

THE SHORT,
UNHAPPY CAREER
OF LEW SHINER,
TOUGH-GUY
WRITER

BY LEWIS SHINER

Introduction to "The Sloane Stories" section of Private Eye Action As You Like It.

FROM THE SUMMER of 1975 to the fall of 1976 I did freelance drafting out of a tiny apartment and wrote as many short stories as I could, trying to break in. Somewhere in there I decided that my plots were weak and that mystery fiction was the antidote. I watched *Perry Mason* every morning at 11:00 on my tiny black-and-white portable and read all of Hammett and Chandler, Ross Macdonald, and a new guy named Robert B. Parker.

My first (okay, second—the first is better forgotten) mystery was called “Buyin’ My Heartaches a Beer,” a story about a construction worker which featured a lot of contemporary c & w coming out of various radios and jukeboxes. I actually got a long, personal letter back from *Hitchcock’s* on that one, the best response any of my stories had received to date.

Immediately I began to visualize a new career. Lew Shiner, tough-guy writer. I would be the new Raymond Chandler, or at least the new Ross Macdonald. I would create the private eye for the 70s. Instead of an ex-cop, he would be—wait for it—a Vietnam vet! (Believe it or not, nobody had actually done that yet.) I would set the stories in Austin, a town that always, in a weird way, reminded me of LA—lakes instead of ocean, politicians instead of movie stars, but still the same feeling of endless youth.

I finished the first Dan Sloane story, “Deep Without Pity,” in July of 1976. I thought, foolishly, that *Hitchcock* would go for it for sure. Since I didn’t actually read the magazine, I didn’t realize that they published virtually no private eye fiction at all.

Eventually it became my second sale, when I got a phone call from the editor of *Mystery Monthly* just after Christmas of that year. As it came hard on the heels of my selling “Tinker’s Damn” to *Galileo* in November, I started to feel like I was finally getting somewhere. I’d already written a second Sloane story, “The Killing Season,” and I began to start to think about maybe toying with the idea of a novel.

Mystery Monthly folded with “Deep Without Pity” in galleys. *Mike Shayne*, the only other mystery market I hadn’t tried, then rejected it. I looked around and saw that there really weren’t any markets for private eye short stories and

there weren't that many private eye novels being published either. So in the summer of 1978, when I decided it was time to write a novel, I put Dan Sloane aside and wrote a mid-line suspense novel called *Red Weather*, inspired by Robert L. Duncan and Eric Ambler.

In 1979 I moved to Austin and finished *Red Weather*. Joe Lansdale and I had by this time sold "Black as the Night" to *Mike Shayne*, so I sent them "Deep without Pity" again. And, partly because of Joe's encouragement, I started *The Slow Surrender*, my first Dan Sloane novel. While I was working on it, I got word that "Deep Without Pity" had been accepted at *Shayne*. Shortly afterward I sold "The Killing Season" to an LA magazine called *Mystery*.

For a brief moment there, I was a private eye writer, and I really liked it. I was corresponding with fellow fans and writers like Lansdale, Steve Mertz, Mike McQuay, and James Reasoner. We would be the next generation to rule the mystery field.

I still don't know why it didn't happen. I was pleased with *The Slow Surrender*, and despite its being too conventional, I still like it today. I'd written a third Sloane short story, "Prodigal Son," which was the best of the lot. I had actually started working on the second Sloane novel, to be called *The Long Run*. It was going to be about college baseball, and I'd already attended UT's first practice of the spring. I was going to follow them through the spring and summer, ending with their annual game against the Texas Rangers. I was going to let the plot come out of my research, though I knew that it would involve gambling, player misconduct, maybe a little blackmail and murder.

What derailed me personally was agent trouble. The Mysterious Literary Agency had agreed to represent me on the strength of *The Slow Surrender*, and I had actually started a full rewrite of the book for them. (I had managed to talk Nat Sobel out of some of his more idiotic suggestions, like "How about if the two plot threads don't come together at all?") When they saw *Red Weather*, however, they dropped me without any real explanation. By this time, *Mystery* had also dropped "The Killing Season," again with no real explanation, then folded. True to form, "Prodigal Son" eventually sold (to *The Saint Mystery Magazine*) and the magazine, as usual, folded before my story could come out.

It was painful to admit, but I decided that maybe I wasn't really cut out to be a mystery writer. I abandoned *The Long Run* and a short story in process called "Rip Tide." "Rip Tide" was going to be one of those clever problem stories, in this case a kind of "locked pouch" mystery. A guy steals some diamonds, goes into hiding, then surfaces in Sloane's office. He hires Sloane to drive him to Galveston, where he wades into the ocean, carrying the diamonds in a pouch, in front of a hundred witnesses. When the cops fish him out, there's nothing in the sealed pouch but salt water. No evidence—the guy gets off. The diamonds are assumed lost. Months later, the guy shows up trying to steal Sloane's unabridged dictionary. Turns out that after the robbery he traded the diamonds for stamps and had the envelope of stamps laminated. He hid that in the spine of Sloane's dictionary, then took salt crystals into the ocean—where they dissolved into the water.

Besides *The Long Run* and "Rip Tide," I gave up mystery writing with one idea still in the back of my mind. I thought of it as "the last Dan Sloane story."

It would have shown Sloane becoming so disillusioned during the investigation of a rape case that he gave up and got another job.

When Joe Lansdale refused to take “maybe” or “later” for an answer on his *Dark At Heart* anthology in 1990, that last Dan Sloane story was the only suspense idea that spoke to me. I didn’t want to write about Sloane any more; that part of my career was over. But when I rethought it in terms of another protagonist, I came up with “Dirty Work,” which turned out to be one of my favorites of my own stories.

So here it is at last: the complete Dan Sloane short story collection.

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