

# I, the Jury Short Guide

## I, the Jury by Mickey Spillane

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# Characters

First and foremost Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer novels are centered on Mike, an ex-GI turned private eye with a penchant for curing societies' social ills, particularly through violent, direct action. From *I, the Jury*, the first of the series, Mike was fully drawn and did not really change much over the run of the books. He is a harddrinking, tough-minded shamus given to sentimentally becoming involved with women, often to his later regret.

Mike's partner in crimefighting is Velda, nominally his secretary who runs the office but actually his co-worker who often investigates as much as does Mike, frequently putting herself into danger while doing so. Although she is gorgeous and takes every opportunity to throw herself at Mike, he seems unable (or unwilling) to succumb to her love or her sexual charms. One of the running themes of the series is the on-again, off-again relationship between Mike and Velda.

*I, the Jury* also introduced Mike's buddy on the police force, Pat Chambers, who frequently has to bail him out of trouble by using his official connections within the law. Pat serves throughout the series as a more conventional law-enforcer against which to see Mike's more reckless, even lawless, behavior. The femme fatale role in *I, the Jury* is filled by Charlotte Manning, a psychiatrist and also mastermind of a drug ring, with whom early in the narrative Mike falls in love and plans to marry. Then he discovers that Charlotte was the one who shot his former army buddy-turned-cop, Jack Williams, with two in the gut and left him to bleed to death slowly and painfully.

Jack Williams's death provides the beginning for the novel and supplies Mike with enough anger to vow revenge and search out Jack's killer with the promise that he would die the same prolonged and agonizing death as his friend. Only the "he" turns out to be a "she," and Mike shoots Charlotte in the stomach during the final scene of the novel, fulfilling his vow of revenge but losing his love to avenge his friend's death.

The novel also has Spillane's usual assortment of odd-balls and sinister types that dot the pages of his books.

There is a woman for Mike to bed while saving himself for Charlotte, a "moral degenerate" or two for Mike to comment on, and a collection of oldfashioned thugs with whom Mike either slugs or shoots it out. Spillane's underworld is interesting because it not only contains the typecast criminal sorts but usually also has several psychologically warped characters that give some resonance to his criminals.

Although such characters have been present since the fiction of Carroll John Daly and Dashiell Hammett, Spillane gives them additional prominence, perhaps suggesting something about the pressures of postwar American society.



## Social Concerns

The title of Mickey Spillane's first novel, *I, the Jury* (1947), only partially describes the role Mike Hammer assumes in solving the murder of his best friend, because the detective wants not only to be the jury but also the judge and executioner of the killer as well.

From the beginning, one of the main concerns of Spillane's fiction was with vengeance, and with vengeance carried out thoroughly and violently. Even his character's name "Hammer" suggests bludgeoning, striking, and beating; indeed, Mike Hammer does mete out vengeance in a heavy-handed way. One of the criticisms consistently leveled at the Mike Hammer books is that they are too violent and that Mike seems to enjoy the violence too much. And the books not only have been described as sadistic but also as homophobic, sexist, racist, and xenophobic, and anyone reading them from a contemporary point of view would have to agree that the novels are certainly all of these things.

If this is true and Mike Hammer is such an unpleasant guy, full of rage and bad attitudes, why has he been so popular? How did Mickey Spillane become one of the best-selling authors in America, and, until a only a few years ago, the best-selling American author since World War II? A number of critics have tried to account for Spillane's phenomenal success, often approaching the question from opposite points of view: He pandered to people's basest instincts, or he reflected the genuine concerns of the postwar society, especially of the returning vets who found their country utterly changed from their memories of it before they entered the service. Perhaps it is a bit of both.

There is really no way to know what Mickey Spillane wanted to accomplish in his fiction. On those infrequent occasions when he has talked about his own writing, it is difficult to distinguish his image-building from what is behind it. Besides, it is always better to trust the tale and not the teller when searching for meaning in fiction. A close look at the Mike Hammer novels reveals that they are full of all of the negative attitudes critics have singled out, but rather than condemning the novels, a more productive approach might be to ask what do these negative attitudes indicate about the world portrayed in the fiction and what do they suggest about the reading public that has so eagerly purchased the books through the years?

Mike Hammer may be the first "angry white male," alienated by the changes that have taken place in the United States in the decades since the end of World War II, and *I, the Jury* offers a paradigmatic study of all of his concerns. Having fought overseas during the war — officially at least — for all of those traditional patriarchal values associated with white, male American culture, Mike returns to a country which has altered unutterably during his absence. Both women and minorities have more opportunities and greater power than when he went away. The political spectrum has shifted; citizens question more, and more loudly, the perceived cultural values of the society.



As had happened after both the Civil War and World War I, social change which was repressed during the conflict, accelerated once the wartime demands for conformity were lifted.

The world that the GI's dreamed about and fought for, memories which probably kept them going through their horrific experiences in combat, was not the same when they returned. It might be worth speculating about just how accurate some of those fantasies of normality were. Under the pressures of the war did the soldiers dream of a world back home which had, indeed, never really existed in the first place?

How realistic were their expectations about what they were returning to?

Since, as soldiers, the returning veterans had been avenging angels fighting against the demonic forces of fascism, unquestionably defending what they believed to be incontrovertible truths of democracy and a way of life, it is little wonder that they retained some of these same attitudes once they had rejoined the civilian world, and if that world had changed, it is also little wonder that they experienced a sense of confusion — alienation even — which might be converted into anger and a penchant for violent behavior. Mickey Spillane's character of Mike Hammer gave voice to such feelings and provided a vicarious way to act out these now unacceptable feelings.

In addition, Spillane's writing extended the darker aspects of the tradition of hard-boiled detective fiction by converting the generalized postwar disillusionment into a searing denunciation of the increasingly bureaucratic, complex modern world, a world which revealed many of the contradictions inherent in American society that previously had been concealed. Spillane, in many ways, simply upped the ante by digging deeper than had other writers working in the field. In addition, Spillane's literary background had been formed by the comic-book traditions of prewar culture and undoubtedly contributed to Mike Hammer's predilection for simple solutions to complex problems. Social problems could be solved and order restored by a good swift kick to the gut and required very little analysis. Values were self-evident and incontestable. Such an approach to justice dates from the earliest days of American culture and still has an appeal today, and it may help to explain the enormous appeal of the Mike Hammer stories and Mickey Spillane's popularity as a writer.



# Techniques

Mickey Spillane developed a clean, uncomplicated — at times even telegraphic — writing style which serves well to convey the direct action of the Mike Hammer books. Unlike some other writers in the hard-boiled tradition, Spillane avoids almost all description to set mood. For example, it is often raining in the city as Mike chases down the evil doers, but Spillane dispenses with lengthy and evocative prose passages describing the dark, wet streets. Sometimes he merely notes that it is raining, or still raining. *I, the Jury* simply begins with Mike shaking the rain from his hat as he enters the room. This does not mean that Mickey Spillane is incapable of writing moodsetting paragraphs, and on the rare occasion when he does, they often border on the poetic. The opening of *The Big Kill* (1951), the fifth Mike Hammer book, begins with this: "It was one of those nights when the sky came down and wrapped itself around the world." Spillane just does not indulge himself in this sort of writing very often.

This economical prose produces books which read as fast as their action; it is a perfect match between content and style. Mike Hammer sees the world as a pretty straightforward place, or at least, he would like it to be.

Spillane's driving, uncomplicated style also helps to convey Mike's singleness of mind and purpose. One of the main reasons for the books' popularity is their emphasis on action, and action, for the most part, uncomplicated by much introspection. Mike Hammer is not terribly verbal, nor does he analyze either himself or the world overmuch.

He is not stupid; he is just given to action and not discussion.

Finally, Spillane's style is part of the tradition of the hard-boiled school of crime fiction, a genre dedicated to returning crime to the streets and to trying to capture the feel of those who live there without being overly literary.

In the end, Mike Hammer is a working-class guy who talks in a workingclass kind of way and sees the world as would a working-class gumshoe, and Spillane's style conveys all this.

# Themes

*I, the Jury* begins with the murder of Mike Hammer's best friend and fellow GI, Jack Williams, who died a slow and painful death with two bullets in the stomach. Mike vows vengeance for the death and announces that he will shoot the killer in the same painful way. So vengeance is the first and overriding theme announced in the novel. That Mike will have to work within, but also outside of, the normal boundaries of police procedure is also celebrated, and although he is cautioned by his other friend who is on the police force, Pat Chambers, to be careful about his vigilante actions, there is little restraint placed upon Mike's subsequent violent behavior.

As the narrative unfolds Mike discovers that Jack, who had himself joined the police force after his discharge, was investigating a drug operation run by a mysterious criminal mastermind.

In the course of his own search for the killer, Mike falls in love with a female psychiatrist, Charlotte Manning, whom he eventually plans to marry. This relationship allows Mike to voice his attitudes about the place of professional women — namely that they should give up their jobs when they marry — and to act out a traditional sexual double standard. As he remains celibate with Charlotte, he sleeps with a "nymphomaniac" twin who occupies a marginal place in the rather promiscuous, drug-using set involved with the case. Spillane's depiction of sex exceeded the conventional reticence of the detective traditions and perhaps reflects a direct and realistic (i.e. less literary) approach to sexual relations more in line with the attitudes of the returning soldiers. In any event, sex is treated in the same unsentimental, forceful way that all other human activities are in Spillane's fiction. Both homosexuality and race play a very small role in *I, the Jury*. Gays are dismissed as a dirty joke, and ethnic groups are hardly present in Mike Hammer's world at all.

The theme of violence is omnipresent. This is partly due to the fact that Hammer lives in a dangerous milieu.

He is, after all, combing the underworld for drug traffickers and murderers. But he does not seem to shirk from beating up or killing people who get in his way; although most of the deaths and beatings are in reaction to overt threats of violence directed at Hammer and not initiated by him. However, the finale of the novel, one of the most notorious in crime fiction, bears a bit more analysis. Mike finally discovers that Charlotte Manning is the killer of his friend and mastermind of the drug operation, and even though he has fallen in love with her and plans to marry her, he must remain true to his vow of vengeance. In the last scene of the novel Charlotte slowly performs a strip tease in front of Mike, obviously hoping to divert his attention from vengeance and the gun she has hidden on the table in back of the sofa on which he is sitting. But Mike shoots her in the stomach as she reaches for the gun and as she gasps, "How could you?" He replies, "It was easy." Critics have often cited this scene as evidence for many of the ills present in the Mike Hammer books: their sadism, cruelty, misogyny, violence, all the antisocial elements of Spillane's fiction.

# Adaptations

*I, the Jury* has been filmed twice: first directed by Harry Essex in 1953 with Biff Eliot starring as Mike Hammer and second directed by Richard Heffron in 1982 with Armand Assante in the lead role. The initial film was a typical low-budget, early 1950s detective movie with so-so production values and indifferent acting and directing, although it did capture the late 1940s style of the novel more successfully than did the 1980s version. Armand Assante played an updated Mike Hammer in the 1982 version and his portrayal in many ways comes closer to capturing the essence of the character than any other portrayal on the screen, including Spillane's own attempt. By updating the timeframe, the later movie also captured the grittiness, violence, and sex inhibited at least in part by the production code imposed on the earlier filmed version of the novel.

Although only indirectly an adaptation of this novel, the TV movie, Mickey Spillane's *Margin for Murder* (1981) starring Kevin Dobson as Mike Hammer, also made use of many of the plot and character elements of *I, the Jury*.

Mike Hammer has also appeared on television in two series, one with Darren McGavin, which ran during the 1958-1959 season, and another with Stacey Keach, which aired during the 1984-1987 seasons.





## Key Questions

Because in many ways the Mike Hammer books have become period pieces, they could be successfully discussed as both products of the immediate postwar years and early 1950s and as extensions of the hard-boiled detective traditions from the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s.

1. How does *I, the Jury* contrast with other hard-boiled detective novels such as say, Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) or Raymond Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940)?
2. Compare and contrast Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer with Ross MacDonald's *Lew Archer*, both detectives from the same postwar period.
3. How does Spillane in this novel deal with gender issues which we now may find offensive but that can also be informative, helping us to learn about attitudes of the late 1940s and early 1950s?
4. If Mickey Spillane is the writer for the returning GI, what does his prose say about the attitudes and values of his audience?
5. What does your group make of the violence issue in general? Can you relate it to other American novels of the twentieth century?
6. What does Spillane have to say about the American city in this book?
7. What is the verdict *I, the Jury* passes on American culture of the late 1940s?
8. *I, the Jury* is in many ways a landmark book. How is that? In what ways?
9. What does it suggest that the central female character, Charlotte Manning, is a psychiatrist? Doesn't her profession raise all sorts of interesting questions about not only her own mental health but also that of the other characters in the novel as well?
10. How does Mike's behavior square with traditional American notions of law and order? In what ways is his vigilante justice a strong part of American literature?

## Literary Precedents

The Mike Hammer novels come directly out of the traditions of the hard-boiled detective fiction of the 1920s and 1930s when writers like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler were creating a new and vital American prose genre. From their beginnings in the pulps, especially *The Black Mask*, the writers worked to develop a writing style stripped of all its literary pretensions and to depict a world of crime, particularly murder, which dealt with actual criminals and avoided all of the excesses of the Sherlock Holmes's school of eccentric and mannered private investigators. The hard-boiled dick actually got down among the petty grafters, rummies, hookers, and pimps to investigate his crimes. He was also not above being seduced occasionally by money, sex, or power. He drank and swore and got beaten up. By the time Mickey Spillane began writing just after the war, the traditions of the hard-boiled detective novel were well-established and had created a literary subgenre which scoured the bottom of the cultural barrel. As Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe might remark, the subgenre turned over a rock and exposed the underside of American life.

By the early 1950s both in fiction and in the film noir B-movies which were turned out for the low end of the distribution circuit, the American public, or at least a segment of it, was well attuned to a dark, nightmare world only hinted at in other, more upscale, cultural forms. Spillane merely adapted an already established tradition to his own literary needs. By using a returning vet as his hero he was able to bring in attitudes of the returning soldiers from the recent world war and to examine the dramatic changes that American society was experiencing in the postwar years and its effects on men who had remained isolated by their war experience from the changes.

Although Hammett and Chandler have received more favorable critical attention, particularly from academics, there was an equally vibrant and even darker tradition running parallel to their more acceptably literary one.

Beginning with Carroll John Daly's stories for *Black Mask* in the 1920s there was a world of even rougher, more violent detectives, and it is to that even more subterranean tradition that Mike Hammer belongs. It is a world even more revealing of the hidden side of American life. Daly's *Race Williams* exhibits all sorts of attitudes towards women and ethnicity which would not be acceptable even to Spade or Marlowe. Spillane extends that layer of the genre into the postwar world with Mike Hammer.

## Related Titles

I, the Jury is of course only the first of an even dozen Mike Hammer novels which Spillane wrote between 1947 and 1989. His output has not been large or steady. Most writers of series try to produce one book a year or at least try to keep the books flowing at regular intervals; this has not been true of Spillane. From 1951 to 1962 and again from 1970 to 1989, Spillane did not publish any Mike Hammer novels at all. He wrote and published other things but nothing for his most popular series, and he has never offered a satisfactory explanation for these breaks.

Critics tend to prefer the six novels written and published from 1947 to 1952: I, the Jury (1947), My Gun Is Quick (1950), Vengeance Is Mine (1950), One Lonely Night (1951), The Big Kill (1951), and Kiss Me, Deadly (1952). Most of the articles written about Spillane's work center on these books as well, and one can see why. They are of a piece. They were written over a very short period of time, and once Spillane worked out the format, they were written quickly.

They also retain a kind of raw energy, a dynamic tension which the later, more polished, Hammer books lack.

These first half-dozen Mike Hammers made Spillane's career and for better or worse fixed in the mind of the public the basic contours of not only his hero but also his persona as a writer.

The later Hammer novels reflect Spillane's growing technical control, but they lack the hard edge of the earlier ones and by the 1970s almost seem like parodies of the earlier books.

The loss of energy was due in part at least to the fact that Spillane already had established the character of Mike Hammer, and his audience had come to expect certain returns from one of his novels. To an extent like all series authors Spillane was hemmed in by his success.



# Copyright Information

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