

The Maltese Falcon (1941) is one of the most popular and best classic detective mysteries ever made, and many film historians consider it the first in the dark *film noir* genre. The low-budget film reflects the remarkable directorial debut of John Huston (previously a screenwriter) who efficiently filmed this American classic for Warner Bros. studios.

The precocious director Huston was very faithful to Dashiell Hammett's 1929 novel *The Maltese Falcon*, that had originally appeared as a five-part serialized story in a pulp fiction, detective story magazine publication named *Black Mask*. However, for an early preview audience, the film took a different, short-lived title, *The Gent From Frisco*. There were two major differences between the book and film: (1) Gutman was killed by Wilmer, and (2) the last quotable line of dialogue was thought up by Bogart on the set.

Hammett's novel had previously been filmed twice: a low-budget film (directed by Roy Del Ruth) with Ricardo Cortez and Bebe Daniels as *Dangerous Female* (1931) (aka *The Maltese Falcon*), and again remade as *Satan Met a Lady* (1936) (directed by William Dieterle) with Warren William and rising star Bette Davis. Huston was convinced that he could remake the film with a more precise screenplay and better acting than the other two adaptations. The idea of a sequel following the film's success, to be titled *The Further Adventures of the Maltese Falcon*, was scrapped when Huston became unavailable and when Hammett demanded an exorbitant financial guarantee. As a footnote, it was refilmed in the mid-70s as the satirical *Black Bird* (1975) with George Segal as Sam Spade, Jr., with two appearances by original cast members (Elisha Cook, Jr., and Lee Patrick). The classic mystery film has also been spoofed in *The Maltese Bippy* (1969) with TV-show stars Dan Rowan and Dick Martin, *Murder By Death* (1976), and *The Cheap Detective* (1978).

The bejeweled, priceless 'Maltese Falcon' [a 50-pound plaster cast, seven in all, made by the Props Department at Warners] is at the center of the intriguing film as an elusive but valuable object that is greedily desired, for different reasons, by all the principals. The film is known

for a number of memorable portrayals of corrupt, deceitful, hard-nosed villains ("The Fat Man"), low-life quirky crooks (Peter Lorre and 'gunsel' Elisha Cook, Jr.) and heroes, interwoven complex interactions between characters, double-crossing intrigues and deceptions (e.g., the treacherous, lying Mary Astor character identifies herself with three aliases - as Miss Ruth Wonderly, Miss Leblanc, and Brigid O'Shaughnessy), posturings, betrayals and materialistic greed. Everything is contained in marvelous characterizations and lines of dialogue.

B-movie lead character Humphrey Bogart presented the definitive Sam Spade in the mystery thriller classic - as a San Francisco sleuthing private-eye. Bogart had just finished another Warner Bros. film *High Sierra* (1941), in a role that was also turned down by WB's contract player George Raft. Geraldine Fitzgerald was originally chosen to play the role that Mary Astor eventually portrayed.

The film received three nominations, but no Academy Awards: Best Picture, Best Supporting Actor (almost 300 lb. Sydney Greenstreet in his talkie film debut), and Best Adapted Screenplay (by the director - John Huston). Competition from John Ford's [*How Green Was My Valley* \(1941\)](#) took the Best Picture and Best Supporting Actor Oscars (Donald Crisp), and *Here Comes Mr. Jordan* (1941) took the screenplay honors. However, in the same year, its un-nominated star Mary Astor, in the best performance of her career, was actually the recipient of the Best Supporting Actress Oscar for her role in *The Great Lie* (1941). Neither Astor nor Bogart were nominated for their immortalized roles.

The 1941 version was going to be called *The Gent From 'Frisco*, but Huston persuaded Warner that the title was a 'dog'. Hal B. Wallis, producer of the '41 version, is also credited with persuading Warner to drop the proposed title in favour of *The Maltese Falcon*. (See Nolan, 1983: 181).

In a memo dated Feb 14th, 1942, Jack Warner wrote to Jacob Wilk, his New York story editor:

To Wilk:

Is there any chance get Dashiell Hammett write a sequel to "Maltese Falcon." What I mean by this is can he take all the characters, with the exception naturally of Mary Astor as she is supposed to receive a death sentence, and go right on from end of our picture. If Hammett would be intersted in this type of proposition let me know quick. We would use Bogart, Greenstreet and rest of cast. However, we don't want this to interfere with Hammett's adaptation of "Watch on Rhine." This can all happen afterwards.

See Rudy Behlmer, *Inside Warner Bros. (1935-1951)* (NY: Viking, 1985) p. 157.