

**DASHIELL HAMMETT : A Life**  
**by Diane Johnson**

Precisely because it was so singular, Dashiell Hammett's life lends itself to various modes of interpretation. Richard Layman, in the first full-length study of Hammett, "Shadow Man," examined his subject with fundamental soundness from a polite academic distance. In "Hammett: A Life at the Edge," published earlier this year, William Nolan used a zoom lens and, in the relentlessness of his focus on Hammett's charisma, magnified the legend, thus losing the man.

If Layman's respectful account is a faraway melody teasingly half-heard and Nolan's a full-volume shout, Diane Johnson's artful work is an after-hours blues that echoes truth. Her tracking of Hammett's inner life is the most revealing to date.

She begins sure-footedly, finding Hammett at nadir—almost 60, broken-bodied from a lifetime of illness, blocked from writing for 25 years, in jail for contempt of court in those chill days when McCarthyism froze liberal bones. The glamour has long gone out of the Thin Man. No more is he the rich, elegantly dressed bon vivant seen at the right Hollywood parties; he is also far removed from early prominence earned as the creator of a new branch of American literature.

But this is the time when Hammett will courageously rise to heights of will and character. "It is the long black years that prove the spirit," Johnson says of him. Using her considerable novelistic gifts, she takes us back to the beginnings that shaped this contradictory man, and leads us forward to his sad end. In the process, Hammett's complex life is rendered understandable by direct examples that she counterpoints with succinct analysis.

To be sure, Johnson enjoys an advantage over other biographers, having had access to Hammett's papers by his executor and longtime intimate friend, Lillian Hellman. Though she talked at length with this strong-willed keeper of the flame, Johnson takes care to rely on Hammett's own testimony as shown through his correspondence. She also interviewed Hammett's wife and daughters, giving us a mirror image—the subject as seen by those closest to him.

*Authentic* is the word Johnson uses to summarize Hammett. It rings right. Not that Hammett was Sam Spade in the flesh; the fictional detective was more an idealization to which the writer

aspired. Hammett himself, though universally respected, was a man with glaring weaknesses. He drank, gambled, womanized—all in epic proportions. He was a man whose graph of success by worldly standards showed a decided downward slope. He was emotionally blocked, never able to commit himself fully to a relationship with another person. “It was love, real love, that he could never speak of,” concludes Johnson.

But Hammett was also strength personified. He wrote the four novels for which he will be remembered in a compressed creative period of less than three years. He went to jail willingly rather than compromise his principles. “I don't let cops or judges tell me what I think democracy is,” he told Hellman. He gave up drinking—cold turkey—when the doctor told him that booze was killing him.

Years later Hellman remembers asking Hammett how he found the inner resources to quit. He replied: “But I gave my word,” puzzled that anyone could fail to understand how such a statement bound him. In an admittedly romantic sense he can be seen as the incarnation of manly celluloid images—the Waynes, Fondas, Coopers and Stewarts who helped form our real-life responses to adversity and fate. Most simply, Dashiell Hammett was a special man. Johnson sees him as “peculiarly American.”

“At each decade of his life he did the American thing—went West before World War I when young men went West, joined the Army, went West again to San Francisco during the '20s and the heyday of gangsters and Prohibition, went to Hollywood in the glamorous '30s, when Hollywood was at its peak, to war again in the '40s, and in the '50s, during the witch-hunts, to jail. He presented himself gamely to history and bore its depredations cheerfully.”

Johnson fixes on pivotal experiences that shaped Hammett's character. While working for the Pinkerton Agency he was sent to Montana to help break up a miners' strike. The brutal methods his side employed (at one point the young detective was asked to take part in the murder of a labor leader) had the effect of radicalizing Hammett for life.

Johnson explores the origins of Hammett's lifelong distrust of authority, whether it was parental, military or political. Out of his implicitly antagonistic stance (though at times he stoically accepted being subordinate), he created the unwavering rules by which he lived. One did work for oneself, not others, and took pride in it even if the job was cleaning a row of latrines. “You

want to do it as well as you can,” says the Continental Op, talking about his own job in a Hammett story, “otherwise there'd be no sense to it.”

But inner strength may also be a character defect. Hammett was cruelly critical of less talented writers, sarcastically riddling their efforts with acidic reviews. Though well intentioned, he was a failure as a husband and parent, at times abandoning his family with icy confidence that things would be as they had been after he came back.

In the years immediately following World War II, after profound efforts to write again failed to produce more than false starts, Hammett channeled his creative energy into helping Lillian Hellman polish her plays. Hellman recalls a particular speech in a “The Autumn Garden” that he wrote and rewrote, a scene in which a man looks back.

“At any given moment you're only the sum of your life up to then. There are no big moments you can reach unless you've a pile of smaller moments to stand on. That big hour of decision, the turning point in your life, the someday you'd counted on when you'd suddenly wipe out your past mistakes, do the work you'd never done, think the way you'd never thought, have what you'd never had—it just doesn't come suddenly. You've trained yourself for it while you waited—or you've let it all run past you and frittered yourself away. I've frittered myself away.”

Hammett, of course, was summarizing his own life.

Perhaps Johnson's most delicate accomplishment is the fine line between iffy psychologizing and creative analysis. There are two basic ways to approach biography. One is the encyclopedic account that endeavors to record all the minutiae—where the subject was at what time, who paid for lunch—an accretive process designed to sum up a life.

The other—riskier—is the interpretive approach chosen here; the biographer studies the facts and filters them through her own sensibility, looking for significant patterns.

Diane Johnson has done just that with her multifaceted subject and the result is pure light.

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