



## The Last Good Kiss

*James Crumley*

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# The Last Good Kiss

James Crumley

**The Last Good Kiss** James Crumley

**One of the most influential crime novels ever written, by a legend of the genre.**

Tough, hard-boiled, and brilliantly suspenseful, *The Last Good Kiss* is an unforgettable detective story starring C. W. Sughrue, a Montana investigator who kills time by working at a topless bar. Hired to track down a derelict author, he ends up on the trail of a girl missing in Haight-Ashbury for a decade. The tense hunt becomes obsessive as Sughrue takes a haunting journey through the underbelly of America's sleaziest nightmares.

## The Last Good Kiss Details

Date : Published April 20th 2016 by Vintage Crime/Black Lizard (first published 1978)

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Author : James Crumley

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Genre : Mystery, Fiction, Crime, Noir, Hard Boiled

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# From Reader Review The Last Good Kiss for online ebook

## Glenn Russell says

### FINAL REVIEW

James Crumley (1939-2008) - Texas tough guy, Army vet and creator of some of the most colorful crime fiction ever written, this rugged author could do drugs and drink whiskey with the best of them. A watering hole in Missoula, Montana has a bar stool dedicated to James Crumley.

From the first page of this, the author's best known novel starring first-person narrator and slumping hero Montana investigator C. W. Sughrue, "Trahearne had been on this wandering binge for nearly three weeks, and the big man, dressed in rumpled khakis, looked like an old solider after a long campaign, sipping slow beers to wash the taste of death out of his mouth. The dog slumped on the stool beside him like a tired little buddy, only raising his head occasionally for a taste of beer from a dirty ashtray set on the bar." Language a reader will find on every page, which goes to show James Crumley has more to offer than simply the well-worn formula of crime fiction where a detective goes about cracking the case punctuated by wisecracks, drinking, fistfights and bedding babes. Here are a fistful of reasons I love this novel and recommend it highly:

**VIBRANT, COLORFUL LANGUAGE** - To underscore this point, here's another example: searching for clues in an attempt to locate a girl who ran away from home ten years ago, Sughrue encounters her old high school music teacher, "He came to the screen door before I could knock, a small man with a painfully erect posture, a huge head, and a voice so theatrically deep and resonant that he sounded like a bad imitation of Richard Burton on a drunken Shakespearean lark. Unfortunately, his noble head was as bald as a baby's butt, except for a stylishly long fringe of fine, graying hair that cuffed the back of his head from ear to ear. He must have splashed a buck's worth of aftershave lotion across his face, and he was wearing white ducks, a knit polo shirt, and about five pounds of silver and turquoise." Oh, baby, Sughrue, tell it like it is.

**RAMOND CHANDLER REDUX** - More than simply language, the two detectives, Crumley's Sughrue and Chandler's Marlowe share a hardboiled cynicism, sharp tongue, sharp wits and big, tough guy body along with an ability to make intelligent use of both fists and firearms. Crumley published a Viet Nam war novel in his 20s and didn't read any detective fiction until well into his 30s when his friend, poet Richard Hugo, suggested Chandler. Crumley followed Hugo's advice and was obviously inspired (Crumley acknowledges Chandler's strong influence) as he went on to write his own first-rate detective fiction, a string of books rightly regarded as first-rate literature.

**TUG AT OUR HEARTSTRINGS** – Rosie sits on the front steps of her bar and tells Sughrue all about how her long lost baby girl, Betty Sue Flowers, ran away as a high schooler ten years ago. Sughrue tells Rosie too much time has elapsed; he will never be able to find her. Rosie insists, heaves and sobs some more, and presses eighty-seven dollars into his palm. Along with Sughrue, we as readers are moved by the depth of Rosie's emotion and pain. The missing person hunt is on, from San Francisco to Denver to the state of Oregon with some not-so-fun stops in between - a whole lot of driving for our bear-drinking cynic investigator.

**TRAGIC HERO, COMIC BUFFFOON** – "Big, fat, larger-than-life poet and novelist, drunk and whoremonger Abraham Trahearne is a modern day King Lear and Falstaff all rolled up into one. As a novelist he leaned on his war experience to write about a young lieutenant on a remote island in the Pacific

during the final week of World War II so in love with killing he refused to let his men know the war was over. He then went on to write two other novels about, in turn, survival out at sea on a raft and a father and son's revenge in the woods. After his travels and adventures with his new drinking buddy Sughrue, Trahearne finally comes out the other end of a long, dry spell where he is able to begin what he knows will be his masterpiece. But great art might require serious blood sacrifice. Sound like trouble? It is trouble.

**THE SIRENS OF ODYSSEUS, THE WITCHES OF MACBETH** – Traheane has to deal with three powerful woman in his life – his mother, his ex-wife and his current wife. You will have to read the novel to find out for yourself if one or all three of these women are inspiration-giving sirens or curse-giving witches or a maddening combination. Since I can't resist the humor, I will share what Trahearn's mother says about her quitting writing after she hit the jackpot and struck it rich with her two best-sellers "If you've read my two novels, then you know what sort of fairy tales they are," she said, "and if you've talked to my son, you know the truth of my life here. I took money from fools, boy, and I earned it, but don't give me any bullshit about art."

**AMERICA THE SEEDY** – Philip Marlowe waded through seedy 1940s Los Angeles and C.W. Sughrue travels through heaps of 1970s seedy Western United States where the scummy world of pornography with its sleazeball promoters and dope-taking porn stars in Chandler's The Big Sleep reappears on a much larger scale.

**THE BULLDOG** - Darn, you have to love beer drinking Fireball Roberts, slobbering buddy of the good guys and loyal canine pal, forever ready to heed the call to action and sink his teeth into a deserving backside. For me, Fireball Roberts added a real zest to the story – each scene with Fireball was one small step for alcoholic bulldog, one giant leap for page-turning novel.

**THE GLAD AND THE SAD** – The Last Good Kiss is 19 chapters long. If Chapter 18 was the book's last chapter we would have had a happy ending. But there's that final Chapter 19, Crumley's biting, hardboiled social commentary on how 1970s America has taken a tougher, more violent turn in the 30 years since Chandler and Marlowe. Read all about it. You might even shed a tear.

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**Tfitoby says**

**The first great read of 2013.**

*"When I finally caught up with Abraham Trahearne, he was drinking beer with an alcoholic bulldog named Fireball Roberts in a ramshackle joint just outside of Sonoma, California, drinking the heart out of a fine spring afternoon..."*

Crumley opens with this line and doesn't let up for nearly 300 pages of **a rambling, alcohol soaked journey through a series of hard-boiled, depraved, violent and miserable events** in the hunt for a beautiful girl missing for the past ten years. His detective SeeDuba is a failed private eye who mostly pays his bills through tending bar and after the amount of mistakes made during this case you can see why.

“I chuckled like Aldo Ray. If I had to endure his l'homme du monde act, he had to suffer my jaded alcoholic private eye.”

America in the 70s seems to have been a rich source for these broken down private detectives, just for starters the same year that Crumley created Sughrue Lawrence Block released his second Matt Scudder novel Time to Murder and Create, the pair of detectives have so much in common it can't be a coincidence. In literature Richard Brautigan gave us C.Card in the almost bizarro semi-spoof of the hardboiled genre Dreaming of Babylon: A Private Eye Novel 1942, in cinema we were treated to Harry Moseby in Night Moves and the remarkable performance of Elliot Gould as Philip Marlowe in the Long Goodbye.

“Stories are like snapshots, pictures snatched out of time, with clean hard edges. But life always begins and ends in a bloody muddle, womb to tomb, just one big mess, a can of worms left to rot in the sun.”

Once more it is the latter of these movies that I was reminded of throughout Crumley's wonderful work of third generation hard-boiled noir fiction. Trahearne, the drunken brute of a writer who undertakes a Hunter S. Thompson like cross country drive with the protagonist, is very similar to Sterling Hayden's Roger Wade in his aggressive, drunken rants for example. Structurally there were also a lot of similarities but mostly it is the **lost, broken mess of a man** that is Sughrue as he valiantly puts his body and soul on the line for his morals and beliefs that is the major comparison and The Last Good Kiss is deeply affecting for it too.

There are plot twists that you just don't see coming, things happen and you wonder just how Crumley came up with them and a moment towards the end of the book that made me feel physically ill in sympathy for C.W. Sughrue.

**Crumley writes this stuff better than just about anyone I've experienced to date**, the way he took hold of the genre, seemingly educated himself on Chandler, Hammett, Willeford, Thompson et al and crafted this masterpiece is a remarkable thing to have witnessed, it is a true shame that he isn't more widely known and respected. Having said that it is only through the praise lavished on his work from the fourth generation of hard-boiled and noir writers who claim to be in his debt that I stumbled across this work. People like George Pelecanos and Dennis Lehane have described this book as **one of the best pieces of fiction written in the past fifty years**. Very high praise indeed and in my experience fully justified.

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## Corto Maltese says

Θα ξεκιν?σω απ? τα θετικ? λ?γοντας πως ε?ναι ο ορισμ?ς του hard-boiled Αμερικ?νικου αστυνομικο? μυθιστορ?ματος. Η π?να του συγγραφ?α απαρ?μιλλη με σπαρταριστο?ς διαλ?γους να ξεχειλ?ζουν απ? σαρκασμ?. Τ?λος η μετ?φραση του Α. Αποστολ?δη Εξαιρετικ?!

Τα αρνητικ?: δυστυχ?ς ε?ναι εξαντλημ?νο.

Και επειδ? κριτικ?ς λογοτεχν?ας ποτ? δεν ?μουν, ο?τε ?χω το κρυψ? απωθημ?νο να γ?νω, θα παραθ?σω την κριτικ? του Patrik Raynal που υπ?ρχει στο οπισθ?φυλλο του βιβλ?ου που την βρ?σκω εξαιρετικ? και to the point που λ?με και στο χωρ? μου.

“Ο κ?σμος του Κρ?μλε? ε?ναι λ?γο-πολ? ο κ?σμος του Τσ?ντλερ που ?χει μεταφερθε? στην κ?λαση των μικρ?ν π?λεων και δεν διαθ?τει ο?τε ?χνος του εκλεπτυσμ?νου αγγλικο? ?φους. Ο Κρ?μλε? αν?κει στους σπ?νιους συγγραφε?ς που ?χουν την τ?χνη να ενσωματ?νουν στην γραφ? τους το μεθ?σι που κ?νει τους ?ρω?ς του να τρεκλ?ζουν... Αλκο?λ, κοκα?νη, αμφεταμ?νες, μαριχου?να, πολ?ς κ?σμος φτι?χνεται στις σελ?δες αυτ?ς, ?που ?μως ατεν?ζει κανε?ς επ?σης τα χιονισμ?να Βραχ?δη ?ρη και οδηγ? το αυτοκ?νητ? του με τον παλι? σκοπ? των Greatful Dead μπροστ? στα ανοιχτ? τοπ?α λες και τα ναρκωτικ?, το ροκ και η απεραντοσ?νη του τοπ?ου να ε?ναι ?νας τρ?πος

να περ?σει κ?πως ο χρ?νος, να ξαναγυρ?σει η μν?μη μιας εποχ?ς ?που κανε?ς δεν ζο?σε πιστε?οντας πως κ?ποτε θα γερ?σει... Οι ?ρωες του Κρ?μλε? κινο?νται μ?σα σ' ?να στεν? περιθ?ριο, αναγνωρ?ζονται μεταξ? τους με τη μυρουδι?, σαν τα σκυλι?. Δεν βλ?πει κανε?ς ομολογημ?νες πολιτικ?ς τοποθετ?σεις, ?μως βλ?πει συμπεριφορ?ς που σημαδε?ουν ?ναν ανυποχ?ρητο τρ?πο ζω?ς. Η πλοκ? των μυθιστορημ?των του Κρ?μλε? ε?ναι πυκν?, δ?σκολη σαν εκε?νη του Τσ?ντλερ. λειτουργε? μ?νον σαν πρ?σχημα για να αναπτυχθε? μια υπερ?φανη και αδι?λλακτη ηθικ?, μια ηθικ? αντ?στροφη, ?που η τιμ? και η αρετ? βρ?σκεται π?ντοτε με την μερι? εκε?νων που ποτ? δεν τις διεκδικ?ν γιατ? ε?ναι πολ? περ?φανοι για να σκεφτο?ν να διεκδικ?σουν την αλ?θεια".

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## Krok Zero says

It would be an insult to the boozy soul of this book to write a review while sober, so for now I'll just say that it's a goddamn masterpiece of American detective fiction, and the best book I've read this year.

Update: OK, I'm still sober but want to get some thoughts down now, so my apologies to the late Mr. Crumley.

This is a post-detective novel, cut from the same cloth as '70s anti-mystery films like Penn's *Night Moves* ("Maybe he would find the girl...maybe he would find himself" could be the tagline for this book as well) and Altman's *Long Goodbye*, dripping in post-Vietnam, post-hippie declining despairing zeitgeist, and engaged in a complex relationship with the conventions and clichés of its hardboiled forebears. Crumley doesn't exactly reject or revise the classic Chandler model of the tough, cynical, morally centered P.I., but he does present us with a detective whose every action is to some degree in reaction to that model. Sughrue, the drunken dick in question, is one conflicted son of a bitch: conflicted between the romantic mythology of his profession and the dirty shitty world he sees around him; between his urge to help the people he's working for/with and his instinct to get the hell out of there and drink himself to forgetting in some anonymous bar; between the remorse he feels over the terrible acts of violence he committed as a soldier in Vietnam and the violence that he can't stop himself from using as leverage in his investigative work. As he tries to track down a flower child ten years missing, he fears succumbing to the cliché of the detective falling in love with his subject: *I was like the rest of them now, I suspected, I wanted her to fit my image of her, wanted her back like she might have been, but I feared the truth of it was that she wanted to stay hidden, to live her own life beyond all those clutching desires. Unless she was dead, and if she was, she had already lived the life she made, as best she could.* That's obviously gorgeous writing, but it also indicates a level of both self-awareness (he knows he's falling into an old private-eye pattern) and empathy (also knowing that said pattern denies the missing girl her subjectivity and free will) that defines the character and sets him apart from his ancestors.

It so happens that around this vivid protagonist there is a rather brilliant mystery narrative. Crumley maintains a ramshackle, spontaneous vibe even as he fills his story with twists and suspense — including a revelation in the final pages that ends the book on a truly grim, hopeless note — so it should please both the "fuck plot!" and the "plot rules!" factions of crime-fiction appreciation. The setting roams all over the American West, and it's clear that Crumley has probably gone on a few drunken tears across this part of the country himself. And the prose, my god, the prose — Crumley's writing has style and soul and wit, descriptive poetry and zingy dialogue that would make Elmore Leonard cry, a damaged voice that's what you'd expect if Philip Marlowe went to Vietnam and came back to a broken world as a broken man. The other characters are great, too, especially the alcoholic writer Trahearne who is at once Sughrue's target, drinking buddy, ward, betrayer, sidekick and arch-nemesis.

Man, I just fucking love this book. It's insane that there has never been a film adaptation, so I hereby announce my intention to write and direct one myself, to star Walton Goggins as Sughrue and John Slattery as Trahearne. Open casting call for the female roles — message me, ladies!

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### **Karl says**

One of those books that showed up just at the right time in my life.  
I enjoyed this book so much it almost hurt. It changed my reading patterns, and what I read.

I can't say enough good stuff about this book.

This copy is signed by the author.

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### **Paul Bryant says**

#### **P BRYANT'S 18 RULES FOR HARD-BOILED PRIVATE EYE NOVELISTS**

- 1) The hero of your hard-boiled private-eye genre thriller shall be irresistible to women, mostly. Say about 80%, no need to stretch credulity. He will shag at least four women he encounters during the story and will also gently, sensitively refuse to shag a fifth one, not because he's tired out but because it wouldn't be the right thing. He has morals.
- 2) All the women are sexually bold. They all sleep naked.
- 3) He will take a good few beatings - broken fingers, ribs. Obviously nothing that's going to put him in traction for 6 weeks but enough that we know he's very tough and he suffers. Shagging and suffering - very important in the life of the private eye.
- 4) He will have a perpetual handy store of tough one-liners but will have an unexpected intellectual streak such as a love of chess or TS Eliot or Ludwig Wittgenstein.
- 5) He will plough on through the corkscrew plot twists and not know what the hell he's doing but his instincts will guide him to a just if messy conclusion.
- 6) He will rescue someone from something and it will go horribly wrong. This will show that he's human.
- 7) He will have a quirk, like a comical pet, such as a bulldog who drinks beer, or being a laplander. Anything. But get that quirk.
- 8) He will have no friends and especially no girlfriend - if he had a girlfriend then he'd be cheating when he shags the five women he encounters during the story, and we do not want our readers thinking our hero has no morals. He is a very moral guy.
- 9) He will drink so much during the course of all this that an actual human being would have been hospitalised by page 35.

10) He seems as the story starts to have no cases on the go, nothing is doing at all. We have to wonder how he makes ends meet. But maybe, given his sexual prowess, he moonlights as Dick Bold in the Naughty Nurses series from Cinema Triple X - come to think, there IS a resemblance.

11) There will be a person in the story who completely reinvents herself, to the point that when we meet them again on page 125 in their reinvented state we have no idea who they were. (So Diana Sonnderling was really Betty Ann Grot? And Pope John Paul II was really.... Dan Brown?? Or - no - the other way round!!) The identity revelation is a Big Plot Shock and either resolves everything or further complicates it, whatever.

12) There will be an older, really sexy woman. Much will be made of the fact that she's Older. But Sexy as Well. This will be piled on with a trowel.

13) The bad guys will spend money like water. They'll never run out. If they write off several cars in pursuit of the hero, several more will appear, as if by magic.

14) The first lot of bad guys are not the real bad guys, even if they seem really bad.

15) The police, the judges, the lawyers, the coroners, they're all on the payroll.

16) Drugs and porn generate vast amounts of money so somewhere at the bubbling plot spring of the story there will be drugs or porn.

17) Someone has a guilty secret which will turn out to be very significant to all the plot corkscrews. Usually this is an illegitimate daughter but it could be that the person used to be Dan Brown.

18) Everything must be very believable otherwise by page 125 your readers will already be thinking now, is this a one star book or a two star book? Hmm - one, two? Well, I didn't hate it THAT much. Okay, it's a nice day, I feel pretty good, so two.

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### **Paromjit says**

I cannot believe that I had never heard of James Crumley or this novel with his colourful Montana PI C.W. Sughrue before! I have to say the novel is brilliant and is set in an atmospheric and eye catching world with Sughrue working in a topless bar. Crumley is a gifted writer and wordsmith who deploys language skilfully. He creates a vivid picture of the characters, their quirks and foibles along with superb descriptions. There is a flawed hero, alcohol, women, cynicism and violence that harks back to the best of the hard boiled detective genre. You cannot help but get emotionally engaged with the tragedy that has befallen Rosie and know that Sughrue is doing the right thing by helping to find Betty Sue Flowers, Rosie's daughter. The trail takes Sughrue into the seedy and murky underbelly of the American dream. Infused with humour and plentiful twists, this is a compelling noir. Thanks to Random House, Transworld for a copy of the book via netgalley.

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### **William says**

## **A Masterpiece of crime-noir. Ten stars!**

This is a truly wonderful crime-noir, with a cast of interesting and complex characters, several hard/real plot twists, not all foreseen. The plot is many-layered and complex, mostly very true to life for the people, times and places. The prose is superb, many passages are exquisite, extraordinary. My favourites are excerpted below

*As usual with my reviews, please first read the publisher's blurb/summary of the book. Thank you.*

The femme fatales here (more than one, in my reading) are each strong and powerful, with hidden motives, and sad and painful secrets. I very much like how Crumley shows where the exquisite Betty Sue came from, how she became who she is in the book, how she made her choices out of pain, fear, abuse and also, love. How men twist the lives of beautiful women, even without intent. It's both poignant and scary; it's the ongoing story of thousands of other beautiful young girls in the world every day, sadly. I know too many of them.

*Lauren Bacall*

*"The better I get to know men, the more I find myself loving dogs."*

- Charles de Gaulle

The first half of the book is mostly a kind of road trip, finding clues and creating the history of the Trahearnes and others. The second half is hard-boiled action, full of cruelty, often senseless. There is no redemption here, this is True Noir, dark and sad and painful.

Ultimately these kinds of experiences are the core of the *philosopher-detective* that I love so much, the Bosches and Spensers and Kenzies (both), the events that hard boil their hearts and ruin their lives, the classic tragic heroes, bound to their fate by their own characters.

I will be reading more Crumley, and his true dark creation, C. W. Sughrue.

Quotes here now, in order from the book as I read. Wonderful, first-class, extraordinary.

Nice down-home prose here, echoing a softly forlorn past, an homage to **The Grapes of Wrath**:

*This was the place, the place I would have come on my own wandering binge, come here and lodged like a marble in a crack, this place, a haven for California Okies and exiled Texans, a home for country folk lately dispossessed, their eyes so empty of hope that they reflect hot, windy plains, spare, almost Biblical sweeps of horizon broken only by the spines of an orphaned rocking chair, and beyond this, clouded with rage, the reflections of orange groves and ax handles.*

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I read this as a love poem to Rosie, it brings her to life, it opens our hearts to her:

*Sadness softened her nasal twang, that ubiquitous accent that had drifted out of the Appalachian hills and*

*hollows, across the southern plains, across the southwestern deserts, insinuating itself all the way to the golden hills of California. But somewhere along the way, Rosie had picked up a gentler accent too, a fragrant voice more suited to whisper throaty, romantic words like Wisteria, or humid phrases like honeysuckle vine, her voice for gentleman callers. “Just ?ne,” she repeated. Even little displaced Okie girls grow up longing to be gone with some far better wind than that hot, cutting, dusty bite that’s blowing their daddy’s crops to hell and gone. I went to get her a beer, wishing it could be something ?ner.*

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Wow! Gumshoe philosophy, hard boiled:

*I left him there on the sun deck, his huge head cradled in his arms like that of a grotesque baby. As I stepped out the front door, a young girl wearing a halter and cut-offs took that as her cue to push her ten-speed bike up the walk. I wanted to tell her that Gleeson wasn’t home, but her greeting and smile were shy and polite with wonder, her slim, tanned thighs downy with sweat.*

“Hello,” she said. “Isn’t it a lovely day?”

“Stay me with flagons,” I said, “comfort me with apples, for I am sick of love.”

“What’s that?” she asked, sweetly bewildered.

“Poetry, I think.” Instead of taking her in my arms to protect her, instead of sending her home with a lecture, I walked past her toward my El Camino.

*Youth endures all things, kings and poetry and love. Everything but time.*

[Song of Solomon 2:5, King James Bible  
Stay me with flagons, comfort me with apples: for I am sick of love.]

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... ahhh ... nurse Bea Rolands. What a delight! She's everything I looked for in a girl when I was a young man.

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A scene from the magic of puberty. There is always a first, powerful *imprinting* event in our sexual awakening that stays with us in some form throughout our lives. Some of these we regret, some we transcend, some we cherish, some we fear, some we misunderstand. But we all have that defining first moment within us:

*Sometimes, though, on these aimless walks, he saw a woman standing naked in front of her second-story back window. Only when it rained, though, as if the gray rain streaked on her dark window made her invisible. But the child could see her, dim but clearly visible beyond the reflections of the windows and stairways across the alley. In the rain, at the window, sometimes lightly touching her dark nipples, sometimes holding the full weight of her large, pale breasts in her white hands, always staring into the cold rain. Never in sunlight, always in rain. Sometimes she tilted her face slowly downward, then she smiled, her gray eyes locked on his through the pane, and hefted her breasts as if they were stones she meant to hurl at him. And sometimes she laughed, and he felt the rain like cold tears on his hot face. At nights he dreamed of*

*sunlight in the alley, and woke to the insistent quiet rush of the gentle rain.*

---

The lament of the wise and powerful, perhaps.

*It little profits that an idle king,  
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,  
Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole  
Unequal laws unto a savage race,  
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.*

- Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Ulysses"

---

A bit of Crumley's wonderful prose here:

*Once you flew sleeping in sunshine,  
amber limbs locked in flight.  
Now you lie there rocky still beyond the black chop,  
your chains blue light.  
Dark water holds you down.  
Whales sound deep into the glacier's trace,  
tender flukes tease your hair,  
your eyes dream silver scales.  
Lie still, wait.  
This long summer must break before endless winter returns  
with tombstone glaciers singing ice.  
I will not mourn.  
When next the world rises warm,  
men will chip arrowheads from your heart...*

- a scrap from Trahearne's poem, found and kept by Sughrue

---

... The book is filled with gentle humour and wit:

Trahearne:

*Goddamn it, Sughrue, has anybody ever talked to you about your hospitality?"*

*"Never twice," I said.*

---

Sughrue considers himself, and Catherine:

*Nobody lives forever, nobody stays young long enough. My past seemed like so much excess baggage, my future a series of long goodbyes, my present an empty flask, the last good drink already bitter on my tongue. She still loved Trahearne, still maintained her secret fidelity as if it were a miniature Japanese pine, as tiny and perfect as a porcelain cup, lost in the dark and tangled corner of a once-formal garden gone finally to*

seed.

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Men's inner battle between our higher selves, and our cruel dictators testosterone and evolution:

*Like too many men, Trahearne and I didn't know how to deal with a woman like [the girl], caught as we were between our own random lusts and a desire for faithful women so primitive and fierce that it must have been innate, atavistic, as uncontrollable as a bodily function. That was when I stopped being angry at the old man.*

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### **Wikipedia on Crumley:**

Crumley has been described as "one of modern crime writing's best practitioners", who was "a patron saint of the post-Vietnam private eye novel" and a cross between Raymond Chandler and Hunter S. Thompson. His book **The Last Good Kiss** has been described as "the most influential crime novel of the last 50 years."

### **American Book Review**

100 Best First Lines from Novels

#85. *When I finally caught up with Abraham Trahearne, he was drinking beer with an alcoholic bulldog named Fireball Roberts in a ramshackle joint just outside of Sonoma, California, drinking the heart right out of a fine spring afternoon.*

- James Crumley, *The Last Good Kiss* (1978)

Marvellous in so many ways.

Update:

Joseph Knox, author of the masterpieces *Sirens* and *The Smiling Man* says:

*An all-time favourite [book]? *The Last Good Kiss* by James Crumley. From the 70s, it feels like a new and dangerous kind of noir, and was a big inspiration for me in writing crime.*

I agree!

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### **Algernon says**

[9/10]

*He wrote about the things he saw on binges, about the road, about small towns whose future had become hostage to freeways, about truck-stop waitresses whose best hope is moving to Omaha or Cheyenne, about pasts that hung around like unwelcome ghosts, about bars where the odd survivors of some misunderstood disaster gathered to stare at dusty brown photographs of themselves, to stare at their drinks sepia in their glasses.*

Noir is for me a literary art form that never gets out of fashion. It's more an attitude, an emotion, a particular way of looking at the world, rather than a series of conventions and clichés. Like blues and jazz music, noir finds ways to reinvent itself while keeping true its classic form. I sometimes find it hard to tell the difference between hardboiled, pulp and true noir, because in my mind they are closely related, and anyway I don't care much about accurate shelving. I care about a good yarn, and James Crumley provided this in spades in this, the first book of his that I tried.

I believe the success of his recipe is in a mixing of more than one genre. The backbone of the novel is a classic missing person investigation by a hard fisted, heavy drinking, cynical private investigator with a casual attitude towards breaking the law combined with an ingrained inner sense of justice. To this, Crumley added a road movie structure typical of the seventies (Two Lane Blacktop?) in a souped up El Camino bastard rig, drifting from bar to bar all over California to Utah, Montana, Arizona, etc; a touch of Vietnam War veteran blues, another of Flower Power escapism, a whiff of Southern country bleakness plus a strong flavour of 'buddy cop' crime thriller as an unlikely boozy friendship develops between gumshoe C. W. Sughrue and one of his charges:

*When I finally caught up with Abraham Trahearne, he was drinking beer with an alcoholic bulldog named Fireball Roberts in a ramshackle joint just outside of Sonora, California, drinking the heart out of a fine spring afternoon.*

Trahearne is a poet and a successful novelist, drowning his writer's block and his marital woes in alcohol and debauchery. Sughrue proves himself capable to match him not only drink for drink, but also in witty repartee and literary quotes, giving the novel a post-modernist, self-referencing dimension. You might think from my comments that the author has thrown everything into the pot at random, but I would like to stress once more that the plot is solidly anchored in the classic P.I. conventions, the dialogue snappy, the pacing good and the characterization nuanced within the same limitations that require a macho attitude on the men and a preference for loose morals and treasonous hearts for women. Some readers might find that these women fall to easily into the arms of Sughrue, given his self-confessed cranky temperament, beer gut and punched-in face, but I guess it comes with the territory when one pursues noir genre books.

The narration is first person in the voice of Sughrue, and for me he is the genuine article: he walks the walk, and talks the talk that first attracted me to the likes of Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe. Here's a sample of him describing how he became a private investigator after his years in Vietnam:

*I headed for San Francisco to enjoy the dope and the good times on my own time. But I was too late, too tired to leave, too lazy to work, too old and mean to be a flower child. I found a profession, of a sort, though, finding runaways.*

The tiredness, the disappointments, the cynical worldview are recurrent themes for both Sughrue and Trahearne, troubles that they systematically drown in booze, even as they continue the search for Betty Sue Flowers, a girl who ran away from a broken home ten years previously. The title of the book is inspired by the same regrets at missed opportunities and wasted years:

*I wonder if I haven't tapped the last good woman, had the last good drink out of the bottle, and written the last good line, you know, and I can't seem to remember when it happened, can't remember at all.*

Also,

*Nobody lives for ever, nobody stays young long enough. My past seemed like so much excess baggage, my future a series of long goodbyes, my present an empty flask, the last good drink already bitter on my tongue.*

It's difficult to continue to give details about the story without spoilers, and the twists come early and they come often, so dig in and enjoy the ride. I'll let Trahearne have the final say, a brief resume of the whole Betty Sue Flowers case, or life versus fiction:

*Stories are like snapshots, son, pictures snatched out of time, with clean, hard edges. But this was life, and life always begins and ends in a bloody muddle, womb to womb, just one big mess, a can of worms left to rot in the sun.*

If Crumley decides to write another Sughrue novel, I will definitely add it to my reading list.

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### **Cathy DuPont says**

#### **The International Chocolate Awards first place winner World Final**

GOLD: Pacari Chocolate (Ecuador) – Montubia

#### **U.S. Open Medal Winners & Grand National Champion**

Wormtown Brewing in Worcester, Massachusetts

#### **Cathy DuPont's first place winner for best book 2014-2015**

*The Last Good Kiss* by James Crumley

Recently I read about an author (whose name I can't recall) who immersed himself in a subject then when he had learned everything he wanted about it, his interest bucketed and he began again on an entirely different subject.

I'm like that about authors. When I find an author I love, I'll read every book he/she has written, read the bio, interviews, etc. and won't read another new author until I'm sated. Thankfully, I'm not as obsessive now as I've been in the past however I have the second book in this short series of C. W. Sughrue, P.I., on my bed waiting to be read. Crumley wrote a total of 12 books/short stories/screenplays.

#### **Index card of C. W. Sughrue, P.I.**

Remind you of any P.I.'s you've read recently?

According to Wiki: *He has been described as "one of modern crime writing's best practitioners", who was "a patron saint of the post-Vietnam private eye novel" and a cross between Raymond Chandler and Hunter S. Thompson. His book "The Last Good Kiss" has been described as 'the most influential crime novel of the last 50 years.'*

I enjoyed reading an interview Crumley gave Noel King, an Australian literary critic and Crumbley describes the primary reason I enjoyed this first book I've ever read by James Crumley:

**KING:** You have mentioned that you enjoy the play with literary language as a crucial part of delivering your crime fictions.

**CRUMLEY:** If the language isn't any fun, there's no sense in writing the book. Stories come and stories go, but good language lasts forever.

Per Wiki: *"Crumley had not read any detective fiction until prompted to by Montana poet Richard Hugo, who recommended the work of Raymond Chandler for the quality of his sentences. Crumley finally picked up a copy of one of Chandler's books in Guadalajara, Mexico. Impressed by Chandler's writing, and that of Ross Macdonald, Crumley began writing his first detective novel, The Wrong Case, which was published in 1975.*

The titles of many of Crumley's books came from Hugo's poems.

Unlike some writers in the mid 1970's, Crumley was never received much acclaim in the U.S., however he achieved a cult following (which I'm now one) mostly abroad. Odd how that happens.

A toast to James Crumley (in Hawaiian shirt) in a Toronto tavern by authors and admirers (l-r) Harlen Coben, Peter Robinson, Dennis Lehane, Eddie Muller, Laura Lippman, and Ken Bruen (No date given but Crumley died in 2008 at age 68.)

I've always been curious as to who influence's writers I enjoy reading and in this case Crumley has influenced Michael Connelly, George Pelecanos, Dennis Lehane and Craig McDonald. I have read most of Connelly's books, I have a Pelecanos audio book in my car and have read a hand full of Lehane. Craig McDonald is the only one of the bunch who I haven't read but I will rectify that.

And although I haven't read anything about Missoula, Montana, being a hotbed of mystery writers, I recall that James Lee Burke lives in Lilo, about 10 miles south of Missoula. Apparently there are a number of mystery writers who live either permanently or maintain a part-time residence there.

And apparently Crumley was assisted somehow in breaking into the industry by none other than mystery publisher, editor and award winning recipient from the MWA, Otto Penzler who Goodreads friend Lynda McCalman and I met in New York City this past October at his bookstore, The Mysterious Bookshop. Wish I would have read Crumley before that unexpected meeting because I surely would have asked Penzler about this incredible but under appreciated James Crumley.

I am now a proud groupie of James Crumley.

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### **John Culuris says**

I often use the word "protagonist" because I don't want to have explain why I picked whichever side I did in the hero/antihero debate, not with the line becoming increasingly blurry, certainly not in a synopsis or capsule review, where space is at a premium. One thing is without doubt. James Crumley's private detective C. W. Sughrue is no role model. A daytime night crawler, he spends more time drunk than sober.

Hired to track down a wayward writer on a multi-state binge, the bar fight that begins the novel and ends Sughrue's quest strands him in Sonoma for a few days, where he promptly picks up another case. The bar

owner asks him to find her daughter, who ran away ten years earlier. An impossible task yet he gives it a genuine effort--if not a steady one. This is 1978, so sifting through the remnants of the hippie culture allows plenty of opportunity to partake in alcohol, sex, and drugs, particularly as the writer Sughrue originally sought has taken a liking to him and has invited himself along on the investigation. Feeding into each other, they actually find time to do some detecting between the bars and parties. And when Sughrue meets the writer's family, a self-described viper's nest, sobriety seems even more like the poorest of options.

But as the case untangles and serious acts require serious responses, Sughrue's deeper code of ethics, long buried somewhere under his surface of self-destruction, comes forward without hesitation. It's the contradictions--in all the characters, not just Sughrue--that make the tapestry so rich. And the atmosphere. There is such a foreboding layered into the story that you know that even as Sughrue works things out, the pages are not going to wind down to a happy ending.

The reader is the better for it. This is an excellent example of elevating the genre.

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**Additional Note:** The reference above to “capsule reviews” is because I reposted this from a message board, where, because I covered more than one book in each entry, I tried to keep things to a minimum.

## Kemper says

James Crumley died last year, and if there were any justice, he'd be alive today and recognized as one of the great modern crime writers while Dan Brown would have had his guts chewed out by weasels and be buried in a pauper's grave instead of getting rich off The Da Vinci Code. But there isn't any justice, and no one knew that better than Crumley.

I once read that his novels were like a combination of Raymond Chandler and Hunter Thompson, and that's about as good as a description as you're likely to find. Tough guy fiction that also pondered the real cost of violence with huge quantities of alcohol and drugs and a lot of melancholy and black humor were what Crumley specialized in and this is a great example of it.

C.W. Sughrue (one of two main characters Crumley used) is a private detective who was hired to find a drunken writer on a binge. But once Sughrue finds him in a dive bar in California, a fight breaks out that results in the the guy needing to spend a few days in a hospital. While Sughrue waits for the writer to recover, the friendly lady bar owner begs him to take a look for her daughter who vanished into the San Francisco hippie underground 10 years earlier. (This was written in 1978.)

Sughrue reluctantly takes on the job, and the drunken writer soon insists on joining him in the search. If Sughrue's liver can take all the drinking, he might just be able to find the girl.

This is terrific noir fiction with a severly flawed hero and lots of twists. If you're a hard boiled crime fiction fan and you never read Crumley, track down one of his books and try him.

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## **Bill Kerwin says**

One of the best mysteries of all time. Contains cynicism and good-humor, elegiac sadness, a lot of drinking, a small bit of love and--oh yeah--a damn good plot and enough violence to keep you awake. And best of all, the voice of the detective narrator: charming, infuriating, and ultimately reliable C.W. Sughrue. If Sam Peckinpah wrote mysteries, they would be like this.

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## **amapola says**

### **Sfumature di grigio**

*Porca puttana, certe volte mi domando se non mi sono già trombato l'ultima vera donna, scolato l'ultimo vero drink, spremuto dalle menigi l'ultima vera riga. E il bello è che non riesco a ricordarmi quando sarebbe successo, tutto questo.*

(Abraham Trahearne)

*Nessuno vive in eterno, nessuno resta giovane abbastanza a lungo. Il mio passato sembrava bagaglio in eccesso, il mio futuro una serie di lunghi addii, il mio presente una fiaschetta vuota, l'ultimo vero drink che già mi faceva la lingua amara.*

(C.W. Sughrue)

Trahearne e Sughrue sono i protagonisti di questo *hard-boiled on the road* che non lascia scampo; un romanzo duro, che non travalica il genere, ma ne esalta al meglio le caratteristiche: strade polverose, squallidi motel, desolati bar di provincia, locali malfamati, sesso, alcool, corruzione, donne fatali, uomini alla deriva, violenza, sconfitta... ci sono tutti gli ingredienti giusti, dosati perfettamente. Il risultato è un mix di malinconia e ironia dal tono tra il lirico e il grottesco.

L'epigrafe riassume bene lo spirito del romanzo: è la prima strofa di una poesia di Richard Hugo intitolata *Sfumature di grigio a Philipsburg*, da cui Crumley ha anche tratto il suggestivo titolo del romanzo.

*Magari vieni qui, domenica, così per toglierti lo sfizio.  
Metti che la tua vita sia andata a gambe all'aria.  
Che l'ultimo vero bacio  
Che ti hanno dato sia roba di anni e anni fa.  
T'addentri per le strade  
Tracciate da dementi, passi davanti ad alberghi  
Chiusi da chissà quanto, a bar che invece  
Ce l'hanno fatta, ai turpi tentativi della gente del posto  
Di dare all'esistenza un colpo d'acceleratore.  
Di ben tenuto ci son solo le chiese. Settant'anni  
Ha compiuto quest'anno la galera. L'unico prigioniero  
E' sempre dentro, e non sa più cos'ha fatto.*

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## **Dan Schwent says**

C.W. Sughrue is hired to rack down an author before he drinks himself to death. Complications ensue and Sughrue takes on a second case while he's waiting for the writer to be healthy enough to travel, finding a girl that's been missing for ten years. Where will Sughrue's cases take him?

Ever read a book and wonder what rock you must have been hiding beneath to never hear of it sooner? The Last Good Kiss is one of those books. Numerous reviewers have described it as a cross between Raymond Chandler and Hunter S. Thompson and I saw why not very many pages from the beginning.

The story seemed simple until someone took a bullet in the ass and Sughrue had some time on his hands. The search for Betty Sue Flowers takes Sughrue and his companion on a drunken odyssey through the most depraved parts of the west.

I have to admit that a lot of the twists caught me by surprise, especially one near the end. By far, my favorite part of the book was the relationship between Sughrue and Trahearne. Sughrue himself is quite a character, part PI, part bartender, all drunk. He's like Phillip Marlowe with twenty consecutive years of bad luck behind him. Crumely's prose reminded me of Chandler's in places but bleaker.

That's about all I have to say. It's a crime Crumley isn't more well-known. Four easy stars.

Also posted at [Shelf Inflicted](#)

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