
(Knopf/Random House 2009)

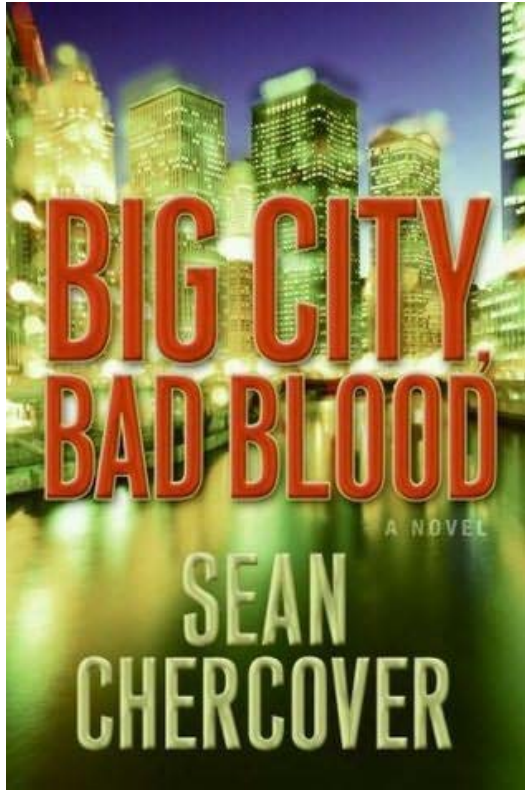
In this prequel to *The Maltese Falcon*, PI Sam Spade is searching for the son of a local bank president, who has gone missing. Seems that after a vacation trip with his parents he's become enamoured of the South Seas, and his father fears he's looking to book passage on a steamer out of San Francisco.



In the process of looking for the lad around the docks, Sam stumbles into a major theft of gold bullion that has disappeared from a ship somewhere between Australia and San Francisco. The real question is where is the brains behind the heist? Before he can run him to ground, Sam gets caught up in the questionable death of a wealthy executive, the plight of a friend of a friend who says she's being tailed for a price-less historical treasure, pilfering on the docks, and a mysterious woman with ties to a Chinese revolution. And for good measure, he takes on a new partner, Miles Archer, with whose wife he has a steamy past. Plenty on Sam's plate, then, but have no fear: Spade always gets to the bottom of things.

A former PI himself, and the author of dozens of novels, screenplays, and television scripts for such series as *Mike Hammer*, *Columbo*, *Kojak*, and *Magnum, P. I.*, author Joe Gores is eminently

qualified to assume the mantle of Dashiell Hammett. I'm not generally a fan of prequels and sequels written by others, but Gores' book is a fine salute to America's own Golden Age of crime writing, and a true labour of love.

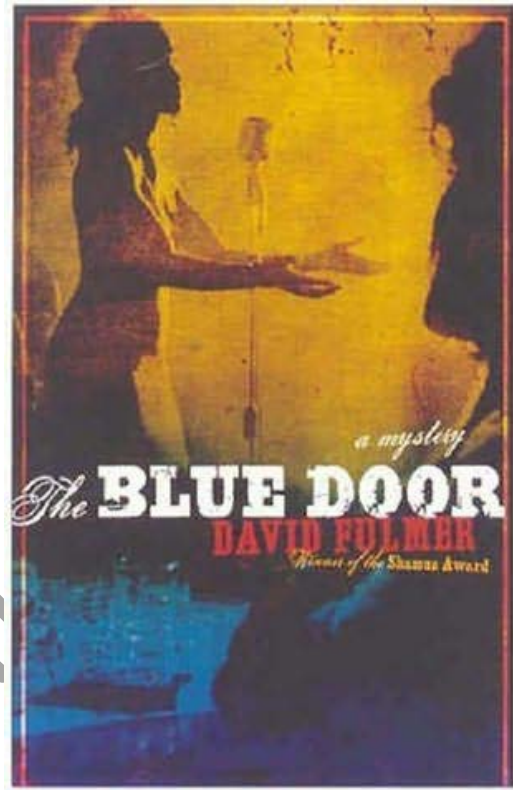


Big City, Bad Blood
by Sean Chercover
Harper, 2007

Chicago P.I. Ray Dudgeon is hired by Bob Loniski, a flunky for a Hollywood film production company who says that a Chicago mobster named Frank DiMarco wants him dead. Inclined to dismiss his fears, Dudgeon's attitude changes when he finds himself tailed and threatened. It's not long before he's caught up in the middle of a mob turf war, and his client isn't the only one who has something to fear.

A corker of a tale by an ex-Chicago PI who won the 2008 Shamus Award and the Gumshoe and Crimespree Magazine

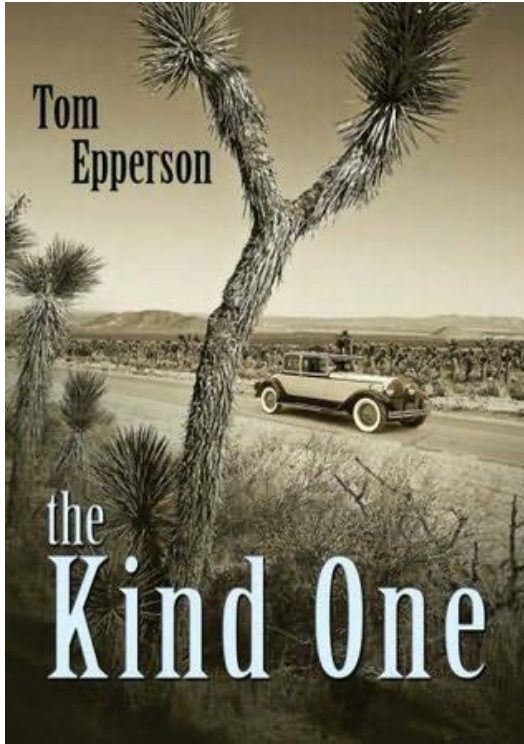
awards for Best First Novel, and was shortlisted for the ITW Thriller Award, Anthony Award, and Arthur Ellis Award for Best First Novel. Follow it up with Chercover's latest, *Trigger City*, which has been optioned for a film.



The Blue Door
by David Fulmer
Harcourt, 2008

In Philadelphia during the early 60's, washed-up boxer Eddie Cero encounters two punks beating up an older man in an alley, and steps in to save the day. The man, a private investigator, offers Eddie a part-time job in gratitude. It's not long before he discovers he has a natural talent for snooping, and turns to investigating a cold case, the disappearance of a front man for the Excels, one of Eddie's favourite soul groups. The case will find the ex-boxer punching well above his weight in a tale of scheming and double-crossing, passion and power.

Writer David Fulmer is also the author of *The Dying Crapshooter's Blues*, *Rampart Street*, *Jass*, and *Chasing the Devil's Tale*.



The Kind One
by Tom Epperson
Pocket Books, 2009

A tale from the 30's with a twist: L.A. gunman Danny Landon can't remember anything since he was hit on the head a year ago with a lead pipe. Vicious mobster Bud Seitz has big plans for Danny, but since his memory went Danny can't handle the dirty work. He'd like to find a way out, but Seitz isn't having it. He orders Danny to keep an eye on his girlfriend, Darla. But things get complicated when Darla begs Danny to help her escape from Seitz's evil world. Not the best career move for someone who can't even shoot straight any more.

Author Tom Epperson co-wrote the film scripts for *One False Move*, *The Gift*, and *A Gun, a Car, a Blonde*. Nominated for a 2009 Edgar Award for Best First Novel, *The Kind One* has been optioned for a major motion picture.

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