

# The Erection Set Short Guide

## The Erection Set by Mickey Spillane

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# Characters

Dog Kelly is like other Spillane heroes, a man of action with a violent past associated with the war in Europe and membership in some sort of clandestine, shadowy operation abroad. He retains many of the old Mike Hammer/Tiger Mann characteristics: He is physically tough (a killer on occasion), predatory with women (although perhaps somewhat less so), smart and resourceful at outwitting his enemies (this time using more legal means), and oddly sentimental. Sharon Cass is the younger woman who loves Dog, which she has for years but from afar we learn later, and who is willing to be tough herself if it will help her man and keep them together. Unlike other Spillane novels *The Erection Set* does not end on a tragic note. The hero's lover does not betray him, and it appears as though that Sharon and Dog will be able to get married and live a more or less normal life at the conclusion of the narrative.

There is an older, avuncular fatherfigure, in this case the family lawyer, Leyland Hunter, who helps to bail out Dog when he finds himself hemmed in by the people he is trying to defeat.

There are a number of Dog's ne'er-dowell cousins who are alcoholic and sexually repressed with their equally bent wives and who serve as foils for Dog's financial takeover of the family company. And finally there are usual collection of baddies, in this case headed by corporate takeover artist Cross McMillan, Dog's boyhood nemesis who desperately wants Barrin Industries in order to wreak revenge for the injuries inflicted on him, especially by Dog, when they were children. The sexually available women are portrayed by McMillan's wife, Sheila, and Rose Porter, a hooker friend of Dog's army buddy, Lee Shay. They both sleep with Dog: Sheila for revenge and Rose for recreation.

There are a shadowy bunch of thugs involved in the drug trade which was once the object of Dog's undercover operation in Europe. They are slowly removed from the scene as the tensions heat up between them and the local Mafia bosses over a lost load of heroin.

Eventually, they manage to eliminate each other, freeing Dog finally from his past life and the dangers of reprisals for his work against them.



## Social Concerns

The *Erection Set* is Mickey Spillane's longest and in many ways, most complicated novel. In the first place substantial portions of it take place outside New York City in the aging New England industrial town of Linton where the central character's maternal grandfather, Cameron Barrin, founded his company. Dogeron (Dog) Kelly was conceived out of wedlock to the daughter of the old buccaneer, and, although his parents did formalize their relationship before he was born, Dog remains the wayward offspring.

Much of *The Erection Set* deals with economic classes and the tensions between those who have and those who do not have money. The theme of wealth appears in most of Spillane's fiction, and his central characters reject both the cash and those who have it. In this novel, though, the question of class and family takes on a central position, because, unlike Mike Hammer or Tiger Mann, Dog Kelly was born into a wealthy family.

At the beginning of the narrative, Dog has returned from a mysterious past in Europe with a great deal of money and an unaccountable interest in the family business. As becomes apparent, he is intent on buying controlling interest in the aging and financially strapped firm from his imprudent cousins who have mismanaged it into near bankruptcy. In the process Dog hopes to bring back the company so that he can restore some measure of prosperity to the inhabitants of Linton.

The novel spends more time than is usual in a Spillane fiction exploring the lives of secondary characters who in this case are workers deprived of their jobs by the cutthroat style of modern corporate administration. Spillane levels a good deal of criticism at the take-over, buy-out management style which deprives workers of pensions and jobs in favor of enriching corporate executives and stock holders. As a predictor of things to come, *The Erection Set* was about ten years ahead of its time.

In this novel, Mickey Spillane shifts the menace threatening society from the hoods on the streets or the communists in the background to the managers in the board room. The groups that pose the greatest threat to workingclass Americans keep becoming more and more slippery and more and more ingrained in the system. It is a fascinating movement within the Spillane canon.

# Techniques

Besides being the longest Spillane novel, *The Erection Set* is among the best written. Longer, more descriptive passages replace the short, dialoguedriven earlier prose, and rather than relying on the terse sketchy accounts of the weather or the locale, Spillane uses detailed, extensive renderings to set the scene. The departure from his usual style may be because the novel ranges outside the normal Spillane terrain.

The small town milieu is not Mike Hammer's usual turf, and when appropriating it for *The Erection Set*, Spillane may have felt that a more descriptive style was needed.

Another peculiarity of the novel are the "Reflections," or internal dialogues, given to various individual characters.

They allow Spillane to insert the thoughts of others in his first-person narrative. Most of them are about Dog, and they reveal not only what the other characters are thinking but also something of their own psychology, which is often missing in first-person narratives and is one of its drawbacks.

Finally, by writing a novel that does not fit into a series, Spillane retained a certain freedom in his characterization and created a tension in his readers not usually available in series novels. The audience does not know much about Dog, nor have any context for him, and the other characters are also unfamiliar, although any reader of Spillane's other novels would recognize the various character types he had created over the years. The use of the small town for much of the action of the novel also was new in Mickey Spillane novels.

The fact that the hero's principal female interest does not betray him and is not killed in the end was also an unusual feature. Unfortunately, Spillane did not follow up on the experiments of *The Erection Set*, and after one more novel, *The Last Cop Out* (1973), published the following year, he has released only one more Mike Hammer book and two juvenile fictions.

# Themes

Many of the old Spillane themes as well are present in this early 1970s novel. The characters reprise traditional Spillane figures, embodying traits of the old Mike Hammer gang.

Dog, for all his background, appears uncannily like both Tiger and Mike.

Violence still occupies a central place in the novel, and sex figures even more centrally, largely, one suspects, the result of loosening restrictions on what could and could not be published.

What is new in *The Erection Set* is the place accorded to the role of the family. Dog's family, for obvious reasons, is center stage, but the novel also focuses on the working-class family of Sharon Cass, who is from Linton as well, although she is from town and not from the set who frequented the Barrin's mansion. In addition, the novel deals with various members of the local community such as ex-workers, bartenders, and the local madam. There are odd elements of the milltown novel made infamous by such working-class writers as Grace Metalious, whose book *Peyton Place* (1956) was a blockbuster best seller in the mid-1950s.

Finally, there is a subplot about the making of a movie in Linton, which gives Spillane the opportunity to write about movies and the people who make them. Given his own experiences in filmmaking such a subplot might supply some interesting insights into the author's own feelings about the industry.



## Key Questions

Since *The Execution Set* departs from the tight format of his series fiction, it might be worth while when discussing this novel to range beyond the mystery/crime genres in drawing comparisons. Think of this book as an American novel with broader social and cultural concerns rather than just another hard-boiled detective story or spy thriller.

1. Discuss the book in the context of other twentieth-century small town exposes.
2. In spite of its differences, however, how does *The Execution Set* compare to the other Spillane novels you have read?
3. What differences from the earlier novels do you perceive in Spillane's treatment of women or of other minority groups in the book?
4. How does the place of family work in the book? Why is there so much emphasis on this thematic concern?
5. The past always plays some role in determining the events of the present in Spillane's work. How does it do so in this novel?
6. What do you make of the ending here? Why did Spillane make changes in his usual finale, in which his hero loses or kills the woman he is about to marry, to supply it with a happy ending?
7. One of the evildoers is a takeover businessman. Does this novel include a critique of contemporary capitalism?
8. To following up on the previous question, why is there so much detail on the class system, not only in smalltown life, but in general in American society?
9. Why has Spillane included the subplot about making a movie in Linton? How does this work in the popular media and what does the author say about it in this book?
10. What does the story's more explicit sexuality do to alter the image of the Spillane novel and sexual image of the main character?

## Literary Precedents

The *Erection Set* is clearly marked by the distinguishing features of other Spillane fiction in characterization, plot, and themes, but it also departs sufficiently from the usual Spillane territory to suggest other related works of fiction. Certainly, the expose novel of small town life such as Metalious' *Peyton Place*, Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), or Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* (1920), come immediately to mind. Linton serves as a metaphor for the omnipresence of corruption in modern American life and serves to suggest that evil is not confined to the city and may lurk below the surface of even the most placid of settings.

A good deal of twentieth-century American writing has been devoted to debunking the moral virtues of small town living which was traditionally contrasted to more corrupt urban life, a literary convention which first appeared at the beginnings of the nineteenth century in the fiction of Charles Brockden Brown. The idea of American particularism, which stressed the special nature of the American experience, emphasized the virtues of living away from the temptations and evils of the city experience. Modern writers have done much to deflate this notion of the isolation of moral virtue.



## Related Titles

Although he is best known for his series fiction, primarily the Mike Hammer books but also the spy series with Tiger Mann, Mickey Spillane also has written a number of novellas and a couple of dozen short stories, which he collected in several volumes released both here and in the United Kingdom.

These non-series works provided a wider scope for Spillane's writing talent and the later novels, like *The Erection Set* and *The Last Cop Out*, exhibit that skill on a larger scale.

That he has not written more in this vein may be explained by his often quoted remarks about being a typewriter for hire. Like the famous English eighteenth-century writer, Samuel Johnson (who said, "No Man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money"), Spillane believes in writing for the cash, and since the Mike Hammer books scored such a spectacular success, he concentrated on the series fiction. But the curious fact that he turned in the early 1950s to writing for a much less lucrative market in the men's magazines also may reveal his need as an author to branch out in his fiction.



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