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The Big Sleep



Synopsis

The Big Sleep (1939) is a hardboiled crime novel by Raymond Chandler, the first in his acclaimed series about detective Philip Marlowe. The work has been adapted twice into film, once in 1946 and again in 1978. The story is noted for its complexity, with many characters double-crossing each other and many secrets being exposed throughout the narrative. The title is a euphemism for death; it refers to a rumination in the book about "sleeping the big sleep". (wikipedia.org) --This text refers to the Leather Bound edition.

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Customer Reviews

"The Big Sleep," written in 1939, was Raymond Chandler's first Philip Marlowe novel. Chandler went on to write several other classic noir novels, like "Farewell, My Lovely," "The High Window," and "The Long Goodbye." Chandler did not start writing his classic works until the age of forty-five, when he began submitting short stories to pulp magazines like Mask. Sadly, Chandler died in 1959, effectively depriving us of more classic Marlowe novels and stories. The shame of the whole thing is Chandler did not start writing until late in his life, although seeing how some great authors decline over the course of their careers perhaps it is best we only have a few novels from Raymond Chandler."The Big Sleep" finds Marlowe in the employ of General Sternwood, a wealthy but dying oil tycoon. Sternwood wants Marlowe to track down a blackmailer who is trying to bleed some money out of the old general. The problem is Sternwood's two daughters, Carmen and Vivian. Both women have major problems; Carmen is just plain weird, suffering from seizures and a penchant for sleeping around with scum of the earth types. Vivian is not much better; she is a heavy gambler who

dates (and marries) mob types. In the course of working the case, Marlowe uncovers underground pornography shops, blackmailers, gambling dens, a couple of murders, and other seedy events in the growing town of Los Angeles. Like other Chandler novels, what we initially see is hardly the whole enchilada. While working the case, Marlowe stumbles on deeper and deeper mysteries involving a missing mobster and his abducted wife. While "The Big Sleep" is Chandler's best known work, it is not his best novel. It seems that Chandler is still working out the style and form later expressed so gallantly in "The Long Goodbye."

It's often been said that Raymond Chandler is the quintessential writer about Los Angeles in the 1940's in the way that Faulkner fictionalized the American South. The Big Sleep is the best example of Chandler's affinity for the city, particularly in the light of its unique blend of pre-fabricated history associated with the film industry and the pre-Hollywood era. That being said, it's a bit ironic that we tend to think of Philip Marlowe as personified by Humphrey Bogart, even though he's been played by several actors over the years and the film of The Big Sleep is markedly different from the book. "Chandleresque" suggests a certain style of writing and of using metaphors and language that can't really be described to anyone unfamiliar with his work without lapsing into stereotype. For any other mystery writer, that would be a negative, but since Chandler is the man who, with The Big Sleep, more or less invented the detective novel as we know it today it's astonishing to read and realize what kind of impact it might have had on those who read the first printing. The Big Sleep introduces Philip Marlowe as the private eye who is both uncorruptable and one step ahead of his antagonists. His characterization is what drives the story, which as mysteries go is not the most suspenseful or even all that mysterious. Indeed, the "mystery" such as it is is barely given notice by Chandler, short of the necessities. While there are some good plot twists, they seem to come together in a generally haphazard manner. None of that matters, because the main interest is in what Marlowe will do next and how he will react. Chandler creates some interesting supporting characters as well, but they float in and out of the story overwhelmed by the protagonist.

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