Raymond Chandler, author of the 1939 novel *The Big Sleep*, famously claimed that his contemporary, Dashiell Hammett (author of *The Maltese Falcon*) had taken murder out of the vicar’s rose garden and given it “back to the kind of people who commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse.” He was having a dig at what he considered the genteel tradition of English detective fiction, above all the province of female writers from the 1930s (Agatha Christie, Marjorie Allingham, etc). His idea was that crimes were committed by people not otherwise living respectable lives, but involved with all manner of shady practice in dubious settings, and often having about them the unmistakable stench of corruption.

His celebrated protagonist, private eye Philip Marlowe, is a figure of non-corrupt, world-weary probity, whose profession often takes him among the scum of society, while he remains untainted. He is not at all saintly – he’s seen too much bad stuff for that – but he has managed to hang on to (while cynically pretending not to be fussed about it) a core of disenchanted integrity as he goes about dealing with assorted blackmailers, nymphomaniacs, murderers, porn-pedlars and run-of-the-mill thugs who routinely carry dangerous weapons.

For people of a certain age, Humphrey Bogart is now perhaps the perfect incarnation on screen of Marlowe, though some would favour the long-forgotten Dick Powell, who played the private eye in *Farewell My Lovely* (1944). Other Marlowes have been Robert Montgomery (*The Lady in the Lake*, 1946), George Montgomery (*The High Window*, 1947), James Garner (*Marlowe*, 1970), Elliott Gould (*The...*)
Masculinist though the ethos of his films is, he also created female characters who earn our respect.

Genre – mystery thriller

Hawks had won a reputation as a filmmaker who understood male camaraderie and explored it across a range of genres, including westerns (Red River, 1947), gangster movies (Scarface, 1932), war films (Air Force, 1943), and science fiction (The Thing from Another World, 1951, co-director). However, he was also adept at screwball comedy, as in Bringing Up Baby (1938), musical comedy (Gentlemen Prefer Blondes, 1953) and romantic comedy (Man’s Favourite Sport, 1963). The point to be made here is that, masculinist though the ethos of his films is, he also created female characters who earn our respect, and the relationships between men and women are treated with a refreshing sense of equality between the sexes. Though no one would describe him as a feminist, he was ahead of his time in representing women as autonomous beings, as capable of self-determination as men, as partners in the sexual and emotional dramas involving men and women.

I stress this matter here because it seems to me that the main appeal of The Big Sleep lies not in its preposterously convoluted plotting but in the growth of the relationship between Marlowe and Vivien Rutledge (Lauren Bacall). I’ll return to this but I wanted to foreground its significance in the genre Hawks is working in here: the private-eye mystery thriller. ‘Genre’ indicates not rules but a loose set of recognizable conventions. The mystery thriller will characteristically have a double action: the series of events that have gone on ‘before’ the film’s start, the matter which sets the film’s narrative in motion; and, second, the investigation which will account for the main action and gradually piece together the information that explains the ‘lack’ or ‘mystery’ which is revealed at the start of the film and accounts for the private eye being engaged. And, as I’ve been suggesting, there’s a third and very important strand here: the gradual emergence of Marlowe and Vivien as a couple.

In The Big Sleep, the crime plot is extraordinarily complicated. It might be a useful (and entertaining) starting-point to list all the murders and other crimes, who committed them and why. Don’t imagine this will be easy. The critic Robin Wood claims: ‘The treatment of plot in Hawks’s film is casual. Hardly anyone can follow it, including apparently Hawks, who maintains that he still doesn’t know who committed one of the murders.’ And William Luhr, writing about Chandler and the movies, confirms this when he recalls the ‘famous story about how neither [screenwriter William] Faulkner nor Hawks was able to figure out who killed the chauffeur, leading Hawks to wire Chandler, who replied that...
he did not know either..." It is amusing to compare these statements (the information was well known at the time) with Chandler’s own comment on the tale told by the Harry Jones character in the novel: ‘It seemed a little too pat. It had the austere simplicity of fiction rather than the tangled woof of fact.’ Chandler can only have had his tongue in his cynical cheek when he wrote that.

The critical issue is this: how much or little does it matter that in this ‘classic film’ (and that is pretty much its status these days, just sixty years after its first release) the plot is at best madly complicated, at worst almost incomprehensible at points? Hawks himself has claimed that what mattered to him was not ‘who had killed whom. It was all what made a good scene.’ The argument that a mystery thriller depends on mystery may not seem a wholly satisfactory answer. The plot gets underway with Marlowe’s accepting a commission from General Sternwood (Charles Waldron) to deal with a blackmailer (and pornographer, as it transpires) who has compromising pictures of the General’s younger, and more wayward, daughter Carmen (Martha Vickers). This job leads Marlowe into a corrupt network involving a very dubious bookshop, a gambling club, a range of paid thugs and duplicitous women, and to a different kind of understanding with the General’s older daughter, Vivian, whose latest husband seems to have run off with the gambling-club owner’s wife … and that list is very incomplete.6

One way of looking at the intricacies of the plot is to consider those whom Marlowe comes to trust, those who deliberately seek to mislead him, and how far he is taken in by such deceits. It may well be that this kind of approach – trying to understand what makes Marlowe tick, what kinds of behaviour he respects and what actually offends him – is more rewarding than attempting to make the usual kind of narrative sense that classic Hollywood cinema is famous for. Consider the bewildering moves of the plot: the killing of Geiger; Carmen’s presence at the crime; the seizing of Geiger’s files by Joe Brody, whom the General has once paid $500 to leave his daughter alone; the strange bond (or is it?) between Vivian and gambling boss Eddie Mars (John Ridgely); the killing of little Harry Jones (Elisha Cook Jr), who has become the lover of Geiger’s former manageress, and so on. It seems to me that the answers to the mystery thriller puzzles inherent in these and other developments are considerably less vital to one’s interest, or even entertainment,
than the gradual revelation of Marlowe’s character and the rapprochement between him and Vivian.

The usual elements of the mystery thriller are present. There is a problem that needs solving, in this case getting rid of Geiger’s blackmailing threat, a problem that proves to belong to a whole web of corruption surrounding the Sternwood family, especially through Carmen’s fast-living sexual predatoriness and slack morality. In his attempts to carry out his original commission, the detective’s quest for the truth brings him in contact with a lot of people of questionable morals, but he can’t afford to be too fussy about his sources. But The Big Sleep is not just a thriller; it is a thriller in a special movie style. It is one of a notable stream of wartime and post-war Hollywood films in the style that came to be known as film noir.

**Style – film noir**

Sometimes film noir (literally, ‘black film’) is spoken of as if it referred to a genre of film, whereas it is more accurately seen as a style that can operate across a range of genres. Certainly, many of the most famous thrillers of the period, such as Double Indemnity (1944) and Out of the Past (1947) are in the noir style; but so are such romantic melodramas as Laura (1944) and Gilda (1946), westerns such as My Darling Clementine (1946) and Pursued (1947), gothic thrillers such as The Spiral Staircase (1946) and psychological dramas such as Spellbound (1945) and The Locket (1947). This is an uncommonly rich period of Hollywood filmmaking and the more one reflects on its richness, and its diversity, the more one comes to see the noir style as a key contributing element. (Not that the phenomenon was limited to Hollywood: for example, some of the most seductive films ever made in Britain, whether romantic dramas such as Brief Encounter [1945], or thrillers of postwar corruption such as The Third Man [1949], owe much of their fascination to their deployment of noir stylistics.)

So, what are some of the distinguishing traits of the film noir? Andrew Spicer, in his excellent introductory study Film Noir, makes the following crucial point: ‘Any attempt at defining film noir solely through its “essential” formal components proved to be reductive and unsatisfactory because film noir … also involves a sensibility, a particular way of looking at the world.’ There is no space here for a detailed treatment of this matter, but it is important to note that the noir mode involves both the look and sound of the film and the kind of world it evokes. The two are of course connected. As in The Big Sleep, there is a characteristic stress on the urban, the nocturnal and the foggy in the visual surface of the noir world, all depicted through a preponderance of low-key lighting which stresses the shadowiness of the ambiances in which the characters move, and frequently intensified by a moody musical score. The noir thriller is typically located in large cities, its settings often including dingy offices, dark alleys, nightclubs, and, when more opulent locations are represented, such as the Sternwood mansion, there is usually a sense of corruption about them. Notice here how easy it is to move from talking about the way the film looks and sounds to the kind of world with which it is concerned.

Try to imagine how different The Big Sleep would feel if it were set among the cheerful bustle of brightly-lit daytime streets to the accompaniment of a chirpy musical soundtrack. The point is that the style both mirrors and helps to create the sense of a disillusioned world in which duplicity, betrayal, decadence and murder are the order of the day, and against which the Marlowe figure is, by contrast, seen increasingly to stand for something decent. Just remember, as a small instance, his telling the double-crossing Agnes that ‘The little man [Jones] died to keep you out of trouble’. He can recognize and appreciate the small shafts of light that briefly illuminate this mainly unlovely world. The troubled society of World War Two and its aftermath produced a ‘hero’ altogether more complex than had commonly been the case in popular filmmaking, and part of that complexity lay in his noting man’s darker possibilities, but managing to stay clear of indulging in them as he goes about his business. Not for nothing were the protagonists of post-war films noir very often disaffected veterans finding difficulty in taking up the threads of their lives again in the peace-time world.

**A love story – on and off the screen**

A great deal of publicity attended the off-screen love affair and marriage of 44-year-old Humphrey Bogart and 20-year-old Lauren Bacall, after the pair emerged as a potent new romantic team in Howard Hawks’s 1944 romantic melodrama To Have and Have Not. The first audiences of The Big Sleep would have had this intertextual information in mind; it would indeed have been a major source of anticipation for the 1945 film, more potent for most filmgoers than the prospect of an adaptation from Chandler’s ‘hard-boiled’ detective story, and it appears to have interested Hawks more than the convolutions of the murder-mystery plotting. To see how this romantic element is developed, it is important to look carefully at several key scenes: obviously the first meeting in Vivian’s plushy bedroom at the Sternwood house; the episode in Marlowe’s office when she sits close to him and he won’t tell her what her father has hired him to do; the nightclub encounter when the sexual challenge in their conversation is rendered not only through the dialogue but also through the preponderance of ‘two-shots’ as a means of conveying a move towards intimacy; the series of shots in the car after they leave Eddie Mars’s club, when they first kiss though Marlowe still persists in his professional enquiries; and the penultimate episode in Mars’s house when she says: ‘I guess I’m in love with you’ and he returns the remark a few minutes later.

The character of Vivian has a depth Chandler hasn’t given her. The early cool insolence of her dealings with Marlowe and her attempts to manipulate him come up against...
something more centrally honest than she has usually found among acquaintances and lovers. She responds with a growing unsentimental tenderness that he returns, and his esteem for her is reinforced by his awareness of how she has tried to protect her sister, just as hers for him takes in his respect for her father’s wishes. When she kisses Marlowe prior to cutting his ropes at the remote ranch house, there is a new gentleness in the music and the camera moves in discreetly but purposefully to register the emotional importance of the moment.

This necessarily brief account of the film has concentrated on a few inescapably important elements in this ‘violent, smoky cocktail’ of a movie.9 A full appreciation of it would pay closer attention than I’ve had room for to such matters as the way the dialogue crackles (novelist William Faulkner had a hand in it, along with Hollywood veterans Jules Furtham and Leigh Brackett), the contribution made by the noir-influenced cinematography of Sid Hickox, and Max Steiner’s insidiously romantic score. David Thomson, who has written a book-length study of the film,10 has said elsewhere that The Big Sleep and To Have and Have Not ‘are really love stories’.11 Reflecting on this assessment might be as good a way as any of coming to terms with this beguiling film.

BRIAN McFARLANE is the compiler, editor and chief author of The Encyclopedia of British Film (2nd edition, 2005) and the editor of The Cinema of Britain and Ireland (2005).

Endnotes
5 Luhr, op. cit., p.124.
6 For a useful summary of the plot, see Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward, Film Noir: Secker and Warburg, London, 1980, p.33.
7 For a comprehensive list of films in the noir style, both Hollywood and other, see Andrew Spicer, Film Noir, Pearson Education, Harlow, Essex, 2002, pp.226–238.
8 Spicer’s book is probably the best place to start in coming to terms with film noir, being both comprehensive in scope and readable in style.