

Dashiell Hammett: Before the *Falcon*

BY JOHN GOINS

A STEADY DIET of hard-boiled fiction might not be good for your health. The faint of heart might rush to the end without enjoying how or why they got there. A long lunch with Chandler or John Carroll Daly, minus the gin or whiskey requisite for such an occasion, might get you in hot water with your boss. An evening with Erle Stanley Gardner or Raoul Whitfield might make you late for work the next morning, if your supervisor hasn't already fired you for the rough company you keep.

Then there is Hammett. Do we really need to ponder who the daddy of hard-boiled crime fiction might be as long as we have his books on the shelf and the evening wind and fog pressing against the windows of our room, if we have a room?

I have seen dog-eared copies of his work peddled by people who appeared more familiar with the food line at St. Anthony's than the old-fashioned menu at John's Grill. Did they read the passage in the "Maltese Falcon" where: "Sam Spade went up to John's Grill, asked the waiter to hurry his chops, baked potato, and sliced tomatoes..."?

A new volume of Dashiell Hammett's unpublished stories, edited by Richard Layman and Julie M. Rivett, Hammett's granddaughter, and published by The Mysterious Press, has hit the market. Many of the 17 stories in the collection cover the period when Hammett was recovering from tuberculosis in San Francisco in the 1920s, his poor health forcing him to resign from the famous (many would say infamous) Pinkerton National Detective Agency. An unfortunate number of writers suffered from the disease in that decade: George Orwell, Katherine Mansfield, Franz Kafka.

"The Hunter and Other Stories" is a reminder of what our city was like during Prohibition — although it didn't seem to slow Hammett down. It was also a tumultuous decade: Sacco and Vanzetti executed in 1927; Hitler's "Mein Kampf" published in 1925; and the Ku Klux Klan, America's largest terrorist organization, 4 million members strong, marched on Washington, D.C., in 1925.

Hammett wrote "The Hunter," the first story in the collection, around 1924 or '25 when he was living on Eddy Street, according to the book's helpful commentary. It introduces us to an unsentimental gumshoe named Fred Vitt who has been hired to find a forger. He tracks the perp to "a dull building" on Ellis Street and forces a confession. However, it's how he gains the confession that gives us a window into the sexual mores of that time. Vitt, sensing the forger isn't married, threatens his girlfriend with contributing to the delinquency of her children if the man doesn't come clean — the woman becoming the potential fall guy. Vitt's ruthlessness pays off and the forger is taken to jail. The story ends with the detective mundanely shopping for three spools of thread for his wife, unperturbed by the blackmail he has just performed. The psychological violence in the story is as riveting as any knife fight.

"POTENT PILLS" FROM 891 POST

"The Sign of the Potent Pills," a light farce that pokes fun at the rich and glides by on wit, satire and a clueless, young detective's ability to make lemonade out of lemons, was written while Hammett was living at 891 Post St. An inexperienced detective named Hugh Trate rushes to a house where a wealthy family is held captive, the head of the household forced, at gunpoint, to empty his bank account. The writer, showing his range, makes us care more for the clueless detective than the pompous family held hostage by a gang of tough guys. Hammett, who lived on Post Street from 1927 to 1929, wrote the story right before or as the Great Depression began.

"I've been forced to borrow money from men I despise! I might just as well live in a wilderness as in a city that keeps me poor with its taxes for all the protection I got..." complains the supercilious grandfather.

Hammett, who would later become a communist and spend time in jail for his political activities, has no sympathy for the old man.

The rookie detective saves the family through a series of mishaps that almost get them killed and the house burned to cinders.



PHOTO BY MARK ELLINGER, 2012

Dashiell Hammett wrote "The Sign of the Potent Pills" when he lived at 891 Post St., probably in room 401. Tenant Bill Arney, who recently lived in the room that looks out on Hyde Street, set up this desk with Hammett memorabilia.

"Do you think it's bad enough to be robbed without being cremated? Do you think the insurance company would have paid me a nickel for the house?" the old patriarch fumes.

LOOKING FOR HIS VOICE

Not all of the stories in this collection take place in San Francisco nor are about crime. Nor do all of the stories work. But, that's to be expected of a writer attempting to find his voice. Hammett was starting to hone his craft. Many of the stories involve characters who are down and out and some won't be back: Money problems plagued Hammett for much of his life.

"Fragments of Justice," written in 1922, is a brief character study of two men who have been selected for jury duty. The first juror's vision and hearing are so poor that it "obviated the necessity of any expenditures for amusements," and the second juror is an outright bigot. "He admitted, with suitable reservations, the existence in the Negro of a soul." Hammett describes the second juror as looking like an unhealthy rodent. "What's the use arguing? That guy's guilty: you can look at him and see he's a crook!" he exclaims, without irony. Hammett leaves the fate of the accused hanging in the rancid air of the jury room.

Women are also featured in this collection. Hammett wrote "Week-End" in 1926. Love, too, can be hard-boiled. In this story, Hammett's hard-candied prose lifts the veil behind sex and a young woman's longing for marriage

and commitment. In the age of censorship, everything is implied, as it is in this story, the dialogue between the young woman, packing to meet her lover in San Francisco for the weekend, and her suspicious mother, as crisp as the starched lace on a straight-back chair.

The mother sees right through her: "A person would think you were going on your honeymoon," said she.

However, Mildred, the main character, is no wilting flower: "No use letting them rot in the drawer."

She catches a train to Oakland, then a ferry to San Francisco to meet her lover. Fried clams and waffles on O'Farrell Street, a cabaret on Mason, a hotel on Ellis. He would have preferred spending their whole weekend at the hotel, doing what men do, before he moved east for a job. That was why she agreed to meet him. She does not want to be used. She is neither a prude nor a prostitute, but the concept of (a woman's) virtue is not easily expunged. They part on a vague promise that she has no confidence in.

The future is hers — with or without him.

And Hammett gives more, his evolution as writer on full display, his prose cutting through the hype. This new volume is a worthy addition to Hammett fans and casual readers alike. ■

John Goins is the author of "A Portrait in the Tenderloin" reviewed in the December-January Extra, and a former reporter for Central City Extra.

1st Girl Scout troop in Tenderloin in 20 years

BY MARJORIE BEGGS

IT'S 10 MONTHS OLD and has seven members, bright as buttons, who speak four languages among them, a reflection of their multicultural neighborhood.

It's Troop #62084 — Daisies and Brownies who make up the Tenderloin's first Girl Scout troop in 20 years. The Daisies, kindergartners and first-graders, and Brownies, second- and third-graders, meet twice a month at Glide Memorial Methodist Church's family housing building at 125 Mason St. and do what the Girl Scouts of America have been doing for a century: They learn about nature and science, create art, earn badges, work together on community projects and have fun.

Girl Scouts of America was founded in Savannah, Ga., and its goal seems tailor-made for the TL: "Bring girls out of isolated home environments and into community service and the open air."

Glide Pastor Karen Oliveto has been working with volunteers to get the Tenderloin troop formed since early in 2012. "It's so important that girls in the Tenderloin find community, role models and a place of empowerment," she says. "[They're] learning things that will serve them well for a lifetime."

Donations have helped with start-up costs for this troop and even a few more. The neighborhood has enough girls for as many as six different troops, but they need to be recruited, says volunteer Nancy Johnsen.

Meantime, Troop #62084 needs a permanent leader and volunteers who can speak Chinese, Spanish and Vietnamese to help with non-English-speaking parents. For information about troop membership or volunteering, contact Nancy Johnsen, njlw9046@yahoo.com, 336-9046. ■



PHOTO COURTESY OF GIRL SCOUTS

Tenderloin Girl Scouts — from left, Anneke Brawmann, Lydia Lin and Helen Li at the Dec. 13 annual taffy pull — are helped by volunteer Nancy Johnsen.