

Arts & Letters

FILM

[Kiss Kiss Bang Bang]

Chandler's Long Shadow

By Steve Sailer

"KISS KISS BANG BANG" is a comic tribute to two of the richest veins of American pop culture during the last century: the hard-boiled Hollywood private-eye novel, invented by Raymond Chandler in 1939's *The Big Sleep*, and its cousin, the LAPD mismatched buddy-cop movie, honed to commercial perfection by screenwriter Shane Black in 1987's "Lethal Weapon."

After making himself perhaps the highest paid and most despised screenwriter, Black disappeared a decade ago. Now, Black is back with a loving spoof of the Chandlerian tradition, an ingenious, self-satirical contrivance that would be incomprehensible to anyone not familiar with Chandler's glorious cinematic offspring, such as "Chinatown," "Blade Runner," "L.A. Confidential," and "The Big Lebowski." Indeed, "Kiss Kiss Bang Bang" is so fast-paced and convoluted that it's close to impenetrable, period. As in Chandler's Philip Marlowe novels, figuring out whodunnit takes a backseat to just enjoying the ride.

To play his detective leads, Black was able to cheaply hire two of the most gifted but least trustworthy stars, Robert Downey Jr. and Val Kilmer. When just a small boy, Downey began receiving recreational drugs from his father, the leftist director of "Putney Swope." His abusive upbringing appears to have

rewired his brain, connecting it directly to his mouth, making him superhumanly articulate but also deactivating all the normal circuits for self-restraint and common sense. Watching this wounded man-child play a lovable loser to perfection resembles what it must have been like listening to the great castrati sing arias—simultaneously awe-inspiring and guilt-inducing.

The Los Angeles detective tale has attracted some of the finest masculine storytelling talent of the last three generations, both filmmakers and crime novelists such as Ross Macdonald and Walter Mosley. Yet Chandler's legacy is often misunderstood.

In 1930, Dashiell Hammett took the detective story out of the country estate drawing room with *The Maltese Falcon*. It was exactly the kind of nonliterary novel that adapts well for the screen. Indeed, John Huston's first draft for his classic 1941 movie with Humphrey Bogart as Sam Spade was merely Hammett's book retyped in screenplay format. Still, as Chandler noted, Hammett's language "had no overtones, left no echo, evoked no image beyond a distant hill."

Chandler taught himself to write pulp fiction in Hammett's style, but, armed with his Proustian eye for evocative detail, his aesthetic ambitions were higher. In *The Big Sleep* and his 1940 masterpiece *Farewell, My Lovely*, Chandler devised a new, endlessly imitated prose style that lifted the detective story to an unexpected level of artistry.

The French term *film noir* for movies such as 1944's "Double Indemnity" (for which Chandler rewrote James M. Cain's dialogue) and the 1946 adaptation of "The Big Sleep" has perpetually confused thinking about Chandler's books by implying that they are morally and visually dark. In reality, the bad guys

serve as contrasting backdrop for Chandler's shining hero Marlowe, of whom the author idealistically proclaimed, "In everything that can be called art there is a quality of redemption. ... Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid."

Nor is the L.A. of Chandler's pages the dingy, underlit Warner Bros. backlot of '40s *film noir*. The gorgeousness of Chandler's vision wasn't transferred to the screen until 1974 in Roman Polanski's "Chinatown." The celebrated plot is largely Watergate-era tosh—millions now believe that the great aqueduct engineer William Mulholland impregnated his daughter—of which even its screenwriter, Robert Towne, has grown increasingly embarrassed. Yet "Chinatown's" cinematography revealed how beautiful Los Angeles had been before smog enveloped it during the World War II boom.

While "Chinatown" embodied L.A.'s past, in 1982 "Blade Runner" indelibly envisioned for L.A. a dystopian future unleashed by uncontrolled immigration.

"Kiss Kiss Bang Bang" is a much slighter effort than those two monumental films. Nor is it quite up to the standard set by the Coen Brothers' shaggy-dog version of Chandler, "The Big Lebowski," which is now generally thought the most hilarious film of the '90s. Still, "Kiss Kiss" is as smart and funny as any film so far this year.

The question this minor masterpiece of mannerism raises and can't answer is whether the L.A. detective genre has become so barnacled with past greatness that it's inevitable that all new renditions will similarly end up being about their predecessors rather than about anything remotely resembling real life. ■

Rated R for language, violence, and sexuality/nudity.

BOOKS

[*Thomas Paine and the Promise of America*, Harvey J. Kaye, Hill and Wang, 326 pages]

American Revolutionist

By Daniel McCarthy

IN A SMALL WAY, this book attempts to do for the Left what *The Conservative Mind* did for the Right half a century ago. Back then, nothing seemed so un-American as conservatism, the political philosophy of a Metternich or a Bismarck rather than an Adams or a Madison. Even Sen. Robert A. Taft, "Mr. Republican," called himself a liberal. Today, tides of political fashion having turned, Harvey Kaye finds himself having to make the case that liberalism is no late transplant to these shores but has roots in soil as deep and old as the Revolution itself.

To do that, Kaye, a professor of Social Change and Development at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, returns to the life and thought of Thomas Paine, whose near-impeccable credentials as a radical make him a suitable Founding Father of the American Left. But the works and ways of Paine are only half of this book; like Russell Kirk, Kaye sets out to trace a genealogy, one that runs from Abraham Lincoln and Robert Owen through women's suffragists and Franklin Roosevelt down to the present day. As Kaye would have it, the spirit and example of Paine have informed almost all of America's progressive movements.

Conservatives, though not Kaye's intended audience, stand to profit in two ways from his efforts. In reminding us of the radical tendencies of the American Revolution, Kaye indirectly furnishes an explanation for the surprising popularity of neoconservative ideology. The

sons of Podhoretz, metaphorically speaking, may find much of American history as remote from their concerns as the War of the Roses, but their universalist aspirations and ardor for global revolution stir some of the same passions in the American psyche that Paine once inflamed. "The true idea of a great nation, is that which promotes and extends the principles of universal society," Paine wrote in his *Letter to the Abbé Raynal*, and eventually he came to favor exporting the French Revolution to Prussia and Austria by force of arms.

The second service Kaye renders to the Right is to shake us out of the complacent belief that our own Revolution was entirely conservative. Paine, through *Common Sense* and *The Crisis*, was as integral to the Revolution as was Lexington and Concord, and the radicalism of Burke's pamphleteering foe is in no doubt. While other rebellious colonial Englishmen still spared King George the brunt of their criticism and prayed for rapprochement, Paine demanded independence and a republic. He went further, too, beyond the point where most Americans were willing to follow him, calling for the abolition of slavery, universal male suffrage, and a progressive land tax. When, after the Revolution, he assailed organized religion in *The Age of Reason*, Paine cost himself much of the esteem in which he had been held by the American public. But even then, he gave eloquent voice to a persistent minority. Kaye is convincing when he argues that there has always been a Paine strain in the American character. Such a strain surely is not conservative, though one may question whether it is as liberal, in the modern sense, as Kaye believes.

The biographical half of Kaye's book is compelling. He sketches Paine's life deftly and sympathetically; Paine makes a plausible working-class hero, which is just what Kaye would have him be. Born in 1737, Paine was the son of a Quaker and an Anglican, ensuring him an early acquaintance with Britain's political-religious conflicts. As a young man he held a variety of mostly low-paying jobs, as corsetmaker, sailor, small-shop keeper,

and excise officer. He lost the shop and his excise position in 1773, and with the breakup of his second marriage, nothing remained to tie him to his country. The following year, carrying a letter of introduction from Benjamin Franklin, he came to America. Soon he made a new life for himself as journalist-cum-propagandist, becoming editor of *The Pennsylvania Magazine* almost immediately and more than doubling its circulation, turning it into the best-selling magazine in the colonies. And that, of course, was only the beginning.

For all that *Common Sense* and *The Crisis* did for the cause of independence, Paine made enemies among his new countrymen, most notably, in Kaye's account, the snobbish Gouverneur Morris, who after the Revolution characterized Paine—in Congress, no less—as "a mere adventurer from England, without fortune, without family or connexions, ignorant even of grammar." Morris would very nearly be the death of Paine in 1793, when as American minister at Paris he made only the feeblest efforts to have Paine released from the prison into which the Jacobins had clapped him.

The French had feted Paine when he came to them the previous year, awarding him honorary citizenship and, upon his arrival in Calais, making him a representative to the National Assembly. There he was closer to the Girondins than the Jacobins, and not long after Robespierre's ascent, Paine, now a "foreign conspirator," was imprisoned. He would have been executed, too, had Robespierre not preceded him to the guillotine. With James Monroe succeeding Morris in Paris, an ailing Paine was soon released into the care of the future president and his wife. The episode neatly illustrates—though Kaye does not dwell on it—the propensity of revolution to consume its own, in this case threatening to devour not its offspring but its spiritual forebear.

Kaye's account of the ideological struggle taking place in America while Paine languished in France holds just as much interest. In his telling, the work of