



The Chinese Parrot

Earl Derr Biggers

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A mysterious millionaire with a penchant for strange pets takes a flyer on a string of pearls and finds that death is the broker. Charlie Chan embarks on an incognito journey across the desert to find the answer to a question – a question posed by a dead parrot who spoke in Chinese . . .

Chan dons a disguise and goes undercover to solve a complex triple intrigue of fake identity, kidnapping and murder.

The Chinese Parrot Details

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From Reader Review The Chinese Parrot for online ebook

Lady Clementina ffinch-ffarowmore says

Charlie Chan comes to the mainland carrying a string of valuable pearls for an old friend, to help her out and have a vacation. But, as young Bob Eden observes, "*If you've ever read a mystery story, you know that a detective never works so hard as when he's on a vacation*". A mystery is not far behind and this puzzle is one where Charlie suspects foul play, even murder, but there is neither a body, nor any clue as to who the victim could have been. Charlie has more of an active role in this adventure (If I remember right) than in the first book, where John Quincey seemed to do most of the sleuthing.

James says

Have read several times over the years. Never tire of the oldies but goodies.

Bev says

The Chinese Parrot (1926) is the second in Earl Derr Biggers's mystery series featuring Charlie Chan. The Charlie Chan stories were first serialized in The Saturday Evening Post. What is interesting is that these stories were running during the same time period as Sax Rohmer's "yellow peril" Fu Manchu. Biggers's representation of Asians may not be perfect, but it is certainly far more positive than most of the Western literature of the early 20th century. The Chinese detective from Honolulu manages to outsmart everyone in this snapshot of 1920s America. And he's using his intelligence for good, rather than in an evil "yellow" plot to wipe out civilization.

A society lady who has fallen on hard times (read: her wastrel son has squandered the fortune his father had left) is forced to sell her valuable string of pearls in order to meet debts and have something to live on. Millionaire P. J. Madden is determined to have the pearls as what he calls a just revenge for how this lady looked right through him when he was a nobody bellhop. A deal is arranged by Eden, a prominent San Francisco jeweler (and friend of the lady's family). Charlie Chan, formerly a houseboy in the lady's home and now a detective with the Honolulu police, is asked to transport the pearls to San Francisco where he will join the jeweler's son, Bob, for the journey to New York to deliver the pearls.

But the jeweler receives a phone call changing the plan--Madden has decided to visit his desert ranch and wants the pearls delivered there instead. There are known criminals lurking about and Bob Eden--and Chan--begin to be worried about the arrangements. It is decided that the two will travel separately and Chan will disguise himself as a man in need of work in order to get into Madden's home. He masquerades as Ah Kim, a "boy of all work" who tends the fireplace, cooks, picks up supplies, and occasionally chauffeurs. Once established on the ranch, they encounter a Chinese-speaking parrot who dies before he can tell all, someone else will be murdered, and Bob will play poker with a millionaire and one of the shady characters. There will be tales of arsenic and Chan will find a hidden bullet hole as well as the missing gun which was responsible.

I grew up watching the Charlie Chan movies on Saturday/Sunday afternoon television and I must say that I appreciate this novel much more. I enjoyed the mystery and the wisdom of Chan. It didn't matter that I

suspected who was responsible the entire time...there were enough twists and turns and unknowns to make for an enjoyable read. Three and a half stars.

This was first posted to my blog My Reader's Block. Please request permission before reposting. Thanks!

Elena says

This was very funny and, though predictable, I enjoyed watching all the pieces fall into place. My 21st century self at first thought it was a bit racist but then I realized how often Charlie Chan was able to use his race to an advantage to find out more about the crime so I decided it wasn't. Also, Biggers clearly points out how racist some of the other characters are and does not praise them for it, so I suppose it was pretty advanced for the 1920s. At times I wondered if these novels were written with the hopes that they would become movies (as they later did) since there was almost too much dialogue.

Bruce says

I probably wouldn't have finished this if not for the character of Charlie Chan. He's a fascinating detective, and I always want to know more about him. Though a more-than-competent writer, Biggers is constantly redolent of slick magazine fiction -- in other words, a facile, charming writer, but fundamentally a superficial crowd pleaser. I remember another mystery of his, *Behind That Curtain*, being better.

Bobby Underwood says

"Trifles sometimes blossom big. Detective business consist of one unimportant detail placed beside other of same. Then with sudden dazzle, light begins to dawn." -- Charlie Chan to Bob Eden

Charlie's first trip to the Mainland is a sparkling adventure full of mystery and old-fashioned romance. It will take the Honolulu detective from exciting 1920s San Francisco to the purple desert.

As in the first Charlie Chan novel, *The House Without a Key*, Biggers writes a mystery and romance in which Charlie plays an integral part while not being the main focus. Beginning with *Behind That Curtain*, Charlie would be more at the forefront, the author using his romantic style to frame the mystery rather than the other way around. I must confess a special affection for the first two Charlie Chan novels featuring Charlie as the secondary lead. In *The Chinese Parrot*, it will be young Bob Eden who works hand-in-hand with our favorite Hawaiian detective from China, finding adventure and romance in one of Charlie's most perplexing cases.

San Francisco's Bob Eden is a young man about town until his father brokers Sally Jordan's expensive string of pearls. He is sent to meet her former houseboy, Charlie Chan, who is bringing them across the ocean on the President Pierce. From the moment he's shadowed at the dock, the young man without a care in the world finds himself in the greatest adventure of his life. He and Charlie will head to the desert to meet the buyer, with Charlie posing as a Chinese cook. They decide to stall rather than part with the pearls, however, after the words of a Chinese parrot indicate something terrible may have happened prior to their arrival. Harboring suspicions that a man has been murdered in this purple desert, the difficulty for Bob and Charlie rests in

discovering who the victim was and who did the deed.

Just as John Quincy was at the heart of the action in *The House Without a Key*, so Bob Eden finds adventure and mystery far from home. Romance is found with Paula, a location scout for the movies. Biggers, who always had a fascination with the movies, works it deftly into this Chan entry when a murder weapon proves to have belonged to legendary silent Western star, William S. Hart.

A secretary, a gambling house, a dead man's clothes, and a second murder with a tangible body make up a complex and confusing mystery which has Charlie and Bob Eden stumped, not to mention the reader. Reporter Will Holley becomes an ally but just when they think they know who was killed at the ranch, and why, their theory is turned upside down and there seems to be no course of action but to hand over the pearls.

The exciting twist which follows, augmented by the only trick Charlie was ever to learn from the Japanese, makes for a fine and surprising end to all the intrigue and mystery in the desert. The blend of romance and mystery perfected by Biggers is one no modern mystery writer has ever come close to attaining. *The Chinese Parrot* is an old-fashioned and delightful mix of fun for mystery fans.

Hannah says

Well, it's official. After 2 Chan Chan mysteries, I'm hooked. I'm sold.

I am really enjoying this writer, this series and this smart, patient, funny and amazing Chinese detective.

Why did writer Earl Derr Biggers have to die in 1933 with only 6 Chan mystery stories under his belt? I could *kill* him for dying much too young! Why couldn't he have taken a page from Agatha Christie's or Georgette Heyer's playbook and been as prolific with his stories as 2 rabbits on a honeymoon?

Why, Biggers, why?

This is golden age mystery as its most golden. A smart, witty and engrossing murder mystery that takes the reader to the 1920's California desert and keeps them there interested for 270 pages. Biggers delivers a little mayhem, a little romance, a little travelog and a whole lot of reading pleasure. His main characters are as charming and old-fashioned as only characters could be in 1926, and yet the stories don't feel dated, but fresh and alive even in 2011.

If you like mysteries, especially those from this time period, then get off your butt and go read these pronto. Charlie is too good to go unnoticed any longer.

Fran Irwin says

I'll give this a 4 1/2-star rating. Very clever mystery, well written and entertaining ... but 1/2 star off because the solution is somewhat far-fetched. Nevertheless, a wonderful read from the past. I highly recommend.

Jayaprakash Satyamurthy says

Charlie Chan continues to be an engaging character and a sharp sleuth in this, the second novel in the series, even though he's transplanted from his home turf to the Californian desert. If anything, watching him improvise in a situation where he has no jurisdiction and must work incognito allows for an even more impressive performance.

I figured out the mystery once it became apparent what the actual mystery was going to be about - it takes a while for the central puzzle to emerge - but even so there were enough red herrings and complications that eventual resolution held its share of revelations for me. The romance angle - involving Chan's Hastings of the moment, the young son of a diamond merchant and a girl who scouts locations for film companies - is handled with a light witty touch and helps the plot zip along rather than acting as an annoying distraction, although the focus is always on the deviously ingenious puzzle Chan has to unravel.

Phrodrick says

Classic drawing room mystery. Charlie Chan has depth

The third Earl Biggers mystery and his second Charlie Chan Novel

Bottom Line: An honest who-done it, with more than enough clues for you to beat the detective to the solution. Light, fun and written before the super sleuth conventions were reduced to formulas.

On advantage of reading the old classic mystery novels is that stock clichés had not yet become stock. Indeed this is one of the more original takes on the "drawing room" detective story.

This is from the 'who done it' school of mysteries. Biggs follows the most basic of the rules in this class; the reader has all the same information as the detective and therefore has a fair chance to solve the case before the hero.

The plot involves a reclusive financial magnate, his personal staff a very valuable pearl necklace a growing assortment of shady characters, the requisite female romantic interest, the white guy demi-hero and visiting Charlie Chan, on a busman's holiday from the Honolulu Police Dept. This mixed bag slowly accumulates at the remote desert home of the wealthy P.J. Madden. Something is rotten in this sprawling Spanish inspired house and it is up to our sleuth to go undercover as a menial cook and determine what is cooking. Our first body is a murdered Chinese parrot and the stakes are a \$300,000 (marked down to \$220,000) pearl necklace.

Having previous read Charlie Chan #1, *The House Without a Key: A Charlie Chan Mystery* (Charlie Chan Mysteries) one is struck by Bigger's vastly increased sensitivity to the racist aspects of his Chinese hero. Indeed, by placing Chan undercover as a Chinese menial, Biggs is able to force the issue of the Chinese stereotypes and allow Chan to make the case for the dignity and respect for the Chinese people living in America. Along the way he admits that there may have been some resentment of the white man existing among the Chinese people. There are even a few asides at the expense of the Japanese - as viewed by the Chinese. All this is insightful for 1926. Chan still speaks in broken English, just less so than in book 1 and with more the freedom to condemn the more extreme examples used in American fiction.

The 260 pages flow quickly. I read this in E book form and so quickly does it move I thought it to be about

½ this length.

Yes there are some major holes. Red clay was a major clue and no one thought to ask the one person with the most local knowledge: where around here do we find red clay? In fact this clue is something of a dead end; a red herring of a clue.

In Sum: Classic and honest who done it. A fast entertaining read. Mostly well written characters and some stock conventions pre-dating the final formulation of the stock conventions.

Dfordoom says

The Chinese Parrot, published in 1926, was the second of Earl Derr Biggers' Charlie Chan mysteries and was even more successful than its predecessor.

I was in some ways a little disappointed that this one, unlike *The House Without a Key*, wasn't set in Hawaii. 1920s Honolulu was such a cool setting. There are compensations however. Charlie Chan himself moves more to centre stage in this second book and becomes a more vivid and more complex character.

The structure is interesting. At first there's no evidence that any crime of any sort has been committed. Just a vague sense of things being not quite right, a feeling that slowly grows into a fairly strong conviction that dark deeds really are afoot but still without anything resembling proof. And even then, even if a crime may have been committed, exactly what was the crime?

Detective-Sergeant Charlie Chan of the Honolulu Police has been looking forward to visiting the mainland US for years. He finally gets the opportunity, and decides to combine a vacation with a favour for an old friend. Forty years earlier Sally Phillimore had been the most sought-after heiress in Hawaii. Now she is broke, thanks to reckless investments by her much loved but hopelessly irresponsible son. The only way to retrieve the family fortunes is to sell the fabulous Phillimore pearls.

Another old friend of Sally's, Alexander Eden, is a successful jeweller in San Francisco. He has a buyer lined up, the wealthy financier P. J. Madden. Charlie Chan's job is simple. All he has to do is to escort the pearls from Honolulu to San Francisco. Eden's son Bob will pick up the pearls from the dock. The handover does not go smoothly however - Bob Eden spots a suspicious looking character who seems to be shadowing him. This is the first faint sign that perhaps the transaction is not going to be straightforward. When Charlie Chan and Bob Eden agree to deliver the pearls to P. J. Madden's desert ranch just outside a town named Eldorado they spot further disquieting signs that all is not quite as it should be.

Charlie Chan's instincts tell him that perhaps something is very wrong indeed, and the affair of the parrot adds further to the sense of unease. To reveal any details at all of the plot from this point on would spoil the fun as Biggers skillfully weaves a series of small incidents into a fiendishly complicated web of intrigue and mystery.

As in the first novel Biggers has fun mocking racial stereotypes, but he does it with such a lightness of touch that you never have the uncomfortable feeling of being preached to. The anti-racist message is subtle but effective.

There are colourful supporting characters and there's a love interest in the shape of Paula Wendell, a location

spotter for the movies (the sleepy desert town of Eldorado is about to be invaded by a Hollywood film crew, a fact which will also have an unexpected bearing on the plot).

It's all great fun. The Wordsworth Charlie Chan Omnibus includes the first three novels involving the redoubtable Chinese detective from Honolulu (based on a famous real-life model) and I recommend it very highly.

Paul Cornelius says

Quite a clever book, this second in the series of Charlie Chan mysteries. Earl Derr Biggers moves from the lush tropical islands of Hawaii, surrounded by their sea of clear waters, in the first novel, to the deserts of Southern California, surrounded by their sea of sand and arid air. A bigger contrast of settings would be impossible to make.

And Biggers has improved on some aspects of the Chan story. The mystery itself is better in this novel. And Charlie himself a stronger character, although he is still secondary, as in the first Chan novel, to the main protagonist. In this case, the protagonist is Bob Eden. And that is where *The Chinese Parrot* fails to live up to the first book, *The House Without a Key*. Bob Eden is annoying. Not only does he bumble around, become easily distracted, and constantly fall into childish mood swings, but he also doubts himself--and Charlie. Only through dumb luck, really, does he solve the case. This is markedly different from *The House Without a Key*, where the protagonist, John Quincy Winterslip, combines with and supports Chan.

The Chinese Parrot is still a wonderful mystery and fun book to read. Its frequent puns alone make for an effective break of the tension. Too bad about Louis Wong and Tony.

George says

2 in the Honolulu police detective Charlie Chan mystery series. Chan is in San Francisco on his first trip out of Hawai'i on a busman's holiday transporting a valuable pearl necklace for a family he was a "houseboy" for as a youngster. However, instead of turning over the necklace as planned, he is asked by the family to transport the necklace to the desert location of a secretive millionaire who has bought the necklace. Traveling incognito, Chan travels to the ranch and works there undercover because the simple transaction has become very complicated seriously rousing Chan's suspicions. As the title indicates, it is a parrot that is key to the mystery.

Keith says

I bought this a few years ago because it had a great painted cover, and promptly forgot about it until I was looking for something to read about a month ago. I'd never read a Charlie Chan novel before, and in reading it I've learned a lot of weird but obvious things about Charlie Chan novels.

You're going to read a Charlie Chan novel in 2016 and realize that it's horribly, horribly racist, but also that it has no idea it's racist and in fact is trying to be progressive. Charlie has this ridiculous speech pattern that's

trying to emulate what it's like for a Chinese person to speak English as a second language which, as soon as you read it, you realize a) is how Chinese characters spoke in literally every movie until at least the 90s, and 2) is nothing like how an actual Chinese person learning English actually speaks. Plus, Chan has this weird line about how his grasp of English frustrates him for its clumsiness, which is like, not how becoming conversational through immersion in another language works at all EVEN A LITTLE. So it's sort of horribly offensive that Biggers was trying to write this dynamic progressive Asian lead character and making up this fucking stupid way of talking WITHOUT SPEAKING TO AN ACTUAL FUCKING ASIAN OBVIOUSLY.

Also, Chan speaks in a lot of faux-koans and goofy nature metaphors, and I can't decide how I feel about this. While making every Asian character in Western fiction speak like a cartoon of a Buddhist monk is totally fucking insane, all the Chinese transfer students in my composition courses LOVE them some Confucius quotes and nature metaphors, holy shit. You can't read a single page of a first year's first paper without a zen quote or story about trees. It's like if you had a Russian student write a paper about bears and vodka. (Actually I did have a Russian student who did this once, but he just did it to fuck with me.) Anyway, I don't know if stereotypes are real or our horrible ideas about Asian culture have somehow rubbed off on Asian college students trying to assimilate into Western culture or what, and none of it excuses Charlie Chan, who is a fucking detective from Honolulu and would seriously never talk about a lotus blossom.

Anyway, I can't stop thinking about all that stuff, but it's also really obvious -- the ways this book is really obviously racist. The ways that is less obviously racist is how Charlie is not the main character of his own book, and is apparently never the main character of any of the books, but always sort of the 'smart assistant' character to some milquetoast white guy he runs into in each story. Here the main character is Bob Eden (I mean dear god), who is totally awful. Just awful. Just stupid and entitled and bosses Chan around and is trying to marry this woman the whole book and just sort of objectifies her and tries to protect her and leads every single one of their conversations through a series of microaggressions and again, it's interesting because Chan and Paula (the woman) are obviously, obviously way more interesting characters and they spend a lot of the book sort of leading Bob around by the nose and being smarter than him, but he's still the star of the book. And the only three-dimensional characters in the book are Bob and all of his male friends, who are vulnerable and thoughtful and capable of acting in different ways at different times while still maintaining their selfhoods, while Chan and Paula, who are clearly supposed to be smarter and more sophisticated, are still these sort of one-note character robots. Charlie is sly and submissive and Paula is independent with a wild hair, and THAT IS IT. THEY DON'T CHANGE. Basically Chan could have solved the entire mystery with Paula as his streetwise wheelman and Bob could have stayed at home. Bob is the main character and he's admittedly, loudly, obviously useless to the story except to act as some kind of mediator for the Mysterious Woman and the Wily Chinaman.

I mean, I don't know. I don't fucking know. This book was written like 100 years ago. I fucking don't know. I think Biggers meant to do a lot of these things, to make these kinds of commentaries not just about the Other, but about white men too. I mean, I think. It's so consistent, but also so AWFUL, but what. But what. But what.

The entire time I was reading this book I was, from the start, rewriting it as a movie directed by David Fincher, in which Charlie talked like a normal person and solved everything while leading Bob around by the nose, Charlie sort of maintaining the wall between himself and the audience, but as an act of careful planning rather than Othering. Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, hell man, even Columbo -- the tradition of having a guarded detective character is not new to Charlie Chan. But obviously there's something wholly different about how he's treated in the context of these stories.

As I'm typing I'm getting another idea about Charlie and Paula as the main characters while Bob just fucks

around in the background. But literally who would star in this movie even. Racism is so obvious it's boring, this book was written 100 years ago and less has changed than hasn't changed, that's the mystery, that's your zen koan, that the lotus blossom, someone call me Honolulu, someone hook me up with Charlie Chan.

Steve says

The second original Charlie Chan novel is a well written mystery that keeps you guessing until the end. Charlie is asked to deliver a very valuable sting of pearls to a dessert ranch by all old friend. The story is written primarily from the point of view of the jeweler's son who is to accompany Charlie. Written over 90 years ago the attitudes are much different from today but the author gives Charlie an amazing dignity within a world where he was not considered a racial equal. Fascinating novel on many levels.
