

Soft-Boiled: Pynchon's stoned detective.

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“Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean,” Raymond Chandler’s famous dictum states. It appeared in an essay called “The Simple Art of Murder,” published in 1944—Chandler’s attempt to define what might give a little literary dignity to the murder mystery. Chandler had aspirations for the genre, and it annoyed him that most mystery writers seemed not to, that they turned out unrealistic plot contraptions for an undemanding readership—“Murder on the Orient Express”-type theatricals, in which the solution to the mystery is usually whatever is least probable. Chandler believed that what redeemed the form, what made it art, or potentially art, was the character of the detective, and that the detective should be (unlike Hercule Poirot or, from another mystery writer Chandler held in contempt, Lord Peter Wimsey) a man who goes down mean streets. “He is the hero,” Chandler wrote. “He is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor.”

The personal honor of the private eye is the genre’s most hallowed convention. He owes nothing to anyone. He is in it only for himself; therefore, he is selfless. In Chandler’s description: “He is a relatively poor man, or he would not be a detective at all. He is a common man, or he could not go among common people. He has a sense of character, or he would not know his job. He will take no man’s money dishonestly and no man’s

insolence without a due and dispassionate revenge. He is a lonely man and his pride is that you will treat him as a proud man or be very sorry you ever saw him. . . . The story is his adventure in search of a hidden truth, and it would be no adventure if it did not happen to a man fit for adventure.” The detective in Chandler’s books is Philip Marlowe, a character probably created on the model of Dashiell Hammett’s Sam Spade. (Hammett was a mystery writer Chandler did admire. “Hammett gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse,” he said.) Lew Archer is Ross Macdonald’s private eye; Mike Hammer is Mickey Spillane’s. Thomas Pynchon’s is named Larry (Doc) Sportello.

Sportello is the best thing in Pynchon’s self-consciously laid-back and funky new novel, “Inherent Vice” (Penguin; \$27.95). The title is a term in maritime law (a specialty of one of the minor characters). It refers to the quality of things that makes them difficult to insure: if you have eggs in your cargo, a normal policy will not cover their breaking. Getting broken is in the nature of being an egg. The novel gives the concept some low-key metaphysical play—original sin is an obvious analogy—but, apart from this and a death-and-resurrection motif involving a saxophonist in a surf-rock band, “Inherent Vice” does not appear to be a Pynchonian palimpsest of semi-obscure allusions. (I could be missing something, of course. I could be missing everything.) It’s a slightly spoofy take on hardboiled crime fiction, a story in which the characters smoke dope and watch “Gilligan’s Island” instead of sitting around a night club knocking back J&Bs. It’s “The Maltese Falcon” starring Cheech and Chong, “The Big Sleep” as told by the hippy-dippy weatherman. Whether you think it’s funny depends a little on whether you think Cheech and Chong and the hippy-dippy weatherman are funny for more than about two minutes. It’s funnier than Chandler, anyway.

Like most detective novels, “Inherent Vice” begins with an apparently innocuous request. Doc’s old girlfriend shows up and asks him to look into a problem involving a wealthy real-estate developer with whom she’s been having an affair. Almost as soon as Doc takes the case, the developer turns up missing. And, as in most detective stories, the missing person is a thread that, once pulled, unravels a complex conspiracy of murder, greed, lust, and so forth. The missing person or the murder victim (often they are the same person, although that’s not the case here) is, of course, just the *donnée*, a clothesline on which to hang a series of implausible coincidences and, for the private eye, misadventures high and low, with the occasional unanticipated amorous encounter. The victim is almost never someone we are interested in. Who cares or even remembers (as Chandler pointed out in “The Simple Art of Murder”) who killed Miles Archer, Spade’s partner, in “The Maltese Falcon”—despite the fact that Archer’s murder is what sets off the whole business?

Pynchon’s capacity for goofball invention is limitless. A list of characters’ names, drastically abridged, might be enough to suggest the variety, and also the relative fineness, of the narrative texture: Ensenada Slim, Flaco the Bad, Dr. Buddy Tubeside, Petunia Leeway, Jason Velveeta, Scott Oof, Sledge Poteet, Leonard Jermaine Loosemeat (a.k.a. El Drano, anagram of Leonard), Delwyn Quight, and Trillium Fortnight. Not overly fine, in other words. Plotwise, there are probably too many pieces of the puzzle to hold in your head, and it’s not completely clear where, or whether, every piece fits. But that, too, is standard business procedure in the form. Despite Chandler’s demand for greater realism, his own plots could be pretty far-fetched, and they’re not always coherent, either. When Howard Hawks was shooting the film adaptation of “The Big Sleep,” he got in touch with Chandler to ask who was supposed to have killed one of the characters, a chauffeur. Chandler was embarrassed to say he didn’t know.

Pynchon's novel is set in Los Angeles, which is by no means a departure from hardboiled tradition. This is partly because mystery writers have tended to be screenwriters as well (or wished that they were), and so have lived near Hollywood, and also because movie and television crime stories have been shot in and around L.A. for a century, since it's cheaper not to travel. Marlowe and Archer both work in L.A. So does Walter Mosley's detective, Easy Rawlins. Southern California, in real life a place of few dark alleys and little weather, is bona-fide noir territory.

The twist is the time period. The events in Pynchon's story take place in the spring of 1970, something we can infer from frequent references to the Manson trial and the N.B.A. finals between the Lakers and the Knicks. And the book is loaded—overloaded, really, but Pynchon is an inveterate encyclopedist—with pop period detail: “Dark Shadows,” “Marcus Welby, M.D.,” and “Hawaii Five-O”; Blue Cheer, Tiny Tim, and the Archies; Casey Kasem, Glen Campbell, Herb Alpert. There are some local Southland references—the used-car dealer Cal Worthington—and a few bits of rock-and-roll esoterica (“Here Come the Hodads,” by the Marketts; “Super Market,” by Fapardokly). The proto-Internet makes an appearance: “This ARPAnet trip,” one character explains; “I swear it's like acid, a whole 'nother strange world—time, space, all that shit.” There are a lot of drug jokes, and there are a lot of drugs (though, strangely, little reference to the antiwar movement: the bombing of Cambodia, mentioned in passing, took place in the spring of 1970). Nixon has been President for a year. The sand is running out on the counterculture.

Doc, Pynchon's private eye, is a countercultural type. He wears his hair in an Afro. He's peace-loving and undersized. (“ ‘What I lack in *al*-titude,’ Doc explained for the million or so -th time in his career, ‘I make up for in *at*-

titude.’ ”) Mainly, he’s a pothead. His thoughts are the usual private-eye thoughts, but if the private eye was, say, Jeff Spicoli:

If he had a nickel for every time he’d heard a client start off this way, he could be over in Hawaii now, loaded day and night, digging the waves at Waimea, or better yet hiring somebody to dig them for him.

Philip Marlowe or Mike Hammer would have eaten this guy for breakfast.

But he does walk down mean streets (or the L.A. equivalent: bikers, drug dealers, sex-club performers, nefarious dentists) and is not himself mean. He pines after the ex-girlfriend, flees in terror a never-ending sequence of heavies, fences with his police counterpart (another hardboiled convention—in this case, the cop is a hippie-hater named Bigfoot Bjornsen), takes on cases without hope of a fee, is nice to his mom, and shares his stash. He is a man of honor, and a neat, counterintuitive creation.

The epigraph to “Inherent Vice”—“Under the paving-stones, the beach!”—was a slogan in the Paris student uprising of May ’68, and it’s a reminder that Pynchon does have a stake in this period. Biographical claims about Pynchon are notoriously uncheckable, but he is supposed to have been living in Manhattan Beach in the late nineteen-sixties, working on “Gravity’s Rainbow,” and there is a lot of affection in these new pages for the way of life—surf, drugs, and rock and roll—they describe. “Inherent Vice” is a generally lighthearted affair. Still, there are a few familiar apocalyptic touches, and a suggestion that countercultural California is a lost continent of freedom and play, swallowed up by the faceless forces of coöptation and repression:

Was it possible, that at every gathering—concert, peace rally, love-in, be-in, and freak-in, here, up north, back East, wherever—those dark crews had been busy all

along, reclaiming the music, the resistance to power, the sexual desire from epic to everyday, all they could sweep up, for the ancient forces of greed and fear?

The world is going to hell. Which is what private eyes always think. ♦

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Soft Construction with Boiled Beans (Premonition of Civil War) (1936) is a painting by the Spanish surrealist artist Salvador Dalí. Dalí created the piece to represent the horrors of the Spanish Civil War, having painted it only six months before the conflict began. He subsequently claimed that he was aware the war was going to occur long before it began, and cited his work as evidence of "the prophetic power of his subconscious mind." However, Dalí may have changed the name of the painting after the war. More like this. Soft-boiled detective. 0. 0. Soft-Boiled Mysteries. Author's Notes: I'm poor! All was quiet on the street and in the offices of Tasuki and Nuriko, private detectives" Nuriko snorted as Tasuki posed against the window frame in his dark brown slacks and loose, secondhand tie. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows displaying a mark shaped like the kanji for "Yoku." He posed carefully on the ledge.