

Farewell, My Lovely by Raymond Chandler

StoryLines California Discussion Guide No. 8

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About the Author

In addition to his many novels and stories, Raymond Chandler wrote Hollywood screenplays (*Double Indemnity*, *The Blue Dahlia*, *Strangers on a Train*). *The Big Sleep*, his first Philip Marlowe novel, was written in three months in 1939. Disgusted with Hollywood, he moved to La Jolla, California, in 1946. He died in relative obscurity in 1959.

Discussion questions

What drives Marlowe? Is he too good to be true?

In what ways do the specific landscapes and places of southern California help shape the moral atmosphere of the book? Would a story like this work as well set in another part of the U.S. in 1940?

Additional readings

James M. Cain. *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, 1934.
Raymond Carver. *Short Cuts*, 1993.
Raymond Chandler. *The Long Good-bye*, 1950.
Dashiell Hammett. *The Maltese Falcon*, 1930.

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Farewell, My Lovely
by
Raymond Chandler

Raymond Chandler wrote seven Los Angeles-based mysteries, all featuring the hard-boiled, wise-cracking detective Philip Marlowe. Although Chandler didn't invent "tough guy" fiction, or coin the character of the hard-boiled detective as urban crusader, his detective novels are of notable and lasting value; he raised the detective thriller to the level of social criticism. The seven Philip Marlowe novels have been made into 11 films, in which Marlowe is played by Humphrey Bogart, Robert Mitchum, Robert Montgomery, Dick Powell, Elliott Gould and others. Because of the haunting depictions in these films of urban life in Los Angeles as sordid and unglamorous, Chandler's works have become associated with "film noir." His novels are more than entertaining stories; they are keen insights into the contradictions, illusions, and uneasiness of mid-twentieth century life in California.

Jerry Speir, Chandler's biographer, emphasizes the development of Philip Marlowe's character as an expression of Chandler's own struggles. Born in Chicago in 1888, Chandler moved to England with his divorced mother and spent most of his childhood in the Victorian atmosphere of moral rectitude and social propriety of his maternal grandmother's home. In English public schools, Chandler studied the classics and internalized a code of ethics in which masculine virtue is achieved through honor and self-sacrifice. Entwined in these two influences, Chandler's personality became a contradictory mix of high-minded moralism and a fascination with the lustiness and allure of adventurous, exaggerated masculinity.

Speir describes this contradiction of the mind as an "essential dualism" in the young Chandler, signifying an internal struggle between an "innate romanticism against a very self-conscious cynicism." The battle between romanticism and cynicism accurately defines the driving force behind tough-guy detective Philip Marlowe. It may also account for his public appeal: many twentieth-century Americans struggle with similar contradictions.

Romanticism is deeply rooted in the American character, beginning with dreams of the New World immigrants, to the "land of opportunity" optimism in the expansion and development of the continent, to the "get rich quick" thrill of the California gold rush. Of course, the problem with dreams is that they so often lead to disillusionment when reality fails to measure up to impossibly romantic expectations.

Since the Gold Rush days, California has been a focal point for this human dilemma. The "Golden State" has always promised more than it could deliver. Yet dreamers arrive every day, and Raymond Chandler was one of them; Chandler moved to southern California after World War I, lured by the economic prospects of the oil boom. There he found the perfect external expression of his own internal conflicts.

This was paradise corrupted; urban development sprawled across southern California explosively, erratically, and irresponsibly, fueled by the discovery of oil. The landscape was blemished with billboards and garbage. Local governments were troubled by graft and corruption. The movie industry's glittering facade hid a seamy underside of amoral excess and integrity blighted with greed. Southern California became, in Chandler's view, the epitome of the world gone wrong; this was the American Dream plundered by the dark side of success. Chandler's novels became a powerful indictment of the careless, selfish, narcissistic, dishonest society in Los Angeles prior to World War II.

In *Farewell, My Lovely*, which some critics believe to be Chandler's best work, several apparently unrelated crimes are ultimately traced by the dogged, much abused detective to a single source—a kingpin gangster and gambler who has effectively bought the mayor and police of Bay City (read Santa Monica)—a not inaccurate representation of the pervasive corruption of L.A. officialdom in the 1930s and early 40s.

The trail begins in a dangerous, virtually all-black neighborhood of Central Avenue; moves through the shabby stucco bungalows of South L.A., the seaside mansions of Montemar Vista (Malibu) and the winding canyon roads to the east, and well-known stretches of Hollywood Boulevard and Sunset Strip, and climaxes with a dramatic scene on board a gambling ship moored in international waters off Bay City.

Enroute, our rude, stalwart hero is beaten, choked, and drugged; meets and insults the wealthy and the decadent, a fake psychic healer, and burned-out and sold-out cops and other unsavory characters, most of whom drink and smoke constantly. The ever-twisting plot, which involves a stolen jade necklace, various kinds of drugs, a brutal ex-convict searching for his old flame, and a surprising final revelation, is in the end less important than Chandler's overall indictment of careless, cruel, selfish, and dishonest society, and his vivid, if only slightly overdrawn, portrait of Los Angeles in the years before World War II.

Marlowe is a modern innocent. His quest is truth and justice, but his greatest challenge is maintaining his own moral equilibrium in a world of crime and compromised ethics. This broken-hearted tough-guy will make you laugh with caustic asides: "The eighty-five cent dinner tasted like a discarded mail-bag"; "She was cute as a washtub"; "He was a big man but not more than six feet five inches tall and no wider than a beer truck." Chandler summarizes Marlowe's character as follows:

[Marlowe]. . . never gets the girl, never marries, never really has any private life, except insofar as he must eat and sleep and have a place to keep his clothes . . . he gets nothing but his fee, for which he will if he can protect the innocent, guard the helpless and destroy the wicked, and the fact that he must do this while earning a meager living in a corrupt world is what makes him stand out.