

Mickey... and Me

By Max Allan Collins

I'm thirteen, on a family vacation. Back home, I've been eyeing the lurid covers of Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer novels, not daring a purchase. Here I risk *One Lonely Night*, with its cover of a nude damsel. "How old are you?" "Sixteen!" I throw down thirty-five cents, and soon am devouring fever-dream prose in the backseat of a Pontiac.

It's 1947 and Mickey Spillane, former fighter pilot, is having a tougher time than promised in the post-war world. Before the war he'd written comic books (*Captain America*, *Submariner*), but nobody wants his private eye strip, *Mike Danger*. In upstate New York, he pitches a tent and pounds out *I, the Jury*. A Dutton editor finds it in poor taste but possibly commercial.

I'm eighteen years old. A high-school senior. I've written three novels in the Spillane style, all rejected by encouraging editors who don't know I'm a kid. I have everything of Mickey's, rooting out issues of Manhunt and Cavalier in second-hand shops from Chicago to New York. I have written Mickey Spillane perhaps thirty unanswered fan letters.

Signet publishes *I, the Jury* in paperback in 1948, selling millions. Liberal critics revile vigilante Mike Hammer; conservatives are offended by the sexual content. Mickey laughs it off but feels the sting. Hollywood makes Hammer movies; there's a comic strip, radio show, and TV series (with Darren McGavin). Mickey takes time off to tour with a circus, deep-sea dive, race stock cars, fly jets.

I am twenty-two years old, taking my MFA at the Writers Workshop at Iowa City under Richard



Yates, who encourages my pursuit of smart pulp fiction; others there are not so tolerant, but when my first novel sells, my stock rises. I send Mickey a copy, and he responds, welcoming me to the club.

No new Spillane novels appear until 1960, while the existing Hammers continue selling in the millions. Blake Edwards' Hammer imitation *Peter Gunn* sparks a private eye craze on TV. As a stopgap until Mickey starts writing again, Signet publishes "the English Mike Hammer," James Bond.

I'm thirty-three years old. Bouchercon is in Milwaukee, Mickey a special guest. As the con's liaison, I'm taken to meet him at his hotel room. "Mickey, this is Max Collins, he's..." "I know Max! We been corresponding for years!" I say, "Right Mickey – one letter from you, one-hundred from me." We are immediate friends. Soon I'm at his outdoor bar in South Carolina, where he flirts with pretty neighbor Jane Rogers, who flirts

right back. She's gonna be the next Mrs. Spillane, Mickey tells me. He's right, as usual.

In the '60s and '70s, Mickey roars back with more Hammer novels, plays his famous detective in a movie, and publishes blockbusters like the outrageous *The Erection Set*. He spoofs Hammer in Miller Lite commercials, and Stacy Keach stars in a hit Hammer series. By the '90s many critics are reappraising him and MWA selects him Grand Master.

I'm forty-five years old. I'm in Florida for the launch of a comic book Mickey and I developed. My wife Barb and I are walking along the beach. Ahead of us are two kids—Mickey Spillane, seventy-seven, and Nathan Collins, eleven. They



tease each other, Mickey bumping into him, Nate bumping back, the bigger kid telling the littler one how to eat worms. They are laughing and it echoes off the water – hear it?

Max Allan Collins was selected by Mickey Spillane to complete the late author's unfinished works, most recently *Kill Me, Darling* (Titan). *Road to Perdition*, his 1998 graphic novel, became an Academy Award-winning film. His Quarry thrillers celebrate a fortieth anniversary with *Quarry's Choice* (Hard Case Crime) and a Cinemax TV series. Collins is a recipient of the Private Eye Writers of America life achievement award, the Eye, as well as their Hammer award for his Nathan Heller historical novels. He and his wife Barbara live in Iowa, where they collaborate as "Barbara Allan" on the cozy Trash 'n' Treasures mysteries (*Antiques Swap*, Kensington).