

The Maltese Falcon by Dashiell Hammett  
By Dianne

I chose this book for our club meeting because crime fiction isn't a genre that we dive into very often. 'The Maltese Falcon' is widely regarded as the original American 'gumshoe' detective novel, defining the type for decades – the hard-nosed detective with a weakness for the ladies, a mind like a steel trap and a wry, cynical outlook on life. Many regard it as the first and best of the modern detective novels. Of course, lots of others would argue with them.

The main character, Sam Spade, is a smooth-talking, hard-bitten detective caught up in an international intrigue surrounding the theft and recovery of the Maltese Falcon, a priceless statue that has been stolen, lost, stolen again and is now hidden from those who would kill to retrieve it. He is dragged into this by the appearance of a beautiful woman and the death of his business partner in mysterious circumstances. Compared to modern detective / crime novels, 'The Maltese Falcon' seems very simplistic, dated and the characters one-dimensional. There's certainly no element of the psychological thriller that we are used to. But we need to remember that this was crime fiction at the very beginning. For its time (sorry, Claudia) it was probably ground-breaking work and a breathtaking adventure. It was certainly hugely popular at the time of publication and remains the iconic crime novel to many readers and critics. In 1998, the Modern Library website ranked 'The Maltese Falcon' as number 56 of the best 100 novels ever written.

'Maltese Falcon' was written in 1929 and was originally serialised in three parts in the 'Black Mask' magazine. It has been made into film three times – most memorably the 1941 version starring Humphrey Bogart, Mary Astor, Sydney Greenstreet and Peter Lorre. There was quite a bit of debate at the book club meeting about whether the novel would have the legendary status it holds without the movie – we agreed probably not. Reading the book, it's almost possible to hear Humphrey Bogart speaking as Sam Spade and picture the characters of Cairo as Peter Lorre and Gutman as Sydney Greenstreet. The movie is iconic – the book possibly less so on its own, but still worth exploring as a good example of early crime fiction.