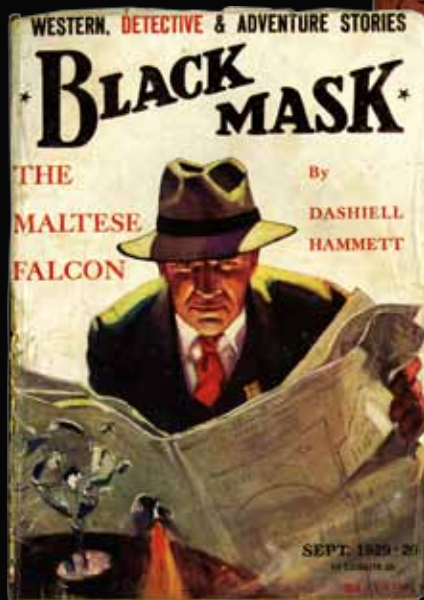


A Bird in the Hand

The Comics Claim a Classic

Steve Kronenberg

What would be the most daunting task of any film noir scholar? A good bet might be cataloging all the adaptations of Dashiell Hammett's prodigious body of work. Where to begin? Books? Films? Radio and TV productions? Stage plays? But the list might understandably omit one item: a mysterious 1946 comic-book adaptation of *The Maltese Falcon* published by the little-known David McKay Co. Some die-hard comic-book fans are unaware of it. Fewer still have even laid eyes on it. It's a book that's as rare as it is obscure.



Above: Rodlow Willard's colorful, eye-catching cover for the *Feature Books* adaptation of *The Maltese Falcon*. Right: the cover for the story's original appearance in the Sept. 1929 issue of *Black Mask*

The *Falcon* comic-book was actually part of a series entitled “Feature Books,” released by the McKay group and distributed by King Features Syndicate. Hammett actually wrote it—sort of. The book's word balloons duplicate snippets of dialog lifted directly from Hammett's source novel. The Thrilling Detective Web Site lauds the comic as “. . . supposedly quite well-done, very faithful to both the book and the film.” That statement is partially true. In a mere 47 pages, the *Falcon* comic cleanly and concisely capsulizes Hammett's story. But the necessity of its publication is questionable: Hammett's novel and John Huston's superb 1941 film were probably all that needed to be said—or read—about the Black Bird.

This comic-book redux is also marred by Rodlow Willard's dull, indifferent artwork. Willard drew each character from whole cloth (none bears a direct resemblance to any of the actors in Huston's film).



ABOVE AND BELOW: Sample pages from *The Maltese Falcon* comic-book, with Rodlow Willard's unfortunately dull artwork

But the art itself is largely wooden and amateurish. Only Willard's Joel Cairo and Kasper Gutman are drawn with any nuance and zeal. Sam Spade looks like a thousand other cartoonish tough guys. And Willard's drab Brigid O'Shaughnessy lacks Mary Astor's sinister, duplicitous charm.

The book's primary artistic asset is its full-color cover—a beautifully-rendered image depicting the captain of the *La Paloma* fleeing his burning ship, *Falcon* in hand and pursued by O'Shaughnessy, Gutman, and a gun-toting Cairo. No credit for the cover appears anywhere, but the characters are rendered in the same style as Willard's interior art, so it's a good guess that Willard performed the chores for the outer wrapper. If only the rest of the book matched the verve of the come-on cover.

Willard's name may not carry the cachet of a Johnny Craig or Graham Ingels, but he had ample experience as an illustrator. He was born in 1907, educated at the University of California, and served as art director, editor, and cartoonist for such publications as *Review of Reviews*, *Digest*, and for several of Dell Publishing's magazines—all in the 1930's. In 1943, Willard illustrated a book entitled *800 Ways to Save and Serve: How to Beat the High Cost of Wartime Living*. In 1946, he illustrated the *Falcon* comic-book and also began drawing the Scorchy Smith syndicated newspaper strip, which would keep him busy until 1954. Scorchy Smith was a James Bond-like mercenary who trotted the globe smashing spy rings and wooing damsels in distress. Willard's comic-book work also included two Golden Age rarities: *Ghost Squadron* and *Tiger Man*. The latter was an obvious *Batman* clone who

fought crime dressed in a tiger costume and vanquished the bad guys with a "Tiger Car," "Tiger Boat," and "Tiger Plane." Later, Willard created the storyboards for the Cinerama documentary *Cinerama Holiday* (1955). He died in 1988.

The Maltese Falcon comic-book was one of several "Feature Books" published by the McKay Co. The series was the first to devote complete issues to well-known comic strip characters, reprinting the newspaper art in single volumes. The books began in 1937 with icons like *Dick Tracy*, *The Lone Ranger*, and Hammett's own *Secret Agent X-9*. The *Falcon* was Issue #48 of the series, and was quickly followed by the comic-book debut of *Perry Mason* in two issues: "The Case of the Lucky Legs" (1946) and "The Case of the Shoplifter's Shoe" (1947). After the two *Mason* books, the McKay Co. reprinted two *Rip Kirby* comic strip capers: "The Mystery of the Mangler" and "The Case



of the Master Menace," both of which were released in 1948 and boasted artwork by the legendary Alex Raymond.

"Feature Books" ended its long run in 1948, amidst underwhelming sales and overwhelming competition from comic-book giants like Marvel and DC. Today, *The Maltese Falcon* and the other P.I. books in the series are among the rarest and most collectible detective comics on the market. To comic-book collectors, the Black Bird still represents "the stuff that dreams are made of." ■