



House Dick (Hard Case Crime #54)

E. Howard Hunt

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House Dick is one of Hunt's very best, a classic hardboiled story of a detective in a Washington D.C. hotel (no, not *that* hotel) investigating a twisty tale of burglary and murder, of skullduggery under cover of darkness, of deception and shifting loyalties – and of the price you pay when you trust the wrong people...

House Dick (Hard Case Crime #54) Details

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Author : E. Howard Hunt

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From Reader Review House Dick (Hard Case Crime #54) for online ebook

Dave says

Next we will be reading books by G Gordon Liddy and Charles Colson. E Howard Hunt is best known as one of Dick Nixon's "plumbers," a secret team of operatives fixing leaks, which included breaking into Daniel Ellsberg's office and forging State Department cables designed to make JFK look bad. Hunt masterminded the first Watergate burglary and served nearly three years in prison for his role in the scandal. In addition to being a criminal, Hunt served for twenty years as a CIA operative and even a station chief. He was highly involved in the Bay of Pigs fiasco and, as he died in 2007, hinted that LBJ had been involved in the JFK assassination.

Strangely enough, Hunt wrote many novels. Beginning in the early forties, he penned a number of spy novels under his own name and under various pen names. His spy novels were informed by his experience in the CIA and are considered quite intriguing for that reason. All told, Hunt may have published as many as 41 fictional novels and 4 nonfiction books over the course of fifty years.

House Dick was originally published in 1961 under the pen name Gordon Davis and published by Gold Medal. It is, quite unbelievably I might add, a terrific hardboiled book that I highly recommend. It has recently been republished by Hard Case. It stands up quite well with other books of the era. It is a quick-reading story that I found hard to put down.

The protagonist, Peter Novack, is, as the title suggests, the House Detective, at a large 350-room Washington, D.C., hotel. He is grumpy, sour, and, although, on the surface a bit crooked and corrupt, a guy who ends up doing decent things. The tone throughout the book is dark. The story is about a "a girl in a platinum mink coat walking toward the reception desk." "The girl was an ash blonde" and "walked with her head thrown back, her heels making subdued clicking sounds on the marble floor of the lobby." "[H]er eyes were as grey as the furs she wore." This is Ms. Paula Norton, who is the femme fatale of this story. She has a very wealthy sugar daddy. She also has a mean mobster she was once married to and who has found her again. And, Novack, tough as he is, falls for, hook, line, and sinker. The story is about a wealthy couple who stays at the hotel and reports and then unreports missing jewels. Mrs. Boyd "was a tinted brunette in the mid-forties with bon-bon jowls and arms like rolls of biscuit dough. Her fleshly feet were jammed into pointed slippers two sizes too small and her face was heavily powdered to improve an uncertain complexion."

Hunt can write descriptive phrases like nobody's business. The dialogue, the scenery, the tone, all works and all feels like your typical hardboiled detective novel. You have your femme fatale, your gangsters, your police detectives, your murders, your kidnappings, your stolen jewels, and the story that flows quite well through all its twists and turns. And, Hunt can write fight scenes quite well too: "The man gurgled and his eyes went wild. From the hips up his body started to shake. Novak slapped the other cheek. Harder and a little lower. A drop of blood appeared on the man's upper lip. His face was scarlet now, jaw muscles working like a skein of worms."

I never thought I would read a hardboiled detective novel by one of the Watergate burglars or that the novel would have been written, not while the burglar was cooling his heels in prison, but years before. Nor would I have thought that it would be just as compelling as many of the other Gold Medal or Fawcett books published at that time.

Josh says

From the outset its apparent that Novak is going to be involved in some heavy handed duties following the arrival of Paula Norton, an alluring blonde whose ex is a prominent underworld figure who desperately needs a cash injection to payout a bigger criminal organisation.

Author E. Howard Hunt established a backdrop which was as much a living organism as the characters. I liked the emphasis placed on creating a feeling of being inside the inner workings of busy hotel where staff have chance interactions, complaints of upper management, problems with guests etc. While on the peripheral, this was a key aspect to the novel and went a long way to providing a heightened sense of reality to the fiction.

The small cast of characters and suspects alike contained the mystery but by no means did it dilute proceedings. Each suspect had a motive and E. Howard Hunt kept the reveal well under wraps until the moment was called for. The mystery extends outside the hotel but the theme doesn't deviate - a great entry into the 'hotel noir' sub sub genre :-).

'House Dick' is a multi faceted mystery involving blackmail, murder, and a jewel theft held together by a strong protagonist who oozes noir from his very pores. Not to forget the dame to kill for who is as much a star as the House Dick himself.

I bumped my original rating from 3 to 4 stars on this reread (some 4 years later). Well worth a second (or third / fourth) look.

Chris says

So, part of the enticement of this book is that the author was partly responsible for the Watergate break-in under President Nixon's administration and here he is the author of a book about a hotel house detective in Washington D.C.. How meta! Of course the book was written almost twenty years prior to that infamous robbery. Taken on its own terms, this is a fairly straight ahead murder mystery with slight dips into blue collar philosophy ("...is there more to life than that?" "I wouldn't know." He straightened his lapels. "The job buys whisky and clean sheets. In today's world only a fool would complain").

While reading it I was at times reminded of the film Union Station (1950) with William Holden. Both are about detectives who aren't quite cops, protecting the small beat that they have on the fringes of the law. Not much more of a comparison than that though. Great movie, by the way.

All in all, it was a good book, not great one.

Dan Schwent says

Pete Novak is a hotel detective (or house dick) working for a Washington DC hotel. Novak takes a shine to a gorgeous guest, only to find the murdered body of her former sugar daddy in her room and the jewels he

gave her missing. Can Novak find the jewels and keep the woman out of jail?

First off, I almost dismissed this one as one of Hard Case's more dubious picks, like the Robert Parker book that wasn't by the Parker everyone was thinking of. E. Howard Hunt was involved in the Watergate break-in, after all. Well, I was wrong.

Hunt's writing is top notch and Novak is a great noir protagonist. He's a lonely hotel detective with a budding drinking problem. The web of sex, lies, and murder is very easy to get caught up in and hard to get to the center of without being devoured by it. I should know. I read the whole thing in one sitting. It's a little lighter on violence than some Hard Cases but heavy on twists. It took me forever to catch on to what actually happened regarding the jewels and Chalmer's murder. On the surface, the plot looks simple but once all the players are introduced, it becomes much more complicated.

If I could only recommend one Hard Case to someone, it would probably be this one. Who knows? It might become someone's favorite book with the word dick in the title*

*Yeah, it was an easy joke but I had to do it...

Valentina89 says

Nulla di speciale.

Come giallo non é un gran che. Mi spiego meglio: se volete leggerlo per avere un buon finale, di quelli che ti lasciano a bocca aperta, allora questo non é il romanzo adatto a voi.

Se però si vuole leggere un libro scorrevole, con un ambientazione tipica dei film noir, allora é proprio ciò che cercavate.

Nel complesso, una lettura piacevole ma non speciale.

Ralph says

Take a seedy no-nonsense somewhat battered detective with a bottle of scotch in his desk drawer and a love-hate relationship with the cops, and toss him into a respectable hotel in the early 1960s, and you end up with Pete Novak. Knowing that a hotel is only as good as its reputation, he does what he can to keep out the unsavory elements, the grifters, hookers and thieves, but since this is Washington DC you can only do so much. After all, some people come to Washington to be bad, and others get elected.

A tourist tells Novak that \$90,000 in jewels (more than a million in today's debased US currency) has been stolen from her hotel room. After talking to her (he tells her to call the cops) Novak is visited by her husband who tells him there was no theft, that his wife hallucinates. Well, that may be, Novak thinks, since the woman keeps an herbal-dispensing quack on a short leash, as well as her husband, but still more the cops' business (or the insurance company's) than his or the hotel's. What he makes his business, however, is the

hullabaloo he hears across the hallway from the hallucinating wife, a lovely babe getting slapped around by an unlovely ex-husband crooked gambler. Down the crook goes, then out with the trash. What Novak finds out later is that there is a definite connection between the the husband, the wife and the woman across the hall, not to mention the "stolen" jewelry.

Novak finds himself embroiled not only in an Eternal Triangle situation, but murder, drugs and gambling debts sorely in need of collection. By staying on the periphery of the action, remembering his relationship to both the District police and the hotel, Novak more or less plays both ends against the middle. That, however, does not keep him from getting occasionally beat up or going on blind dates with the Grim Reaper.

The novel does not plow any new ground in the crime noir genre, though it does add some interesting twists to the character of the detective, giving him enough cynicism to make Marlowe seem an optimist and unambitious enough to make Spade seem an eager-beaver. Still, it's a very enjoyable read, hitting all the right notes to set it firmly in the genre without letting it descend into either a pastiche or a lampoon. It's tightly plotted and told with a narrative voice that has both authority and gravitas. The story is a half-century old, but if death and taxes are eternal, so are human nature and corruption, thus the story is renewed.

Tom Stamper says

Yes, that Howard Hunt. This is a taut pulp novel about a gruff house detective that lands in the center of a murder and blackmail scheme. The detective is a character that you know by attitude from so many other stories. He's a tough guy who doesn't mind a wisecrack even if it might cost him a punch in the gut. It's derivative of the genre as a whole but never boring and quite clever at times. The setting is Washington D.C., a place Hunt knows. I'm not sure what it was like in 1961 but from the dialogue you'd get the idea that the country was going through a depression. I would read Hunt again if the opportunity arises. How history would be different had Hunt given up his government career to write full time.

Nicholas says

Solid vacation read

John says

A stellar example of the pulp noir genre, HOUSE DICK assembles all the expected cliches, but does so in a way that still feels sharp and invigorating. The writing is outstanding and deliciously hardboiled, but modern readers who are unfamiliar with old-fashioned crime lingo may find certain elements--including the title--difficult to decipher. The book is a truckload of politically incorrect retro fun, and, interestingly, was penned by one of the real-life "plumbers" involved in Richard Nixon's Watergate scandal.

Leslie says

Sub-Spillane, really--in other words, hardboiled-lite--but more likeable than Spillane, because the hero (the

titular house dick) is allowed to be more than a pulsating cartoon of manhood.

Jake says

(3.5) I've been on a Watergate kick lately and, like most Americans, I'm familiar with Howard Hunt because of his role in the infamous burglary. Hunt was also a novelist who wrote mystery and spy novels (I found one once in which a fictional Massachusetts Senator and his wife were part of a nefarious underground blood cult; you can take a guess as to the obvious reference) and since I've had this sitting in my HCC collection for years, I figured I'd finally knock it out.

It's got the witty, tough guy dialogue you'd expect from one of the many Chandler imitators of the 40s and 50s. It also has the familiarly bad gender politics of that time, along with some major fat shaming. However, the plot was interesting enough that it kept the book moving and finished without overstaying it's welcome. It's not written by the most enlightened of writers but as far as mystery novels go, it's decent entertainment.

Eric_W says

Taking this along on a trip. Most of us who lived through Watergate rather despise E. Howard Hunt and Gordon Liddy and Chuck Colson and all those cretins, but apparently Hunt had quite a career as a writer of noir pulp fiction, a genre I rather enjoy, so we'll see how this pans out.

The story revolves around a house detective (dah!) working at the Hotel Tilden. Pete Novak is the classic hard drinking, babe loving, honest-to-a-fault, cigarette smoking, gumshoe who gets caught in the middle of a double- or triple- cross. Babes, jewels, mafia, police, fakesters, murder and mayhem all nicely plotted in this very quick, enjoyable hard case novel.

Hunt should have stuck with writing novels instead of poking around the Watergate,

Paul says

Excerpt:

Leaning forward, Novak heaved his shoulder & the door burst inward. The man staggered back cursing. "I'm Novak. Hotel Security. Where's the woman?"

To see her, all he had to do was glance sideways & down. Her back was braced against the edge of a chair, her legs folded under her thighs. She wore a filmy white dressing gown, one sleeve ripped. Her cheeks showed ugly patches of red, the rest of her face was bloodless. She must have been in the shower when the guy came in because the dressing gown was all she wore. The legs were nicely muscled & they melted into slim thighs. Her stomach was taut & she had never been a nursing mother.

The man dropped his head & lunged...

Originally published in 1961 & thankfully reissued in 2009 by Hard Case Crime.

Novak is a the "House Dick" of this narrative, He's your typical hard-boiled, hard drinking, heavy smoking wise-cracking dick. In this rather convoluted tale, you have a jewellery heist, blackmail, murder, not very bright, but large vicious thugs, a smooth, urbane contract killer, the obligatory 'femme fatale' & various other

unsavory characters.

There's even time in this lively tale for reflection, hard-boiled style;

“Hell, I haven't changed much. A little older & grayer, but they say the richer years come later.”

“Not to a woman they don't. That's what I told myself. We're a couple of characters, you & I - & not out of fairy tales. Me, looking for a guy to keep me in furs & caviar, you – wrestling drunks & hop-heads out of lobbies. Or is there more to life than that?”

This is another excellent offering from the Hard Case Crime stable. This is my sixth HCC title & I've not found one to be disappointing yet. The wonderful cover was painted by Glen Orbik.

This will appeal to fans of Raymond Chandler, David Goodis & perhaps more specifically, fans of Dashiell Hammett. 4 out of 5 stars from this reader. Highly recommended.

Craig Childs says

You have to give Hard Case Crime credit for finding unique novels with interesting pasts. *Hotel Dick* is a serviceable noir mystery written in 1961 by one of the most reviled political figures of recent American history.

THE AUTHOR:

E. Howard Hunt lived an interesting life, to say the least. As an OSS and later CIA officer he helped mastermind the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, he was one of President Nixon's White House plumbers who went to jail over Watergate, and he has long been rumored to be one of the “three tramps” spotted near the grassy knoll in 1963. His own son claimed he was the inside man in the CIA responsible for the JFK assassination.

He was also a best-selling novelist, particularly early in his career, even though many of his books were published under pseudonyms.

THE BOOK:

This novel has a great opening hook. Pete Novak is a whisky-chugging, chain-smoking middle-aged “house dick”, an investigator whose job is to discreetly deal with crimes at an upper-crust Washington DC hotel. He's supposed to keep the hotel's good name out of the papers. This normally involves investigating burglaries, breaking up illegal dice games, and evicting high-class call girls. Tonight, he runs into two problems on the 5th floor. A rich woman claims \$90,000 of jewelry has been stolen, a claim which her philandering husband then quickly denies. Then, in the room across the hall, Novak finds a young beautiful woman being beat up by her ex-husband. He tries to intervene, but the mysterious woman pulls a gun and tells him to go away.

Well, heck, it doesn't take long for Novak to figure out these incidents are linked, then shortly thereafter a dead body turns up. Novak has to beat the police to find out which of four suspects is to blame.

It's a rousing start, but the story never quite lives up to its early promise. It would have fared better had the author built up a lively supporting cast of eccentric hotel staff, a foundation for a series perhaps, but this

never happens. The best minor character was Detective Morely from the DC police department, a picture-perfect grizzled 1950's cop. He had the best scenes. He kept throwing out pop culture references which reminded me of how old the book really was. For example, there was a discussion about the lousy Washington Senators season. (That would be the 1960 squad that relocated the following year and changed its name to the Minnesota Twins. It was replaced by a new D.C. expansion franchise in 1961, also called the Senators, which eventually became the Texas Rangers in 1972.)

Morely's had a predictably dated outlook on CSI forensics: "To find the killer all I have to do is find the motive and match it to the right guy. I don't need no head-shrinkers or test tube wizards... Start throwing technical answers at a jury and you got yourself a mountain of trouble. It's what defense shysters love to pick the most."

Morely was dismissive of now-infamous Twenty One game show scandal: "Some quiz show genius grabs a hundred grand the clever way and the whole country dissolves in tears. Boo hoo. Ahhhhh, the hell with it."

Morely's take on politics: "Most of them don't know a crook from a Senator."

And the best quote of the book: "A hotel is like a prison... The rooms are cells holding secrets and passions. Then something happens, the smallest thing, and the doors fly open. The explosion goes off. Panic. And fragments of truth."

There are several weak points in the story's execution. The book fails to use its Washington DC milieu to any advantage—no political espionage or military intrigue. A key recurring plot point is Novak's infatuation with one of the suspects; he keeps taking risks on her behalf, even though it is clear he doesn't trust her and doesn't even seem to care for her very much. The final resolution of the various plot threads is acceptable, if not particularly surprising or clever, but the explanation of everyone's motives and a few key events turns out to be overly convoluted and not very sensible.

This novel is recommended, barely, but it does not rank among Hard Case Crime's best.

Thomas says

Before Howard Hunt became a Watergate burglar, E. Howard Hunt was a crime-thriller writer. House Dick is very much a by-the-numbers early-'60s noir book, but the fact that it's typical -- more typical than the higher-quality novels Hard Case publishes -- actually makes it more fun. It's at once effective as a crime story and campy-goofy because it's so average. That makes me love it. It's packed with stereotypical dialogue, a detective who grins, sleazy characters, swaggering mobsters, and insulting observations about how disgusting the fat lady is. A total document of its times! This is EXACTLY the kind of book that I love to stumble across, and HCC gets major kudos from me for reprinting it. Basically, it's just a straight-up fun read.
