

One of the earliest writers to create a sweetheart detective duo was Samuel Dashiell Hammett (1894-1961). In his 1934 novel, *The Thin Man*, he introduced the wickedly sophisticated Nick and Nora Charles—a married couple of equals who solve murder mysteries with more cocktails than clues while exchanging sharp repartee. Hammett lets readers peek in on New York and San Francisco's sophisticated society during the Great Depression and right before Prohibition.

Nick and Nora Charles' relationship centers around drinking, flirting, fun, a deep intellectual affinity, and their schnauzer "Asta." Hammett's writing style embodied no-frills, spartan and bawdy language, funny and loving human beings.

Before he wrote *The Thin Man*, Hammett had established his literary reputation with such novels as *The Red Harvest* (1927), *The Dain Curse* (1929), *The Maltese Falcon* (1930), and *The Glass Key* (1931). In the summer of 1930, he moved to Hollywood to pen original screenplays for Paramount Studios. A year later, he contracted with Warner Brothers to write a detective movie for the actor William Powell, but the studio rejected the screenplay. While in Los Angeles, Hammett partied with a fast crowd, drank too much, and quickly ran out of money. Friends paid his hotel bill and put him on a plane back to New York.

Hammett then began writing *The Thin Man* but after sixty-five pages abandon the novel. Meanwhile, Warner Brothers produced *The Maltese Falcon* starring Humphrey Bogart as private detective Sam Spade. Hammett then decided to revisit Hollywood to re-write other people's scripts. When he returned to New York, he checked into the Sutton Club Hotel to re-work *The Thin Man* and completed the novel in May 1933.

Hammett tried shopping the novel to magazines for serial publication. However, editors refused, deeming the story "amoral if not immoral." He finally sold it to Redbook for \$5,000 in December 1933.

The following month, Alfred A. Knopf bought the rights and published the novel. But it was not a bestseller. Then, MGM purchased the film rights for \$21,000, a veritable fortune during the Great Depression. In today's value, that amount would be about \$436,000.

**That same year, MGM produced the film version starring William Powell and Myrna Loy and it quickly became a box-office favorite. Although the movie was a summer release, the first movie is set during Christmas in New York. The Thin Man received four Academy Award nominations including Best Picture. Because of the film, people assumed (incorrectly) that Nick Charles was the Thin Man. William Powell's dapper and thin image, as well as Hammett's thin frame, which appeared on the novel's cover, fueled that image. In fact, the "Thin Man" refers to the murder victim in the novel.**

**In 1936, the second film, After the Thin Man, also starred William Powell and Myrna Loy as Nick and Nora Charles, and featured James Stewart as an old friend of Nora's family.**

**As a departure from his famous hard-boiled detectives, the Continental Ops and Sam Spade, he portrayed Nick as an alcoholic former private detective who retired after he married the rich and clever Nora. Nick had worked for the Pinkerton National Detective Agency as did Hammett and was a renowned tippler and martini aficionado as was Hammett. As an aside, Nick preferred his martini shaken decades before we learned about James Bond's preference.**

**Nora's character is reportedly modeled after Hammett's longtime partner and playwright Lillian Hellman (1905-1984). They never married but lived together, off and on, for thirty years and encouraged each other's literary careers. Nora is flirty, flippant, and boozy, like Hellman.**

**Hellman gained fame as a playwright and memoirist best known for such Broadway plays as "The Little Foxes" (1939), "The Children's Hour" (1934), and more. Hammett dedicated The Thin Man to her.**

**In 1942, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, he enlisted in the U.S. Army for the second time. He was a disabled veteran of World War I and a victim of tuberculosis. In 1951, he appeared in Manhattan's District Court on suspicion of communist activities. In his time as president of the Civil Rights Congress, he created a bail fund to pay for the release of people convicted for political reasons. He was a trustee of those funds and because he refused to answer any questions the court held him in contempt. He served six months in prison, which aggravated his tuberculosis.**

**In 1953, he testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee about his alleged affiliation with the Communist Party. Again, he refused to offer information. This time he avoided conviction but was blacklisted from employment in Hollywood. Hellman was also blacklisted.**

**After a lifetime of boozing and cigarettes, his tuberculosis worsened, and he could no longer live alone. While staying at Lillian Hellman's house on Martha's Vineyard he had a heart attack. Hellman took him to her Manhattan brownstone where she could care for him.**

**In the final months of 1960, Hammett learned he had lung cancer. He died two months later on January 10, 1961, in a New York hospital. He was sixty-seven. Because he was a veteran of two World Wars, he was buried at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, D.C.**



**Dashiell Hammett**