



Unless the Threat of Death Is Behind Them: Hard-Boiled Fiction and Film Noir

John T. Irwin

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Early in the twentieth century a new character type emerged in the crime novels of American writers such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler: the "hard-boiled" detective, most famously exemplified by Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*. Unlike the analytical detectives of nineteenth-century fiction, such as Edgar Allan Poe's Inspector Dupin, the new detectives encountered cases not as intricate logical puzzles but as stark challenges of manhood. In the stories of these characters and their criminal opposites, John T. Irwin explores the tension within ideas of American masculinity between subordination and independence and, for the man who becomes "his own boss," the conflict between professional codes and personal desires. He shows how, within different works of hard-boiled fiction, the professional either overcomes the personal or is overcome by it, ending in ruinous relationships or in solitary integrity, and how within the genre all notions of manly independence are ultimately revealed to be illusions subordinate to fate itself.

Tracing the stylistic development of the genre, Irwin demonstrates the particular influence of the novel of manners, especially the writing of F. Scott Fitzgerald. He goes on to argue that, from the time of World War II, when hard-boiled fiction began to appear on the screen in film noir just as women entered the workforce in large numbers, many of its themes came to extend to female empowerment. Finally, he discusses how these themes persist in contemporary dramatic series on television, representing the conflicted lives of Americans into the twenty-first century.

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