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The Standard Reader

Columbia University's faculty senate wins a Sontag; "The Mike Hammer Collection."

MORE SONTAGS

This week's Susan Sontag Certificate--The Standard Reader's way of acknowledging inanity by artists and intellectuals--goes to the Columbia University faculty senate, which voted 46 to 0 to "reaffirm open discourse as a prime value in our community." Almost anywhere else, we'd applaud this affirmation of free speech. But the senate did it because, it claimed, "some student members of the Columbia community have felt pressure to curtail their opinions of the national response to the Sept. 11 attacks." It didn't cite any examples of students who had been stopped from denouncing the United States, primarily because there don't seem to be any examples. But the senate just wanted unanimously to get on record that students should feel free to do so.

As the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education notes, this is the same Columbia that disinvited John Leo and Dinesh D'Souza because they were, well, not leftists. The same Columbia where Ward Connerly's speech against affirmative action was howled down by students shouting "bigot" and "Uncle Tom." When Columbia doesn't just mean freedom for approved causes, the school will deserve applause for upholding free speech. In the meanwhile, we'll simply point out that the worst result of evil is the corruption of something good.

BOOK OF THE WEEK

Spillane His Guts: It was easy.
By J. Bottum

The Mike Hammer Collection, in 2 vols.
by Mickey Spillane
(New American Library, 513 pp. & 517 pp., \$15 each).

Your first impulse will be to like Mickey Spillane. Here's a guy who was loathed by the 1950s literary establishment. He hated communism, organized crime, and district attorneys. His 1949 "I, the Jury" sold five million copies in its first paperback edition--and ended with detective Mike Hammer shooting the love of his life because she had killed his partner. "'How c-could you?' she gasped. I only had a moment before talking to a corpse, but I got it in. 'It was easy,' I said."

Long out of print--missing even from the Library of America's volumes canonizing pulp noir--Spillane's first six Mike Hammer novels have been reissued in one last effort to claim for him the fame that has enhaloed Hammett and Chandler.

It was worth a shot. "One Lonely Night" and "Kiss Me, Deadly" are more thrillers than mysteries, but they're fast-moving, hard-boiled, and--unlike most noir--make moral distinctions between good guys and bad guys. The famous prose isn't as clean as its parodies; to write low-class lines is a high-class art, and Spillane is the kind of writer who says "utilize" when he means "use." But there are enough lines like "The guy was dead as hell" to keep you going.

The only objectionable parts are the sex and violence. Unfortunately, sex and violence are the novels. It's not that Hammer lives in a world in which beautiful women tear off their blouses and moan "Make me" fifteen minutes after meeting him. Who could object to that? The problem is that they have to punch him in the jaw and get punched

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back before tearing off their blouses. You don't mind so much that his solution to male Communists is to cut them into pieces with a Tommy gun. But your skin starts to crawl when his solution to a female Communist is to rip off her dress and beat her, drooling over the sight of "a naked woman and a leather belt." (It's unnecessary effort. She had already been converted to democratic capitalism by her first encounter with Hammer--on a bear-skin rug, no less.) And I'd just as soon not know exactly what is going on with the transvestite Juno, the homme fatale of "Vengeance is Mine."

It's finally just too creepy and silly to be worth the effort. Sure, Spillane was hated by Commies, eggheads, and all the rest of the self-satisfied prigs of the 1950s. But even that isn't enough to make him a good read.

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