



## Lifestyle/Features



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# Back down these dark streets

By LOUIS B. PARKS  
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"How c-could you?" she gasped.

I had only a moment before talking to a corpse, but I got it in.

"It was easy," I said.

Tough words from the ultimate hard-case detective, Mike Hammer, after shooting his murderous lover.

The grim closing lines to Mickey Spillane's *I, The Jury* jet-fueled a paperback book revolution. The 1947 book made the transition to the new paperback medium in 1948 and became a multimillion-copy best-seller. Spillane, a former comic book and pulp writer, rode his violence-and-sex Mike Hammer thrillers to the title of world'sbest-selling author.

Sixty years later, the once-dominate tough-guy pulp short novel has all but disappeared and the pocket-size paperback is in decline, victim to the more expensive and profitable trade-size paperback.

So it's fitting that Hard Case Crime, a small publishing project that has been single-handedly bringing back hard-boiled and noir paperbacks in a retro format, just published *Dead Street*, the first Spillane novel to appear since the writer's death last year.

"Hard Case Crime wouldn't exist if it weren't for Spillane," says the series' founder and editor, Charles Ardai. "Paperback publishing as we know it wouldn't exist without Spillane."

## Hard-boiled fans

### RESOURCES

#### PHOTOS AND MORE

[Hard Case Crime covers](#)

[More Mike Hammer on the way](#)

#### STARTING A LIFE OF HARD CRIME

We asked publisher Charles Ardai which five Hard Case Crime books we should read to learn what the series is about. He responds:

**Fade to Blonde** by Max Phillips: Our first original novel won the Shamus Award for best paperback novel of the year, was written by one of the founders of the line, and features a beautiful Greg Manchess cover that became iconic for us, as it appeared in dozens of newspapers and magazines at the time of our launch.

**Lucky at Cards** by Lawrence Block: A great example of our penchant for finding long-lost treasures from top writers. Block has won four Edgars and was named a Grandmaster by the Mystery Writers of America. This early novel had never been published under his real name and hadn't appeared in any form for four decades.

**The Confession** by Domenic Stansberry: Winner of the prestigious Edgar Award for best paperback original of the year, this very dark psychological thriller goes

Spillane's huge success forced publishers and booksellers to realize they could no longer ignore the inexpensive paperback format, which had started in 1935. Americans, after four grueling years of World War II, were ready for harder heroes in grittier, racier stories.

Paperbacks supplied both in mass quantities. They depended on high-volume and inexpensive paper to keep their prices low (most sold for 25 cents), thus reaching people who couldn't afford hardbacks. Their pocket size was an added convenience.

Many were terse, rough crime novels featuring eye-grabbing, lurid covers that appealed to the many, mostly male, readers of pulp adventure magazines.

"Mickey had demonstrated there was an audience for tough, hard-boiled, sexy crime stories," Ar dai says. "That is the kind of book Hard Case Crime exists to resurrect, so Spillane is indirectly responsible for Hard Case Crime."

Other retro book series such as Vintage Crime/Black Lizard have brought back old noir and tough-guy classics, but Hard Case Crime also recaptures the original look and size. Their new artwork matches the style — often with more artistic quality — of paperbacks of the 1940s to '60s.

"We find people respond to the covers, in some cases with more excitement than to the stories," says Ar dai, 38, who admits covers were a huge attraction when he was a kid poring through shoe boxes of books at garage sales with his parents.

Today, he adds, "people are not accustomed to seeing covers that are, A: sexy, and B: painted. The old-time artists realized there was more sex appeal in a dangerous-looking woman who has some clothing on than (a naked woman) pouting at you."

Ar dai has used more than a dozen artists to supply his new covers. Of the first 37 books, all but two feature an attractive woman.

"The (six) covers I've done for (Ar dai) are all in oil. He didn't care as long as it has the look of that genre. He wanted covers that felt like they had been lost in a closet 50 years ago," says artist and illustrator Glen Orbik.

"Charles Ar dai has re-invented that (genre style) by bringing back the look of those old time books and making them cool to read," says Houston's David Thompson, publisher of Busted Flush Press, which also does crime book reprints.

## Back in fashion

Thompson, a longtime manager at Murder by the Book, notes a difference in Hard Case's appeal, however.

deep inside the mind of a hunted man who may or may not be a remorseless killer. A good example of the 'noir' side of the pulp spectrum.

Branded Woman by Wade Miller: A rarity — a 1952 crime novel with a strong female lead. Protagonist Cay Morgan is a jewel smuggler hunting down the male rival who burned his initial into her forehead as a warning to stay out of his way. Great suspense by the authors (Wade Miller was two men) of Badge of Evil, which became Orson Welles' classic film noir, Touch of Evil.

Songs Of Innocence by Richard Aleas: A self-serving pick? Perhaps: I did write it, under my "Aleas" alias. But the Washington Post called it "an instant classic" and the San Francisco Chronicle called it "the best thing Hard Case is publishing right now," so I don't feel bad telling people to read it. A story that brings the myth of the private eye into the modern day.

SO YOU THINK YOU'RE A TOUGH GUY?

While other teens were watching Star Wars, future Hard Case Crime editor Charles Ar dai was reading about hard-boiled tough guys in books like these: (Comments by Ar dai.)

The Big Sleep (1939) by Raymond Chandler: He's the man who started it all, and his sentences are breathtaking. The great poet of hard-boiled fiction. Became a classic 1946 film with Humphrey Bogart. Refilmed in 1978.

I, The Jury (1947) by Mickey Spillane: Like a punch to the gut — this is the multimillion-copy bestseller that awakened America to what paperback crime stories could be: sexy, tough, frank, mean and absolutely exhilarating. Filmed in 1953 and 1982.

Eight Million Ways to Die (1982) by Lawrence Sanders: The heir to Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett and Ross Macdonald, Sanders weaves an emotionally devastating story about a battered, alcoholic ex-cop looking for a little justice in a harsh world. A 1986 film starred Jeff Bridges.

The Postman Always Rings Twice (1934) by James M. Cain: The master of intense, electric, super-condensed storytelling in his classic story of adultery and murder. Became a classic 1946 film with Lana Turner, John Garfield. Refilmed in 1981 (Jack Nicholson, Jessica Lange).

The Fabulous Clipjoint (1947) by Fredric

"Back in the 1950s and 1960s the average readers were men," he says. "These books are probably being read by as many women as men. Several of his books have strong women protagonists."

The series has developed a devoted following, many of whom, like prolific Houston crime writer Bill Crider, are subscribers who own every Hard Case book.

"I have no idea why the short, hard-boiled, blue-collar novel went out of fashion," says Crider, whose own collection of retro crime paperbacks numbers in the thousands. "That's the kind of book I've always liked to read."

Many of the Hard Case books are reprints from authors famous in the hard-boiled field — George Axelrod (screenwriter of *The Manchurian Candidate*), David Dodge (*To Catch a Thief*), Lawrence Block (*Eight Million Ways to Die*), Earl Stanley Gardner (*Perry Mason* novels), David Goodis (*Dark Passage*), Donald Hamilton (*Matt Helm* novels), Cornell Woolrich (*Rear Window*), Richard Stark (a pen name of Donald E. Westlake) and Richard S. Prather (*Shell Scott* novels).

Others are original novels written for Hard Case by writers such as Ken Bruen, Jason Starr, Christa Faust (its first female author) and, of course, Spillane. Fan Stephen King wrote *The Colorado Kid* for the series.

Max Allan Collins (*Road to Perdition*), a friend of Spillane who completed the final work on *Dead Street*, has had three of his early crime books republished by Hard Case. He has a new novel, *Deadly Beloved*, based on his famous comic book female detective, Ms. Tree, coming in December. Collins, 59, is old enough to remember the tough-guy paperbacks at their peak.

"Many of us came to grips, so to speak, with our sexuality through those books," he says. "Of course back then, those paperbacks with their racy covers were forbidden fruit. I got in a lot of trouble in the sixth grade for bringing one to school."

## Passion for pulp

Hard Case was launched three years ago by mystery writer Ar dai, former president and CEO of Juno Internet service provider, with the art direction help of novelist and graphic artist Max Phillips.

"We're trying to bring back a style of storytelling I love and you don't see on bookstore shelves much anymore," Ar dai says.

"Our books are 200 to 250 pages, so it's high-velocity storytelling. By the end of page 1 you have a dead body and by page 2 a man's on the run. ... You don't have to wait a hundred pages for something exciting to happen."

*Dead Street* is the 37th volume in the series, which

Brown: A dark horse choice by an underappreciated master. Brown's bloody love song to Chicago is violent and dangerous, but strangely sweet at the same time.

## FROM BINDINGS TO CELLULOID

Tough-guy and noir crime novels have been a rich source for movies. Here, in no particular order, are some of the favorite crime films of Charles Ar dai, editor of *Hard Case Crime*. (Comments by Louis B. Parks.)

*The Last Seduction* (1994): Linda Fiorentino makes one of cinema's wickedest sexy bad girls in a minor noir classic.

*The Big Sleep* (1946): Humphrey Bogart is Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe in Howard Hawk's incredibly entertaining detective classic.

*Chinatown* (1974): That rare noir homage that is a great film, with Jack Nicholson as the nosy detective.

*Out of the Past* (1947): Perhaps the most perfect combo ever of detective and noir, with young Robert Mitchum.

*Touch of Evil* (1958): Incredibly rich, dark, visual noir as only Orson Welles could film it, with Charlton Heston.

*The Godfather, Part II* (1974): Denser, darker than the original, with Al Pacino owning his crime lord role.

*The Vanishing* (Spoonloos, 1988): Scary, fiendish Dutch noir film in which a character's mysterious fate is slowly revealed.

*The Usual Suspects* (1995): Clever, complex, hip noir crime caper with good bad guys and bad, bad guys.

*Get Shorty* (1995): Amusing black comedy with John Travolta as a hood gone Hollywood, Elmore Leonard-style.

*The Fugitive* (1993): Harrison Ford action update of the classic '60s noir TV series. An innocent man is hunted as a killer.

*L.A. Confidential* (1997): Entertaining retro crime saga rises above homage with complexity of plot and characters.

*The Spanish Prisoner* (1997): David Mamet's twisty noir film about folks working a con on an inventor's new program.

*The Sting* (1973): Delightfully clever crime, con and buddy movie with Robert

made a small profit in 2006, far exceeding Ardai's expectations.

"If we had put out a dozen books and never got to a 13th, I could still point to a bookshelf I was really proud of and say, 'I made them.' Max and I each got to write one, we got to work with artists and writers we admired. We never asked for more."

Ardai's own books for *Hard Case*, *Little Girl Lost* and *Song of Innocence*, using his whimsical alias, Richard Aleas, have also received critical praise. They feature a regular-guy New York detective, John Blake, who struggles bravely through tough-guy situations.

"He's small, he wears glasses, he's an intellectual city kid who studies poetry," Ardai says. "I could have written about an ex-Marine who is 6 feet 2 inches and has a buzz cut and big gun, but lots of people have done that, and I didn't think I'd be able to relate to the character."

Ardai keeps having fun. The 42nd book in the series, due next April, is a two-cover double-novel by Psycho author Robert Bloch in the tradition of the highly collectible *Ace Double* series (read one story, flip it over for the other) that ran from the 1950s to the '60s.

Book 50, still in the writing stage is "a fictitious history of *Hard Case Crime*," Ardai says. "It'll tell how *Hard Case Crime* was founded in 1958 by an absolute scoundrel. I'm writing that one."

Is it making anybody rich? No.

"The artists and writers are generally working for lower fees than they would get from a big publishing company," Ardai says. "We are barely turning a profit. But we set out to make books we love and if it's self-sustaining.

"That's a success in my eyes. You won't hear many hard-boiled heroes say this, but money isn't everything."

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Redford and Paul Newman.

*The Narrow Margin* (1952): "B" movie classic with tough cop protecting female witness on a train trip.

*Memento* (2000): Burdened with severe short-term memory loss, a man tracks "backward" to his wife's murderer.

*Rear Window* (1954): Alfred Hitchcock's version of Cornell Woolrich's story turns peeping James Stewart into a suspense hero.

*Body Heat* (1981): Steamy noir with a classic spider woman leading a not so bright or honest man into big trouble.

*The Killing* (1956): Fatalistic crime caper in which plans all go awry. Visual, low-budget early Stanley Kubrick.

*Bound* (1996): Super suspenseful lesbian-erotic noir thriller with female protagonists.

*Strangers on a Train* (1951): A Hitchcock thriller in which two men, one willing, one not, swap murder victims.

#### ON THE WEB

Find more on the books, covers, authors and artists of *Hard Case Crime*, and read chapter excerpts from many novels, at [www.hardcasecrime.com](http://www.hardcasecrime.com).

Houston publisher Busted Flush Press also reprints crime novels, and new crime anthologies, some with a retro look. Check them out at [www.bustedflushpress.com](http://www.bustedflushpress.com).

The [www.thrillingdetective.com](http://www.thrillingdetective.com) site has "biographies," often quite detailed, of hundreds of book, TV, movie and radio tough guy and gal detectives, from Harry Bosch to Sam Spade to Paladin.

Retro crime paperbacks are for sale on many Web sites, including [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com) and [www.alibris.com](http://www.alibris.com). For the most fun, try [www.ebay.com](http://www.ebay.com), and search title and description for something general like "vintage paperback mystery." Most auctions have cover photos. Find cover art of *Ace Double* mysteries at [people.uncw.edu/smithms/ace.html](http://people.uncw.edu/smithms/ace.html).

Many *Hard Case Crime* artists have Web sites that show some of their covers. Glen Orbik's is [www.orbikart.com](http://www.orbikart.com). Robert McGinnis is at [www.mcginnispaintings.com](http://www.mcginnispaintings.com).



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