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First written in 1941 but banned from publication in the United States until 1988, this hard-boiled mystery covers such unsavory but potent topics as grave-robbing, religious cults, kinky sex, and whorehouse violence. In this classic noir novel, a private eye from St. Louis, who likes his steak rare, his liquor hard, and his women fallen, arrives at the small town of Paulton to protect his wealthy client's daughter from a suspicious religious cult. Throughout the span of the case, he confronts Paulton's mob boss, avenges his partner's death, and falls for a classic femme fatale named Princess.

Solomon's Vineyard Details

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Author : Jonathan Latimer

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From Reader Review Solomon's Vineyard for online ebook

Sam Reaves says

This book is touted as a forgotten classic, suppressed when it came out in 1941 because of its sexual frankness and general lurid disreputability. By current standards, of course, it's pretty tame, and the only reason to read it is because it flaunts just about every touchstone of the classic hard-boiled PI novel, in spades.

Karl Craven is a St. Louis PI hired to get a millionaire's niece out of the clutches of the weirdo cult she has fallen in with in a smallish town of unspecified location. He likes booze and broads, he carries a gun, and oh yeah, his partner has been mysteriously murdered while investigating the cult. There's a blonde, a redhead, a whore with a heart of gold, an Italian vicelord, a crooked police chief... you get the picture. The weirdo cult gives it a creepy twist (who knew they had weirdo cults luring in rich kids back in the thirties?) but in the end it all comes down to the fat cat bastards who run everything, and the best thing to do is just shoot somebody. Good clean fun.

Still says

This was the second time I'd read this.

I own the Black Mask Online edition but decided to download the Kindle version for reading while on vacation. I became suspicious about the Kindle version after reading comments someone over in the Hardboiled Group Reading Thread posted re: the Kindle edition being an edited version of this.

I decided to wait to return home and read my original Black Mask Online edition.

I had fun with this. As much fun as I had the first time I read it.

As good as this is, it's *not* up to quality of Latimer's best pulp fiction novels.

Those would be his remarkable alcoholic private eye Bill Crane series: Murder In The Madhouse (1935), Headed For A Hearse 1935), The Lady In The Morgue 1936), and The Dead Don't Care (1938). There's also a title I don't own but would love to find- Red Gardenias (1939) reissued as Some Dames Are Deadly (1955).

The detective in "Solomon's" (who can remember names?) seems to have a voracious appetite for food, booze, and women and likes to annoy people. He's kind of an unpleasant wise guy and I'd hate to spend a long train ride with him in a seat beside mine.

The plot bears a slight resemblance to the plot of Red Harvest by Dashiell Hammett

He doesn't so much as solve the mystery/case/crimes as the resolutions sort of fall into his lap.

I've read comments from some people who were upset by the occasional racist and sexist jibe.

All I can say is that style of writing is from an era when people were not sensitive to racial or sexual stereotyping.

Maybe offended readers should have watched the Whoopi Goldberg disclaimer at the beginning of the DVD collection "The Looney Tunes Golden Collection Volume 3" which can be viewed here"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HCT1c...>

Noah Goats says

Solomon's Vineyard started in a big hole with me because I made up my mind right away that the book's protagonist was an unlikable creep who said things like, "she'd swing a hip until it looked like it was going out of joint and then she'd throw it back in place with a snap making the buttocks quiver under this dress that was like black skin." In that passage the narrator/protagonist is describing a woman's walk that he considers particularly sexy, but, no, gross. That does not sound sexy. Now, I enjoy noirish patter, but Latimer lays it on a bit too thick for my taste. Not everyone can be Raymond Chandler, and I wish Latimer hadn't tried so hard.

But, so help me, I enjoy a cheesy noir where every character is kind of terrible, where the cops are crooked, the gangsters are cruel, and the women only want to sleep with you so they can double cross you in the next chapter. And this novel has all of that. It also has a fun story weaving together a standard detective story plot (avenging a parter's murder) with the slightly weird (combatting a murderous religious cult).

In short: this is trash but I sort of liked it anyway.

Andy says

The most brutal detective novel ever written. A dick gets sent to Heartland USA to find a missing girl hidden in a crazy religious compound protected by vicious racketeers. Our rotund hero is (literally) in bed with the Cult's princess and the gangsta's gun moll, too. Loads of sex and murder, "Solomon's Vineyard" never gets boring. And I didn't even mention the necrophiliac part, either.

Johnny says

A quick, fun, gin-soaked ride of a story. In many ways, ahead of its time, especially in its approach to sex and violence (probably why it wasn't in print in the US unedited until 1988). Even though it was written in 1941, it feels much more like a Mickey Spillane era story.

As it states in a kind of mini-prologue (I'm paraphrasing): This is a wild one. It has everything but an abortion and a tornado.

I would be interested in reading THE FIFTH GRAVE, the edited version that was published in the US to compare the differences.

The only reason I'm not giving it five stars is because the story is so secondary to the scenes and atmosphere that by the end, I just wanted more scenes and didn't really care about the story. Rarely do I embrace style, over substance, but this book is so hard-boiled that it's hard to read without a smile on your face.

Nancy Oakes says

for plot, etc. feel free to [click here](#). Otherwise, continue.

The very short preface to this novel states the following:

"Listen. This is a wild one. Maybe the wildest yet. It's got everything but an abortion and a tornado. I ain't saying it's true. Neither of us, brother, is asking you to believe it. You can lug it across to the rental library right now and tell the dame you want your goddam nickel back. We don't care. All he done was write it down like I told it, and I don't guarantee nothing."

That little tongue-in-cheek blurb is signed by Karl Craven, the narrator and main character of this novel. His attitude toward women sucks -- he is the poster boy (and quite possibly king) of misogynists everywhere. Ex-football player and now PI, the only thing going for this fictional jerk in my opinion is that he was a fervent reader of Black Mask magazine. His creator was evidently a reader of Dashiell Hammett -- if you've read Hammett's *The Dain Curse*, you'll notice that there's a beyond-huge similarity between the two books: both take the reader on a wild ride centered around an odd religious cult. Here it is the titular Solomon's Vineyard taking center stage, a "religious colony," where they "raise grapes and hell." (just an FYI: it looks like Latimer may also have taken notes from Cora in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.)

The novel gets pretty out there sometimes, not just in terms of the masochistic sex (very un-noteworthy these days), but also in what's really going on in the town and more importantly, up at the Vineyard. To get through it, you absolutely have to leave whatever amount of PC-ness and modern sensitivities you have at the door. It's not for the faint of heart -- in this book misogyny and racism rule the day. If you're a plot-based crime reader, you'll also notice that this book starts moving into the incredulity zone pretty quickly and just sort of hangs there like an inversion layer until the ending.

Solomon's Vineyard is likely the most hardboiled (and icky) novel I've ever read and I'm hoping, judging from the short preface, that it's meant to be kind of a wisecracking, skewering take of that genre especially since it's pretty obvious that Latimer sort of "borrowed" elements from at least two other books I've read. All in all while I hated the main character, I did enjoy the novel. Once you pick it up, you cannot put it down.

It actually scares me that I just said that.

Tom Mathews says

Karl Craven believed there were two ways to approach the private detective business; underground or on top. The way he saw it, *"Underground you had the element of surprise on your side, but it was harder to move around. On top you went everywhere, taking cracks at everybody, and everybody taking cracks at you. You had to be tough to play it that way."* Craven was tough. He could stop a lousy mook's fists with his face or scuff up a gangster's shoes with his ribs. He liked his men manly, his Negroes servile, and his sex rough. He was a man's man with big appetites and I'm not just talking about the 4 lb. steaks and six double lamb chops

he scarfed down regularly.

In other words, Karl Craven was not the kind of guy folks would describe as warm and fuzzy. Truth be told, he was an asshole.

But sometimes when you are reading hardboiled pulp fiction, warm and fuzzy just doesn't cut it. You need someone who reminds you of the ripe odor of the locker room at the boxing gym. This is that kind of book. Written in 1941 and banned from publication until 1988, Solomon's Vineyard has it all, grave-robbing, religious cults, kinky sex, and whorehouse violence. What more could a guy want? An affordable price? How does 99¢ on Kindle sound?

Bottom line: This book is what it is and what it is is entertaining gritty mid-century pulp fiction. Be warned, if my review so far hasn't tipped you off that this book is far from politically correct, take it from me, this book is far from politically correct. Karl Craven is not someone whose actions I approve of. If you find misogyny, racism and homophobia in a fictional setting intolerable, you may wish to look elsewhere for your reading material.

FYI: On a 5-point scale I assign stars based on my assessment of what the book needs in the way of improvements:

- 5 Stars – Nothing at all. If it ain't broke, don't fix it.
- 4 Stars – It could stand for a few tweaks here and there but it's pretty good as it is.
- 3 Stars – A solid *C* grade. Some serious rewriting would be needed in order for this book to be considered *great* or *memorable*.
- 2 Stars – This book needs a lot of work. A good start would be to change the plot, the character development, the writing style and the ending.
- 1 Star - The only thing that would improve this book is a good bonfire.

jennifer says

A private detective is hired to bring a rich man's niece home. But the niece is being held captive by a religious cult with a sinister plan for the girl, and the cult is led by a beautiful blonde. There's also a local mob boss, who has the prettiest girl in town.

This book was written in 1941 but banned from publication in the U.S. until 1988, though I can't figure out why. The "kinky" sex scenes are brief and almost laughable, but no more graphic than any other pulp writing at the time.

The writing can be flat as a pancake for a few paragraphs here and there but Latimer is good at action, with gangland shoot outs and fistfights being plentiful. So are double-crosses and deaths; this detective gets everybody involved in his problems.

My beef is with the publisher, Black Mask. This book takes sloppy editing to new lows. Paragraph structures are often wrong, dialogue is attached to previous dialogue so that the reader has to guess which character is speaking and the spelling mistakes are too numerous to count. For some reason, the word "off" is replaced with "oil" in almost every instance.

However, I really enjoyed the exciting story with all its intrigue and it's a true example of hardboiled pulp.

Richard says

3.5 Stars

From the way her buttocks looked under the black silk dress, I knew she'd be good in bed. The silk was tight and under it the muscles worked slow and easy. I saw weight there, and control, and, brother, those were things I like in a woman.

Yea, from that first line, we know that this book puts the "hard" in hard-boiled. This one might just be the "hardest" of them all. I can see now why it's publication was delayed for FORTY years(!) due to content. It follows private detective Karl Craven, who's hired to travel to a small town to convince a young woman to leave a religious sex cult that has wild orgies every year in the woods, worships a rotting corpse they keep in a temple, and chooses a girl to go marry the corpse and have sex with it. Like Craven says about his story in the prologue: *"It's got everything but an abortion and a tornado."*

I thought it was pretty cool that Craven's true nature was kept vague throughout the story, causing the reader to never fully know where he stood on certain things and never be able to predict what he would do. We know he's supposed to be a detective, but is he disguising himself as one? Is that a lie? Is he a con man? Or maybe he's just the worst private eye in the world and is just using the job to bed down as many ladies as possible? This added an interesting dynamic on top of the craziness. But at the the same time, it was a thin line to walk for a writer because I also felt like I was distanced from him as well. He also sometimes seemed like a real dick in the way he treated women, minorities, or for that matter, every other human being he came in contact with...

I also thought the book was unexpectedly funny because Craven seemed like he didn't really give a damn about solving the case for most of the story. He spends a good amount of the book either napping, eating, taking multiple showers, reading *Black Mask* magazines, or having rough sex with the cult's princess, who likes to get punched around while in bed instead of getting kissed. I just got a kick out of how laid back he was, as if he thought that the pleasures in life were the priority and everything else would work itself out in the end. And who knows, maybe it will. You'll have to read to find out.

I took a peek into the grave. Flowers had almost covered the coffin. I thought: there goes \$135. It was the first time I'd ever spent that much on a doll without getting something in return.

Bill Kerwin says

The best hardboiled detective novel you've probably never heard of, *Solomon's Vineyard* was published in Britain in 1941, but never issued in unexpurgated form in its author's native U.S.A. until 1988.

As Detective Karl Craven tells us in his brief introduction: "This is a wild one. . . it's got everything but an abortion and a tornado." Does it ever. It begins like classic Hammett (a wandering daughter job, a murdered

partner, "Red Harvest" style intrigue), gradually transforms into Chandler baroque, and then--three-quarters of the way through--metamorphoses again, this time into "The Arabian Nights" Mike Hammer style: a crypt crammed with gold and jewels revealed to our hero by a hot blonde called "The Princess," who is very into *very* rough sex. Want to hear more? It also features: a razor-wielding negro bouncer in a bordello, a brother mourning his sister who, when reckless with grief, fires randomly into a steam room, a black-robed assassin, a roadhouse shoot-out which ends with an exploding car, and a religious cult grown rich on bootleg hootch that still has time for human sacrifice and purchases of large lots of rotting meat. Plus a dash of necrophilia and (well, kind of) the resurrection of the dead.

I couldn't decide whether this was the sleaziest great detective novel I'd ever read, or just the greatest sleazy detective novel I'd ever read, so I erred on the side of caution and gave it four stars. Then I thought about it for three years, and one day said to myself: what the hell, give it five.

Algernon says

opening lines:

From the way her buttocks looked under the black silk dress, I knew she'd be good in bed. The silk was tight and under it the muscles worked slow and easy. I saw weight there, and control, and, brother, those are things I like in a woman. I put down my bags and went after her along the station platform.

The pulpiest pulp detective novel to come out of the 40's! The story was considered too risqué at the time of publication for the sensibilities of readers more used to the posh settings and the stiff upper lip elegance of Sherlock Holmes or Lord Peter Wimsey. Even for me, a long-time fan of the noir movies and of the hard-boiled detectives, the first impression on meeting private investigator Karl Craven is that this is a tongue-in-cheek parody of the genre stereotypes. A little research though demonstrates that the hero of Jonathan Latimer's adventure is, instead of a pastiche, the original mould from which so many other detective will be later cast. Together with Chandler and Hammett, Latimer is one of the founding fathers of the style that stormed and brought down the rules of the criminal investigation game in the British mannner.

Karl Craven is not a nice man. He is a cynic without scruples, a lecherous drunkard, an opportunist and a liar. He might be loud, mean, over the top, yet the more time you spend in his company, the more you realize that he is the real McCoy, a true product of the hard times of Prohibition, mob rule and economic depression. And he's good at what he does, which is why a rich industrialist has hired him to go to a small town in the Midwest and rescue his only daughter from the clutches of a secretive cult.

Karl's attitudes towards 'Negroes', anything wearing a skirt, 'healthy' food, domestic violence and other hot button issues might be a turn-off for a thin skinned reader, but if you can relax and put all these quirks in the context of society as it was in the early 40's, you might just have in your hand one of the best adventures in the field.

I was having a good time. There were only three things I really liked in the world; food, fighting and ... women. Oh yes, and maybe liquor.

Good times for Karl Craven in a nowhere town include, but are not limited to:

- murder most foul of his former partner, sent ahead to test the field
- barroom brawling with the local mobster, delightfully named Pug Banta
- seducing the redhead moll of said Pug Banta
- beating up the matron, the bouncer and a couple of the whores in the local bawdy house... then thoroughly thrashing the place as a lesson not to piss him off
- an exchange of machine-gun fire during a romantic dinner, with a side dish of a burning car through the windows
- (view spoiler)
- eating about four pounds of red meat each day (he needs the energy for his night time wenching)
- fighting persistent hangovers with a bottle of brandy and a dozen raw eggs ... each morning
- a bare knuckle fight in a sauna that seems lifted right out of a James Bond movie, only written a couple of decades early.
- (view spoiler)
- (view spoiler)

One significant short passage shows that Karl Craven knows what he's doing: he can either follow the police procedures and investigate clues, interview witnesses, go on stakeouts; or he can kick the hornet nest, raise hell and see who comes after him with a crowbar. His style requires a man who can take a punch, one who can blend in with the bad guys, who talks their language and walks their walk. If the style sounds familiar, it may be because it is the exact same method advocated by the Continental Op in "Red Harvest", another paunchy, middle-aged, cynical, hard drinking and hard fisted private investigator. To continue with the comparison, both investigators use unorthodox methods, taking the law into their own hands and administering the punishments as they saw fit for the crimes, yet in their own minds, they are still the good guys who keep the rest of us 'sheep' safe from the 'wolves'

Usually Justice was supposed to be a tall dame in a white robe, but in Paulton, I decided, if the citizens ever stuck a statue of Justice on the courthouse steps, it would have to be a fat, red-faced guy with a scar on his belly.

Since I mentioned earlier Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, I will finish with explaining why I am holding back a star, even as I admit "Solomon's Vineyard" is in many ways just as good as its more famous counterparts. The style of Latimer is sharp, genuine, effective and Karl is entertaining in his first person narrative, yet the prose doesn't soar for me like the wild metaphors of Phillip Marlowe and it doesn't quite reach the emotional intensity of Sam Spade. It's fun, but more than once I wished for more depth and more nuanced, better fleshed out secondary characters.

I plan to read more from the short list of Latimer's novels, and even to watch some of the movies where he worked as scriptwriter. It's not too late to turn even the present novel into a movie. I believe it will be a success, with fun lines like this last quote:

"Charles, it would be nice now if you got me that blonde from the Vineyard."

He rolled his eyes. "You don't want her, Mister Craven."

"How do you know what I want?"

"They say that blonde's poison."

"Listen, Charles, if blondes were poison, I'd have died thirty years ago."

Melki says

"That's Solomon's Vineyard."

"What?"

"You heard of it," the driver said. "A religious colony . Raise grapes . . . and hell."

Dunn-dunn-dunnnnnnnnnnn!

Private dick Karl Craven is hired to spring a rich man's daughter from a freaky cult and enters into a world of cranky gangsters, willing women and more religious nutjobs than you can shake a shepherd's crook at.

Labeled too hot for US publication in 1941, it seems pretty tame by today's standards. (Because NO ONE EVER HAD S-E-X way back when. Right?)

(view spoiler) Though there's nothing particularly outstanding here, it's still a swell read, PLUS there's the added bonus of possibly the greatest gangster name ever - **Pug Banta**.

Noir fans should not miss this one!

"Bodies always give me goose pimples."

Paul says

“ FROM THE way her buttocks looked under the black silk dress, I knew she'd be good in bed. The silk was tight and under it the muscles worked slow and easy. I saw weight there, and control, and, brother, those are things I like in a woman. I put down my bags and went after her along the station platform. “

I defy any fan of Hard-Boiled/Noir crime fiction to read the above first paragraph of 'Solomon's Vineyard' & not feel compelled to read on.

Reminiscent of 'The Dain Curse' by Dashiell Hammett, in that both are stories about a shady pseudo-religious cult. The comparison in no way detracts from Latimer's excellent & arguably most Hard-Boiled/Noir novel. No doubt Latimer was influenced by Hammett, but there's a Jim Thompson twist in this tale too. And in fact I preferred 'Solomon's Vineyard' to 'The Dain Curse'.

It's notoriety meant that it was only published in unexpurgated form in the States in 1982, 40 years after its original publication. In this classic noir novel, St Louis private eye Karl Craven, who likes his steak rare, his liquor hard and his women fallen, arrives at the small town of Paulton to protect his wealthy client's daughter from a religious cult. He soon finds himself involved with various unsavory characters, as well as a femme fatale named Princess, and proves more than a match for the worst of them. Private eye Karl Craven is, as they say, a piece of work!

I can't recommend this example of classic noir highly enough. An easy 4 out of 5 stars from me. Nudging 5.

Good reading.

Karla says

I was pretty optimistic about this one, based on other reviews touting how hard-boiled it was. Well, maybe it was, but I thought the plot (what little there was of it) got overwhelmed by the hard-boiled elements, which was basically some rough sex with a masochistic nympho and the buckets and buckets and vats of bourbon and beer downed by our hero-detective no matter the hour of the day.

Whiskey for breakfast, bourbon bottle in the shower or sauna, raw eggs in whiskey for hangovers, bourbon for lunch and dinner and mid-afternoon and early evening, followed by beer chasers.

And then there's the food. This guy polishes off 4 lb steaks or 3 hamburgers at a sitting. And don't forget the bourbon (or beer).

Latimer's tale did indeed have an interesting slant: a fat detective protagonist. He's called Fatso multiple times, and he's described as being about 240 lbs. My mental image of the guy from the get-go was a slightly svelte Victor Buono.

Which made the slappy, bondagey rough sex with the nympho quite the mental image.

In the end, it was more of a curiosity piece than a cohesive tale to enjoy.

James Thane says

This is a classic piece of pulp fiction that was first published in Britain in 1941, but which was deemed much too racy for the U.S. at that time. Accordingly, it was first published here in an sanitized version that glossed over all the parts that were too "adult" for the delicate sensibilities of the American reading public. The opening couple of sentences of the original version might suggest why:

"From the way her buttocks looked under the black silk dress, I knew she'd be good in bed. The silk was tight and under it the muscles worked slow and easy. I saw weight there, and control, and, brother, those are things I like in a woman."

Our intrepid narrator is a man named Karl Craven who's just arrived in a small, out-of-the-way Midwestern town on some mysterious errand. We learn that he's been preceded in town by a partner, or an accomplice; as Craven checks into the hotel, we're not yet sure which. Things get complicated right away, though, when it turns out that the man Craven is to meet has been shot to death. The killer is still at large.

The town is as corrupt as they come in a pulp novel of this sort, from the sheriff on down. But added to the mix is a mysterious religious retreat, know as Solomon's Vineyard, which sits just outside of town. No one is quite sure exactly what goes on behind the closed doors of the Vineyard, but you can bet it's titillating and maybe even dangerous.

Karl Craven is a large man with even larger appetites and he drinks and eats his way through this story at a mind-boggling pace. At one point, he has a four-pound steak for dinner, along with all the trimmings and a half an apple pie for dessert. His sexual appetites are pretty much on the same scale.

It would be unfair to reveal much of anything about the plot, but this is a story with lots of gunplay and other malicious violence. There's tough dames and a fair amount of rough, kinky sex, some grave-robbing and a bizarre religious cult headed by a princess who may be even too much for a man like Craven to handle.

If your a fan of the sort of trashy pulp fiction that was popular at the middle of the last century, you'll probably love this book which is so much over the top that it almost becomes a parody of the genre. Latimer, who would ultimately become a fairly successful Hollywood screenwriter walks you right up to the line but steps back just in time to give you a really fun read.
