



***“Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean.”***  
**— Raymond Chandler\***

Dear Faithful Reader,

I spent my first 15 years or so as an author writing nice, quiet nonfiction books about lovely things: leadership, personal development, the power of belief and positive thinking. How to grow a good career making useful contributions to society.

And then I came out with a [series of novels](#) that featured sociopathic killers doing terrible things to perfectly innocent people.

A friend of mine was horrified.

“Why would you want to imagine and bring to life fear and violence [he wrote], and then go around the country encouraging others to enter such a world?”

I thought a good deal about that. I knew I loved reading these books — Dennis Lehane and James Lee Burke, Tana French and Kate Atkinson, Sue Grafton and Robert Crais, John D. MacDonald and Raymond Chandler. I loved reading them, and now I’d discovered that I loved writing them, too.

But why?

I shared some of those thoughts in the journal *CrimeReads*, in a piece titled “[What’s a Nice Guy Like Me Doing in a Homicidal Place Like This?](#)” But the short answer, I think, comes down to this:

*We live in a broken world.*

Plans fall apart. Promises go violated. Feelings get hurt. People we trust are suddenly cruel. A flash flood destroys our home. War breaks out. We form a government to protect us and then it turns on us and beats us with a bludgeon. The world is full of surprises, not always benevolent. And yet . . .

*Down these means streets we must go, without ourselves becoming mean.*

Every great faith tradition tells us that the world is broken, from Christianity with its original sin, Eden debacle, and fallen humanity to Buddhism with its endless wheel of

suffering. Yet Christianity also holds out its transcendent Savior and benevolent God, Buddhism its Eightfold Path.

The final paragraph of Raymond Chandler's classic essay "The Simple Art of Murder," the very same paragraph of the very same essay that contains his famous "mean streets" quote, opens with this declaration:

"In everything that can be called art there is a quality of redemption."

Elsewhere I've told [the story of my father](#), growing up as a teenager in pre-war Germany. One day a Nazi military parade came through town. Needing to get across the street, my dad tried to dart through an opening in the column of soldiers. They trampled over him, smashing his bike to bits, and kept right on marching. Over the years that followed they marched on, trampling his livelihood, his career, his homeland, forcing him to flee across the Atlantic to start his life over.

And yet.

He was the kindest, least bitter man I've ever known.

How do you stay positive in the face of malevolence and duplicity? How do you preserve your humanity in a broken world?

How do you walk these mean streets without yourself becoming mean?

This question, to me, is the soul of good crime fiction. It is the journey taken by Odysseus to Troy and back, by Chandler's Philip Marlowe and MacDonald's Travis McGee and Grafton's Kinsey Millhone and, yes, the memory-challenged Navy SEAL Chief Finn in [the Steel Fear books](#) that so horrified my friend.

It's also the journey, one way or another, that you and I face at some point in our lives, isn't it?

The actor and writer Emma Thompson, talking about coping with her father's stroke in [a 1996 Vanity Fair interview](#), made this observation:

"You can have heartbreak for all sorts of reasons, but one can't help thinking that that's the crucible in which one's humanity is fired. It's unfortunate — and I really wish I didn't have to say this — but I really like human beings who have suffered. They're kinder."

(You may have read this quote before; it's pretty well known. It's worth noting, though, that Thompson immediately added this: "I mean, if you've suffered and done some work on it. Adolf Hitler suffered, and look what happened to him. All those years of being a tramp in Austria didn't really help out on the old compassion front." Perhaps we should say: suffering *plus a kernel of humility*.)

**A question: What mean streets have you faced in your life, and how has it changed you? I would love to hear. Seriously: hit “Reply,” if so moved.**

I think my friend had it backwards. Writing about the shadowy side of existence is not a matter of “imagining and bringing to life a world of fear and violence.” That world is right here, spread around us. It’s a matter of looking it in the eye — and then finding a way through it.

I am still a great believer in positive thinking and wholeheartedly subscribe to the notion that we become what we think. “What you focus on is what you get,” as the worldly-wise mentor Pindar tells Joe in [The Go-Giver](#).

But positivity is not a mandate for living in denial. Within optimism there is ample space for realism.

Writers are often lauded for their imagination. Having been on this side of the pen for a few decades, I see it differently. It’s not so much imagination as it is *interpretation*. Our job as writers is not to invent a world that doesn’t exist but to see the world that does, and identify a path through it, untarnished and with nobility.

Perhaps that’s our job as human beings.

To face the darkness and find a way to frame it, not as hopelessness, but as opportunity. To walk the world’s mean streets unscathed. To be Daniel in the lions’ den, Odysseus found.

**My May wish for you: that you identify a mean street facing you in your life — and resolve to walk it with kindness and nobility.**



**\* ABOUT THE WRITER**

Only child of an alcoholic father and immigrant mother, Raymond Chandler was born in Chicago in 1918. At age 7, his father long gone, his mother moved the two of them to her native Ireland, then to England, where Raymond spent the rest of his childhood and early adult years, including a stint as a journalist which was, by his own account, dispiritingly unsuccessful. (He later described himself in those years as “not a clever young man, nor a happy young man.”) At the age of 24, he moved back across the Atlantic, settling in the City of Angels that would become the setting for his novels.

Those next few decades back in America were a strange hodge-podge. He took a string of odd jobs — picking fruit, stringing tennis rackets, and so on — then enlisted in the Canadian army when the Great War broke out. (When his unit in France was shelled by German forces, Chandler was the only survivor.) Returning to Los Angeles, he tried his

hand as a poet (again, without success) and meanwhile took a job as a bookkeeper to pay a few bills. Bookkeeping led to accounting and a stratospheric rise in career; by 1932, a decade after taking that first job, he was a married, well-paid, highly successful vice president of a major oil syndicate.

At which point he was fired. His boozing, ongoing affairs with female employees, and rampant absenteeism had become too much for the syndicate's board; a string of threatened suicides didn't help matters.

Forty-four years old and facing the wreckage that was his life, Chandler made a fateful decision: why not go back and give writing a third try?

He threw himself into reading popular "pulp" magazines (so called because they were printed on cheap wood-pulp paper, designed to be read once and thrown away). As he later wrote in a letter to his publisher:

"It struck me that some of the writing was pretty forceful and honest, even though it had its crude aspect. I decided that this might be a good way to try to learn to write fiction and get paid a small amount of money at the same time."

Modeling himself after Erle Stanley Gardner, author of the hugely popular Perry Mason books, he started in on his first story. Progress was slow and laborious, as he revised and revised and revised. Gardner, who wrote about a thousand such stories, would routinely turn out a new piece in three or four days. It took Chandler five months — but in 1933 his 18,000-word novelette, "Blackmailers Don't Shoot," was published in *Black Mask* magazine, earning him \$180: a penny a word.

He kept writing for the pulps, painstakingly revising every paragraph, his private detective heroes going through multiple identities — Mallory, Dalmas, Carmad, Gage — as his skills improved, until he was ready to pen his first novel. In 1939 Knopf published *The Big Sleep*, featuring the iconic Philip Marlowe.

The book sold some 10,000 copies in the United States, a goodly number for Chandler yet barely a hint of the popularity to come. (*Time*, *The Guardian*, and BBC have all included *The Big Sleep* on their lists of the 100 Greatest / Most Influential Books of All Time.)

The pulp years had been lean times (Chandler once commented that for five days he and his wife had nothing to eat but soup), but the novels took off. Soon Hollywood came knocking; Paramount hired him to cowrote the screenplay adaptation for James M. Cain's novel *Double Indemnity*, which earned 7 Oscar nominations, including one for best adapted screenplay. In 1944 *The Atlantic* [published his essay "The Simple Art of Murder,"](#) prefacing the article with this glowing introduction:

"A master of dialogue, [Chandler] has created in his character, Philip Marlowe, a professional detective as knowledgeable as sin and as likable as Robin Hood. Mr.

Chandler's novels, *The Big Sleep*, *Farewell, My Lovely*, *The High Window*, *The Lady in the Lake*, have established him on the top rung of mystery fiction."

Which in time proved to be if anything an understatement. To modern crime writers — hey, to modern *novelists*, period — Raymond Chandler isn't simply influential; he's a god. ("In the periodic table of modern American fiction," as I wrote in [this review of a later Marlowe book](#), "if Hemingway and Steinbeck are oxygen and hydrogen, Chandler is carbon.")

Chandler's writing is often singled out for its singular style: the crackling dialog, the poetry of his descriptions and over-the-top similes. Some classic Chandler lines:

"It was a blonde. A blonde to make a bishop kick a hole in a stained-glass window."

"The plants filled the place, a forest of them, with nasty meaty leaves and stalks like the newly washed fingers of dead men."

"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."

"I'm an occasional drinker, the kind of guy who goes out for a beer and wakes up in Singapore with a full beard."

Yet for Chandler it was all about character. What he sought to bring to a genre dominated by drawing-room cozies and elaborate jigsaw-solution murder mysteries, beyond the gritty realism of modern urban life, was the soul and struggles of his heroes. As he wrote in that *Atlantic* piece:

"In everything that can be called art there is a quality of redemption. It may be pure tragedy, if it is high tragedy, and it may be pity and irony, and it may be the raucous laughter of the strong man. But down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. . . . If there were enough like him, the world would be a safe place to live in, without becoming too dull to be worth living in. Such is my faith."

In the end, the mean streets got the better of him. The icon of noir was by nature a shy, insular man who never adapted well to the circumstances of good fortune. Unable to triumph over his own demons, Raymond Chandler died in La Jolla at the age of 71, depressed and alone.

His Marlowe, on the other hand, has survived and thrived. Decade after decade, Chandler's books have continued to inspire not only generations of novelists and screenwriters in their own work but also a string of authors to try their hand at adding to the Marlowe canon. Further adventures of Chandler's private eye include:

*Poodle Springs*, an unfinished Chandler novel, later completed by Spenser author Robert B. Parker; *Perchance to Dream*, Parker's second Marlowe outing; *The Black-Eyed Blonde*, by Irish novelist John Banville (writing as Benjamin Black), later republished as *Marlowe*; *Only to Sleep*, by British-born Bangkok resident Lawrence Osborne; *Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe: A Centennial Celebration*, a collection of Marlowe short stories penned by 23 authors; *Ten Percent of Life*, by Uruguayan writer, playwright, and literary critic Hiber Conteris; *The Marble Orchard*, by William F. Nolan, and *The Kept Girl*, by Kim Cooper, two meta novels that feature Chandler himself as a character; and *The Second Murderer*, by Scottish playwright Denise Mina.

What is it exactly that continues drawing so many of us to Chandler's light? I don't think it's just a matter of his style, nor the evocative noir atmosphere, nor even the magic of his story-telling.

I think it's the power of his vision, as he wrote in that *Atlantic* article:

"If there were enough like him, the world would be a safe place to live in, without becoming too dull to be worth living in. Such is my faith."

Amen, Mr. Chandler. And sleep well; your dream lives on.

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