
Gene D. Phillips. *Creatures of Darkness: Raymond Chandler, Detective Fiction, and Film Noir*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000. 311p.

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Using Chandler's three presences in film (as one who adapts, is adapted, and who writes originally for the screen) as a frame for his book, Phillips provides a solid starting place for those who wish to become conversant with detective fiction. His stated purpose is "to examine the relationship of film and fiction as reflected in the screen versions of the work of one novelist" (xxiii), but he very shortly finds himself unable to remain within those self-described parameters — and, for the most part, thankfully so. The jacket blurb for this book calls it "a comprehensive introduction" to Raymond Chandler, and that is exactly what it is: an introduction. Readers will find here some interesting biographical bits — about Chandler and others — and a mix of definitive statements about the genre along with disappointments in the form of flawed assumptions and outright errors. The book contains bits of many things, thoroughly handling none, but offering a number of research possibilities for those who are inclined to embark on their own investigations.

One of the most useful aspects of this book is its identification of resources, earmarked by signpost adjectives for those who would read further. Phillips points to such publications as Maugham's "influential essay on detective stories" (5), Auden's "important essay on detective fiction" (5), Schrader's "influential [essay] on film noir" (7), Frank's "seminal essay on film noir" (7), Chandler's own "essays and letters about his work" (156), and Highsmith's *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction* (216). The listing, along with the appended selected bibliography and filmography, provides a sturdy foundation for both the self-taught and those who would teach courses in detective fiction. Equally beneficial are Phillips' succinct theoretical statements which seem made to clarify and order the superfluity of information about Chandler-influenced films. Certainly, they are tailor made as the basis for discussion: "*Murder, My Sweet* is quite simply unforgettable and remains the definitive screen adaptation of the book" (47), "the 1946 *Big Sleep* [is] a historically and aesthetically important motion picture" (71), "the best of these films — *Double Indemnity*, *The Big Sleep*, and *Murder, My Sweet* — deserve to rank as screen classics, and some others, such as *The Blue Dahlia*, *The Lady in the Lake*, and *Strangers on a Train*, are not far behind" (247). For those uninclined to formal study, the list serves as a basic must-see requirement for cultural literacy.

However, the book has some lapses. Phillips points out in his prologue that “Chandler implicitly identified his detective-heroes with the legendary Arthurian knights ... who were committed to rescuing the oppressed and vanquishing the wicked” (xxii) but, aside from a couple of vague references later in the book, has no particular interest in any direct confrontation with the connection. He is less successful in his attempt to gloss an equally interesting subject: queering Philip Marlowe. Although Phillips does acknowledge another scholar’s work in the area, he clearly struggles throughout the book with the whole possibility of Marlowe’s homosexuality. Half a dozen times he returns to the topic, fumbles around with it, and lets it go. The effect is frustration for the reader, who would have been better served by a several page face-to-face discussion, or an outright neglect after citing Gershon Legman’s research. In a theoretical discussion, the reader should not be left to deduce and muse alone on the very salient fact that Chandler’s Marlowe apparently loses consciousness whenever he is in the company of gay men.

Further, while the book’s premise is not one of biographical study, Phillips makes the same mistake in his approach to Chandler’s women as he does with Marlowe’s men. He never seems to make the connection, for example, between Marlowe’s rejection of Violet’s “wretched woman’s withered body” (22) in *Murder, My Sweet* and Chandler’s repulsion by the body of his own wife. On the basis of information Phillips himself provides, it is clear that Chandler’s very complicated relationship with his wife (after whose death he attempted suicide) figures frequently in the creation of situations and characters in Chandler’s novels; yet, in spite of the fact that he delivers the examples (because they are relevant to the work), Phillips leaves the reader to theorize on the material relatively unaided. The book presents some flawed assumptions and logic, such as the claim that Chandler “found the seedy side of Los Angeles a fertile soil for Marlowe’s investigations” (xxiii), when more likely it is the seedy L.A. which suggested Marlowe’s mission. In other words, in the case of which came first: clearly the city. As well, Phillips naïvely marks August 14th, 1917 as “the outbreak of World War I” and the impetus for Chandler’s enlistment in the Canadian military. It is this Canadian connection, combined with Chandler’s British youth, which absolutely requires Phillips to acknowledge that for the rest of the world the war was already three-years old by that point. Concerned with Chandler’s alcoholism, Phillips points to the trauma of war as a stimulus but ignores genetic predisposition in spite of Chandler’s father’s disease suggesting an inherited tendency that is both biological and sociological. These sorts of oversights and omissions annoy the reader and harm the book quite seriously, but are by no means fatal.

Phillips' summarizing, of books and films, is quite helpful; so too are his occasional definitions of genre — that it is “grotesque characters and pithy dialogue which distinguish a vintage film noir from a routine mystery movie” (92) for example — his well-chosen quotations which give his players (Chandler, Hitchcock, Wilder) personality, and his reminders that Chandler's goal was to write “not mere pulp mystery stories but full-scale novels of some literary merit” (75). Phillips includes some “pithy” descriptions of his own, which are the most entertaining moments in his book, when he has Marlowe “hired by a bitch to find scum” (132), or refers to a character as “a treacherous harpy” (112) or “an unrepentant old hag” (92) or (my favourite) “a full-time entertainer and part-time trollop” (26). Sadly, the pleasure with his diction here is somewhat diminished by his unremitting overuse of “hardboiled,” “gumshoe,” “shamus,” and “dream factory.”

The book is a mixed blessing, but nevertheless a blessing. One has to wade through the missed opportunities, the out-and-out errors, and moments when he misses things altogether, because interspersed with these are the précis, references, and morsels of scholarship when Phillips offers the things which make this book a valuable resource — not an end point, but a starting point — for the neophyte. The edition's very unfortunate physical deformity — the placing of pages 201-48 between pages 168 and 169 — is a glaring example of a lack of care on someone's part which is a disservice to Phillips' overall contributions, to Chandler scholarship and the study of detective fiction in general, which are to be found in *Creatures of Darkness*.