

The Thin Man

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Vintage paperback

The Thin Man, Dashiell Hammett's classic tale of murder in Manhattan, became the popular movie series with William Powell and Myrna Loy, and both the movies and the novel continue to captivate new generations of fans.

Nick and Nora Charles, accompanied by their schnauzer, Asta, are lounging in their suite at the Normandie in New York City for the Christmas holiday, enjoying the prerogatives of wealth: meals delivered at any hour, theater openings, taxi rides at dawn, rubbing elbows with the gangster element in speakeasies. They should be annoyingly affected, but they charm. Mad about each other, sardonic, observant, kind to those in need, and cool in a fight, Nick and Nora are graceful together, and their home life provides a sanctuary from the rough world of gangsters, hoodlums, and police investigations into which Nick is immediately plunged.

A lawyer-friend asks Nick to help find a killer and reintroduces him to the family of Richard Wynant, a more-than-eccentric inventor who disappeared from society 10 years before. His former wife, the lush and manipulative Mimi, has remarried a European fortune hunter who turns out to be a vindictive former associate of her first husband and is bent on the ruin of Wynant's family fortune. Wynant's children, Dorothy and Gilbert, seem to have inherited the family aversion to straight talk. Dorothy, who has matured into a beautiful young woman, has a crush on Nick, and so, in a hero-worshipping way, does mama's boy Gilbert. Nick and Nora respond kindly to their neediness as Nick tries to make sense of misinformation, false identities, far-fetched alibis, and, at the center of the confusion, the mystery of The Thin Man, Richard Wynant. Is he mad? Is he a killer? Or is he really an eccentric inventor protecting his discovery from intellectual theft?

The dialogue is spare, the locales lively, and Nick, the narrator, shows us the players as they are, while giving away little of his own thoughts. No one is telling the whole truth, but Nick remains mostly patient as he doggedly tries to backtrack the lies. Hammett's New York is a cross between Damon Runyon and Scott Fitzgerald--more glamorous than real, but compelling when visited in the company of these two charmers. The lives of the rich and famous don't get any better than this! --Barbara Schlieper

Nick and Nora Charles are Hammett's most enchanting creations, a rich, glamorous couple who solve homicides in between wisecracks and martinis. At once knowing and unabashedly romantic, The Thin Man is a murder mystery that doubles as a sophisticated comedy of manners.

Other Books

Dashiell Hammett, A collection of five mysteries.

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