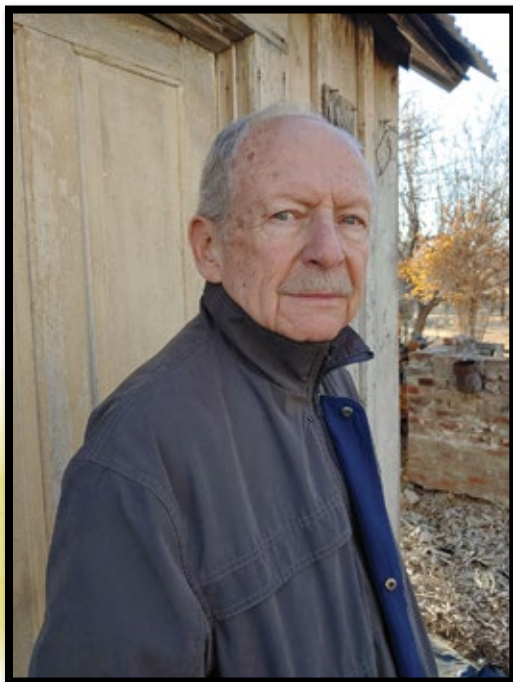


Stellar Rays:

The Fashion for Chandler

By Janet Rogers

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Copper pilasters envelope the doorway to the private dining room. Undulating waves of copper frame the tiered dining area from the bar. Outsized deco chandeliers hover overhead. A mural following the trail of the Monterey Cypress rings the room at the ceiling. The walls are sculpted. It's bosomy and warm.

You're inside the *Cypress Club*. No, not Eddie Mars' gambling joint. That was Raymond Chandler's confection, dating from his first full novel, "The Big Sleep," circa 1939. The quote is more than a half-century later, from a Ray A. March piece on a high-toned eatery opening in San Francisco. The piece gets to the wines and the cooking later (for a flavor, the article is on my website). But like the Eddie Mars' original, this *Cypress Club* knew first to put its patrons in the mood, starting before they stepped inside. The approach to Chandler's club is discreet to the point of disappearing in the oceanside fog, in among the twisted Monterey cypresses at the far end of Las Olindas. Likewise in the Bogart and Bacall movie, where it's a quiet presence behind its parking lot. You get the picture. There are night spots you only hear about. The cool appeal is

inside, for those who already know the address. Ray March's *Cypress Club* gets the picture so well, it's practically invisible. He writes: *Outside, in the dark rain the cabby slows down looking for a sign, lights. Something, but here's nothing.*

The *Cypress Club*. If you're not from San Francisco you might be looking it up, wondering about grabbing a table the next time you visit. But you're as late as I was. Chandler's version has been evergreen in print these last eighty years. The version on Jackson near Montgomery ran for a decade and closed before I ever saw the city. So, while Ray March's copy would have me queuing around the block for instant noodles, I was never there. Even so, the idea intrigues me.

I mean, what was the deal that rainy night, about a restaurant that took itself too seriously to put its name in lights? It was stylish, but what was the appeal? And after a glittering opening, what did it have, apart from eating, to pull an end-of-century San Francisco crowd to a chic dining room, name-checking a club in a late 1930s novel set in Los Angeles?

Sure, Eddie Mars' joint has scenes of its own in the dazzling Warner Brothers' movie, from 1946. What film fan forgets the night spot where Bacall glides and Bogart nods approval? But San Francisco's *Cypress Club* knew the appeal reached way past literary crime enthusiasts and classic movie aficionados. At the close of the century, 30s going-on 40s style—Deco lighting, two-tone shoes, dreamland dresses—was (and is still) an instantly recognizable look and hook, constantly recycled and generally adored. Which started me thinking. A hook for what, exactly?

The 30s through the 50s were Chandler time. The decades of his pulp writing and full-length mysteries, when his drawled lyricism shook up detective fiction and his image of southern California was so powerful it never went away. Nobody did or does hardboiled better. But his transforming of mystery writing isn't for now. For now we'll stay with the time and the place.

Like many arriving in LA in the boom years of the 1910s, Chandler was not obviously equipped for making a success. In his mid-twenties, English schooled and accented, he hadn't been prepped for this overgrowing city with its dark, religious devotion to the main chance, from City Hall on down. He jobbed around there, went to war and back, climbed the oil business

and got up close to civic and corporate graft; then drank his way out of work and ended on the skids just as Depression bit hard. For the rest of the 30s he made a bare living writing for the pulps at a penny a word, adjusting by degrees to the hardscrabble of a narrower, meaner world. Not until "The Big Sleep" was published by Knopf in 1939 could he begin making a name. And in that same year, the world went up in flames.

Through another World War, the A-bomb, Cold War and Korea, Chandler completed six more Marlowe novels, for a generation as drained of illusion and sentiment as he was, himself. He was already in his fifties, capturing that disillusion in a hardboiled poetry and clear-eyed cynicism that played to readers in perfect pitch. More than that, it was his luck to come good in a decade when Hollywood was also distilling the somber spirit of the times, in a tough new cinema of dark motives and deep shadows, doomed fortunes, bleak encounters and tilted angles. By the mid-40s, Chandler and Paramount had gotten together on *Double Indemnity* and *The Blue Dahlia*, and put out two of the indelible screenplays of *film noir*.

Ray March's opening night at the *Cypress Club* brought it all back: the taut players around the tables at Eddie Mars' place; the manner of a California clientele; chrome-hard surfaces and ink-soft depths in the camerawork of classic film noir. And underneath it all, a mid-century mood Chandler nailed better than anybody else, that tasted of bitters and stayed in the mouth of a generation.

It's where that look and hook of the 1940s takes you, if you go looking. To a mood; cynical, detached, seen-it-all and not impressed, that sold a million Marlowe stories and electrified on the silver screen. A handful of patrons at that gala opening might have known those years themselves. A generation too young to know them could only thrill to the fashion. They simply knew the *Cypress Club* was its style, and the lone trumpet twisting through *Chinatown* was its soundtrack—*played sexy*, the way Jerry Goldsmith said to, *but like it's not good sex*. For the rest, if they were curious about the times and the mood that went with the fashion, those Chandler books and movies would have put them right there. They were around. Still are. Ray March knew them. Cue a lone trumpet to let him play us out:

Outside it's still raining. Couples are scattering into the dark.

'You call for a cab?'

'Yeah.'

The cabby holds the door open until we're seated, then looks back at the façade of the restaurant. No visible address, no sign under the lights.

'What's the name of this place?'

'Cypress Club'

'Cypress Club, huh?' ■



Janet is a historical fiction author, writing literary crime. She's published by Troubador Publishing in the UK and represented by JKS Communications Literary Publicity in the USA. She trained in archaeology, history and English Lit. and has a special interest in the early Cold War. Her debut novel, "Shamus Dust: Hard Winter, Cold War, Cool Murder" was published October 28th and is currently attracting widespread media interest. Find her reviews at <https://www.janetroger.com/media>, and find Janet on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) @janetroger.



"The Cypress Club" by Ray A. March was first published in StatesWest Travel May/June, 1991. Ray A. March is an American author and journalist who has worked on newspapers in this country, and in Europe as an investigative reporter. He is the author of five nonfiction books and his latest, "Mass Murder in California's Empty Quarter" is scheduled for publication this fall by the University of Nebraska Press. His reporting has also appeared in the New York Times, Time, San Francisco Chronicle, Los Angeles Herald Examiner and The Associated Press. He is a member of the Native American Journalists Association, Investigative Reporters & Editors, a former delegate to the National Writers Union, co-founder, Surprise Valley Writers' Conference, and founder and co-chair of the Ed Kennedy Pulitzer Project, a national coalition of journalists.

