

## WRITING FROM THE SHADOWS

### AN EXPLORATION OF NOIR

By Axel Howerton

“Noir” En Francais for *Black*. Originally coined as a term to describe a wave of violent and nihilistic crime films from the US that hit French cinemas in the aftermath of WWII. American films were banned in France under Nazi occupation, and newly liberated French cinephiles were in a unique position to recognize the paradigm shift in American Cinema between the melodramatic morality plays of early crime films, to the bleaker, darker and more criminal-oriented films of the post-war era. For other first world audiences, in America and abroad, it was a subtle change over the course of a decade. For the French it came on like a mugger in a back alley. It was termed “Film Noir” and recognized as a movement in both storytelling and esthetic that would prove to be influential even to the modern day.

In literature, the change was far more subtle and convoluted, and its origins can be traced back as a particular strain of Gothic fiction as early as the “penny dreadfuls” of the Victorian era, and certainly as a major sub-genre of the “pulp fiction” that prevailed in the American market from the end of WWI until the late-1950’s. Noir is not a genre per se, but rather a mode of storytelling that drapes itself and its conventions over – predominantly crime fiction – but certainly genres as wide-ranging as romance, science fiction, horror and beyond. Today’s “neo-noir” pastiche tends to be more likely to be influenced by the styles inherent in “Film Noir” more than the literary history, and much of what is labeled Noir is more aptly called “hardboiled”, but there are modern authors – James Ellroy, Dennis Lehane, Christa Faust – that seem to truly grasp the underlying concepts of the Noir story.

Tracing the lineage of Noir literature we can go back to the Gothic literature of the Victorian era – which itself was born of earlier Romantic-era works like Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* which had been labeled “Roman Noir” by the French (Are we seeing a pattern here?). Originally a meld of lofty philosophies and high-brow entertainment for the educated elite, by the Victorian era the burgeoning literate middle class was delving into the same ideas – religion vs. science; man vs nature; modernism vs. thousands of years of ingrained superstition; Ego vs Id. Gothic tended to present a polarized view of illumination and darkness. It utilized atmosphere over action, and metaphor and allegory to explore the blossoming intelligence and spiritual adolescence of a new middle class. Despite the popularity of more melodramatic prose, historical romance, and adventure books by the likes of Sir Walter Scott and Jane Austen, dark fiction continued to show up here and there. In the mid-1800’s there was a resurgence of this Gothic bent, typified by the cheap and plentiful “Penny Dreadfuls” and led into a new, even darker world-view by Poe in America and G.W.M. Reynolds in England. This led to a new, and immensely popular, type of storytelling that featured doubt, danger, darkness and evil penetrating the world of well-meaning, but misguided protagonists – books like *The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll & Mister Hyde*, *Dracula*, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Pessimism and darkness began to win out as the Gothic split into the new genres of Mystery, Science Fiction and Horror with the likes of Ambrose Bierce and Robert W. Chambers leading the way into a new century, as Mystery (under the guidance of A.C. Doyle and later Agatha Christie) began to veer towards the sleuth and the “whodunit”.

Eventually, books became big business as the technology advanced and world-wide distribution became more accessible. With the rapid commoditization of literature, lines were drawn. Literature became “Literature” of intellectual and spiritual value, leaning back towards the highbrow mentality of the pre-industrial age, while the “Penny Dreadfuls” spawned the “Dime Novel”, the Monthly magazine, and what would come to be affectionately known as “Pulp Fiction”.

With the rise of plentiful paying markets, most of which were fairly lax on the standards of quality, and likewise turned a blind eye to more colorful elements of sex, violence and gore, new writing talent began to come out of the woodwork. Most of the new writers were working-class, high-school educated at best, and steeped in populist Gothic fiction. By the end of the 1920’s there were hundreds of magazines and publishers cranking out product on a monthly, if not weekly, basis. The public’s tastes began to dictate content, and the genres became clearly demarcated – Romance; “Cozy” Mystery; Detective Stories; Horror; Science Fiction; Suspense. One of the biggest and baddest

new labels was Crime. Crime was a catch-all for Detective fans, Suspense fans and Mystery readers, and usually promised more titillating and extreme thrills than in any of the standard lines. Magazines like *Black Mask*, *Weird Tales*, *Spicy Detective* and *Startling Stories* sold upward of a million copies an issue.

Not only did these magazines offer a wide range of accessible fiction for an affordable price, but – as with any cultural art form - they began to reflect the consciousness of the masses. Post WWI that meant another turn towards the darkness. This time, the old Gothic template of a calm and decent world invaded by outside forces was flipped on its head. As with the coming of Film Noir in the Cinema, influenced by German Expressionism, post-war nihilism and a sense of impending doom, the Pulp Fiction and, subsequently, literature in general, took a nosedive into the abyss. Crime fiction began to focus more on the criminals than the square-jawed heroes. Women became demonized, or sexualized, reflecting the trepidation of the American male in the face of the increasingly liberated feminine population. Authority figures became back-stabbing cretins, or incompetent fools. Institutions became the enemy. Run from the government. Kill the cop. Trust no one. Eventually a style emerged, seething with pessimism and a new view of a broken world that wasn't worth saving. Save yourself. To hell with everybody else. Fatalism ruled. No one escaped alive or unscathed.

Otto Penzler, in his introduction to *The Best American Noir of the Century* describes Noir as “dark and often oppressive, failing to allow redemption for most of the people who inhabit their sad, violent, amoral world... Carefully wrought plans crumble, lovers deceive, normality morphs into decadence, and decency is scarce and unrewarded.”

Ed Gorman calls it “a once disreputable and never more than loosely defined genre,” in the foreword to 1998's *The Big Book of Noir*.

In *A Girl and a Gun*, David N. Meyer skirts the issue by calling noir “nothing so recognizable or limited as a genre, motif or style. Noir's mysterious nature identifies it as a subculture, a constantly mutating form (containing genre, motif, and style) that by mutating seeks to avoid co-option by the omnivorous mainstream,”

Penzler goes on to state: “Curiously, *noir* is not unlike *pornography*, in the sense that it is virtually impossible to define, but everybody thinks they know it when they see it. In fact, the two subcategories of the mystery genre, [*hardboiled*] stories and *noir* fiction, are diametrically opposed, with mutually exclusive philosophical premises,” he writes. “The [*hardboiled* hero] retains his sense of honor in the face of all the adversity and duplicity with which he must do battle. Although not every one of their cases may have a happy conclusion, the hero nonetheless will emerge with a clean ethical slate.” By comparison, “The central figures in noir stories are doomed to hopelessness.... A Noir story will end badly, because the characters are inherently corrupt and that is the fate that inevitably awaits them.”

This resonates with the conclusion Paul Duncan reaches in his 2000 book, *Noir Fiction: Dark Highways*. “Noir is not a kind of macho Hard-Boiled fiction where Tough Guys pass moral judgement on an immoral society,” he writes. “Noir is about the weak-minded, the losers, the bottom-feeders, the obsessives, the compulsives and the psychopaths. Noir is not about the people standing on the edge of the abyss looking in, but about the people in it, forever writhing, aware of the pain, aware of the future pain to come. The character(s) must suffer/confront the darkness inside them. Whether they live or die is immaterial—the quest into this heart of darkness is the thing.”

Penzler writes: “Noir works, whether films, novels, or short stories, are existential, pessimistic tales about people, including (or especially) protagonists, who are seriously flawed and morally questionable. The tone is generally bleak and nihilistic, with characters whose greed, lust, jealousy, and alienation lead them into a downward spiral as their plans and schemes inevitably go awry.”

This jibes with a point Meyer makes in *A Girl and a Gun* that “the rise of existentialism profoundly influenced noir.” “In the absence of a defined moral order and in the certainty of our own demise, humans must devise their own morality, must determine what each regards as good and evil,” he writes.

Nihilistic, existential, pessimistic—it sounds dour, or at least depressing.

“The thrill of noir is the rush of moral forfeit and the abandonment to titillation,” writes James Ellroy in *The Best American Noir of the Century*. “Noir will never die—it’s too dementedly funny not to flourish in the heads of hip writers who wish they could time-trip to 1948 and live postwar malaise and psychoses.”

“The social importance of noir is its grounding in the big themes of race, class, gender, and systemic corruption. The overarching joy and lasting appeal of noir is that it makes doom fun...The subgenre officially died in 1960. New writer generations have resurrected it and redefined it as a sub-subgenre, tailored to meet their dramatic needs. *Doom is fun.*”

Going back to the Gothic roots – where Gothic set stories in the looming shadow of empty castles, secluded and foreboding family estates, labyrinthine buildings filled with secret passages and trap doors, surrounded by mazes and dark forests – Noir replaced these pastoral fears with an urban nightmare, shadowy corners, eerily silent third-floor hallways, the endless maze of the city streets. It morphed the supernatural terror of the Victorian battle between superstition and science into a fatalistic modern nightmare of an oppressive world full of human monsters and changed out the impending doom of science-gone-wrong with the frailty and betrayal of our own human hearts.

Noir protagonists are usually mired in a “haunted past” whether it’s a traumatic event or a terrible childhood. Often it’s a self-imposed exile to the shadows over the burden of a crime of passion, or they’re fleeing their own, uncontrollable demons – alcohol, drugs, sex, gambling – it always boils down to the same thing – human failure. Caught up in this fatalistic nightmare, the Noir protagonist retreats to the shadows, finding anonymity and a disconnect from society in shady bars, dark alleys, and the arms of disreputable and, more often than not, untrustworthy women. Noir is about causality. You can’t escape your past, and you can’t avoid your future. You can only delay the inevitable. Psychology, chance, and the inescapable corruption of the world-at-large will ultimately crush any good intention, high hopes, or noble aspirations our anti-hero has.

As James Ellroy, the self-professed “demon-dog of crime fiction” once put it:

Noir exposites one theme:

“You’re fucked.”

“You just met the woman of your dreams. You’re about to have the greatest sex in the history of the universe. The price you pay for it? You’ll be turned into a criminal, hunted down and killed... and with your last breath you will be grateful for the time you had with her, yet even more grateful for your own death.”

## ARCHETYPES OF NOIR

**Anti-Hero** – The principal protagonist of a film who lacks the attributes or characteristics of a typical hero, but with whom the audience identifies. The character is often confused or conflicted with ambiguous morals, or character defects and eccentricities, and lacks courage, honesty, or grace. The anti-hero can be tough yet sympathetic, or display vulnerable and weak traits. Specifically, the anti-hero often functions outside the mainstream and challenges it. This is the most abstract of character descriptions, and most of the other male archetypes can fall under this umbrella

**The Truth Seeker** – The Truth-Seeker in Noir is not usually a Private Detective. Those are Hardboiled tropes. In fact, the Truth-Seeker in noir is usually a criminal, or at least someone on the bottom rung of the social ladder. Sometimes it's a cop, or an agent of some government office – if so they are usually disgruntled, disenchanting, or otherwise disillusioned with both their post and the world-at-large. They're searching for something, usually an answer, a reward, or the reason behind some wrong they've suffered. They're going to suffer a lot more in the pursuit of their truth. If what they seek is a thing, a "what's it" or a "dingus" as in Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (one of the most famously misunderstood Noirs) it's sure to be a McGuffin and a metaphor for something more personal and more poetic. Most Noir protagonists are cynical, brooding, obsessive and morally ambiguous, and the Truth-Seeker is usually one of them (Again, see *The Maltese Falcon* or Charles Willeford's *Hoke Moseley* novels)

**The Hunted** – Sprouting from the Existential end of the Noir spectrum, this character finds himself on the run – hunted and pursued – from one end of a story to the other. Usually an outsider and usually unable to adapt to the socially expected rules and regulations of his world. He finds the world chaotic and inherently absurd, and defies everyone and everything, rebelling no matter the cost. Like Nelson "Nice Nelly" Tare from MacKinlay Kantor's *Gun Crazy*, likely to be obsessive, but not always as cold and cynical as some other Noir leading men. The best of these characters will be layered carefully – jovial, fun-loving and careless on the outside, but secretly tortured and self-destructive. He's still doomed. Charlie Arglist in Scott Phillips' incredible *The Ice Harvest* is a prime example.

**The Femme Fatale** – The most enduring, and easily identifiable, trope of Noir. The Femme Fatale is a Black Widow character, using her sexuality to achieve nefarious ends. Many, many examples of this as a one-dimensional man-eater exist, but sometimes (Phyllis Nirdlinger in James M. Cain's *Double Indemnity*; Lilly Dillon in Jim Thompson's *The Grifters*) the archetype can be used to evince a strong woman who refuses to fall in line with the social patriarchy. Obviously this is a trickier character type to work with by today's standards, and can easily devolve into misogyny or ugly caricature as a duplicitous succubus. Used correctly, there are few more interesting character types in fiction. Traditionally they were a reaction to the "destruction" of the "demure housewife" and further represented the fatalism of the style, in that men were powerless to resist the allure of a sex-starved, forceful and demanding woman. Overtly sexual, masculine in their sexuality.

**The Menaced Woman** – Almost as common a trope as the Femme Fatale, the Menaced Woman is tortured, tormented and abused, physically or psychologically, and usually by a man. Basically a post-war version of the Damsel-in-Distress, broken and lost, necessitating a strong male character to save her. Often as pandering and stupid as it sounds, but sometimes used to great effect when the psychological menace is handled especially well, as in

**Hooker With A Heart Of Gold** – Another tired stereotype that played well in its time, but comes across as stale and sexist today. Still, like the other female archetypes listed here, it's all in how you handle it. If the character has depth and agency, and more than one layer, it can blossom into something spectacular. Christa Faust has a double-set of novels from Hard Case Crime that accomplish this in spades. In both *Money Shot* and *Choke Hold*, her character Angel Dare, a former porn actress, combines elements of Menaced Woman and HWAHOG with liberal doses of Femme Fatale and then turns the tables on all of the established tropes, creating a worthy adversary for any of the army of dirtbags and hardened criminals she encounters. Likewise, Susan Waggoner in *Miami Blues* is an interesting twist on both the HWAHOG and The Redeemer.

**The Redeemer** – Usually a good girl, possibly a virgin, as with Lola in *Double Indemnity*. Uses sexuality as a passive lure, or a bargaining chip to entice a Noir protagonist back into the fairway of social acceptance and a lawful and productive life. Sometimes she's simply the wife at home, or the respectable girlfriend waiting at the altar. Being Noir, things don't usually work out in The Redeemer's favor. Usually employed in tandem with the Femme Fatale as a love-triangle tug-of-war over the fate of the protagonist, or between two men as brilliantly flipped in James Ellroy's *Black Dahlia*. These characters usually come in a 50/50 split between "demure housewife" and "sensible career woman" depending on the level of sexism inherent to the story. Also sometimes known as The Good Woman.

**The Grifter** – Stock and trade of Jim Thompson, from bellboys (*Bell Boy*) to pseudo-Sheriffs (*Pop.1280*) The Grifter is a lone wolf in all ways, willing to cut and run at any moment, and just as willing to leave anybody and everybody behind. The Grifter worms and struggles and cheats his way to the top – or the middle – and is usually positive and energized and motivated to the edge of sociopathy. He will do anything, and screw anybody to get himself ahead. Along with the flat-out psychopath, The Grifter is the least remorseful, thoughtful or conflicted character type on the spectrum. He may still have weak-spots when it comes to other characters, especially women and sidekicks. Usually only brought to ruin by another Grifter or criminal.

**The Psychopath** – More prevalent in modern Noir, this character is the coldest, hardest monster in a heartless wasteland. He cares for nothing and no one, and is subsequently one of the hardest characters to write. Jim Thompson does it well in *The Killer Inside Me*, as does Dorothy B. Hughes in *In A Lonely Place* and Gillian Flynn in her recent best seller *Gone Girl*.

**The Devolving Mind** – Closely related to the Psychopath, but usually starting out in a more "normal" place, this type of protagonist is slowly losing touch with reality, becoming more and more violent and/or depraved, usually as a mirror to the ever-crumbling chaos around him. Slow-burn descent into madness and eternal damnation follows. Sometimes accompanied by atrocities against more sympathetic characters like The Menaced Woman or the Redeemer, sometimes as a poetic comeuppance to a Grifter or Femme Fatale who underestimates the Devolving Mind. Unpredictable, sometimes emotional, usually a force of absolute chaotic destruction. *Every Shallow Cut* by Tom Piccirilli and *The Last Projector* by David James Keaton.

## ELEMENTS OF NOIR

Keep in mind, that Noir is a *mode* of storytelling, rather than a genre in-and-of itself. The elements of Noir have been successfully employed across various genres in Film and Literature throughout the last hundred years of its existence. From science fiction (*Blade Runner*; *Neuromancer*) to Political Thriller (*The Manchurian Candidate*) and Alternate History (*The Yiddish Policeman's Union*). There are now “Noir” collections with themes ranging from blue collar noir, country noir, retro noir, political noir, urban noir, and so on and so on. There are “Noir” anthologies based in every major city *Las Vegas Noir*, *Boston Noir* edited by Dennis Lehane, *L.A. Noir*, etc. There are, likewise, “Noir” events across North America and Europe – Including NOIRBARYYC which I began a couple of years ago here in Calgary. The point being that Noir is an elastic term that describes more of a feeling, of a style, than it does a hard and fast set of rules. That being said, here are some common elements found in most Noir stories.

**Urban Settings** – Noir is most often set in the confines of the modern metropolis, though sometimes the use of individual scene settings can be just as apropos (*The Ice Harvest*, set in Wichita Falls, Kansas but exclusively in tiny strip clubs, massage parlours and bars, or the interior of cars) The setting should be cheap, sleazy, and oppressive. Small, cramped and tight. Claustrophobic environments enhance the cabin fever crazy of a Noir character. Likewise, streets should be crowded and noisy, or empty and foreboding with the city itself pushing your characters down.

**Light Vs Dark** – While far more fluid than the representations of this in either Gothic or Hardboiled, because it's not necessarily “good vs evil” the relationships and main conflicts should be stark. Decidedly good girls are waiting for definitively bad boys, while demonic femme fatales slink in the sidelines. Any representation of Law and Order is corrupt or incompetent. Any criminal organization is all-powerful and far-reaching in its monstrous and infinitely violent pursuits. Any goody-goody hero is destined to die terribly. Anybody who professes love or fealty, is certainly dead in the next scene.

**Lost In The Woods** – As everyone, including the surroundings themselves are out to get your protagonist, they are, by necessity, lost, abandoned and dismayed. Doubtful, broken and struggling with their own morality, mortality and subsequent death or madness. Remember – Nobody Gets Out Alive.

**Two Flavours** – Women come in two flavours – chocolate cherry explosion, and vanilla. Traditionally women are either trash-talking, strong, ballsy and attacking the remnants of the patriarchy with their unleashed aggression and thermonuclear sexuality, and consistently smarter and more capable than any man; or they are meek, compliant and utterly devoted.

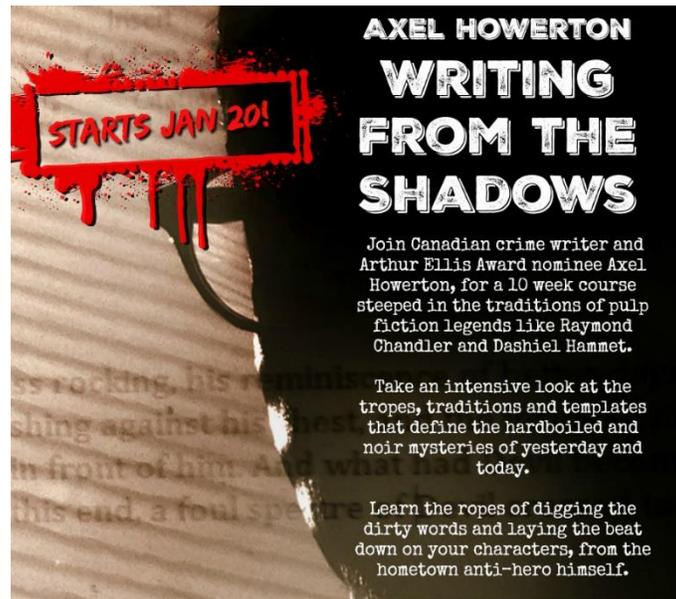
**Street Talk** – Fast, slang and profanity-filled dialogue, and lots of it. Think Tarantino. Most of the Noir writers had a biting sense of humour and were more than happy to unleash it in bon mots and witty rejoinders. Your villains make lots of veiled threats and outright demands, your Femme Fatale uses innuendo like a weapon. Everybody tosses around shallow metaphors and clever observations like they haven't a care in the deep dark world.

**Ultra-Violence** – These are criminal characters, or as QT put it “A bunch of gangsters sitting around doing a bunch of gangster shit.” If there is to be violence, it needs to be fast, brutal and decisive. No holding back, no pulling punches, and now way that everybody wakes up in the hospital and imps off into the sunset. It's Noir. Somebody needs to pay the ultimate price and take that Long Goodbye.

**The Old In-and-Out** – Sex. As Maude Lebowski says in *The Big Lebowski* (which is more Hardboiled than Noir, but still...) “It can be a natural, zesty enterprise”. In Noir it should be dirty, borderline (or outright) violent, passionate and rife with subtext and implied repercussions. Cheating. One Night Stands. Hate-fucking. These are the lurid bread and butter of Noir.

**The Grey Area** – Everything relating to your main character has to engender a deep moral ambiguity. Remember that this is a style born out of the misery and existential malaise of two of the most devastating wars in human history. The first wave of Noir writers came out of WWI damaged, deranged, hopeless and broken. They saw hundreds, if not thousands of their fellow human beings die in the most horrible ways imaginable. They literally lived through hell. Then they slid into the poverty and disillusionment of the Great Depression. Then there was

another, even bigger and more devastating war. By the time these crime writers were looking down the barrel of the 1950's, most of them had no more faith in the institutions of God, America and Apple Pie than they did in Extra-terrestrials. Most of these men (and women) were death-bound alcoholics and drug addicts by then. They cared for nothing. They were Nihilists. It all came out on the pages. The bad guys began to win, crime sometimes paid, the cops weren't paragons of Truth or Justice, the girl next door was more likely to be a Betty Paige S&M doll than a true-blue girl-next-door. America as they knew it was dead, and it was every man for himself. By the time Jim Thompson, Charles Williams, David Goodis and Charles Willeford had come to prominence, psychologically scarred and tormented was the name of the game. Every emotion becomes a perversion – love is obsession; greed is uncontrollable avarice. Nobody gets out alive. You're Fucked.



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