



Nightmare Town

Dashiell Hammett , Colin Dexter (Introduction) , William F. Nolan (Introduction)

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Introduced by Colin Dexter, one of England's greatest writers of detective fiction, here are twenty long-unavailable stories by Dashiell Hammett, the author of *The Maltese Falcon* and one of the finest writers of the twentieth century.

In the title story, a man on a bender enters a small town and ends up unravelling the dark mystery at its heart. A woman confronts the brutal truth about her husband in the chilling story, *The Ruffian's Wife*. *His Brother's Keeper* is a half-wit boxer's eulogy to the brother who betrayed him. *The Second Story Angel* recounts one of the most novel cons ever devised. In seven stories, the tough and taciturn **Continental Op** takes on a motley collection of the deceitful, the duped, and the dead, and once again shown his uncanny ability to get at the truth. In three stories, **Sam Spade** confronts the darkness in the human soul while rolling his own cigarettes. And the first study for *The Thin Man* sends John Guild on a murder investigation in which almost every witness may be lying.

In **Nightmare Town**, Dashiell Hammett, America's poet laureate of the dispossessed, shows us a world where people confront a multitude of evils. Whether they are trying to right wrongs or just trying to survive, all of them are rendered with Hammett's signature gifts for sharp-edged characters and blunt dialogue.

Hammett said that his ambition was to elevate mystery fiction to the level of art. This collection of masterful stories clearly illustrates Hammett's success, and shows the remarkable range and variety of the fiction he produced.

As a novelist of realistic intrigue, Hammett was unsurpassed in his own or any day. - **Ross MacDonald**

A legend of a different kind: exemplary, not only of a certain kind of American fiction, but also of a certain kind of American life - **Margaret Atwood**

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Nightmare Town Details

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From Reader Review Nightmare Town for online ebook

Julie Davis says

#49 - 2010.

Yep. I couldn't just try Chandler without also sampling the other great master of hard-boiled mystery fiction, Dashiell Hammett. Again, my random library selections yielded a novel and this short story selection. It also has an interesting overview of Hammett's life in the introduction. These stories contain hard boiled detectives but also, surprisingly, twist ending stories from different points of view as well. Hammett is a more varied writer than Chandler and I am always amused whenever the main detective describes himself as short and stout (which seems to happen frequently). About halfway through and thoroughly enjoying this intro to Hammett.

Carla Remy says

As a writer of mysteries there's much to learn from Hammett's shorter fiction from the 1920s pulp periodicals. He's the best. Okay, granted, the simplicity of some of the mysteries wouldn't fly today. And, truly, I get a bit bored with hardboiled detectives. But one has to keep in mind that the cliché hadn't formed yet, that Hammett created the cliché. He's a great writer.

Joe Santoro says

This took me a lot longer to get through than I expected... the Maltese Falcon was just a page turning pleasure, I thought I would buzz through these just a quickly.

While you still get an amazing feel of each case, as if you were a witness on the side of the road, in many of these shorter stories there's just a little too much detail. There are definitely times where they read more like a police report than a story.. which, given Hammett's background, they may well be.

The Continental Op also isn't nearly the character Sam Spade is.. he's really more just a run of the mill PoV character that doesn't really have a whole lot of personality. The stories are still very well told and interesting, but the heroes and villains often are just there, rather than popping off the page with personality,

John says

By and large, I found the stories in this collection to be overrated, but I certainly wouldn't argue with the cultural impact they had. Hammett put hardboiled fiction on the map and created three of the most memorable detectives in American literary history.

That being said, I don't really care for Hammett when he's not writing detective stories. Several of the pieces in the first half of this collection fall completely flat. But Hammett shines whenever the Continental Op, Sam Spade, or the Thin Man take center stage, making NIGHTMARE TOWN a book well worth reading. I was

almost ready to bump it up to four stars, when I discovered that the last 15% of the book consisted of ten chapters of an uncompleted novel that Hammett later used as a springboard for writing THE THIN MAN. Personally, I don't get people who enjoy reading the literary tablescraps of famous authors. There are too many good books out there to waste time on unfinished first drafts, especially when the same author has written a completed version of the story, only somewhat altered (and probably for the better, I'm guessing). So back down to three stars we go...

Evgeny says

I have to admit I can be slow at times. I consider Dashiell Hammett to be one of the best noir writers as well as practically the father of the genre. Both Sam Spade and nameless Continental Op are the prototypes of all PIs in literature. Imagine my surprise when I realized there are 3 short stories featuring Sam Spade as well as few with Continental Op I have not read yet. This book has all with the former one and several of the latter. My library happened to have the book. I immediately ran out to get it. How fast did I run? Let me just say I outran a couple of these guys:

And so the book consists of 20 novellas showing different sides of Hammett's writing talent. I will discuss the ones worthy of notice.

Nightmare Town. A guy ended up in a town that can give Personville (aka Poisonville) from Red Harvest a good run for the money when it comes to corruption. I have no doubt some ideas were later reused in what I consider to be **the** best ultra-violent noir crime novel.

House Dick. Hello Continental Op! The guy took an easy job as a house dick. That is it was easy until multiple murders took place.

The nameless Continental Op was hugely influential despite his lack of a name. Let me introduce the following exhibit:

Night Shots. The Continental Op was hired to find out who shot at a rich guy confined by a bed because of his sickness. The moment the man arrived the lead began flying around non-stop.

Zigzags of Treachery. The Continental Op was trying to clean up a name of a widow accused of murdering her husband. I always say when it comes to double-crossing in modern literature nobody surpasses Glen Cook of The Black Company fame.

Reading this story made me think he could have been a pupil of Dashiell Hammett: here back-stabbings were plentiful and impressive.

Death on Pine Street. The Continental Op was hired to find a doctor's killer as the police had no luck with its investigation. The guy did the job while getting beat up and narrowly avoiding a false accusation of rape.

Afraid of a Gun. A gangster would get into a state of sheer panic the moment he saw a gun pointed at his direction. As it can be easily guessed he was not very successful at his job.

Tom, Dick, or Harry. The Continental Op was hired by an insurance company to find stolen jewels. This mystery can be qualified as a "closed room mystery". It is probably the most peaceful of Continental Op stories.

One Hour. It took the Continental Op exactly this much time not only to solve a murder, but also getting thoroughly beaten up: effective work all around.

Who Killed Bob Teal? A promising young operative from Continental Detective Agency was killed and this fact pissed off the head of the local branch. The Continental Op to the rescue! The main idea of the plot was lately reused in *Maltese Falcon*, so it is possible to figure out the mystery almost right away.

A Man Called Spade. Enter Sam Spade.

A guy hired him for a protection, but was killed before Spade got to see him. So Spade decided to stick around to check how official investigation is going and beat the police to the solution.

Too Many Have Lived. Sam Spade is hired by a rich guy to find out what happened to the husband of a woman he was in love with. Spade delivered.

They Can Only Hang You Once. During his investigation Spade posed an investor from Australia to gain access to an eccentric rich guy with several relatives patiently waiting for him to meet the Maker. This act resulted in several people being murdered.

The First Thin Man. These are first chapters of unfinished novel. Later on they were heavily rewritten and became *The Thin Man*. Despite the tale stopping right in the middle it is easy to figure out the mystery if you are familiar with the final product.

The only reason the anthology loses one star from a perfect rating is that paradoxically I am not a big fan on non-mystery noir; for this reason I never bothered to read anything by James M. Cain. Anyhow, 4 solid stars is the rating.

Ben Winch says

Clearly, Hammett is a legend. *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Glass Key* are both great, but I'd rate the title piece of this collection, a short novella of 40 pages, just as highly. It's got everything: it's painstakingly and impeccably written, it's fast, it's fun, it's furious. The only reason no-one's made a movie out of it yet is surely that it gets hidden away in these kinds of collections. It's a hoot! It's so ridiculous it verges on metafiction, both a parody of a genre and a supreme example of that genre. Most of the other stories are high quality too, and the writing is so consistently polished that it's hard to imagine how the young Hammett could have earned a reasonable wage for his efforts, publishing in pulp magazines alongside writers who could churn out their stories on auto-pilot. All of this goes some way to proving that Hammett was an artist, who just happened to write crime because, as a professional detective himself, it was what he knew. This guy is one of a kind.

J. says

It was a necessary train ride, off the eastcoast grid to the center of the rust belt. It was a necessary six hours, even before whistle-stops and unexplained lulls were counted in. After a high-proof holiday and a few sleepless celebrations, the ride back to college was generally comfortable and quiet.

This was still the era of *The National Limited*, *The Broadway Limited* and other time-honored routes. New fabric protective mats every trip on the shoulders of the seats. Smoking cars, Pullman Captains and lounge cars with a bartender; linen tablecloths in the dining car, a single-stem carnation in a weighted glass flute on every table.

Somehow like ships, long-distance trains sometimes seem to lose the edge of the wind, waste their energy on the flats and find themselves grounded somewhere, becalmed, on a siding near ... nothing at all. On a good day, that happened only once or twice.

It was my luck to slip into a coma-like sleep after the doldrums and false starts, lulled by the quieting of the train from the light snow falling on the rails. When I woke up the car was pitch black and gliding through unfamiliar terrain. Conductors no longer loudly announced the stops, but headed down the aisles whispering "somewheretown, next," or "mumbleville, arriving shortly," just under their breath, so as not to disturb the pervasive, rumbling quiet. I didn't recall ever hearing these towns before. I had overslept my stop.

In a disquieted lurch, I grabbed my luggage, perhaps including the manual typewriter's carrier case that disguised a thick pack of Lps, and went for the exit in bloodshot fury. Having seen this sort of Holden Caulfield reenactment before, the night porter suggested that I wait until the city of Johnstown came up, where they had, he explained, taxis, hotels, lights. At this hour. There were no more trains today, and I'd have to overnight in this unforeseen urban center, if it wouldn't be too much trouble.

The meeker and more polite the Pullman porters got, the more everyone knew that was the sign they were interacting with grand-scale assholes. So you knew at that first lowered glance and demure suggestion that they were still with you but, well, you were pushing your luck. These were generally clever, reasonably paid black men at a time of tricky, changeable racial conditions and unsaid segregation codes; they operated both north and south of the Mason-Dixon line, sometimes in a single trip. They knew how to control carloads of white businessmen with less than a gesture and no fuss. I would wait, in a seat nearby the door, until the glitter of Johnstown's skyline gently shimmered into view.

Finding myself at the only lit building in a scruffy warehouse section of a dead city, I checked into the *Penn-Hunt-Dementia Hotel*, where I was tossed the keys to a 13th floor doornumber somewhere in the thousands. Nothing added up, or made much sense, and the elevators were upstairs, on a darkened mezzanine landing.

My suite's ambience wasn't aided by the bare-bulb ceiling fixture, so I switched that off and went back to the coma I had been missing since the train. It wasn't till the cold light of day that I began to have a real look around.

College wasn't at any danger of going anywhere in my absence, so I began to have ideas about having some kind of adventure. Something unusual, explainably unavoidable, while doing my duty to get back, within a completely reasonable delay. As soon as I called down for "room service" it became obvious that I might want to get back on a train quicker than all that. Seems there was no such thing, not now, not ever, no sir,

and it wasn't really understood very well by the morning desk staff, who seemed pleasurably confused by the inquiry.

As I spoke I was looking around. The Hotel was massive. The train station far below the window ledges fit perfectly into the picture. I was in a depression era city, bleak and gray and unappealing in the hard winter light. The closed-up storefronts on the street below must have served an industrious populace once, forty or fifty years ago, but were now immobilized, seized-up and still, like the barber's poll with it's stripes derailed, skewed and dusty, the stopped station clock, and the shop windows featuring broken mannequin parts.

The room was threadbare of course, but nondescript and banal in the décor of the Thirties Commerce Traveller, flat and unadorned by design. The phone I was holding in my hand was a kind of museum-piece, so obsolete as to seem installed for culture shock, curated for its shiny, black antiquity.

Dashiell Hammett's *Nightmare Town* is at its best when it gets to these kind of banalities, the astringent quality in an Edward Hopper interior.

It hardly needs saying that I was down that old elevator to the street, and out of there long before the first train of the day rumbled into mumbletown. Suspiciously heavy typewriter case in hand, I did have the whole rest of college to consider, didn't I?

Guillermo Galvan says

Nightmare Town is a collection of short stories from the originator of the hard-boiled crime genre, Dashiell Hammett. As a private eye for the Pinkerton Detective Agency in San Francisco during the Prohibition Era, Hammett experienced shootouts, knifings, stakeouts, and cold-blooded murder for cash. These experiences convinced him of one thing: everyone is a suspect. He began writing short stories based on his detective work for pulp fiction magazines.

Nightmare Town is a book of high-quality stories punctuated by brilliant gems. This book shows Hammett as a versatile writer able to work in any area concerning crime. He can use the first or second person perspective and put readers in foggy city streets or little desert towns with a whole cast of psychologically-unique characters.

Several stories break away entirely from the detective backdrop. "The Man Who Killed Dan Odams" centers on an escaped convict hunted across a barren countryside. He's wounded and desperate, and nobody is going to take him in alive. This story has the life-or-death feeling of John Steinbeck. "His Brother's Keeper" is told in the first person perspective of a young boxer who just can't figure out the deadly plot closing in on his brother. "Afraid of a Gun" lays out the naked fear of a gangster with a phobia of guns.

The stories range from crimes of passion to bone splintering violence. In every instance, there are tightly-drawn plots unfolding at an exciting pace. The dialogue is original and enjoyable. Hammett's prose is economical, achieving the greatest impact and solidity with the least number of words possible. He tells complex mysteries in a barebones style.

Nightmare Town is a great book because it gives lowbrow subject matter a literary-grade treatment. For all

the pulp, noir, and crime readers out there, get back to your roots with these hard-boiled masterpieces.

Harold says

This book is exactly what it purports to be. A bunch of short crime fiction stories that taken individually deliver a satisfying read in minimal time. The Continental Op and Sam Spade are in for many of the stories and there is even one story that can be taken as a western. Good stuff.

Mark says

This is a short story collection I found courtesy somebody on GR, it really has expanded my reading world and this seems to become one of those treasures in a bookish sense I am really very glad to read.

Nightmare Town - Steve Threefull awakes after a crazy bet in a little town where about everything seems to be off. It kind of tickles his curiosity and when he finds out what is going on he can only be surprised.

House Dick - Why are there three dead people inside an hotel room?- Continental Op does find out and the solution leaves you shaking your head with pure disbelief and total surprise. Grand ending.

Ruffian's wife - She is threatened in her own house and when her man comes home she finds out more than she cared to know. A story about a woman and her perspective. Well written

The man who killed Dan Odams - locked up because he shot a man in a fair fight, he takes his chance to escape jail. The man who killed Dan Odams finds a place to hide in safety with a widow. Another brilliant little gem that does give a great kick in the last paragraph.

Bight shots The Continental op gets sent to a house where somebody took a shot at the sick and old patriarch of the family and nobody saw anything. When the next night the same happens again and somebody else gets hurt the Op has an idea and it is an uneasy one.

Zigzags of treachery

In which the continental Op gets asked to investigate the suicide/murder of a Doctor by his wife, especially when his first wife comes forward with her claims after she visited the Doctor when he was alive. The detective will have to find out what really happened with the good Doctor and his first wife. Another surprising little tale of human drama.

The assistant murderer

Private detective Alec Rush is not the typical PI in that there is nothing really attractive about him, in fact he's quite ugly, and women aren't falling all over him. But as a former policeman he does know his stuff. He paid to check out a woman who gets followed and discovers murder and mayhem. a well written story sometimes a wee bit confusing.

His brother's keeper

A boxer and his brother and a major fight on Saturday evening. At the end one boxer wins and somebody dies. Well told but perhaps somewhat shortish.

Two sharp knives

A man comes to town by train and gets picked up by the chief of police as there is a warrant out on him. Give the man a nice locked room and then the man kills himself. What really happened? - well written but somewhat predictable too soon.

more will follow.....

Kirk Smith says

Who wouldn't want to read a collection of 20 great Detective/Mystery short stories by the Old Master himself? Dashiell Hammett is credited as the writer responsible for the creation of the hard-boiled school of detective fiction. And why is it so good? Authenticity. Hammett worked for seven years as a Pinkerton Agent. His stories are close enough to some of his actual cases to keep the stories realistic. Another positive feature is that all were written in a 12 year time period 1922-1934. This creates a cohesiveness and flow as you move from story to story. *** I might also point out that these somewhat defy typical stereotypes. Most occur in the western region of the United States. Intelligence and logic are his weapons, guns appear occasionally. The title story lives up to its description, it truly is a nightmare of a town. Another story, The Man Who killed Dan Odams, reads as a modern western and takes place in Montana. I was really impressed with the diversity. For those seeking the familiar, there are three Sam Spade stories, and seven featuring The Continental Op (operative). Fantastic writing, there is not a stinker in the lot. I would say that to avoid too much of a good thing, it would be good to read 2-3 at a time and stretch it over a 6 month period. A great book to own!

Dulani says

There's a line in this book that stayed with me:

"If a man says a thing often enough, he is very likely to acquire some sort of faith in it sooner or later."

That's a quote of our current age.

Ryan Jones says

Nightmare Town contains 20 stories by Dashiell Hammett that haven't seen the light of day in decades. It is definitely a nice surprise to have more stories from a writer who left us with too few works.

The stories in *Nightmare Town* are mostly what you would expect from Hammett. Seven of the stories are about his character, the Continental Op, his quintessential detective. The Continental Op is everything a hardboiled detective should be- but not quite the Hollywood version. The Op is balding and middle-aged, and avoids trouble, if he can.

It's remarkable that Hammett isn't a more noted stylist- his minimalism often makes Hemingway look wordy.

This collection also contains the only three Sam Spade stories, and a story that would change radically before becoming *The Thin Man*.

Aditya says

An engrossing introduction to Hammett and a delight to lovers of hard boiled crime fiction. There isn't a single shocker but neither is there a standout. The stories are crisply written with late twists that range from inspired to farcical. Some of the stories do appear dated but it isn't too distracting. Overall a good concoction of hard-boiled sensibilities and old school whodunits but falls well short of greatness, a word often used to describe Hammett's major works. Rating 3/5.

Karen says

I've just started reading Dashiell Hammett, some short things, and I really like his blunt style.
