



# Red Harvest

*Dashiell Hammett*

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When the last honest citizen of Poisonville was murdered, the Continental Op stayed on to punish the guilty—even if that meant taking on an entire town. **Red Harvest** is more than a superb crime novel: it is a classic exploration of corruption and violence in the American grain.

## Red Harvest Details

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Author : Dashiell Hammett

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## From Reader Review Red Harvest for online ebook

### Terry says

2.5 – 3 stars (I hope Dan and Kemper don't throw me out of the noir club before I even get in!)

I feel as though I ought to have liked *Red Harvest* more than I did. After all it was written by Dashiell Hammett, one of the fathers of noir fiction (perhaps more famous for *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Thin Man*) and, like many of his books, became the source for numerous (often excellent) film adaptations. It has an interestingly conflicted protagonist and is chock full of killing, double crosses, deception, and shoot-outs, but somehow it didn't fully hold together for me. Our story details the entanglements entered into by the character known only as "the Continental Op" (due to the fact that he is an operative working for the Continental Detective Agency out of San Francisco, a veiled nod to Hammett's own days working for the Pinkerton Detective Agency). The Op was a character featured in many of Hammett's short stories, but I believe this was the only novel featuring him (though it was originally published in serial form). The Op himself is in many ways the prototypical noir protagonist: hard-boiled, not averse to violence, and ready with a quip when the occasion warrants; on the other hand he is no dashing detective able to make the dames swoon, for he's described as overweight, middle-aged, and generally ugly in appearance. He's a man who will do what it takes to get the job done, whether that means manhandling his clients into agreeing with his methods, lying to all and sundry in order to get the information he needs, or joining in on some endeavours not strictly legal in their methods and intentions if it will get him in good with the people he needs to bamboozle. All in all, the Op is a real piece of work...though he's someone you'd probably rather have on your side than against it (the trick is knowing when he's genuine about his partnership, even some of his compatriots from the Agency aren't sure of this).

In this tale the Op finds himself in the town of Personville, aptly named Poisonville by all and sundry, one of those little burghs that got itself under the thumb of a domineering and greedy 'patriarch' who subsequently had to relinquish some control to various crooked cops, gamblers and boozers in order to keep things going. Now the patriarch's son (who for reasons unknown had asked the Op to come to town) has been murdered and his pop wants revenge. Enter the Op who decides this town needs a change of management and upgrades his assignment from finding a murderer to cleaning out the sewer that is Poisonville. The Op proceeds to get the lay of the land and inveigle himself into every criminal nook and cranny he can, cannily playing off each faction against the other, planting seeds of doubt (both true and manufactured) in the right ears and hoping to be able to simply step back and watch the fireworks. Things turn out to be a little more complicated for the Op than he had hoped and start to look very bleak indeed for our "hero" up until the very end.

This tale of a stranger coming to a corrupt town and proceeding to clean up by playing one side against the other is a great set-up (perhaps most effectively portrayed in film in Kurasawa's *Yojimbo*, but also used in *A Fistful of Dollars* and *Last Man Standing* to name but a few), but I just wasn't totally sucked in by the book. I think D\_Davis nailed it in his review with the observation that this book was just longer than it needed to be (not surprising considering it was originally published serially). The twisted plot of lying and deception could probably have been pared down, and tightened up as a result, and I therefore found that some points sagged a bit. The Op is an interesting character though, someone who is world-weary and damaged enough to be willing to do whatever is deemed pragmatically 'necessary' regardless of how dirty it might be, and yet at the same time you can tell that he wishes the world wasn't thus and he wants to be the 'good guy'...whatever that might ultimately mean to him. I plan on eventually checking out his further adventures as well as some of Hammett's other more famous noir tales. I just wish I had been blown away by this one.

## Glenn Russell says

Published in 1929, *Red Harvest* is the first of five classic novels written by Dashiell Hammett, inventor of the "hard-boiled" school of fiction. Since there are dozens of reviews already posted here, I will take a different slant, citing how quotes from nineteenth century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche apply to the novel's unnamed main character/narrator, a man simply known as "Continental Op" and the city where the novel is located, Personville aka Poisonville, a dingy mining city of 40,000 squeezed between two Northern California mountains.

"Without music, life would be a mistake."

There isn't one reference to music in the entire novel. Not surprising, since, from the perspective of music and the arts, this grimy berg run by gangsters, bootleggers, crooked cops and gritty thugs could be considered one colossal mistake. Of course, I'm not entirely serious, but imagining a Personville String Quartet playing an evening of Mozart at the town's public building would be belly-laughable. Not laughable, that is, for the townspeople, who would probably protest such music by riddling the musicians with bullets after playing the first few bars of their Mozart.

"He who has a why to live can bear almost any how."

The Continental Op is a private detective for a national agency; he's insulted, double-crossed, and has to listen to the lies and cons from the city's sleazy power-boys as well as dodge unending gunfire. All in a day's work as he goes about seeking revenge for being set up to be bumped off by Noonan, the fat chief-of-police. Such a 'why' and 'how' is the stuff of Hammett's riveting story.

"The best enemy against an enemy is another enemy."

This Nietzsche quote could have been used by Hammett as the novel's epigraph. The Continental Op sets gangsters, bootleggers, professional thieves, police and politicians all against one another. The result? Too many dead bodies to count. With dozens and dozens of murders, *Red Harvest* qualifies as a 200 page blood bath. But, please don't be put off by all the blood; fortunately, for lovers of great literature, this is great literature. Always good to keep in mind many works of great literature, for example *The Iliad* and *Richard III* are chock full of blood.

"Ah, women. They make the highs higher and the lows more frequent."

Meet Poisonville's femme fatale: Dinah Brand. If you are a man and would like to pick lead out of your belly, hang around Dinah. Here is the Continental Op's reflections on meeting Ms. Brand for the first time, "She was an inch or two taller than I, which made her about five feet eight. She had a broad-shouldered, full-breasted, round-hipped body and big muscular legs. The hand she gave me was soft, warm, strong. Her face was the face of a girl of twenty-five already showing signs of wear. Little lines crossed the corners of her big ripe mouth. Fainter lines were beginning to make nets around her thick-lashed eyes. They were large eyes, blue and a bit blood-shot. Her coarse hair--brown--needed trimming and was parted crookedly. One side of her upper lip had been rouged higher than the other. Her dress was of a particularly unbecoming wine color, and it gaped here and there down one side, where she had neglected to snap the fasteners or they had popped open. There was a run down the front of her left stocking."

"He who fights with monsters must take care lest he thereby become a monster."

Here is a quote from the Continental Op after taking the necessary steps in starting to clean up the city for his double-crossing client, old Elihu Willsson. "Look. I sat at Willsson's table tonight and played them like you'd play trout, and got just as much fun out of it. I looked at Noonan and knew he hadn't a chance in a thousand of living another day because of what I had done to him, and I laughed, and felt warm and happy inside.

That's not me. I've got hard skin all over what's left of my soul, and after twenty years of messing around with crime I can look at any sort of a murder without seeing anything in it but my bread and butter, the day's work. But this getting a rear out of planning deaths is not natural to me. It's what this place has done to me." The Continental Op knows the truth of Nietzsche's words from his own first-hand experience.

"Of all that is written, I love only what a person has written with his own blood."

Dashiell Hammett spent some years with the Pinkerton agency as a detective. He had his first-hand Poisonville-like experience in Butte, Montana where he probably had occasion to see his own blood flow in the line of service. So, if there ever was a book that could have been written with the author's own blood, *Red Harvest* is that book.

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## Alex says

"Who shot him?"

"Somebody with a gun."

But everybody has a gun in Dashiell Hammet's first novel (1929). This is one of the most action-packed books I've ever read, 200-some pages of black cars skidding around corners with gangsters hanging out of them spraying bullets everywhere.

Hammett's weirdly chaste, unnamed protagonist arrives in Personville bringing absolute bloody havoc with him, for reasons even he's not completely clear on. He's not much of a hero: "a fat, middle-aged, hard-boiled, pig-headed guy" by his own description, and usually at least half-drunk. He works for the Continental Detective Agency and is referred to as the Continental Op; he stars in many of Hammett's stories. The agency is based on the famous Pinkerton Detective Agency, which Hammett was an alumnus of. Personville - it's pronounced "Poisonville," of course - is crawling with corruption, and the Op catches it. He wants to clean it up, but along the way he wants to kill. There are ways, he thinks, for him to get "the support I needed to swing the play legally. I could have done that. But it's easier to have them killed off, easier and surer, and, now that I'm feeling this way, more satisfying." He loses control so badly that when he's framed for murder, (view spoiler)

*Red Harvest* has a sprawling cast of characters and a dizzying plot; if you miss a thread here or there it barely even matters. It's less tight and less good than *The Maltese Falcon*. It's still awesome, though, supremely entertaining and hard-boiled. Just don't bother to count the bullets.

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## K.D. Absolutely says

My second in this genre called noir and I loved it. To like this genre one needs to develop an acquired taste because it is something that is very distinct and could be alienating if you just delve into it without opening your mind.

The setting is dark and the characters' prospect for happiness is almost nil. According to Wiki, Hammett himself worked as an investigator for the Pinkerton's Detective Agency and he was therefore able to bring strong sense of realism to his milieu and to the character of the nameless narrator - the Continental Detective

Agency Operative or **Op**. This book, Hammett's first, was first published in 1929 and its setting was the Depression and the Age of Prohibition. I have read a number of stories, both fiction and non-fiction, about this period in America, but *Red Harvest* is one those that masterfully used to its advantage the chaotic situation during that time. There was too much lawlessness and crimes were rampant. Rich and influential businessmen had their own armies and could manipulate a town to their own benefits.

However, I still prefer my first novel read from this genre, James M. Cain's *Double Indemnity*. Even in this genre, I think I still prefer the story to be character-driven rather than event-driven. I know that crime or mystery fiction is normally the latter, i.e., the more complicated the plot is, the harder it is for the reader to guess whodunit. However, I thought there was not too much inner struggle inside the main characters in this Hammett. For example, the character of **Dinah Brand** was killed halfway the story and only became really the focal point of the plot when she was already dead. Unlike in Cain's *Double Indemnity*, his *femme fatale* **Phyllis Nirdlinger** was the one who manipulated the narrator. I prefer to read on alluring ladies to be the predators, outsmarting men because of their beauty, instead of having them as the usual preys. Worst if they end up dead in the end. They are beautiful so they deserve to live!

Oh I am enjoying this genre called noir. There's just too many books. Too many genres to pick and try. The endless allure of literature.

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### **Tfitoby says**

*"You're drunk, and I'm drunk, and I'm just exactly drunk enough to tell you anything you want to know. That's the kind of girl I am. If I like a person, I'll tell them anything they want to know. Just ask me. Go ahead, ask me."*

A quick and impressive read, especially for the time it was written. Hammett's Continental Op is obviously the basis for everything that would come in the hard boiled/noir genre and for that alone it deserves all the praise it gets. But it's not just the character and the style that he nailed first time out, the plot of *Red Harvest* has been used and reused continuously for the past 80 years too. If you've read even only one hard boiled crime novel in your life, you're almost certain to find part of it within the pages of *Red Harvest*.

An enjoyable crime novel that everybody with even a passing interest in the genre should seek out.

*"This damned burg's getting me. If I don't get away soon I'll be going blood-simple like the natives."*

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### **Bobby Underwood says**

I've always been the dissenting opinion on this one. Yeah, it was influential, but since Hammett himself was copying John Carroll Daly's new hardboiled style, maybe we should give him a bit of the credit. Cynical and definitely hardboiled, Hammett's *Red Harvest* is missing the one ingredient which might have made it work for me — Raymond Chandler. Compare this to Raymond Chandler's first novel, *The Big Sleep*. Both novels have elements cannibalized from their respective pulp stories, both have bodies dropping left and right, and both are terribly convoluted. Yet *Red Harvest* comes off as simply a dark and unpleasant tale of corruption and violence, while *The Big Sleep* is wildly entertaining, almost dream-like. There is nowhere to lay the blame except at Hammett's doorstep.

Chandler could turn a simple phrase into visual magic. Hammett often took a circuitous route, as though in

love with his own literary voice. In *Red Harvest* we get all kinds of lengthy descriptive detours which bog down any narrative pace whatsoever. And by narrative pace, I mean the next body dropping. It almost feels when you go back and read this one after many years, that this might have been a better tale had Hammett not chosen to insert his Continental Op from the pulps, even though it's a string of Op stories strung together. Instead, Hammett could have turned this into a noir melodrama, an unsuspecting stranger encountering the town and getting twisted up in its corruption. Hardboiled doesn't have to be this bloody, and what's worse, we don't really care about the people dropping left and right, can't even keep track of all the players.

Hammett subtly uses Personville/Poisonville as a metaphor for all of America, painting it as corrupt and violent at its core, and crime-laden due to the “evils” of capitalism. There are plenty of rather quiet and vague marxist underpinnings to the serpentine goings on in the corrupt town, which Hammett based on his own experiences in Montana during a miner's strike. This would be neither here nor there, if this were a good story, like *The Glass Key*, or delightful fun like his *The Thin Man*, but it's just an unpleasant mess.

Perhaps because Hammett himself hadn't yet distanced himself from the pulps, this comes off as an ambiguous hodgepodge of some wonderfully written moments, and some that go on much too long. Even the metaphor angle is ambivalent, as Hammett doesn't proffer any alternatives. If the left-leaning Hammett had an argument to make, he chose not to make it, leaving us with only the violence and ugliness, and a tepid underpinning.

*Red Harvest* is certainly bloody enough for a hardboiled detective novel — the Op takes a body count while talking with Dinah Brand before an ice pick finds her, and it's staggering — and there are flashes of good writing — really good writing — but the convoluted plot isn't offset by an entertaining enough narrative to rank this one as high as Hammett's better stuff.

I truly believe if this had been handed in outline form to Raymond Chandler, after a few stiff drinks, he'd have made this so readable and entertaining we wouldn't care about its underpinnings or its flaws. In Hammett's hands, at least at this point in his career, this is a herky-jerky ride. There is some good stuff here, even great stuff, but it isn't put together well enough to make it a great read for this reader, or in my opinion, the average reader unfamiliar with the genre. For me, *Red Harvest* is a reminder why I've always preferred Chandler to Hammett.

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## John Culuris says

★ ★ ★ ★ 1/2

“The reader knows a great deal. He has taste and wisdom, or he wouldn't be reading.” -- John D. MacDonald.

I often think about the quote above and how much has changed since JDM wrote those words in the 1974. The wisdom part is still true. If nothing else, constant reading grows vocabularies. Today's readers, however, have come of age in an environment that in some ways restricts the use of literary intelligence. An example of this can be found in the lack of respect often accorded the acknowledged forefathers of the hardboiled detective novel: Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler and Ross MacDonald. Intelligence alone can--and should--easily recognize that what is now clichéd and overused was once new and original. Unfortunately, the modern reader regularly fails make such simple leaps of logic. Technology has curtailed such thoughts from even occurring. The future is now, in our hands and filling our senses daily, and its byproduct is a blurring of the past. Nowadays readers are more apt to believe in alien worlds and mystic realms than a reality without cell phones and computers.

Chandler comes off the best of the three, which is not surprising considering that at its core his work was about a moral man awash in a sea of immorality. It's a universal concept. And yet the modern reader still cannot get past the occasional prejudices that show up in his work, perhaps abetted by the first person narrative. Themselves awash in a Twitter world of instant outrage and pile-on indignation, they fail to comprehend that they are being given a portal through time and instant access to an era where such attitudes were more common. Instead recognizing the opportunity for what it is, they mutter "racist crap" and toss the book aside, and thus cheat themselves of the chance to appreciate societal evolution while being entertained in the process.

Ross Macdonald takes his hits from a different quarter. Once considered the most literate practitioner of his genre, he has since given way to the likes of James Lee Burke and Joseph Hanson and Walter Mosley, among others. To those used to authors who paint with a broad brush, the economical yet lyrical use of words employed by MacDonald is lost. The art of subtly has lapsed--and with it, appreciation for such. This applies to his lead character as well. Lew Archer does not act like the protagonist of a novel. He acts like a private detective, which is what he is supposed to be. He becomes involved in a situation, talks to those people, learns of others, goes and talks to them, learns of more, and continues to do this until there is a clear picture. There is no angst and little confrontation--just the exploration of lives and living. And when there is an altercation, even at the conclusion, it is never drawn out. It is as abrupt and as resolute as the story requires. Conditioned by today's world of thrillers and psychological suspense, readers have come to expect melodrama. When it is not found they become frustrated as they continue to turn pages, searching for something that was never meant to be there, and they miss the point of a Ross MacDonald novel: poignancy has been layered into the narrative in a way that allows its resonance to be felt alongside the solution of the case. Because it is intentionally understated, the modern reader has been conditioned to miss it.

Hammett takes the biggest hit of the three, essentially because the pulps from which he sprang never left his work. Long before his novels helped co-opt the term to describe this style of storytelling, **noir** dripped from his every word. The Maltese Falcon and The Thin Man, appropriately, are noir detective stories, but Hammett's delivery masks, to some, Sam Spade's complexity and Nick Charles' underlying sadness. The Glass Key is a noir power struggle. Woman in the Dark is an attempt at noir romance, which ultimately fails because the finale reads as if it were lifted from a different novel by a different author. *Red Harvest* is a noir adventure, and its pace almost never lags.

The man dubbed "The Continental Op," the original nameless private detective, arrives in an industrial town nicknamed Poisonville and promptly has his client murdered before he can meet him face-to-face. Donald Wilsson, who grew up abroad, had returned home to take charge of the local newspaper--a position that carried considerable power in the late 1920s. A reformer, he decided outside help was needed once he learned that his father, owner of much of the town--including the paper--was deeply seeded in the corruption. Along with a crooked police chief and strikebreakers brought in almost ten years earlier who had since imbedded themselves in the city, Poisonville was essentially run by criminals who had neatly, but peacefully, divided up its felonious pie. Once the Op convinces the old robber baron that that his son was murder by one of his allies, he is commissioned to clean them all out of town.

The bulk of the novel shows the Op befriending most of the principal criminals and turning them against each other. As befitting a noir adventure, the bodies pile up quick. But because Hammett was once a detective before becoming an author, even in an adventure he had to have the Op actually solve something. And so he does. Three separate mysteries are presented and explained, all without a loss of momentum. And almost as if to prove that The Op is not infallible, he also misses one near the end. That's not a detriment. The only real detriment is a digression involving a shady lawyer that was nothing more than a stepping stone to the next important story beat. It could have, and should have, been bypassed.

One small misstep is not enough to mar Hammett's first masterpiece. *Red Harvest* is too strong a work for that. One part the pulps (keep things moving, keep things entertaining) and one part the author inimitable

style, a style that would help influence an entire genre of movies a decade or so later--and all it takes to enjoy this book is being open to the sensibilities of a bygone era. It sounds simple. But with each passing day that seems to be asking too much. If you are open, it can allow yourself to be swept away, a classic of the genre awaits. If you can't, then *Red Harvest* will become another valuable piece of the past left behind by the march of time. I'm hoping for the former.

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### **Kemper says**

An operative from the Continental Detective Agency is summoned to Personville (a/k/a Poisonville) by a crusading newspaper publisher, but the man is murdered before the Continental Op can meet with him. The Op quickly learns that Poisonville has a crime problem that would make Gotham City seem like Topeka by comparison. After getting a look at its seedy underbelly the Op browbeats the dead publisher's wealthy father into paying him to clean up the town even though he's a big part of the problem.

The Op starts working angles, playing criminals and crooked cops and every corrupt person he runs across against each other. Bodies start dropping and warfare between various factions looms as everyone is looking to move up the food chain. The Op exploits this in every way he can, but the increasing carnage starts to take a toll on him as he fears that he's becoming as bad as the people he's up against:

**“This damned burg’s getting to me. If I don’t get away soon I’ll be going blood simple like the natives.”**

Hammett was obviously doing something over the top here with a town where murder is seen as the first and best solution to almost every problem. While it's got that pulpy kind of story, Hammett was also drawing on his experience as a former Pinkerton agent to paint in some of the details and give it just enough gritty reality to make it seem plausible. The plot he cooks up about a tough guy trying to bring down a corrupt town by playing sides against each other was hugely influential in crime fiction and in the movies.\* There's also a line you have to admire on just about every page.

I don't think this quite measure up to *The Maltese Falcon*, but this violent tale about one man trying to clean out a corrupt city earns it's reputation as one of the best of the genre for a reason.

*\*You can read more about how Red Harvest has inspired many movies in this Salon article.*

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### **James Thane says**

Originally published in 1929, *Red Harvest* is a classic crime novel that helped established the hard-boiled genre. This is most definitely *not* a polite, parlor mystery where most of the blood is spilled off of the page. As the title suggests, this book is filled with mayhem and the bodies are falling left and right.

The main protagonist is the Continental Op, who doesn't remotely resemble the genteel Hercule Poirot or any of the other fictional detectives who were so popular in the 1920s. The Op is certainly smart and skilled, but he's a squat, overweight man who's more than willing to cut whatever corners are necessary in order to achieve what he believes to be the greater good.

The Op, who is employed by the Continental Detective Agency in San Francisco, is detailed to the Personville, a mining town known to most as Poisonville. The town was, for a long time, under the thumb of

Elihu Willsson who owned the Personville Mining Corporation, the local newspapers, and a number of other businesses as well. He also controlled all of the politicians of any consequence, up to and including the state governor.

During the First World War, Willsson had made whatever deals were necessary with the miners' unions to ensure that the company's operations were unimpeded. But once the war ended, he determined to break the unions and in doing so, invited in a number of thugs and crooks to assist him. The unions were effectively cowed, but the thugs and crooks stayed in town and carved out interests for themselves, effectively reducing Willsson's authority.

As the book opens, Elihu's son, Donald, has asked the Continental Detective Agency for assistance. Elihu has now turned the town's newspapers over to his son and the son is something of a reformer. But before the Op can even meet with Donald, Donald is murdered. The Op believes that it is his obligation to identify the killer. As he attempts to do so, old Elihu Willsson offers the Op \$10,000.00 to clean up Personville. In reality, he wants to get rid of the gangs that are competing for control of the town so that he can dominate it unchallenged once again.

The Op is repulsed by the level of corruption in the town and by Elihu himself. But he decides to take the job so that he can indulge his own desire to clean up the town and cleverly drafts his agreement with Willsson to effectively give himself carte blanche, even if Willsson should ultimately change his mind about turning the Op loose on the problem.

The plot that unfolds is dense and convoluted, but the strength of the book lies in Hammett's prose style, in the characters he develops, and in picture he paints of Personville. As a practical matter, there is not a single moral, selfless person in the entire town, the Continental Op included. He quickly proves that he's ready to get down in the muck with the crooks, grafters and corrupt city officials and do whatever is necessary to complete the quest he's assigned himself.

As a young man, Hammett had worked as a detective for the Pinkerton agency in San Francisco and had spent some time during the war in the mining town of Butte, Montana as a strikebreaker. People have long speculated that "Poisonville" was modeled on Butte, a company town controlled by the Anaconda Mining Company. People have also speculated about Hammett's motives for writing the book, suggesting that he might have been seeking some redemption for the actions he had taken in Butte. Whatever the case, the result is a seminal work that stands as one of the great classics of American crime fiction and that has influenced scores of writers who have attempted to follow in Hammett's footsteps.

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## **Mohammed says**

My second time reading this and i saw things i missed the first time. Some nuances of the characters,dialouge,the authors world view. I dont re-read ever but i should re-read this every two years when i forgot little of the mystery,the work The OP is doing in Posionville.

This novel is a true literary Masterwork that makes you understand why Hammett has the reputation he has in mainstream American Literature let alone in crime,noir fiction. It is a great,fun,bleak hardboiled PI story. Also Hammett's unpretentious,spare prose flows so amazingly well.

It was fun read like the other Continental OP stories I have read because of the wit and a lot of the times I smiled, almost laughing because of how well The OP put the words in a dialogue or inner monologue.

I have not read anyone who comes near Hammett when its about writing dialogue, tough, wiscracking lines to qoute. Also its a shame the ultra detailed way he described every character in the novel is a thing of the past. He wrote very precisely what people was wearing, what their eyes was doing, how their noses, mouth made all clear pictures of who they are. Its a lost art from most contemporary fiction, let alone crime fiction. If it was a new novel, it would have described once what the characters looked and thats enough for the whole novel. You wouldnt see every few pages how the corrupt Chief of Police eyes was glinting, doing something all the time showing his emotions, naunces. How messy Dinah Brand looked for a femme fatale in every scene she was in.

Its a real shame that Hammett never captured the magic of this novel again in his other novels. The other novels are written with same literary quality. But Maltese Falcon, others are not as hardboiled, as bleak world view, characters wise The OP stands out with this novel. Only the short stories of The Continetal OP look like its the same author as this novel.

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### **Anthony Vacca says**

A perfect rejoinder for whenever you are next accosted by some bothersome elderly person prattling on about how things used to be so much nicer (e.g. books, movies, \*chuckle\* the world). Little more than ten years shy of being a hundred, this pulp classic is as volatile a read now as it was when it first spilled ink across the pages of *Black Mask*. As André Gide put it, "a remarkable achievement, the last word in atrocity, cynicism, and horror." Last word? Well, maybe not. But this rollicking private eye yarn is packed with gun fights, drugs, boozing, lurid women, blackmail, explosions, fist fights, stabbings, crooked cops and dumb crooks, reckless driving and an average of about a violent death every five pages. Pulp noir was the original punk rock in case you didn't know.

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### **Lynda says**

**"Discovering pulp fiction now, right now, is a bit like finding a lost treasure. You are unearthing something that will entertain, enlighten, amuse, horrify, mangle, jangle, keep you riveted. Decades after they were written, these stories still manage to have an edge."**

--Harlan Coben

I'm in heaven.

Well, maybe not literally...but certainly in a literary sense!

I've discovered pulp fiction. I am excited. Deliriously so.

I've:

- secured a couple of telephone directory sized compendiums of hardboiled and pulp noir - The Black Lizard Big Book of Pulp and The Black Lizard Big Book of Black Mask Stories.
- made great progress in the collection of the Hard Case Crime Series.
- been introduced to my first John D Macdonald 'Travis McGee' novel.

AND...the pièce de résistance...

- just read my first Dashiell Hammett novel.

What a revelation!

**"The writers who really have never read pulp fiction are writers the rest of us do not associate with. They have poor self-esteem. They had a troubled home life. They are not fun at parties."**

--Harlan Coben

Hell...I don't want to be one of those readers either! I'm confident. Had a good upbringing. Like fun. Like parties. Like having fun at parties. I want in!

COUNT ME IN!

In the '20s, '30s, '40s & early '50s, the biggest names in the crime fiction pulp world were all published by *Black Mask* and other major pulp publications; Chandler, Daly, Gardner, Hammett, McCoy, Nebel, Whitfield, to name but a few. It is said that Hammett was (and remains) the "gold standard" for hardboiled crime fiction.

Fittingly, although not known at the time of my choosing, my first Hammett was in fact Hammett's first novel **Red Harvest**. It first appeared in *Black Mask*, serialized over four issues, spanning October 1927 to January 1928. Hammett reworked it somewhat for hardback publication in February 1929. It could best be described as an extraordinary tale of gunmen, gin, and gangsters.

In **Red Harvest**, Hammett introduces the reader to a private investigator (PI), an unnamed Operative (Op) from the Continental Detective Agency, San Francisco branch. The Op finds himself in a corrupt Montana town named Personville (which is sardonically referred to by the locals as "Poisonville"), where there's a power struggle among contending factions. Virtually all of them, the hoods, the lawmen, the lowlifes, the local grandees, are lying and corrupt. Essentially we have a literary image of the United States as a violent, greedy, power-hungry society. The main villains are wealthy influential people who use thugs to defend their often ill-gotten wealth and the power derived from it.

The Op, a short, heavy-set, overweight, often a little drunk, is no movie star. He's a hero all the same, a man on his own, maneuvering among the crocodiles, frequently with fists and firepower, always with a brutal and amusing efficiency.

There are some great reviews on Goodreads that discuss the plot further; three are included below:

Kemper's review

James' review

Algernon's review

What I personally liked about this novel was the wonderful characterization of the Op, the complexity of the story, the history of the time period, and the obvious intelligence, insight and wit of Hammett. There's both irony and comedy in the humor:

*"We bumped over dead Hank O'Meara's legs and headed for home. We covered one block of the distance with safety if not comfort. After that we had neither."*

*"Be still while I get up or I'll make an opening in your head for brains to leak in."*

*"Who shot him' I asked.*

*The grey man scratched the back of his neck and said: 'Somebody with a gun.'"*

Hammett was one of the few writers of PI fiction who had actual experience as a private detective, having worked for the famous Pinkerton Agency.

**"Edge. That might be the key for me. These stories still cut, still tear, still even shock a bit. These guys experimented. They wrote on the move. They went places maybe they shouldn't have and we love them for it.**

**I like edge. I like it a lot. I think you will too."**

--Harlan Coben

Yes Harlan, I sure do.

Red Harvest is a pulp classic that fires from the first page to the last. If you're a Noir devotee or have yet to read the genre, Red Harvest is an essential novel.

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??? 2.? says

★★★★?

*Red Harvest* opens when an unnamed detective known only as, "The Continental Op" is called in by small town newspaper publisher to investigate local corruption. The Op arrives in the ugly little mountain town, known locally as "Poisonville" (due to the extensive mining pollution or vast criminal element, take your pick), only to discover his client has been murdered, before their meeting can occur. Rather than turning tail back to San Fran, our fearless detective decides to follow through with his investigation.

The Op soon discovers that the publisher's father is a highly influential man about town, with a stake in all the important local enterprises. The father is also partly responsible for much of the criminal element plaguing the city. Thugs and gangsters, which were originally brought in to break up a union strike, have stuck around to carve out territories of their own. The widespread corruption even extends to the Chief of Police. Seeing as how the father's dirty dealing may have inadvertently led to his nosy son's murder, the Op blackmails the father into hiring him on to clean up the city.

With the considerable help from an old *gun moll*, our detective digs up dirt on many of the gangsters. Which he then feeds to their rivals, in an attempt to stir things up and pit the criminals against one another. It's not long before his plans begin to bear fruit, and the streets run red with blood, as the bodies begin to pile up at an astronomical rate. God help any innocent bystanders caught in the crossfire.

*Red Harvest* was originally published in 1927 as a four-part serial in the pulp magazine *Black Mask*, and later went on to become the first full length novel from the legendary Dashiell Hammett, which helped to establish the hard-boiled detective genre. While its influence cannot be overstated, sadly there's never been a faithful film adaptation. Perhaps that's due to our rather pedestrian detective, who's described as a, "short, squat, middle-aged, pig-headed and utterly unsentimental tank of a man," which is nearly the polar opposite of the suave sophistication and classic good looks of a character such as Philip Marlowe. Or perhaps it's simply due to the fact that, while the plot is not quite as convoluted as *The Big Sleep*, it's still incredibly dense, with a ton of moving parts, and an inexhaustible supply of bodies being dropped seemingly every other page.

Honestly, there are far too many characters, setups, and riotous activity to keep everything straight. But the good news is that, it doesn't matter in the end. The superb prose style is the real star of the show, and

makes this an absolute pleasure to read. The snappy and highly quotable dialog is especially noteworthy. If you decide to pick this one up, do yourself a favor, forget about trying to follow along with the plot, and just enjoy the ride. It's a lot of fun.

*"I've arranged a killing or two in my time, when they were necessary. But this is the first time I've ever got the fever. It's this damned burg. You can't go straight here..."*

*"You're crazy."*

*"I know it. That's what I've been telling you. I'm going blood-simple."*

4 blood-soaked-stars.

Read as part of another *Non-Crunchy Cool Classic Buddy Read*.

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## **Brandon says**

No, this book isn't about farming in communist Russia.

The Continental Op travels to Personville, USA following an invite from the editor of the local newspaper, but upon the Op's arrival, he finds out that his host had been gunned down in cold blood. Just another day in *Poisonville*. When Personville's most powerful man enlists the help of the Op by floating a cool ten grand his way, the Op puts forth a plan to clean up the town once and for all.

The plot of Red Harvest although simple and straightforward, is a strange one. The Continental Op - his true name is never revealed - is certainly taking a hell of a risk for what seems like very little reward. Sure, he's getting a hell of a payday out of this job but the odds are overwhelming that the only way he'll be leaving Personville is in a box, so why stick to it? Does he get off on going up against the odds? Is he just that stubborn? However, the Op being a man of conviction, I suppose nearly getting gunned down must make your blood boil.

Hammett might just be the most influential man in crime fiction. He's been listed as a major inspiration for Raymond Chandler, George Pelecanos, The Coen Brothers, Duane Swierczynski and many others in the way he pioneered what would become known as the hard-boiled style. It's amazing to think that what Hammett presented in Red Harvest was something completely new and fresh - the man basically created the entire genre with this novel!

Hammett's Red Harvest moves at the speed of sound leaving a pile of corpses in its wake. But I must confess, I had some trouble following the events as they unfolded. The basis of the Op's plan involved turning all the rival gangs in Personville on one another and that could only be done by playing sides coupled with a whole hell of a lot of back stabbing. It was hard at points to remember where certain characters stood and believe it or not, who was alive and who had recently bit the dust. There's a lot of death in these pages, people.

I liked this a great deal more than The Thin Man. I'll have to get my mitts on The Dain Curse.

Also posted @ Every Read Thing.



\*\*The deceased's father, who founded Poisonville and has seen his control threatened by several gangs his originally brought in to break a labor strike.

\*\*Dinah Brand, a hard drinking and harder loving femme fatale more twisted than a corkscrew and just as sharp.

\*\*A host of local gangsters and thugs led by Max "Whisper" Thaler.

\*\*A fat, sweaty stereotype of the crooked chief of police that reminded me of the guy from the movie *Mississippi Burning* (great flick by the way).

As the body count rises, The Continental Op manages to pit all of the bad guys against one another creating a powder keg that will blow the lid of the town and bring all the rats scurrying out of the dark.

## **THOUGHTS**

If you like noir crime novels, it's hard for me to imagine you wouldn't like this. This is noir at its most filthy and you can feel the wet, slimy villainy staining each and every page as Hammett's sparse, clipped prose is deftly navigates the story.

My only qualm with the narrative is probably my own failing as a reader. This is the most complicated crime mystery plot I have come across and the total number of players and victims, the myriad of double, triple and quadruple crosses and the extremely convoluted central mystery was at times hard to keep straight in my itty, bitty brain. To make matters worse, Hammett provides no training wheels in the form of info-dumps or recaps to help the reader so you are pretty much stranded and on your own. Just like his narrator.

Thus, my strong 4.5 star rating for this (rather than 5 stars) is based solely on my inability to completely follow the trail of sleaze from beginning to end. I intend to re-read this at some point and if all of the pieces end up falling into place, this may well get bumped to 5 stars and receive an engraved apology for my lack of plot comprehension.

As it is, this is about as good as it gets when it comes to noir and Hammett has created another superb work that reads as well now as it did back in 1929. That says a lot for the man's talent. Here are a couple of classic quotes that I thought were just full of awesome:

*"Be still while I get up or I'll make an opening in your head for brains to leak in."*

*"If I don't get away soon I'll be going blood simple like the natives," says the Op. "I've arranged a killing or two in my time, when they were necessary. But this is the first time I've ever got the fever"*

*"[spoiler] tried to assassinate me last night. I don't like it. I'm just mean enough to want to ruin him for it. Now I'm going to have my fun. I've got ten thousand dollars of your money to play with. I'm going to use it opening Poisonville up from Adam's apple to ankles."*

*We bumped over dead [Spoiler] legs and headed for home. We covered one block of the distance with safety if not comfort. After that we had neither."*

It's enough to bring out the O face.

4.5 stars. HIGHEST POSSIBLE RECOMMENDATION!!

P.S. I listened to the recently released audio version of this story as read by Richard Ferrone and I thought he did a very good job with it. Certainly one to check out if you like audio books.

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## Bill Kerwin says

I'll give you three good reasons—from least to most—why you should read *Red Harvest*: 1) it made possible the fine Leone film *A Fistful of Dollars*, 2) it inspired the Kurosawa masterpiece *Iojimbo* which influenced *A Fistful of Dollars*, and 3) it is an old school hard boiled, hardcore novel, with a detective as tough as Spade, Marlowe and Hammer put together, written in hard-as-nails prose, and set in a small West Coast city, a city with a heart of stone.

The City is Personville, and people call it “Poisonville,” but not because they are speaking with an accent. A few years before the book opens, mining tycoon and city boss Elihu Wilsson called in some thugs and goons to break a mining strike. Oh they broke it alright, but now these gangsters—with names like Lew Yard, “Whispers,” Pete the Finn—have carved Elihu’s little city into fiefdoms, and Boss Wilsson is not the boss anymore. Our detective, the nameless “Continental Op”—employed by the Continental Detective Agency—soon begins systematically destroying the rival gangs by sowing lies and discord among them. Sure, there is a murder the Op has to solve, but soon, in addition, we have stabbings, ambushes, furtive late night shootings and afternoon gun battles. And a good looking but slatternly gold digger too. Everything a reader could want.

At least you'd think so, wouldn't you, and it *would* be enough for your average hard-boiled novel. But three-quarters of the way through, the Op begins to realize he *likes* all this killing, and after drinking too many laudanum-and-gins and dreaming some stone-crazy dope-head dreams, he wakes up to find a bloody ice pick in his hand. Now the Op has one last murder to solve, and he can't exclude himself as a suspect.

*Red Harvest* (1927) is certainly a genre classic, but it is also a great book on any terms. The prose is spare, the metaphors are crisp, and, although the narrative is often crowded with incident, the plot remains simple and clear and close to the bone.

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## Evgeny says

**The review is updated on May 9, 2016.**

**A group read with a bunch of Pantaloonless Buddies.**

Welcome to ~~Poisonville~~ I mean Personville, population 40,000. The local policemen are very friendly and truly enjoy doing their job:

*The first policeman I saw needed a shave. The second had a couple of buttons off his shabby uniform. The third stood in the center of the city's main intersection — Broadway and Union Street — directed traffic, with a cigar in one corner of his mouth. After that I stopped checking them up.*

All the people are very eager to help during a murder investigation:  
*'Who shot him' I asked.*

*The grey man scratched the back of his neck and said: 'Somebody with a gun.'*

You really cannot get any more helpful than this.

If you ever get in legal trouble, there is always a very competent and affordable lawyer available:

*He's the guy that the joke was wrote about: "Is he a criminal lawyer?" "Yes, very."*

Of all classic hard-boiled novels, this one has a record of having maximum number of dead bodies per page. To give an idea, one of the chapters in about two thirds of the book is titled Seventeenth Murder; this is most definitely not the last one. A nameless narrator from Continental detective agency is invited to a city for corruption investigation by the city tycoon's son. Unfortunately, by the time the MC arrives, his potential employer is already killed. It does not take a genius to realize the city is ruled by criminals with the entire police department being on their payroll and chief of the department being a member of criminal gang (reminds me of my city now).

So, does it mean the end of the mission for the MC? Not in the least. He forces the father of the victim to hire him to rid the city from criminals. What is the best way to do it without outside help? Turn them on each other. This is where the bodies start piling up. Double-crossings, back-stabbings, military-type operations of one gang against the other, and a single guy trying to just stay alive after kicking the hornet's nest – repeatedly when things slow down.

Not a single person in the book appears to be nice, including the main character. The guy scares himself when he realized he began enjoying putting bad guys against each other and watching the resulting fireworks. He admits that this way of cleaning the city is much easier and probably more effective than the legal one.

This is non-stop action with not a single page being boring, a wild roller-coaster ride: 5 stars. I only have one question remaining: where the heck is The Continental Op when you need him?

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## David Schaafsma says

"He who fights with monsters must take care lest he thereby become a monster."—Nietzsche, quoted by the Continental Op.

Red Harvest (1929) is a novel by Dashiell Hammett. The story is narrated by The Continental Op, an "operative" for the Continental Detective Agency, much of which is drawn from Hammett's experiences as an operative of the Pinkerton Detective Agency. The labor dispute in the novel was inspired by Butte's Anaconda Road Massacre.

"Who shot him?" I asked.

The grey man scratched the back of his neck and said: 'Somebody with a gun.'

The action takes place in Personville, known by its inhabitants as Poisonville. The Op finds his client, a newspaper publisher, Donald Willsson, killed; the client's father rules the town. In the process of figuring out whodunnit, there are fixed fights, the bombing of the City Hall holding cells, an ice-pick murder of an informer, gang wars. Yeah, stuff like that. And the title refers to "reds," or union organizers, Commies.

There's police corruption, and repressive police violence. I had just read *The Thin Man*, which is light and breezy and clever in comparison. This is the real noir deal, menacing and brutal, all the more so as it was in part based on actual events.

“This damned burg's getting to me. If I don't get away soon I'll be going blood simple like the natives.”

I don't think I had ever read this book before, though I did see *Fistful of Dollars* (featuring Clint Eastwood), which was in part based on this story. There are three central Hammett novels: *The Thin Man*, *The Maltese Falcon*, both known also for famous film adaptations. And then *Red Harvest*. They couldn't be more different, with different tones, different emphases, different style detectives. I think I like *Maltese Falcon* best, as the action seems more focused, and I like Sam Spade, but I like the real life economic justice focus of this one, and the true to noir viciousness that earns Hammett his Best of Noir Club stripes. The writing is lean and mean.

“I haven't laughed so much over anything since the hogs ate my kid brother.”

Oh, and true to form, there is a femme fatale, Dinah Brand, Hammett (and noir generally) has to have one of these in almost every noir story:

“. . . domineering, and spoiled, and suspicious, and greedy, and mean, and unscrupulous, and deceitful, and selfish, and damned bad—altogether damned bad!”

And she drinks. And then talks like this: “You're drunk, and I'm drunk, and I'm just exactly drunk enough to tell you anything you want to know. That's the kind of girl I am. If I like a person, I'll tell them anything they want to know. Just ask me. Go ahead, ask me.”

If you decide to read a few noir classics, this has to be on your list. It has to be on a list of top twenty five of the genre.

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## Algernon says

[9/10]

- *What's the rumpus?*
- *Don Willson's gone to sit on the right hand of God, if God don't mind looking at bullet holes.*
- *Who shot him?*
- *Somebody with a gun.*

Donald Willson may have been the last 'straight man' in the city of Personville, better known as 'Poisonville' - a midwestern industrial town overrun by criminal gangs during the Prohibition. Editor of the local paper, Don has called on The Continental Op (the unnamed hero of the novel, a private eye employed by the Continental Detective Agency) to help him unmask the corruption and the criminal activities going on in the city. He dies before he could meet with the protagonist of the novel, the first victim in a bloody novel that has become famous for its high bodycount.

The plot is complex, with more twists than an Elvis Priesley musical, but basically it can be reduced to a stranger coming to town and setting up the bad guys fighting each other until they completely annihilate each other, until from the ashes a brighter future can arise. Or not ...

*So that's the way you scientific detectives work. My god, for a fat, middle-aged, hard-boiled, pig-headed guy,*

*you've got the vaguest way of doing things I ever heard of.*

*- Plans are all right sometimes. And sometimes just stirring things up is all right - if you're tough enough to survive, and keep your eyes open so you'll see what you want when it comes to the top.*

If the story sounds familiar, it may be because, while the actual novel has never been filmed in the original format put down by Hammett, it has inspired one of the best samurai movies in the Kurosawa catalogue : **Yojimbo** and a Sergio Leone spaghetti western featuring Clint Eastwood : **For A Few Dollars More** . It may also be the source for the more recent **Last Man Standing** and **Miller's Crossing** . I would not be surprised to see a space opera or a fantasy 'gritty' adaptation in the future. The book has that special quality that makes it not only a genre defining moment, but a story that goes beyond it's time and space setting and touch on the basic need of the individual and of society to stand up to bullies and criminals. Plus the public really loves a badass hero and unrestrained mayhem. A lesser man than the Continental Op would have given up on the job as hopeless after the first murder, and written off Personville like some people are writing off Denver today. Even more terrifying is the realization of the hero that he actually enjoys making trouble, while the bodies pile up as a result of his tricks and lies. Is he really the hero of the story or just another bastard thirsting for power?

The cast of characters is big for a crime novel, with four criminal gangs vying for control of the city, a corrupted police department and a former Industry Magnate that was the top fat cat before the gangs came, and later a dubious lawyer ( *He's the guy that the joke was wrote about: "Is he a criminal lawyer?" "Yes, very."* ). My favorite character is Dinah Brand, the ultimate femme fatale that sits like a spider queen at the centre of all the plot threads. In a dreamcast for a movie version I see Ava Gardner as the perfect match for the slightly sleazy, slightly overweight, hard drinking, hard smoking, hard loving Dinah:

*She looked as if she was telling the truth, though with women, especially blue-eyed women, that doesn't always mean anything.*

Dashiell Hammett's prose is lean and mean, less flowery than Raymond Chandler's, but still delivering memorable one liners and particularly suited for action scenes - raids on isolated farms out in the country, riding in period cars brimming with machine guns, bare knuckled boxing matches in dingy hotel rooms, etc. I would have liked more development on the gang leaders and their anturages, more build-up to the shocking twists and revelations towards the end, but I guess the novel would have become at least double in size. Kurosawa solved the problem by reducing the number of factions from five/six to two. I think the loose structure of the plot comes from the fact that the novel was initially developed as a four part serial, and there was a need for some closure at the end at each section.

I guess reading Red Harvest has moved Dashiell Hammett up a few notches in my noir future reads list, with The Thin Man being the favorite for next, given how much I enjoyed Myrna Loy and William Powell in the movie adaptation.