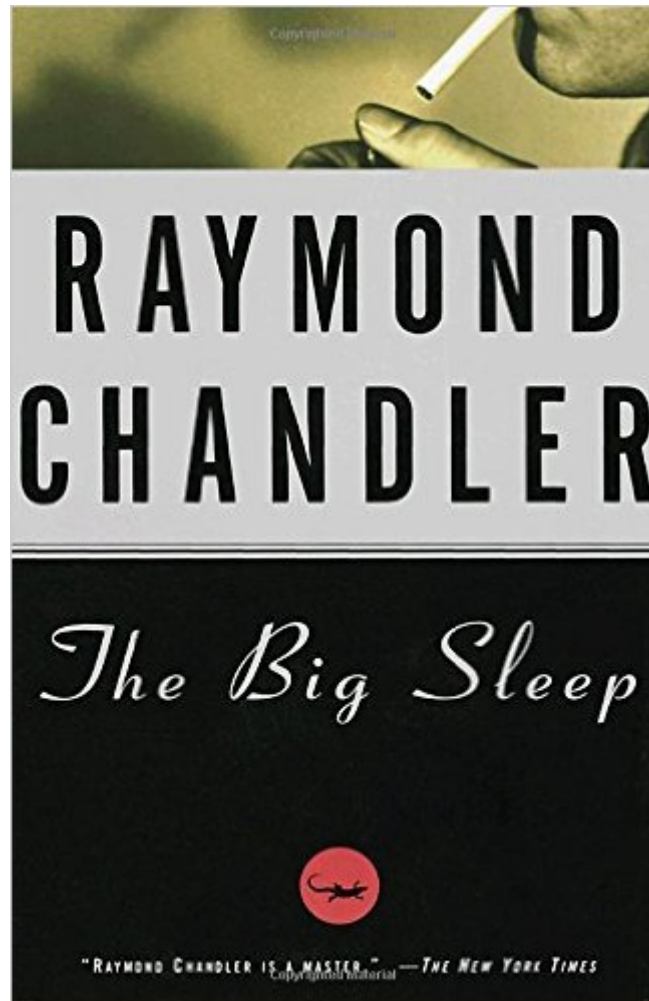


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The Big Sleep (Vintage Crime/Black Lizard)



Synopsis

When a dying millionaire hires Philip Marlowe to handle the blackmailer of one of his two troublesome daughters, Marlowe finds himself involved with more than extortion. Kidnapping, pornography, seduction, and murder are just a few of the complications he gets caught up in. "Chandler [writes] like a slumming angel and invest[s] the sun-blinded streets of Los Angeles with a romantic presence."--Ross Macdonald

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"The Big Sleep," written in 1939, was Raymond Chandler's first Philip Marlowe novel. Chandler went on to write several other classic noir novels, like "Farewell, My Lovely," "The High Window," and "The Long Goodbye." Chandler did not start writing his classic works until the age of forty-five, when he began submitting short stories to pulp magazines like *Mask*. Sadly, Chandler died in 1959, effectively depriving us of more classic Marlowe novels and stories. The shame of the whole thing is Chandler did not start writing until late in his life, although seeing how some great authors decline over the course of their careers perhaps it is best we only have a few novels from Raymond Chandler. "The Big Sleep" finds Marlowe in the employ of General Sternwood, a wealthy but dying oil tycoon. Sternwood wants Marlowe to track down a blackmailer who is trying to bleed some money out of the old general. The problem is Sternwood's two daughters, Carmen and Vivian. Both women have major problems; Carmen is just plain weird, suffering from seizures and a penchant for sleeping around with scum of the earth types. Vivian is not much better; she is a heavy gambler who

dates (and marries) mob types. In the course of working the case, Marlowe uncovers underground pornography shops, blackmailers, gambling dens, a couple of murders, and other seedy events in the growing town of Los Angeles. Like other Chandler novels, what we initially see is hardly the whole enchilada. While working the case, Marlowe stumbles on deeper and deeper mysteries involving a missing mobster and his abducted wife. While "The Big Sleep" is Chandler's best known work, it is not his best novel. It seems that Chandler is still working out the style and form later expressed so gallantly in "The Long Goodbye." "The Big Sleep" is classic Chandler; there is plenty of the gritty atmosphere, amusing wordplay and slang, and despicable characters found in Chandler's later novels. The problem with "The Big Sleep" is that the story does not hold together well. Far too often, I found myself wondering why things happened the way they did, or I had trouble following the twists and turns of the case. Even a somewhat confusing story line does not cause much damage to the entertainment value of "The Big Sleep." You still get the classic snappy dialogue between Marlowe and everyone he encounters, and that is always fun to read. Even more exciting is the realization that you are reading the first book length effort from a master of noir fiction. You can see how he develops his technique by comparing this book with his later novels. What is also amusing is seeing how Chandler paints L.A. at the end of the 1930's. By that time, Los Angeles had yet experienced the enormous growth of the post World War II era. At one point, one of the characters in the book states that L.A. is still a growing town. You have to chuckle over Marlowe's discovery of a pornography shop operating with police protection--this in what is today the home of the pornography industry! Any fans of Chandler will want to read "The Big Sleep" eventually, although I recommend starting with some of his later novels first. Nearly forty-five years after Chandler's death, there is still no one who can touch the master. That fact alone should convince anyone interested in crime novels to read everything Chandler ever wrote.

There isn't any question about where American noir fiction began: all fingers point to James M. Cain's *THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE*. Likewise, there isn't any question about where the tough California P.I. novel started: the credit goes to Dashiell Hammett's *THE MALTESE FALCON*. But in 1939, a pulp magazine writer fused the two concepts, and the result is a style--street-smart, tough, witty, and compellingly direct--that belongs to one writer only: Raymond Chandler. And his first novel, *THE BIG SLEEP*, made him a household name. In some respects *THE BIG SLEEP* is a problematic novel. The plot concerns detective Philip Marlowe's efforts to protect the wealthy Sternwood family from blackmail--but from this starting point it spins out into several complicated directions. Chandler manages this myriad of elements very well through the first half of

the novel, but at mid-point the plot breaks apart into a series of loose ends and improbabilities from which it doesn't recover until the last fifty pages--and then only just. But that is almost beside the point. Thanks to Chandler's unique style, you simply can't put the book down long enough to criticize it. THE BIG SLEEP reads with tremendous speed and power, creating a portrait of a seamy world ruled by bisexual pornographers, purring hitmen, cheap hoods, and enameled dames determined to have their way no matter what--a fascinating collection of everything small and mean and gutter common. At the same time, it also presents a surprising degree of integrity in the midst of the corruption: Marlowe won't sell out, no matter what the bribe, and behind their various masks the hardbitten Vivien Sternwood, mysterious Mona Mars, and small-time Harry Jones have enough courage, loyalty, and unexpected integrity to win your respect. THE BIG SLEEP is not the perfect novel. But it is extremely, extremely readable, and with it Chandler paves the way for everything from Sue Grafton's popular mystery series to television crime drama. Chandler's voice here is often imitated, but it has been seldom equalled and never really bested, and both his style and THE BIG SLEEP remain as potent today as they were when the novel was first published. Strongly recommended. GFT, Reviewer

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