



## The Bigger They Come

A.A. Fair, *Erle Stanley Gardner*

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# **The Bigger They Come**

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They are an unlikely pairing of detectives: Bertha Cool, in her sixties, is rolling in pounds and profanity. Her new hire is Donald Lam, young man, insignificant runt, without a tie on earth. A.A. Fair is an alias of Erle Stanley Gardner, of Perry Mason fame, and this delightful series gives a lighter side of the mystery master.

## **The Bigger They Come Details**

Date : Published by McNally & Loftin Publishers (first published December 1938)

ISBN : 9780688031374

Author : A.A. Fair , Erle Stanley Gardner

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## From Reader Review The Bigger They Come for online ebook

### Dave says

The Bigger They Come is the first book in what would eventually become a thirty book series over a thirty year span from 1939 to 1970 (not counting Hard Case's lost novel The Knife Slipped published in 2016). The essence of the Cool and Lam series is a mismatched pair of detectives, which includes big Bertha Cool (originally 300 pounds but later a svelte 165 pounds) and brainy but scrawny Donald Lam. This novel introduces the two characters and brings them together.

This one is perhaps a bit lighter in tone than later books in the series and, for those of us who didn't start reading at the beginning of the series, it's real interesting to see how the characters started out and what they later became.

Here, Lam is very young, green, wet behind the ears, and not at all sure of himself either as a detective or with women. His background as a disbarred lawyer is emphasized and this one is resolved in a Perry Mason like legal way which makes you wonder if Gardner's original intent was to sort of repeat the success he had with the Perry Mason series just in a different setting. Perhaps the fact Gardner published this under the pseudonym AA Fair is a hint as to what his intentions were.

In later books in the series, Lam has a real confidence about him and his abilities and even Bertha realizes that he's the real detective of the two. This is not the best of the series, but it's an enjoyable read. It's unfortunate that most of this series is not available in e-book format yet as a little effort and perhaps a library Card is needed to find some of the volumes in this series.

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### Bev says

The Bigger They Come by A. A. Fair (aka Erle Stanley Gardner of Perry Mason fame) is the first book of the Bertha Cool and Donald Lam series and it is their first case working together as well. Lam is a down-on-his luck former lawyer who lost his license to practice for a year because he unwisely bragged to a client that he knew a foolproof way to commit murder. No locked doors; no mysterious poisons; just a little loophole in the law that would allow a guilty man to walk free. Cool is a woman who set up her own detective agency as a means of support after her philandering husband passed away. She's greedy, vulgar, and not opposed to dealing with both sides of the law if it means she'll make a fast (untraceable) buck.

We meet them as Lam arrives at the office in answer to a personal ad. He and every out-of-work Johnny in California have lined up to try and convince B. Cool of "B. Cool Confidential Investigations" that he is the man for the job. None of the applicants who go into B. Cool's private office last longer than 15 minutes and they all come out looking dazed, confused, or like they're running from a fire. Lam goes in and despite no experience whatsoever as a detective and his scrawny appearance manages to land the job. His ability to string a story and his former life as a lawyer will serve him well. Here is his take on his employer:

I sized up my new boss as she walked across the office and revised my first estimate of her weight by adding twenty pounds. She evidently didn't believe in confining herself to tight clothes. She wiggled and jiggled around inside her loose apparel like a cylinder of currant jelly on a plate. She walked with a smooth, easy rhythm. It wasn't a stride. You weren't conscious of her legs at all. She flowed past like a river. (p. 9)

Lam's first assignment is to serve divorce papers on Morgan Birks a man rumored to have wealth from a slot-machine scandal. There's just one problem. Birks has apparently disappeared. So, Lam has to learn the ropes quickly and find ways to hunt down a man who has managed to elude both the police and the mob. He's also caught up in a web that involves a lot of moolah, mysterious safety deposit boxes, and a gang of toughs who kidnap him and beat him up in an effort to get him to reveal Birks's hiding place. When Birks winds up dead and the cops try to pin the murder on Lam's love interest (oh, yeah, we've got one of those too), he gets to try out his theory on committing a murder, confessing to it, and walking away scot-free.

This is a fairly amusing introduction to the Cool and Lam combo. The characters aren't quite settled, so the entertainment value wasn't quite up to the standard of *You Can Die Laughing* (my own introduction to this series). The private eye/hard boiled genre isn't my usual fare, but Cool and Lam are a combination that I can enjoy. Because of his size Lam has had to depend on his wits rather than his brawn and I really appreciate his interactions with Bertha Cool. I have a few more of these sitting on my shelves and look forward to reading them. ★★ and 1/2 rounded up to three here.

First posted on my blog [My Reader's Block](#). Please request permission before reposting. Thanks.

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## **Daniel says**

Repost 2013 review:

It's a very sad state of affairs that most of the Cool and Lam books are out of print. This is the first, and my second read. I'd previously read *Top of The Heap*, which is number thirteen, because it was available from Hard Case Crime, but the kindle edition I read suffered from a really bad scan job which clearly nobody had proofread. Plus it was not at all clear what Bertha Cool did to receive top billing in a story which was narrated by Lam and in which she played little part. But I liked it enough to try another, and now I've got me a new favorite P.I.

The Cool and Lam books don't have the rich prose of Chandler's Marlowe novels, or psychological layers of Macdonald's better Archer novels. But as a character, Lam beats either. I'd hesitate to say this volume is required reading for taking up the series, but it definitely sets out who the characters are in a way that wasn't clear to me from the other book.

What's so special about Lam? Let's start with Bertha Cool sizing him up:

*She said, "You're just a little shrimp. I don't s'pose you weigh over a hundred and twenty, do you?"*

*"A hundred and twenty-seven."*

*"Can you fight?"*

*"No--I do sometimes, but I get licked."*

*"This is a man's job."*

*"And I'm a man," I retorted hotly.*

*"But you're too small. People would push you around."*

*"When I was in college," I said, "some of the boys used to try it. They gave it up after a while. I don't like to be pushed around. There are lots of ways of fighting. I have my way, and I'm good at it."*

I absolutely love that he's a little guy, and has to get by on his brains. He's up against similar types of thugs and lowlifes you'd find in Chandler or Macdonald, but he can't rely on muscles to get out of a scrape. He's a

young, and trained as a lawyer, but lost his shot at a legal career through as a result of a situation I'll let you discover for yourselves. He's clever, nervy, and laid back in a way that's just right. They actually made a TV pilot featuring former jockey Billy Pearson as Lam in 1958, but it didn't get picked up.

In this book (1939), he's broke and answers a job ad for the Cool detective agency. He gets the job and his first assignment is to serve divorce papers on a man involved in a slots racket. As usual, things are not quite so simple as they seem.

Bertha won some affection in this one too. I'd found her kind of annoying in *Top of the Heap*, but here, learning her backstory, and seeing her involve herself in the case, she comes off to me as a complex, forceful, pragmatic woman, though I can see how some readers might reduce her to fat and greedy. According to wikipedia she's the lead in books 7 & 8 while Lam is away in the Navy. I'm looking forward to them.

I'm both sad and glad this series didn't make it as a TV show, I'd have liked to see what they did with it. But the fact that they didn't means I can read these without knowing whodunit before I even start. I've never been a "beat the detective" type of mystery reader. I don't spend any time wondering about who did it, or analyzing the clues, I just enjoy the ride. But so far in each Perry Mason novel I've read, there's invariably a moment early on when I recognize the story from the TV adaptation and know who the killer is.

Like I said, I can't believe only three of these are currently available. Open Road, or one of Amazon's imprints ought to snap these things up and reissue the series. I'll be reading all the ones I can get my hands on.

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### **Ed says**

#1 in the Bertha Cool and Donald Lam series. APA: *Lam to the Slaughter*. Debut novel of an unusual PI series written by Gardner, Erle Stanley as Fair, A.A. Ingenious plot in the debut with a pair of oddball, but likeable, protagonists.

Bertha Cool and Donald Lam series - Donald Lam is a private detective, 5 and a half feet tall and 127 pounds. But what he lacks in brawn he more than makes up for in brains. His new employer, Bertha Cool, is sixty-something with grey hair, weighing in at over 300 pounds. When Lam gets the job he is put to work immediately because if there's one thing Bertha Cool believes in it's getting her money's worth. His first job is to serve divorce papers on Morgan Birks, husband of Sandra Birks who claims he has been abusing her. It seems a straightforward enough job, and it is. But it's only after the papers have been served that the real fireworks begin. It's following a seemingly successful job that Lam's genius is uncovered as he works his way through deductions and comes up with a brilliant solution that is as impressive in its cunning as it is in its simplicity.

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### **Tony says**

THE BIGGER THEY COME. (1939). Erle Stanley Gardner writing as A. A. Fair. \*\*\*.

This was the first novel in Gardner's series featuring the detective firm of Cool and Lam. It is a must-read book (if you can find it) because it provides all of the history of both members of the firm and a review of their individual personalities and abilities. We learn how Lam is hired by Bertha Cool as her first operative and how he gets involved in and ultimately solves their first case. Gardner is still getting his feet wet with these two characters, and proposes a series of talents for each of them that might come in handy as the cases progress. In this adventure, Lam uses his background as a student of the law to develop a technique for committing the perfect murder – perfect in that the murderer is protected from the law because of how the laws surrounding the case were written. This is the first example of how closely Gardner followed the laws of different states to come up with his amazing ability to provide legal talent to his clients under the guise of Perry Mason. The ending of this novel is – at best – confusing, as Gardner executes his legal sleight of hand to get Lam off the hook as a first-degree murderer. I read that section twice, and could still not explain fully how it all worked. Gardner also gives us a lesson on bank scamming using multiple banks to provide multiple references and points of identity with a fixed amount of funds. This section was also tricky to understand. I suspect that careful readers of this work could very well use the techniques explored to potentially make a few bucks off of the process. Anyway...look for this one to give yourself a good grounding in the series and learn more about the two principle players of the private detective company they have established.

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### **James Thane says**

Erle Stanley Gardner is best known for his series of eighty-five novels featuring Los Angeles attorney, Perry Mason. But beginning with *The Bigger They Come* in 1939, he wrote a second series under the pen name A. A. Fair, featuring a mismatched pair of detectives named Donald Lam and Bertha Cool. The series, which was lighter in tone than the Mason series, ultimately ran to twenty-nine books, the last of which, *All Grass Isn't Green*, was published in 1970.

As the series opens, the Great Depression was still under way in the United States and Donald Lam was twenty-nine years old and out of work. A lawyer with a quick mind, he had been suspended from practice for suggesting that he knew a full-proof way of committing a murder and getting away with it. Down to his last dime, he answers an ad placed by the Cool Detective Agency in Los Angeles. The agency is owned by Mrs. Bertha Cool who inherited the firm from her philandering husband.

While Donald Lam is a slight young man who barely weighs 130 pounds, Bertha is in her middle-sixties and somewhere north of 275 pounds. Describing herself to a client, she says, "I like profanity, loose clothes, and loose talk. I want to be comfortable. Nature intended me to be fat. I put in ten years eating salads, drinking skimmed milk, and toying with dry toast. I wore girdles that pinched my waist, form-building brassieres, and spent half my time standing on bathroom scales. And what the hell did I do it for?"

Bertha is notoriously cheap and demanding. She's constantly ragging at Donald for something or other that displeases her, but nonetheless, she will ultimately take him into the firm as a partner. She largely confines herself to the office, trying to drum up business and attempting to wring the maximum amount of money out of any potential client, while Donald is the brains of the outfit, doing all of the investigations and usually skating along the thin line that separates him from trouble with the law.

We meet the characters here for the first time. Bertha hires Donald and immediately assigns him to what

appears to be a fairly straightforward case. A woman is seeking a divorce and wants the firm to serve her husband with the appropriate papers. But as always happens in these books, what seems to be a fairly simple case turns into something much more complex and deadly.

The soon-to-be ex-husband is on the run from the law and finding him will be no easy task, especially when the cops can't find him either. But Donald has an advantage that the police do not and before long there will be action galore; people will be getting hoodwinked, beat up and murdered, and poor Donald Lam will be in the toughest spot of his life.

This is a fairly classic, soft-boiled pulp novel and it's a great introduction to the series. Crime fiction fans who enjoy books of this sort (and who can lay their hands on a copy at this late date) are sure to enjoy it.

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### **Manuel AlfONSECA says**

ENGLISH: The English title of this book is "The bigger they come". The protagonist and narrator, Donald Lam, is an unsuccessful lawyer who knows many legal tricks, such as how to commit a murder without being punished. He does not commit it, but he shows how it could be done, because he wants to save an innocent girl he is half in love with. Well, perhaps two thirds (:-)

ESPAÑOL: El protagonista y narrador, Donald Lam, es un abogado fracasado que sabe muchas trickeyuelas legales, como cómo cometer un asesinato sin que puedan castigarle. Él no lo comete, pero demuestra cómo podría hacerse, porque quiere salvar a una chica inocente de la que está medio enamorado. Bueno, quizá dos tercios (:-)

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### **Jeanette says**

While every one knows Mr. Perry Mason, let me introduce to you Donald Lam and Bertha Cool...two of my favorite noir detectives. Bertha Cool is Big, Bold and Larger than Life itself. Donald Lam is more slippery than any weasel out there. The two of them together make one of the best Detective Teams ever. So sit back and enjoy and indulge in some classic '30's Detective Stories....

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### **Gary Vassallo says**

After having read a number of Cool and Lam mysteries, it was great to see how it all started. A great mystery and a great start to the series.

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### **Colin Mitchell says**

This is one of those wonderful private eye's, sexy women and murder. This is the first of Erle Stanley Gardner's Cool and Lam novels first published in 1939. The story starts with Donald Lam, a struck of

lawyer, applying for work with with Cool Detective Agency run by Bertha Cool. It follows the pairs history and Lam's first case which leads to his theory of a perfect crime.

I do enjoy this type of story and ranks alongside the 87th Precinct stories.

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### **James Love says**

The first novel in the Cool and Lam Mysteries. Erle Stanley Gardner writing under the pseudonym of A. A. Fair.

Donald Lam is a disbarred lawyer hired to work as a private operator by Bertha Cool. His first job... to serve a divorce subpoena on Martin Birks.

This is one of those rare novels that teaches the reader while entertaining them. The plaintiff in a California divorce proceeding can not collect any alimony if served by publication in the newspaper or other media outlets. The state legislature of Arizona was forced to close an obscure loophole that would allow a person to commit a murder with public witnesses and not be prosecuted. This is the bet that cost Donald Lam his law license for approximately one year as punishment by the American Bar Association who felt that he should not have made a bet involving a lesson on how to get away with murder.

Bertha Cool along with Irene Adler and Miss Marple is one of the women proving that you don't need balls to make a great detective.

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### **Joe Noir says**

This is the first novel in the series about Bertha Cool and Donald Lam, written by Erle Stanley Gardner under the pseudonym A. A. Fair. It's a very enjoyable novel; an easy, fast read. The dialogue is superb. It's snappy and sharp, but also very real, how people really speak to each other. There is a surprising amount of very "modern" language in this book. It was written and set in 1939, during the Depression, but is written in a style much different than that of the Perry Mason novels. The time elements are non-specific, and it could be any year from the 1930's through the 1950's; much like the A&E Nero Wolfe television series where they took Rex Stout stories from different eras and placed them all in the same fictional 1950's setting.

Speaking of which, some readers might feel the characters also follow the Nero Wolfe template. Mrs. Bertha Cool is a very large woman, with gravitas, brains, and money to match. She's the head of the detective agency. She hires Donald Lam to do the legwork, deal with violence, and take the risks; all the hard-boiled stuff. He is slight in stature, very intelligent and educated as a lawyer. He also has tremendous nerve, and is not afraid to scrap, but does not always physically triumph over his adversary.

Sandra Birks wants to serve divorce papers on her husband, Morgan Birks, but he's a gangster hiding from the police and carrying on an affair with a mistress, so no one can find him. She hires Cool and Lam to find him and make the service. Lam comes up with a brilliant plan and serves the papers. Or does he? Lam is subsequently kidnapped and beaten up. After that, nothing is quite what it seems. Then, of course, someone gets killed...

This is only the third novel in the series that I've read, and it's probably the best place to start, as it provides broad context for the other novels. It tells the story of how Donald Lam came to be hired by Mrs. Cool. It is the first chronologically, and introduces us to the characters, including Elsie Brand. The other books can be read in any order. I've also enjoyed Widows Wear Weeds (in the 1970's Pocket Books published the books, and numbered this novel as #1 in the series) and Top of The Heap (published by Hard Case Crime). There was a pilot made for television back in 1958 starring former jockey and \$64,000 Dollar Question winner Billy Pearson as Donald Lam, and Benay Venuta as Bertha Cool. The series was not picked up, and the pilot remains the only episode made. The entire pilot is available on YouTube. The opening shot, under the title "Cool and Lam", is a pile of novels in the series with the great old cover art visible. On YouTube, the opening credits are one video and the rest of the pilot is a separate second video. Check them both out.

This is a breezy, entertaining novel. It combines comedy and hard-boiled detective action. There's even a little courtroom drama thrown in; and, of course, the "perfect murder". It has some of the best dialogue I've read in a long time; and the characters, particularly Lam, are very street wise. Reading it, it's hard to believe it was written so long ago. It's fun, and will completely take your mind off of this world.

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### **Ashley says**

When Donald Lam walked into the offices of Mrs. Bertha Cool to answer the help wanted ad he'd seen in the paper, he had no idea what he was truly in store for. But when you're down on your luck, you aren't too picky with what comes your way. So, when he is hired on as an agent of the Cool Detective Agency, he soon discovers that his first assignment isn't as cut-and-dry as he is led to believe. With a educated, calculating mind and the backing of his no beating-around-the-bush boss, Lam will spare no expense to get to the bottom of the case. And though things may seem to take a turn for the worse, appearances can be deceiving; For you see, Lam, trained at a school of law, knows the perfect ploy that can make everything turn out right.

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### **Jack Heath says**

Synopsis: a unlikely pairing of detectives: Bertha Cool in her sixties rolls in pounds and profanity, and Donald Lam is young and insignificant.

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### **Philip Dampier says**

My favorite series as a teenager. Done by a master writer who has sold as many mysteries as anyone. If you like clean reading and mysteries this is a great series.

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