

Day of the Guns Short Guide

Day of the Guns by Mickey Spillane

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Characters

The characters in *Day of the Guns* will seem familiar to readers of Spillane's other novels. Tiger Mann is a hard-hitting, ex-OSS officer who now works for a mysterious quasi-governmental agency called IATS. He is basically Mike Hammer re-dressed as a spy with both Mike's personal traits and political loyalties intact. His boss at the agency is Colonel Charlie Corbinet, who was also his superior officer in the OSS during the war. Just as in real life ex-OSS officers staffed the newly created CIA after World War II, Spillane's spy organization is full of ex-military men. There are lots of other functionaries from IATS who play minor roles in the fiction, but one deserves special mention: Ernie Bentley is the guy who invents all sorts of gee-whiz gadgets much like James Bond used in Ian Fleming's spy series.

In the novel there are two major female figures. The first is Edith Caine, the younger sister of Diana Caine who was a Nazi spy working under the name of Rondine Lund and who was Tiger's war-time lover. During their last rendezvous she shot him twice in the stomach and left him for dead.

Tiger spends most of the novel thinking that Edith is Rondine who has had plastic surgery to make her look younger. Edith works at the United Nations where there is a security leak Tiger is supposed to plug. He suspects that Edith is the cause of the breach in security. While he is investigating Edith and threatening to kill her the way she tried to kill him, Tiger meets and falls in love with Edith's friend, Gretchen Lark, an artist who lives in Greenwich Village. Their relationship develops in predictable ways, and Tiger eventually fantasizes about getting married and having a family. In the surprise ending to the novel, Gretchen betrays Tiger by turning out to be the real spy mastermind, who is diverting secrets at the UN, and Edith turns out to be who she says she is, Diana's younger sister and a loyal British subject.

Vidor Churis is the chief Soviet agent; he has a deformed hand caused by an earlier encounter with Tiger when Tiger shot a gun out of it. We see little of Vidor; he primarily just lurks on the periphery of the narrative until the final showdown. Wally Gibbs is a newspaper man who writes a Broadway column for *The News* and often supplies Tiger with inside information.

There are several diplomats that figure as possible sources of the security leaks, the most important of which is Burton Selwich, a starchy British type and head of his delegation. He is the target of Gretchen's attempts to disrupt the peace processes of the UN.



Social Concerns

Day of the Guns was the first of a new series featuring Tiger Mann, Spillane's American James Bond. Although he had Mike Hammer on occasion investigate communism in America, most notably in *One Lonely Night* (1951), where he slaughters a whole warehouse full of commie agents, it was in his spy series, which he began in the mid-1960s, that Spillane really opened up the genre. As many critics have pointed out, Tiger Mann is really Mike Hammer as a secret agent, but, for that matter, all of Spillane's heroes are just Mike Hammer clones who use the same methods of detection, are as violent, and pursue women with an identical single-mindedness. Spillane even went so far in plotting *Day of the Guns* to recycle many of the events of *I, the Jury* (1947), complete with the strip tease conclusion, but this time with a happy ending.

In the opening of the novel, Tiger Mann, who has worked in various capacities for several secret government agencies, becomes embroiled in an investigation of a female spy he believes to have been a lost love of his, Rondine Lund, a double agent from the immediate postwar years in Europe when he was Nazi hunting. The plot of the novel includes an attempt to blow up a government building in Washington and a double, double-cross of agents in which Tiger is forced to reexamine and eventually relive his own emotional death over his lost love. As with other Spillane novels, the author presents his readers with a complicated message about women. Tiger, like Mike Hammer, encounters women portrayed as the stock characters of both the virgin and the whore in the course of his investigation. Both men exhibit a firm adherence to the double standard by bedding the women who "do" while remaining celibate with the women they intend to marry. It is a strangely adolescent and quite old-fashioned view of women and sex, which coming in a work of fiction heavily larded with violence and gutsy "realism" seems oddly quaint. In the end, however, Tiger Mann proves to be no James Bond, at least where the women are concerned, because he simply lacks most of O07's predatory instincts.

Once again, Spillane also uses his secret agent to attack and ridicule the bureaucratic elements of government and the law. Preferring to be free of constraints, Tiger Mann operates outside the usual legal channels and is thereby more successful at thwarting the forces of evil. Like Mike Hammer he finds his way around such confining niceties as the usual search and seizure protocols. Being an undercover agent for a clandestine government agency, similar to the CIA, also gives him some back-up in dealing with the authorities when he runs afoul of them. Like Hammer's policeman friend, Pat Chambers, Tiger has Colonel Charlie Corbinet, his old OSS boss, to run interference for him on occasion.

The social concerns remain relatively constant in most of Spillane's fiction.

He juggles the characters a bit, twists the plot, and here and there plays with the organizations represented by the bad guys, but in general Spillane focuses on the set of concerns he first laid out in *I, the Jury* back in the late 1940s. Some critics have accused him of writing the same novel over and over, while others recognize the mythic

formulation of his plots which contain stories which over and over again reveal the preoccupation and fears of the Cold War. These concerns are so pervasive that they seem to crowd out all other concerns, to shape the narrative so completely that they leave little room for examining anything else. It is Spillane's special achievement to have pursued in his fiction, as obsessively as the culture did, these few major preoccupations and to have exposed how such obsessions warped and distorted an entire generation's view of the world.

Techniques

Although Spillane's writing has gotten smoother through the years, his fiction still retains the direct, spare style which best suits the action and characters of his narratives. As with the Mike Hammer books, it is often raining in Tiger Mann's New York, but Spillane does not spend much time waxing poetic about it; he just tells his readers that it is wet outside. The dialogue is smooth and retains the staccato rhythms Spillane developed earlier. Tiger Mann, like Mike Hammer, is a man of more action than words.

As with the Hammer books, Spillane uses names to signify characteristics: Tiger Mann is obviously one tiger of a man as the females in the books occasionally mention. In the spy novels most of the evil figures have foreign sounding names, like Vidor Churis, to accompany their suitably alien personae. Many of the other minor characters possess names which also reflect facets of their personalities. It is a stylistic device Spillane has employed from the beginning.

Themes

The primary theme in this novel is the conflict between the two great powers of the United States and the Soviet Union, the forces of light and of darkness and the subsidiary themes of betrayal, loyalty, and freedom which spin off from the primary conflict. Like his predecessor, Tiger Mann fights to protect the liberty of the common people in the streets, and he is willing to go to any means to keep that freedom alive. He is unconcerned with the delicacies of diplomacy, because they so often end in betrayal by those who at first seem to be our allies if not our friends. He trusts no one because his experience has been that to trust is to expose weakness which makes for vulnerability and the possibility of defeat.

As so often is true in his other novels, Spillane in the Tiger Mann series personalizes his themes in the life of his central characters, often in the form of their attachments to women. The surprise ending to this novel allows Tiger to experience both betrayal and reward for following his loyalties.

Spillane remarked once in an interview, that there are no winners and losers in his fiction and in life, only some who lose less than others. This seems a rather existential statement for someone who seems to deny the importance of the intellectual.

Adaptations

Although at first glance, it would appear that the Tiger Mann novels would make perfect movies, perhaps their lack of exotic locales, already preempted by Fleming, made them less than desirable film properties. In any event, none of them was adapted for the screen.



Key Questions

The broad popularity of Spillane's books may not transfer easily to contemporary readers who may find the books too sexist, racist, and homophobic for their sensibilities but such a disjunction may be the point to stress.

How did these books achieve such sales numbers if people did not agree or at least were not bothered by such social and political attitudes? Perhaps the starting point for any discussion of Spillane's work involves an analysis of his books as a measure of the cultural attitudes of his audience.

1. In what ways is Tiger Mann like James Bond? You might take as two central issues their attitudes towards women and their violence.
2. How do Spillane's spy novels compare to others you have read?
3. What issues of international concern does Spillane explore in *Day of the Guns*?
4. In what ways does the "International Communist Conspiracy" stand in for other, more parochial issues closer to home?
5. What do you make of the switch ending in which the "good" woman suddenly turns evil and the "bad" woman turns out to refute Tiger's beliefs and is the one he loves after all?
6. How is the Tiger Mann novel just like a Mike Hammer one in a slightly different guise? What do you make of this?
7. Discuss the various traits of the Russian (earlier Nazi) spies. How does Spillane describe them so that they appear evil?
8. In 1964, the year the novel appeared, Lyndon Johnson defeated Barry Goldwater for the presidency and one of the main things used against Goldwater was his perceived extreme views about Cold War politics. How does that fact stack up against the attitudes expressed in this spy thriller?
9. Reading this novel in the aftermath of the Cold War can provide us with a real perspective on the paranoia and fears of the period. How do you respond to the book from a more distanced view?
10. The whole idea of "spying," with all of its secrets, hidden agendas, and deceit, provides a kind of metaphor for much of the twentieth century's fiction which has been fascinated with the interior and hidden. How then can "spy" fiction provide a kind of object lesson for contemporary readers?

Literary Precedents

Since the Tiger Mann books are spy novels and began as a series in the 1960s, the most obvious comparison with them would have to be Ian Fleming's hugely popular spy thrillers featuring British agent 007, James Bond.

Unlike the Bond books, however, Spillane's Tiger Mann sticks pretty close to home and does not travel all over the globe searching out enemy agents. Like Bond, though, Tiger is run by one head operative, Colonel Charlie Corbinet, who often covers for him with higher ups when he has violated international law or transgressed the pleasantries of the old boy network. Like M, Bond's boss, Colonel Corbinet most of the time secretly approves of Tiger's extralegal procedures, and like M, he disapproves of Tiger's womanizing and general way of life.

There developed an entire genre of spy writing in the wake of the James Bond phenomenon; some were direct clones of the popular series, with others hearkening back to the interwar spy stories of Eric Ambler, John Buchan, and Somerset Maugham. The sexually reticent, low-key violence of these earlier novels are especially evident in the espionage novels of John Le Carre.

Tiger Mann retains closer ties to the Bond tradition, but in no way can Spillane's series be described as a rip-off of Fleming's, because, although the Tiger Mann books did not appear until the 1960s, Mike Hammer was created years before Fleming's first novel in 1954.

Tiger is too solidly developed a character-type of Spillane's.

Related Titles

Spillane wrote only four Tiger Mann novels: *Day of the Gun* (1964), *Bloody Sunrise* (1965), *The Death Dealers* (1965), and *The By-Pass Control* (1967). Although the series sold well (almost all of Spillane's books have sold well) they did not by any means equal the Mike Hammer series in popularity. By the late 1960s, Spillane was interested in developing some of his nonseries ideas.

The genesis for wanting to branch out a bit probably developed during the 1950s when he temporarily stopped writing Mike Hammer novels and spent almost ten years working on shorter fiction for the men's magazine market, a period when he was released from the series restrictions and could expand his characters and plot ideas.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994