

**NOIR: “That did not end well for anyone.”**

HELLO and Good Morning!

This is me. (See slide for details.)

I’m not an author, or editor, or writing instructor.

I’m a computer science geek, which in my case means introvert, which in my case also means I read a lot of books. And watch a lot of films, a lot of them noir. I tend to read deep rather than wide so this has been a fantastic opportunity to read outside the box, outside the comfort zone, and to share with you what I’ve learned.

I love this sub-category of crime novels - PI stories, hard-boiled stories, and the classic noir films that, of course, will lead me back to the fantastic source material. It is the language that captures me - the style of the writing, the tightness, the sharpness, not one word spare. It is the black and white frame in which there is a morally grey sensibility. It is the toughness of the protagonist. The working class Regular Joe, just trying to make their way, trying to solve people’s problems, and bring a little bit of order to someone’s world. This appeals to me very much. They struggle against larger forces - they get beaten up, lied to, thwarted - nevertheless they persist. They are very affirming stories.

As I will discuss in this talk, true Noir is a very different kettle of fish. There is no noble struggle, there is no heroic morality, and there is no happy ending.

My hope for this talk is that I get to introduce you to authors that you were unaware of, that you are intrigued enough by to seek out at the library, on the web, or at a used bookstore and that, most importantly, you find a bunch of great reads!

Now, a confession: No one can read everything. That realization quite broke my heart when I finally realized that somewhere in my 30s.

It is also true that Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

This is particularly true when talking about Noir.

When I began preparing for this lecture I quickly found myself going down the rabbit hole from what I knew to be pure Noir, to dark Hard-boiled, to psychological suspense to neo-noir and grimdark. It took me to places that I didn’t expect: to issues of morality and human nature, and the role that pop culture plays in acting as a lens for interpreting reality; and a whole host of authors whom I hadn’t known about. All very exciting!

But today, I will present, and hope to convince you, that not only is hard-boiled not noir, it is by its very plot construct at the opposite end of the moral spectrum. I will suggest to you instead that what is now generally marketed as noir is, in fact, gritty or psychological suspense and gory thrillers. And, I will introduce you to some

names and sources where you might seek out your own flavour and brew strength of noir however you define it.

This lecture's slides and the suggested reading list will be available online both on my website and on the Learning Unlimited website.

Here is an Overview of my presentation today:

1. A Brief History
  - Poe, Daly, Traditional, genteel, Golden Age 1920s
2. Transition from Traditional to Pulp
  - 1920s-1950s HB breakaway style
  - Hero narrative
  - The term "noir"
  - From film back to books
3. Contrast Hard-boiled to Noir
4. 1980s and beyond
  - Resurgence of PI category, now with women writers and protagonists
  - Rise of "noir" term, neo-noir/gore/thriller
5. Introduce significant names to be aware of
  - Writers – men who created/changed the HB style
  - Writers – women who wrote in the noit/suspense style
6. Extensive Recommendation List: *Chacun son goût*
7. Conclusion: why read noir?

To contrast hard-boiled and noir, there will be a little history on the mystery, a definition and discussion of Hard-boiled as a morality tale, a brief discussion of films noir, and a contrast between hard-boiled and noir. I will spend some time on highlighting writers you may not be familiar with from the Classic Hard-boiled school and psychological suspense category. Hopefully, you will discover new favourites in some of these names.

I also want to acknowledge that there may be some redundancy in this lecture with what you have already heard. I can well imagine that some aspects of what I say here today will be well familiar to you from previous lectures and your own knowledge.

So here we go.

## History

I think we can agree that Crime is a genre of literary fiction. But Mystery? Is it really a genre? I would suggest mystery is not a genre, per se, but a plot construct. The construct is a puzzle. And a puzzle can occur in any type of literature, anywhere, with any kind of crime, and any kind of "solver/sleuth" – professional, private, amateur, living, dead, human, alien, Victorian, Edwardian, even a cat.

In the mystery plot construct there is always an issue that needs to be resolved; let's call it The Problem.

Traditional Mystery plot construct is a Quest:

Solver/Hero + The Problem ----->Journey -----> The Truth

We are presented with The Problem usually quite early in the book. We are introduced to the cast of characters, and we are introduced to the protagonist – the Solver, the small-d detective of the piece, who will embark on the Quest to solve the problem and find The Truth. We the readers follow along as the Solver goes about the process of getting to The Truth (this is called the Journey).

These types of crime novels follow a series of commandments for how the plot will lay itself out.

In small-d detective novels, there are a series of “commandments” or expectations:

- Crime – committed early in the book
- Lots of suspects, each with a motive
- The central character acts as the detective/solver
- The detective collects evidence, and interviews the suspects and any leads and follows up on the clues (despite the police being involved in the case). This lets the audience in on the process/evidence, passing to us information to aid solving the puzzle
- The detective solves the case (closure-pt1)
- The criminal is arrested or otherwise punished (closure-pt2).
- Justice is done.

We feel clever if we can guess the solution to the puzzle in advance of the reveal, we are engaged in the journey with the protagonist as he or she tries to unravel the puzzle, and we feel satisfaction – when the payoff is revealed – that the author has played fair with the evidence presented to us throughout the story.

This is a brilliant quote by Sue Grafton on the relationship between the reader and the author.

This is the Traditional mystery formula. It is used in most Crime categories from cozies through to Thrillers.

This is also the formula that **Edgar Allan Poe's** *Murders in the Rue Morgue* launched in his detective story in 1841 featuring C. Auguste Dupin. It began as a highbrow form of entertainment, a puzzle to be solved by a rational sifting of clues salted adroitly throughout the story. In Britain especially, the stories were decidedly upper crust: the crime often committed in a world of manor homes and formal gardens, and the blood on the Persian carpet - usually blue.

This was the “Romantic” style of detective fiction: from 1890 to the start of the First World War in 1914. Some well-known authors of the time include: **Arthur Conan Doyle**, **Émile Gaboriau**, **R. Austin Freeman**, and the **Baroness Orczy**.

The gentlemen aristocrats featured in these stories (Dupin, Holmes, Lecoq, Thorndyke, Sir Percy Blakeney), were occasionally paired with capital-L ladies (when “women’s matters” were involved). The focus, however, was exclusively on the deductive abilities and exalted intellectualism of the male detectives.

During this era there were also women who were writing prolifically in the Traditional mystery form.

**Anna Katharine Green** (1846-1935) is the first woman to have written in this form with *The Leavenworth Case* (1878), in which she introduced her police detective Ebenezer Gryce. She also wrote novels featuring a Lady Detective, Violet Strange, in her own series of novels. **Mary Roberts Rinehart** (“the American Agatha Christie”) also wrote prolifically in this era. Called by many critics “unquestioned dean of crime writing by and for women”, the Rinehart Formula (aka the “Had-I-But-Known” school) was an important contribution to the field of mystery writing. **Catherine Louisa Pirkis** created *The Experiences of Loveday Brooke: Lady Detective* (1894) and was also a prolific mystery writer.

The adjective “Lady” in front of detective was used to make clear to the reader that the protagonist, despite doing a working-class job, was a woman of breeding and class; that, though the matter itself was distasteful, there would be nothing vaguely sordid or lower-class to be expected from her behaviour. The “poor victims” that she helped were, in fact, other upper class acquaintances. Servants were to be suspected, questioned, and ruled out in the most discrete way possible so as not to reflect poorly on the household. In these stories, reputation was all.

While it may be surprising to find how many of these novels and short stories were written by women at that time, it is more striking how well many of them hold up after a century. Because they are well-plotted and well-written, focusing on the thoughts and actions of the characters, rather than just describing clues, they use the same human archetypes as we have today, with the same social concerns and complaints. For fans of the style, they are worth seeking out.

### **The 1920s-1950s**

After the First World War there was a strong shift in the major categories of crime stories that gained wide popularity:

- one was what we now refer to as the “Golden Age of Detective Fiction”, which continued the classic or Traditional murder mystery formula but shifted the type of protagonist solving the crime; and,

- two, the pulp stories that came to also be known as “hard-boiled” that thrived from the 1920s through the 1950s.

When pulp stories came on the scene, there were three major socio-economic and political factors contributing to the changing tastes of readers:

1. Men were coming back from the first world war damaged and to a much changed society;
2. Corruption and organized crime was pervasive and rampant, fueled by Prohibition; and
3. Pulp magazines came on the scene, profoundly changing access to reading material.

The men coming back from the war, were both physically and emotionally scarred by their experiences. They had held on to an idealized expectation that things at home were going to be as they were before they left. The economic and social climate had changed so much from what they had left 4 years ago. Realizing they couldn't just pick up where they left off, and having challenges finding jobs and fitting back in to society, many became embittered, disillusioned, and angry.

Los Angeles in the 1920s was a cold and hard city. Peoples' homes were being demolished to build freeways and office buildings. Farmland was being expropriated for industry and tract housing. Post-war urbanization was creating a tremendous disruption to the fabric of society, disproportionately affecting the lower and working classes.

There was tremendous economic, political, and social unrest leading up to the Crash. The Red Scare fed a wave of fear and hostility directed at foreigners as possible Communist agents. People truly felt that they would never get a “fair shake” from a judicial system geared to those who could pay for it – evidence could easily be planted, witnesses coerced, officers bribed to look the other way.

The political and business environment in New York and Los Angeles were seen to be run on a bribery-based quid pro quo – we were well into Prohibition by this time – a boon for the criminal element.

As Philip Marlow said: “there is no honest way to make a hundred million dollars” (*The Long Goodbye*, 1953)

Despite surviving the war, they felt the spoils of war were not being realized fairly. There was a real feeling of helplessness by working-class people to get out from under. It didn't seem like such a far-fetched idea to take the law into one's own hands, administer a little “rough justice” and possibly do a little business on the side. Just don't get caught.

Women, too, had changed. They were more independent, having worked in factories and fending for themselves during the war years.

The woman's right to vote was ratified in August of 1920. The 1920s also ushered in the Flapper Era – no corsets, short hair, short skirts, smoking in public. Women were more socially and sexually assertive and less agreeable to the idea of staying at home and taking orders from their fathers and husbands.

### **The Pulp**

With post-war scarcity of resources, pulp magazines popped up as a cheap vehicle for disposable short stories. One of the first and most influential, *Black Mask*, was established in 1920. In those times, books were financially out of reach for most of the population. Unlike hard cover books, pulps were cheap to produce, cheap to buy, portable, and disposable. That made them easy to acquire, and pass around.

At its peak, selling up to one million copies per issue, dedicated pulp magazines were hungry for content. Writers obliged by cranking out a mind-boggling volume of stories of wide-ranging quality. The publishers of pulp magazines were so desperate for content they would take chances on completely untried talent - including women (though they would usually hide their names behind a pseudonym).

The pulp writers chose to reflect the reality of what they saw through their fiction. With widespread economic hardship, daily evidence of political and police corruption, people were much less interested in reading about the troubles of the wealthy, and more interested in stories about people like themselves.

Right from the beginning, the American writers in these magazines worked important changes to the Traditional crime formula. Three radical changes were: the nature of the small-d detective, the use of language, and the locale.

Led by writers such as **Carroll John Daly, Dashiell Hammett, James M. Cain, Paul Cain, and Raymond Chandler** audiences were introduced to a harder and darker type of small-d detective.

Taking many of the characteristics for their protagonists from the Westerns, the writers of the hard-boiled PI stories infused them with many of the same characteristics:

- professional skills
- physical courage affirmed as masculine potency
- endurance
- moral strength
- a fierce desire for justice
- social marginality
- a degree of anti-intellectualism

A Regular Guy just like their readers!

**The main protagonist**, by no means a Gentleman, was always depicted as mentally and physically tough, sullen, wise-cracking, hard-drinking, ready to get physical, generally coming from the lower social classes, and most importantly, suspicious of authority and the wealthy, and impertinent to the point of rudeness. In other words, a hard man.

<b>Traditional</b>	<b>Hard-boiled</b>
Big-g Gentleman	Working class
Well dressed	Cheap suit
Well mannered	Rude
Queen’s English	Street slang, colloquialisms
Rarely comes to blows	Regularly uses fists
Rarely carries a gun	Regularly armed
Peers with authority figures	Distrusts/withholds from authority figures
Asexual	Swayed by a great pair of gams
Lives well	Lives in office/one-room flat
Connoisseur	Grub

By comparison, the Traditional detectives were disparaged as soft. In fact, the term “hard-boiled” was a direct slang snub to the “soft boiled eggs” that populated the genteel Traditional mysteries. It was meant to convey the reader’s disdain for a whole class of people who, they felt, would not be able survive the hard knocks of their world.

These detectives regularly got beaten up. They always looked a little worse for wear. Most drank, copiously; they used their fists, easily; in many cases they shot first and asked questions later. The new kind of shamus was suspicious of everyone, trusting few. He worked only for himself, cherishing his independence. But he could be swayed by a great pair of gams.

The plotting in these stories had a different structure than the conventions of a puzzle mystery. These were not elite male detectives, articulating their hypotheses, quoting French or Latin to illustrate a point, cerebrally working the clues for the reader’s erudition. There was no drawing-room reveal at the end.

Certainly there was a problem to solve. But the problem did not necessarily start out with a body, or any discernable crime. There was usually no list of suspects, but rather a trail of possibilities through which the PI had to grind. Evidence was not laid out to the reader, because puzzle solving was not the primary plot point of the story. It was more about the characters we met and the journey our protagonist was taking. Women were portrayed in more active roles – less docile, less “lady-like”, more capable and conniving.

The style of writing, and the language used by the characters in these stories, was a radical departure from that used in Traditional mysteries.

The style was fast-paced, tightly written, and very dialogue heavy. There were no extensive, lyrical descriptions of atmosphere, inner thoughts, or the countryside. Sentence structure was simple. Adjectives were minimal. If it was not absolutely essential to the through-line of the action, it was not said. The cadence of the sentences was sharp and had a distinctive rhythm.

This style took a page from the “Realist school” of writing, a new approach to how the characters and subject matter were depicted. The story’s function was simply to report what happened without comment or judgment. And the representation of people was based on what the authors personally observed. There was no hiding the toughness and grittiness of the world in which the PI operated.

The language they used was distinctive: it was a faithful reproduction of the speech patten and vocabulary of the people they worked with and lived beside.

It was unadorned, direct, and used street jargon and mob slang. This was not the language of Lords, barristers, or the wealthy. This was how the people who read the stories spoke. It was rapid fire, and perfectly suited to the pulp formats: fast-paced, fast to write, fast to read.

Conventional hard-boiled language is clipped, slang-filled, sarcastic, and provocative, to the point of rudeness. The hard-boiled PI’s language irritates. Not only does he not care that he does not fit in with the hoi-polloi, he does it deliberately. A great example of this is in *The Maltese Falcon*: contrast Gutman’s long finely wrought pompous monologues with the terse responses from Spade. Hammett is mocking Gutman and his ilk, and he’s using Spade to do it.

In their speech, their personal style and attitude the hard-boiled detectives are recognizably American characters. The staccato cadence mirrored the rhythm of the industrialized mechanical world.

Wisecracks and verbal toughness convey defiance to authority. Having a “smart mouth” or “bad attitude” was de rigueur for a hard-boiled PI.

It is this style, cadence, and choice of language that many see as the “noir style” and in so doing tag books as “noir” simply for their use of this writing style, when there are no other elements that fit the noir criteria.

The locations where the action happened were commonplace and recognizable.

These stories shunned all the trappings readers had been familiar with: bright clean rooms were replaced by dark, dingy, and dirty offices and alleyways; well-bred and educated people were replaced with blue-collar and the working-class – many of whom were homeless or lived in impoverished circumstances; gentlemen politicians



and stuffy military men were replaced by compromised members of tainted organizations – lazy cops, lying political operatives, and the dissolute wealthy.

These hard-boiled detectives were not habitués of the drawing room, but rather of what Chandler coined “the mean streets” – a term meant to be used in both senses of the word “mean”: both poor and hard. The most common cities depicted were New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco seen by many Americans to be centers of corruption and graft.

Our PI is cynical from all that he’s seen and experienced – whether through his dealings with organized crime, self-serving politicians, and the collusion of the police, or from his years of service in the war. It is his cynicism that gives these stories some of their bite.

### **The “Code”**

Despite this hardness, our protagonist does share something with his Gentleman predecessor: he has a moral “Code”.

He will bend or break society’s rules if it suits him, but all to his Code’s purpose. He may be amoral by societal standards, but uncompromising with regard to his own sense of morality.

“I’m half-way between the cops and crooks – what you might call the middleman... I do a little honest shooting once in a while – just in the way of business – but I never bumped off a guy what didn’t need it.” – Race Williams, “Knights of the Open Palm” by Carroll John Daly

This sentence communicates to the reader four things:

1. Indicates where he places himself in the social order
2. He is comfortable with violence
3. He has a personal moral code to which he adheres (not society’s)
4. Talks in “street argot”, signally his Regular Joe status

### **The hard-boiled detective is, in fact, a Knight Errant.**

Knights in Medieval times pledged themselves to protect the weak and the oppressed and the poor. There is a constant tension between two competing demands: leave no man behind and every man for himself.

In this example this hard-boiled PI sees himself as a sucker for helping another human being in dire straits... but does so anyway. This is how we develop a liking for the guy, despite his apparent anti-social behaviour. He is there to help the little guy, and by extension, to help us.

The Knight’s oath was to punish the guilty and protect the innocent. They had courage, prowess, loyalty, and generosity. The hard-boiled PIs have this as well.

He also has Endurance.

Our Hero pushes on, even though he is a) harassed by cops, b) warned off the case, c) beaten up and/or shot, and d) is lied to by informants, the police, and even his clients. Despite all these obstacles, our Knight persists. He is driven to catch the guilty, and find the Truth.

With a Hard-boiled PI story, you know from the outset that the PI will prevail – and it is up to the talent of the writer to keep you engaged in the how and the why of it. Justice – of one sort or another – is done. We feel that. We are satisfied. The bad guys didn't get away with it. They got what was coming to them. How unlike real life. And we know, despite him being bloodied and bruised, our Knight will live on to fight another day.

The Knight Errant effectively absorbs a little of the evil and the filth of human society in order to spare those who are naïve or innocent. With each encounter he becomes more tainted, worn, and bitter. And yet, he perseveres and, though he tires, and questions himself for what he is doing, he squares his shoulders, holsters his gun, and enters the fray once more. He will be there to fight for us, for the Regular Joes, for those who have nowhere else to turn.

Because that is his Code.

He can be the champion of the unseen and unheard, the invisible in society. Our Hero is a Peoples' champion. A working class audience would cheer on any tactics he uses to right the victim's wrong – as they see their powerlessness reflected in the story. This is why the level of brute violence in many hard-boiled stories is so well tolerated.

In all ways - looks, behaviour, language, attitude: our hard-boiled PI stands apart. Bouncing between two worlds, he is fully integrated into neither. This dichotomy is another element that does not apply to noir.

These stories not only reflected the reality of the world the readers lived in, but much more importantly, they also presented them with a man that they could relate to and root for. He was their champion, saying and doing things that they never could. He was their Hero.

### **The Writers**

The first “hard-boiled” private investigator was created by **Carroll John Daly** in his short story, “The False Burton Combs” (1922) and was set in the New York area. It involved mobsters and had the protagonist quite badly beaten up and ready to be hanged for murder. Told in the first person, you are given no clues about the murder itself nor how things will end for the nameless narrator. In fact, we know up front who did it and why. The tension in the story comes, instead, from the frame-up after

the fact. This story is available for free online, and I would encourage you to seek it out. It holds up beautifully.

In the 1920s, Daly was one of the most popular writers in the pulps. His wise-cracking, confident, sharp-shooter, super talented detective Race Williams embodied the American Hero traits that had been established in Westerns and transplanted them to the mobbed up streets of New York City. He remained a star attraction right through the 1950s.

Starting in 1923, **Dashiell Hammett** wrote detective short stories based on his real life experience as a Pinkerton operative in San Francisco. His protagonist in these stories was the unnamed Continental Op, and they were mostly published in *Black Mask* magazine. His most famous character, Sam Spade was introduced in 1930 in Hammett's debut novel *The Maltese Falcon*. He was an evolution of his Continental Op short stories. Hammett's stories gave a realistic portrayal of the urban underworld, written in sparse, unadorned, gritty, hard prose. It was his Op that played a key role in the development of what is understood to be the moral "code" of the American private eye.

Ten years after the Op, **Raymond Chandler's** Philip Marlowe character appeared in bits and pieces under other names in *Black Mask* starting in 1934. Marlowe in his final incarnation, came alive in the novel *The Big Sleep*, published in 1939.

These pulps were where many, many well-known writers got their start, were able to earn an income in lean times, try out writing in different genres (including science fiction and westerns), and eventually go on to write many standalone and series crime novels. Many of these became the basis of popular Hollywood films.

During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were many women, such as **Leigh Brackett** and **Dorothy Dunn**, writing detective and suspense stories for the many pulps. However, many also used pseudonyms to hide their gender from the readers.

At that time, and for decades later, these pulp stories were labeled tough, dark, suspense, and thrilling.

There is not a lot of nuance in hard-boiled. There are stereotypes and archetypes. There is the "good girl" and the "bad woman"; the sidekick; the boss who puts up with the PI's attitude "because he gets results"; and, the corrupt antagonist who must be stopped. They are, in their way, just as formulaic as the Traditional mysteries in the previous century were.

Hard-boiled as a term started out as an attitude – cynical, bitter, tough, unsentimental – that came from the detective himself, and quickly became a shorthand to represent the style of writing and the story in which the detective operated. These are all PI stories, but the spare, unadorned, clipped style in which the stories were written came to be called the hard-boiled style.

The term “noir” did not come to be a style of crime story until decades later.

Many contemporary books labeled or marketed as “noirs” are, in fact, called that simply because they are written in this hard-boiled style.

### **Hard-boiled vs Noir**

How did this come about? Now things get a bit more complicated.

We need to simultaneously address the progression of two streams:

- Hard-boiled/suspense stories
- Dramatic films produced by Hollywood

and how they came to be conflated.

In the 1940s, the pulp magazines and hard-boiled novels made it over to Europe, where, in France in 1945, the publisher Gaillard created an imprint called *Série Noire* – the Black Series – with Marcel Duhamel as its first editor. Duhamel was instrumental in having many of the American hard-boiled novels translated into French. The imprint’s name came from the amorality and dark deeds done by the characters in the stories. These stories were in high contrast to the lighter and more genteel fare popular before and during the war.

Also in the 1940s, the American film industry was beginning to mature as an art form.

The scripts for many of these Hollywood films came from the novels written in the 1920s and 1930s. Copyright was held by the magazines and easily acquired. Certain masters, such as Hammett, Chandler, and Goodis wrote dialogue heavy stories that adapted well to the silver screen. That made their novels and short stories easy go-tos for Hollywood producers – much less rewrite work made for a fast turnaround. The fast pace and violent action in these stories was tailor-made for film.

Many of the film directors we now associate with noir films had come over from Europe in the late 1930s to escape the rise of the Nazi regime.

Many had been working in the German Expressionist style, and had very particular views regarding their distrust of politicians and police, and how badly things could go when ordinary people made poor moral choices.

It is from them that we get the trademark cinematic signature style that we call Noir. They used innovative visual language to convey on screen the intangibles that would normally be communicated through words on the page. Dread, fear, suspense, doubt, anxiety.

But in converting the books to film certain key plot elements and character attributes, and especially the endings, had to change.

Why?

Cue the Motion Picture Production Code.

This was the set of industry “moral guidelines” that was applied to most motion pictures released by major studios from 1930 to 1968. It was more generally known as “the Hays Code”.

This is a key development because it changed the movie content, and particularly the endings, of many movies made from hard-boiled and suspense stories. If you read the original source material – which I strongly encourage you to do as they are a terrific read - you will find that things do not end especially well for many of the characters. It can reasonably be argued that the BOOKS are more noir than the FILMS that were made from them and retroactively labeled as noir.

The Hays Code meant that no one could get away with murder. In addition, if a woman committed a moral sin (such as adultery, or loose behaviour, or beguiling a man to commit a felony) we know right away that she will be severely punished. We just have to wait to the end of the film to find out exactly how. Not so in the novels.

Two notable examples: *In a Lonely Place* (Dorothy B. Hughes), and *Mildred Pierce* (James M. Cain). In the former, it became a completely different story, with a different protagonist, a different plot and a very different ending; in the latter, it stayed largely true to the book until the last 10 minutes of the film, at which point it did a 180 degree turn.

### **Noir – the term**

The term “film noir” – Black Films – to describe these films coming out of America was coined by a French critic in 1946. It referred to both the tonal quality of the cinematography as well as the very dark tone of the subject matter. In this they were referring not only to the darkness of the deeds being done, but also of the moral darkness displayed by the characters, their black souls, if you will. These people were amoral, struggling and/or helpless against the power of cops, politicians, and their own desires.

So by 1955 the term “noir” came to be associated with these highly stylized films and conflated with the hard-boiled and pulp stories that many of them had come from. What was a cinematic style became a crime “genre”.

So, what distinguishes a Hard-boiled from the Noir?

**Hard-boiled PI stories can be seen as morality tales.**

Because of the dominance of film noir in our culture, the de facto meaning of the term noir has been subverted to mean a dark drama featuring primarily amoral or undesirable characters, and set in the 1940s and 50s. Thus neo-noir is the same story just with a more modern or contemporary setting with broader and more diverse characters.

I contend that noirs are completely set apart and a distinct category from the hard-boiled story – or even the PI or detective story. It is a separate specialty category of its own.

Let's look at the elements of a noir story. (Refer to slide for the list.)

They are people who stumble into crime – regardless of their economic status – rather than seeking it out. They are rich or poor, part of the in-crowd or outsiders, labourers or financiers, dregs of society or ultra-wealthy.

Noir is hyper-local, intimate, and very personal, though it can play out against a backdrop of much larger political and social ills.

While the PI novel can be seen as “moral literature,” Noirs are not. PI novels restore order from the chaos of crime; noirs resolve nothing. PI novels follow a formula; noirs do not.

In noirs, characters are believably drawn, not stereotypes – ordinary people of the lowest to middle-class who find themselves in increasingly dangerous predicaments. Usually you know “whodunnit” (the protagonist) and you are now tracing the whydunnit, or the how-far-will-they-go-to-get-out-of-it. This is the source of tension, of the suspense. Because there is no formula you have no idea how (or, in fact, IF) they will get out of it, or who will be sacrificed in the process.

Our heart aches for the unfairness: The familiar formula of a hard-luck grafter or a hard-boiled detective being undone by self-destructiveness and merciless violence. Rather than “thriller” there is a disquieting mood. You don't know how to feel about the protagonist's moral choices. You dread where this might lead. “Oh, oh...” you think, this is not going well...

At the end of the noir novel, there is no tidy, happy ending. The reader is left discomfited, or even feeling punched in the chest. It is “reality literature”.

We all have a personal moral code. We need one in order to live in a “civil society”. It is that Code we resonate with when we read PI stories. We may not always agree with the protagonist's choices, but we respect his adherence to a morality-based code we understand.

With Noir, that is off the table. Random events control outcomes as much or more than the characters do. Some people are punished for their transgression, some

disproportionately so. But some are not. Evil doesn't always get punished; good or poor or naïve choices do.

In the book, *The Maltese Falcon*, Gutman not only poisons his daughter, he is willing to betray his henchman just to get the prize he wants. This is pure Avarice, and his only punishment is that he is frustrated in his acquisition and he must continue his search. Even the loss of his gunsel that he "loves like a son" is seen as just a cost of doing business. O'Shaughnessy (the amoral woman), must pay for her murders and double dealing with her life. We are not pleased that Gutman got away with it, but consoled that O'Shaughnessy got caught.

Let's look at the Detective novel commandments again.

**Noir stories violate virtually all of these formula elements.**

**Hard-boiled vs Noir: They are diametrically opposed to each other in their philosophy.**

Contrast the protagonist in each type of story. (Refer to slide for the comparison.)

Through the protagonist's eyes the reader is shown a world dominated by corruption and greed, violence and crime in which they sometimes seems to have difficulty drawing a clear line between right and wrong.

The world of noir encourages its inhabitants to engage in deceit and false appearances. This produces an environment of dishonesty and persistent insecurity for the characters. From this point of view, bad decisions are made, with usually lethal consequences.

In *A Rage in Harlem* by Chester Himes, one of the main characters, Jackson, is self-described as a "good church-going man." And yet he continues to violate most of the 10 commandments, each time praying to Jesus to save him from the dire consequences his actions.

Noirs are stories of misfortune. Despite desiring to have a "better" life, the protagonist never succeeds in becoming economically and privately successful. He neither becomes rich, nor does he find a loving woman with whom he can settle down. There is no room for peace or real happiness in his life.

Whereas hard-boiled is Knight Errant; Noir is Vice personified.

Where the hard-boileds reinforce the moral Hero archetype, Noir tears it to pieces and flings it in your face. You are a fool, it says, for thinking it could end any other way.

In the 1980s, there was a rebirth of the noir style in Britain. Their country was in economic crisis with labour unrest and strikes, and the stories reflected that. While authors did not lean on the established PI formula they did adopt the “hard-boiled” style of language. Unlike the restrained noirs of the 1940s, these novels had a meanness, and cruelty that was far more violent.

These authors set a new standard for what a noir novel could be: strong, spare writing, with compelling plots, atmospheric, complex characters, delving into the morally ambiguous nature of their situation, showing their conflicted thoughts. An amalgamation of the best of classic hard-boiled and the suspense novel.

By now Noir had become a fashionable label to use for anything that used the colour black, or had a dark tone or attitude. Books, films, comic books – all claimed to be the “new noir” and the term neo-noir was coined. In fact, most of the books being marketed under this label were, in fact, hard-boiled, psychological suspense, or thrillers (“roman noir”).

In the 2000s, we have had several profound political and economic shocks felt globally. And there has been a commensurate resurgence in dark, gripping, fast-paced vengeance thrillers and psychological suspense. Many have been marketed and labeled as noir (or neo-noir).

Around 2005 we started to see a resurgence in the use of the term “noir” to brand and sell books. Certainly mysteries were getting darker. *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2005) came out and was initially marketed as a psychological crime thriller. Now we have Nordic Noir.

The smart-mouth hard-boiled style in novels had not fully gone away – there were many, many smart, tough female PIs who had come along in the 1970s, ‘80s, and 90s. And psychological suspense has always had a presence in the crime genre.

But, once again, something, some critical mass tipping point in the political and economic environment caused the release of Megan Abbot’s *Die a Little* 2005, *Queenpin* in 2007, Christa Faust’s *Money Shot* in 2008... to create a new wave of hard-boiled love.

### **Major Writers in the Style**

The best writers of the noir category can show us the complicated nature of human behavior, and how otherwise ordinary people could tumble down the proverbial rabbit hole of sin, temptation, and weakness to commit murder—and keep the reader’s sympathy throughout.

In the extensive recommended list of authors, book titles, and suggested anthologies I have compiled you will see many familiar names. So I want to take this time to



surface a few that are lesser known, though no less talented, and are worth seeking out.

**Gil Brewer** was a master of tension. In *The Red Scarf* you can feel the protagonist's desperation even as he walks step by step down the road that will probably lead to his own destruction. But like any great noir character, there's no way he can stop himself. In Gil Brewer's world, good fortune is never free and greed inevitably leads to destruction.

**Ed Gorman** was an award-winning writer and anthologist. His novel, *Blindside*, is sharply written, acerbic, gripping, and eye-opening look at the ruination of American politics and the failing two-party political system. Gorman's keen eye for detail shows us how such shenanigans cost the nation more than they'll ever completely understand.

**David Goodis** worked in advertising during the day and wrote short stories for the pulps in the evenings often using pseudonyms. Featuring the mean streets and doomed protagonists, the plots and actions in his stories empathized with outsiders: the working poor, the unjustly accused, fugitives, criminals. In the 1940s he worked in Hollywood writing scripts for radio and serialized stories for the Saturday Evening Post. Several of his novels were made into noir classics (*Street of No Return*, *Dark Passage*, *Shoot the Piano Player*). He's in the same class as Hammett and Chandler.

**James M. Cain** was a skilled journalist and prolific writer. *The Postman Always Rings Twice* is a brilliant example of a crime novel that has no mystery; we see the slow build of the woman's frustration and watch her wield her sex as a weapon. The suspense builds rapidly as they head down the destructive slope. A stellar noir.

What puts Cain in the top rank of noir writers is the spare, nearly adjective free writing. It helps convey the brutality of the action. He uses the first-person narrative as a powerful tool that engages the reader in the "why, oh, why" did you do it. We feel the gut punch of the rough justice both satisfied and sad, at the same time. Other novels: *Mildred Pierce*, *Double Indemnity* (based on a real case), *Interlude*, *Love's Lovely Counterfeit*.

**Jean-Patrick Manchette** – French crime novelist widely credited for reinvigorating interest in the noir genre with his first book *The N'Gustro Affair* (1969). His novels recall the crime films of Jean-Pierre Melville, a noted French director of noir films such as *Bob Le Flambeur* (1959).

Manchette wrote 11 novels. Of the five novels that have been translated into English, the most well-known is *The Prone Gunman* (2002, made into *The Gunman* in 2015). This tightly plotted, corrosive parody of "the success story" is widely considered to be Manchette's masterpiece.

**Derek Raymond** was born into wealth, dropped out of Eton at 16 and spent most of his early life with criminals. He described his novels as black narratives reported back from the trenches. *He Died With His Eyes Open* (1984) is the first in the “Factory” novels, widely considered to be the “godfather of the British noir novel.” The Factory refers to the police precinct out of which the protagonist works. Five of his novels were on the *Serie Noire*’s publication list.

**James Sallis**, is best known for his detective Lew Griffin who first appeared in *The Long-legged Fly* (1992). He wrote *Drive* (2005) which was made into a movie of the same name (2011). He has written over 15 crime novels. His books contain short, pithy sentences that resonates the 1940s style of pulp fiction and film noir.

**Ted Lewis**, was called the “godfather of the modern British crime story” with first novel, *All the Way Home and All the Night Through* (1965). All his books give a searching look at a criminal world where violence is a way of life. His writing is described as “lean, muscular and elemental, and there is not a word or phrase wasted.” His novel, *Jack’s Return Home* (1970) was made into the film *Get Carter* (1971) starring Michael Caine. He wrote 9 novels before his early death from alcoholism.

**Paul Cain** was a prolific pulp short story author. Little is known of him, by his own choice – he gave himself several aliases, and moved around a lot, changing his biographical info each time. Best known for his novel, *Fast One* (1932), he is considered to be a landmark in the pulp fiction style. *The Paul Cain Omnibus* is a terrific collection of his best pulp stories, including *Fast One; Black; and One, Two, Three*.

**George V. Higgins** – credited with reinvented the crime novel by removing its obvious moral centre. Gone was the private-eye protagonist, who periodically reassured the reader that order was achievable in a troubled world. His first novel, *The Friends Of Eddie Coyle* (1972), tells the story largely through dialogue, a stylized version of Boston street-talk. His work directly informed Elmore Leonard’s style of dialogue-heavy prose.

**Tom Piccirilli** – an award-winning author, he has written over 20 novels, including *Shadow Season, The Cold Spot, The Coldest Mile, and A Choir of Ill Children. The Fever Kill* is true noir.

**Chester Himes** was an American writer who emigrated to France in 1953 where Marcel Duhamel asked him to write for *Série Noire*. This resulted in Himes beginning to write what would become the nine-book Harlem Cycle of novels, and in 1958 the first book in the series, *A Rage in Harlem*, won Himes the Grand Prix de Littérature Policière.

As publishing budgets tighten, and rights become available, old masters of noir and psychological suspense, like **Jim Thompson** and **Charles Willeford**, are being brought back into print and ebooks, opening them up to whole new generations of mystery readers, and more importantly, to non-mystery readers who read their fiction on the pessimistic side.

Both Noir and psychological suspense carry you into the criminal mind.

I mentioned earlier that there were many women also writing psychological suspense stories in the 1920s through 1950s. Most were labeled “domestic” suspense to cue the reader that the setting was centered in the home, and the main protagonist was female.

The main difference the lack of overt violence - “psychological” suspense builds slowly, relentlessly, layer by layer.

To get a good sampling of the masters at their craft, I strongly recommend reading the anthology *Troubled Daughters, Twisted Wives*, edited by Sarah Weinman. She has put together a stellar collection of short stories by 14 prolific noir/psychological suspense authors from the 1930s and 40s, many of whom who are unknown to a modern day audience.

With the renewed interest in psychological suspense (through successes of books like *Gone Girl*, and *The Girl on the Train*) publishers are rediscovering these women. And some of these authors’ works are now being republished by small press houses.

Three particular favourites:

**Dorothy B. Hughes’** stories attempted to understand evil or people sliding toward evil (*In a Lonely Place*) or the moral conflicts of people engaged in evil deeds (*The Blank Wall*). Cited as “the world’s finest female noir writer.” In her books, she was describing the psyche and actions of a serial killer years before the term existed. She depicted the crushing disappointment a war hero feels after coming home to a chorus of crickets, as well as the expectation to pick up where he’d left off — when there’s nothing to pick up. Her books are not only page turners, the characters resonate with you weeks afterwards. I note that the movie in 1950 is a very different story!

Sara Paretsky said of Hughes – “Puts Chandler to shame... Hughes is the master we keep turning to.” She is a psychological suspense writer extraordinaire.

**Elizabeth Sanxay Holding** wrote primarily in the hard-boiled and psychological suspense sub-category of crime fiction. In *Net of Cobwebs* (1945) the protagonist describes the chaotic thoughts that race through his mind as he tries very hard to make sense of his reality. He is an unreliable narrator; as readers we do not know what is real and what is only in his imagination. And the difference is deadly.

**Dorothy Salisbury Davis** published her first novel, *The Judas Cat* (1949). Already many of the themes that would recur in Davis' work—the seemingly close-knit small town populated with flawed but relatable people undone by a murder, and then the corrosive aftermath—appear in this debut, which is set up by a locked-room mystery.

Davis was much more interested in the psychology of regular people, especially women of all ages, like the thirtyish spinster Hannah in *A Town of Masks* (1952), whose timid manner boils over in a murderous, yet justified way; or the elderly matriarch in *The Clay Hand* (1950) who rules her small town using fear and hatred, yet is herself undone. Her novels reflect her concerns about human behavior and social justice.

**M. G. Eberhart**, was a practitioner of the classic romantic suspense novel (a successor to Mary Roberts Rinehart). By the end of the 1930s, Eberhart had become the leading female crime novelist in the United States and was one of the highest-paid female crime novelists in the world, next to Agatha Christie. She wrote a total of 59 novels, the last published in 1988, shortly before her 89th birthday. Eight of her novels were adapted as movies. In 1971, she was awarded the Mystery Writers of America's Grand Master Award. Despite using the Rinehart Formula, she crafted ingenious plots and characters you believe in, building suspense in layers to the crucial moment of danger. Call it noir lite.

**Joan Fleming** was a British crime writer who won her first CWA Gold Dagger Award for her novel, *When I Grow Rich* (1962). Her second Gold Dagger was awarded for her novel, *Young Man, I Think You're Dying* (1970) which focused on "low-lives and criminals." Fleming has written over 30 crime novels.

As publishing budgets tighten, rights access to old masters of both psychological suspense and noir, like **Jim Thompson** and **Charles Willeford**, are allowing them to be brought back into both print and ebooks, making them available to whole new generations of mystery readers, and more importantly, to non-mystery readers who read their fiction on the pessimistic side.

The recommendations list I have compiled also has eight other noir short story anthologies worth checking out. There are a lot of terrific stories by known and lesser know authors. Most are dark without being gory. Many are just hard-boiled. A few will leave you wired from the suspense.

Traditional locations associated with noir are LA, New York, or San Francisco. The Akashic City Noir book series however, shows that darkness, depravity, and casual violence can happen anywhere.

This is an anthology series worth checking out.

In most cases the editor of the City Noir is in some way affiliated with or known to write novels set in that locale. For example, S.J. Rozan (Lydia Chin PI series) edited the *Bronx Noir* anthology and Dennis Lehane (Gone, Baby, Gone) edited the *Boston Noir* anthology.

### **Extensive Recommendations List**

We know what to do if we want to read PI stories – there is a wealth of options out there and the breadth of protagonists is remarkable. We are no longer bound to the old stereotypes (middle-age, beat up, white, male, loner, ex-cop or military).

Our small-d detectives come in every shape, size, nationality, gender, and species. Reading in this category is an embarrassment of riches. The formula is solid, and being tweaked and subverted in so many interesting and exciting ways. There is no reason at all to read the same-old same-old unless one really prefers it.

But, what do I read if I want to read noir?

And how do I read noir without reading gore porn?

Good question.

We know that crime categories go in and out of fashion, and authors write to the market.

When *The Girl on the Train* came out, and was a huge success, imitators crawled out of the woodwork flooding the market. Manuscripts of varying quality were “rediscovered” in the slush pile.

Today’s publishing market is so crowded, how does an author stand out? What is their hook? For many, it was to make the violence more explicit. Darker, more “real”, blacker, more “noir”.

Sales are what determines what is published.

Right now, there has been a strong movement toward more and more shocking, gory, brutal, and excessive violence UNDER THE NAME NOIR.

Gore sells.

It is not my cup of joe.

I find the films that allude to the violence off screen are vastly scarier than the ones that show the axe chopping the limbs. I submit as an example the shower scene from *Psycho* – you never saw the knife touch her body or go in. Yet you well knew what happened and were just as shocked.

The Noir label comes out of the psychological suspense category. Both stories lead you down a path, but there comes a point at which the protagonist makes a decision – a binary one – and if they choose one path, it is a suspense novel, and if they chose the other path, it is a noir. That inflection point hinges on a moral choice. Do they make the “right” choice? Suspense. Do they make the “wrong” choice? Noir.

Many of today’s suspense novels are being marketed as neo-noir.

Great news!

Because we know that **Noir is a perspective**, a downbeat, pessimistic world-view. Therefore, it could be said that **any plot construct**, literary genre, or sub-category of crime novel could encompass a noir sensibility.

Here are some suggestions to find noir stories.

1. go back to the novels of the Classics (including the movie’s source material)
2. look to those who write psychological suspense (past and present)
3. look to different genres (science fiction and westerns for a start)
4. look to noir anthologies to find authors with a voice that you enjoy reading

Right now I am reading an anthology called *Tiny Crimes: Very Short Tales of Mystery and Murder*. Each story is no more than 3-4 pages, and nicely dark.

William Gibson’s book, *Pattern Recognition*, is a textbook example of neo-noir. But you will find it on the science fiction shelves.

I have put together an extensive Recommendations list of noir and hard-boiled books and films:

- Specific book recommendations (with an extensive list of the Classics)
- Authors to check out
- Hard-boiled PI series to look into
- Anthologies to sample
- Websites to visit
- Noir(-is) films to see (many based on novels and short stories)

And remember: “Chacun a son gout” – each to their own taste – And that is especially true in noir. One person’s must-read, or Top 10 may not even make another’s top 50!

## Conclusion

We know we read hard-boiled stories because the working-class hero fights hard for us and, in the end, a form of justice is done. This makes us feel good. We can't punch our boss in the face, or shoot the guy who cuts us off in traffic, but we can live vicariously through the violence our Hero wreaks on those who deserve it! It is cathartic. We leave these stories nodding our heads, giving our approval, feeling good.

In the classic noirs we learn that succumbing to Avarice, Lust, or Jealousy (no matter how small the transgression) will lead to a very bad end, and **not** for all concerned. Just you. And that many times, there is nothing that you can do to get yourself out of it.

Hard-boiled and PI novels offer resolution and justice. They give us comfort in their moral certainty. We love our Hero. She is tough, capable, focused, troubled, questions her life choices, is certain of her mission. I want to be her. But since I can't I will live vicariously through her.

### **If it's so awful, why do I read Noir?**

Noir challenges us.

We are all capable of malice, evil, selfishness, betraying each other, and we also have a huge capacity for good and for caring for each other.

I do not feel uplifted at the end of a noir story. I feel relieved I am out of that world, and grateful for the life I have. I also come away with something else: a deeper understanding of the very different lives of people who are living right beside me in this city, in this world. I have seen through their eyes the struggles they go through and the impossible decisions they have had to make between starvation or selling their bodies; between selling out their dealer or never seeing their child again; feeling their hope at getting out of the city with their loved one and being dragged back into a life they were trying to escape.

I feel less moral certitude after reading noir. I question my absolutist assumptions. My black and white thinking. And I think about ways that I, in my very small way, might make the world a better place. Just like my PI heroes, there is a reason to get back up and keep fighting.

And that gives me hope.

Thank you.