

## Disciples Pay Homage To a Guru of Gumshoes

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Philip Marlowe was a private eye who operated with the basics: a gun, a bottle of rye and a wisecrack. But how would he fare today, half a century after walking the mean streets of Los Angeles in the novels of Raymond Chandler?

"He might do all right," said Michael Hershman, president of the Fairfax Group, a private investigating company. "He had patience, persistence and a good line."

John Miller, a crime reporter for WNBC-TV and more recently a deputy police commissioner for New York City, agreed. "Chandler is not as far from reality as you might think," he said, speaking on Thursday at a panel organized by Random House, which has reissued "Farewell My Lovely" and "The Big Sleep" in a Modern Library volume. Mr. Miller said that as a rookie crime reporter he relied on Chandler's novels to pass as a detective while covering his first murder. He blew his cover by putting the wrong end of a cigar in his mouth.

"You spend so much time in the cars, the endless hours waiting for someone to come out a door, that you start to feel like these characters you read about," said Mr. Miller, whose fellow panelists included Lynda La Plante, the creator of "Prime Suspect"; the mystery writer Mickey Spillane, the film maker Paul Morrissey, and Sarah Lovett, a former forensic researcher and the author of the crime novel "Dangerous Attachments." Presiding over the discussion was Harold M. Evans, the president and publisher of Random House adult trade books.

Ms. La Plante praised Chandler for his "concise, cruel" character descriptions, and read one aloud, from "The High Window": "From 30 feet away she looked like a lot of class. From 10 feet away she looked like something made up to be seen from 30 feet away."

Ms. La Plante, who recently published a crime novel set in Los Angeles, "Cold Shoulder," also noted Chandler's feel for houses and buildings. "He's one of the best writers at giving you the address of someone and making you see it," she said.

The addresses mattered, of course, because Marlowe tended to do a lot of legwork handled by computers today. But computers, Mr. Miller said, have dulled the instincts: "Before, it was much more up to the wiles of the detective to divine these things."

Mr. Evans asked if Chandler's novels deserved to be called literature. "Literature is whatever people read," snapped Mr. Spillane.

The touchy subject of Chandler and women led to a tough analytic session. Ms. La Plante theorized that Chandler desired the women he wrote about, who tended to be extremes, either luscious, leggy man-traps, or boozy chain-smokers with some hard miles on the odometer.

"Chandler had a very adolescent view of women," said Ms. Lovett, who confessed that after reading her first Chandler at 13 or 14, she had run around her neighborhood in a raincoat and fedora looking in people's windows. "I really responded to the character's alienation and pessimism," she said.

On the woman question, Ms. Lovett parted company with her hero and his creator. "Chandler was notorious for chasing women all over the studio lot, and not very successfully, apparently," she said.

Marlowe has been an irresistible figure for film makers. Mr. Morrissey gave top marks to Dick Powell in "Murder, My Sweet," but complained that modern actors cannot communicate the strength, and lack the voice, to carry on the tradition of Humphrey Bogart in "The Big Sleep."

As it happened, Elliott Kastner, the producer of two Chandler films, "The Long Goodbye" and the 1978 remake of "Farewell, My Lovely," with Robert Mitchum, was in the audience and had a word or two to add. He tried to make a Chandler film as early as the 1960's, he said, but could afford Ross Macdonald, and a young screen-writer by the name of William Goldman. The result was "Harper," with Paul Newman as a Los Angeles private eye. "The film was totally inspired by Chandler," he said.

In a spirited back and forth, Mr. Evans tried to extract from Mr. Hershman the juicy details of what private eyes actually do when tailing a suspect. Mr. Hershman described an actual case, in which his company followed an Indian Government official around the world as he bought apartments and jewelry with money he was suspected of embezzling.

But how do you know he's actually buying an apartment? Mr. Evans asked. "We got the contract," said Mr. Hershman, implying no big deal. But how did you get the contract? "Sweet-talked a secretary," Mr. Hershman said, putting the conversation right back in Marlowe territory. "The guy who did it had a nice British accent," said Mr. Hershman. "He reminded me of you, actually."

The basics of detection may be child's play, but Mr. wanted a real puzzler answered. "How could Chandler write those wonderful books," he asked, "and never once use the word 'perpetrator'?"

Photos: Raymond Chandler in 1949. His most famous creation was Philip Marlowe, played by Humphrey Bogart in "The Big Sleep," co-starring Lauren Bacall. ("The Big Sleep")