

MIDWESTERN
MISCELLANY XLII

Spring 2014

being a collection of essays on

Midwestern Noir

by members of

The Society for the Study of
Midwestern Literature

guest editor

JOSEPH J. WYDEVEN

The Midwestern Press
The Center for the Study of
Midwestern Literature and Culture
Michigan State University
East Lansing, Michigan 48824-1033
2014

Copyright 2014 by
the Society for the Study of
Midwestern Literature

All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America.

No part of this work may be reproduced in
any form without permission of the publisher.

Midwestern Miscellany (ISSN 0885-4742) is a peer-reviewed journal published
twice a year (Spring and Fall) by the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature.

This journal is a member of the Council of Editors of Learned Journals



In memory of
Arvid F. Sponberg

CONTENTS

Preface	6
Recent Midwestern Fiction and Poetry	8
“No Place to Hide: Examining the Struggles Between Urban and Rural in Midwest Noir”	Marc Seals 9
<i>Little Caesar</i> : Tough Guys Don’t Dream	Guy Szuberla 15
The Horror of a Simple Man: Midwestern Evil <i>in Scott Smith’s A Simple Plan</i>	Scott D. Emmert 27
The Dark Fairy Tale in the Fiction of Bonnie Jo Campbell	Marcia Noe, Mollee Shannon and Laura Duncan 33
Daniel Woodrell’s American Adam: Myth and Country Noir in <i>Winter’s Bone</i>	Joseph J. Wydeven 45
Noir on the Chicago Stage: Keith Huff’s <i>A Steady Rain</i>	Arvid F. Sponberg 57
Call for Papers	66

PREFACE

Literary noir, the theme of this issue, can perhaps best be defined by its lack of a stable definition. While many writers and scholars conflate noir fiction, film noir, the hard-boiled detective novel, high noir and its postmodern parodies, Otto Penzler, writing in the foreword to *The Best American Noir of the Century* (2011), makes a clear distinction between noir fiction and hard-boiled detective fiction, arguing that the two are opposites: while the protagonist of the latter adheres to a well-defined code of conduct, the noir novel is nihilistic, its protagonist fighting to survive in a morally ambiguous universe. Taking a broader view, Slavoj Žižek argues that noir is not a genre but a logic operating across a number of genres and modes (Orr 3). Summing up this critical imbroglio, Stanley Orr reflects that “[r]ather like a noir protagonist, the scholar falls into a Sisyphean task of identifying this elusive and unwieldy cultural phenomenon” (2). Nevertheless, noir scholarship yields some elements that are repeatedly discussed as components of film noir and noir fiction, such as crime, violence, nihilism, and desperation.

The six essays gathered here offer ample proof of the contested nature of this term. Marc Seals, in “No Place to Hide: Examining the Struggle between Urban and Rural in Midwestern Noir,” finds the stereotypically urban setting in noir novels not to be a defining characteristic of the genre. The Midwestern noir novel, he argues, can also be set in rural locales. Guy Szuberla’s essay on W. R. Burnett’s *Little Caesar*, by contrast, asserts that the urban setting is an essential component of noir fiction and of the social identity that its protagonists construct. Scott Emmert’s essay on *A Simple Plan*, however, discusses a novel in which the rural setting plays a key role, citing this novel as a classic example of country noir and emphasizing its determinism and “assertion of our fraught humanity,” qualities that he views as essential in the noir novel.

Another essay that examines country noir is “The Dark Fairy Tale in the Fiction of Bonnie Jo Campbell,” which discusses the ways in which Campbell marries noir elements to inverted conventions of classic fairy tales to create a uniquely effective form of social critique. Rounding out this trio of essays that deals with country noir is Joseph J. Wydeven’s essay on Daniel Woodrell’s *Winter’s Bone*, which looks at how noir conventions operate in this book and can give us a fresh

perspective on the coming-of-age novel. With Arvid Sponberg's "Noir on the Chicago Stage: Keith Huff's *A Steady Rain*," the focus changes from fiction to drama; however, fictional elements, Sponberg argues, are very much in evidence in *A Steady Rain*, which makes use of several of the conventions of literary naturalism.

Sponberg's essay reminds us that noir is an indeterminate and slippery term. Although many scholars define it as a genre, others assert that noir is not a genre itself and is not limited to one type of discourse. The term can characterize fiction, drama, and film; there are even different types of noir films. As Žižek suggests, "noir motifs are easily discernible in comedies . . . westerns . . . political and social dramas . . ." (qtd. in Orr 3). The essays in this issue remind us of the multidimensional nature of noir, whether we call it a genre, a mode, a style, or a logic, and also of the richness and complexity of Midwestern literature.

WORKS CITED

- Orr, Stanley. *Darkly Perfect World: Colonial Adventure, Postmodernism and American Noir*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2010.
- Penzler, Otto. Foreword. *The Best American Noir of the Century*. Ed. James Ellroy and Otto Penzler. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2011.

RECENT MIDWESTERN FICTION AND POETRY

FICTION

- Airgood, Ellen. *South of Superior*. Riverhead Books, 2011. [Michigan]
- Attenberg, Jamie. *The Middlesteins*. Grand Central, 2012. [Chicagoland]
- Baker, Ellen. *I Gave My Heart to Know This*. Random House, 2011. [Wisconsin]
- Beard, Jo Ann. *In Zanesville*. Little, Brown, 2011. [Illinois]
- Berg, Elizabeth. *Tapestry of Fortunes*. Random House, 2013. [Minnesota]
- Campbell, Bonnie Jo. *Once Upon a River*. Norton, 2011. [Michigan]
- Coake, Christopher. *You Came Back*. Grand Central, 2012. [Ohio]
- Eugenides, Jeffrey. *The Marriage Plot*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011. [Michigan]
- Franzen, Jonathan. *Freedom*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011. [Minnesota]
- Gass, William H. *Middle C*. Knopf, 2013. [Ohio]
- Harbach, Chad. *The Art of Fielding*. Little, Brown, 2011. [Wisconsin]
- Harrison, Jim. *The River Swimmer*. Grove, 2013. [Michigan]
- Lasser, Scott. *Say Nice Things about Detroit*. Norton, 2012. [Michigan]
- Moore, Edward Kelsey. *The Supremes at Earl's All-You-Can-Eat*. Knopf, 2013 [Indiana]
- Rhodes, David. *Jewelweed*. Milkweed, 2013. [Wisconsin]
- Riekke, Ron. *The Way North: Collected Upper Peninsula New Works*. Wayne State UP, 2013 [Michigan]
- Roy, Lori. *Until She Comes Home*. Dutton, 2013 [Detroit]
- Somerville, Patrick. *This Bright River*. Little, Brown, 2012. [Wisconsin]
- Thompson, Jean. *The Year We Left Home*. Simon & Schuster, 2011. [Iowa]

POETRY

- Heller, Janet Ruth. *Folk Concert: Changing Times*. Anaphora 2012.
- Kloefkorn, William. *Swallowing the Soap*. U of Nebraska, 2010.
- Knoepfle, John. *Shadows and Starlight*. Indian Paintbrush Poets, 2012
- Radavich, David. *The Countries We Live In*. Main Street Rag Publishing, 2013.
- Stillwell, Mary K. *Fallen Angels*. Finishing Line, 2013.

NO PLACE TO HIDE: EXAMINING THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN URBAN AND RURAL IN MIDWEST NOIR

MARC SEALS

I teach a course on detective fiction and film at the University of Wisconsin campus in Baraboo, and I focus primarily on noir. I resist defining noir for my students, preferring instead to provide a list of “symptoms of noir.” Calling these traits symptoms rather than characteristics casts noir as a disease, or at least a reflection of a diseased culture. These symptoms (some of which apply only to film) include the usual suspects—black and white, extreme shadow, Expressionistic camera angles, femmes fatale, thematic confusion, voiceover narration. One of the symptoms included is an urban setting. I had the idea for this article two years ago when I first read Sara Paretsky’s *Indemnity Only* (1982). As a proud immigrant to Wisconsin, I howled with joy when a character runs to a rural Wisconsin town to escape certain death in Chicago. I thought that if I examined other works of Midwest noir, I would find that rural Wisconsin is a refuge and Chicago a dangerous cesspool. I was wrong; after careful consideration of the evidence, my thinking on the matter has changed dramatically. In the world of noir, there is no place to hide.

Raymond Chandler’s famous essay on detective fiction, “The Simple Art of Murder,” reinforces the idea of noir’s link to urban settings. Though associated most closely with Los Angeles, Chandler was originally a Midwesterner, born and raised in Chicago. Chandler writes:

The realist in murder writes of a world in which gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities, in which hotels and apartment houses and celebrated restaurants are owned by men who made their money out of brothels . . . a world where a judge with a cellar full of bootleg liquor can send a man to jail for having a pint in his pocket . . .

where no man can walk down a dark street in safety because law and order are things we talk about but refrain from practicing It is not a very fragrant world, but it is the world you live in It is not funny that a man should be killed, but it is sometimes funny that he should be killed for so little, and that his death should be the coin of what we call civilization. (991)

Chandler here speaks exclusively of an urban milieu, as if to imply that the rural has no place in the noir world. Classic noir typically tells the tale of diseased urban corruption, rarely venturing from the mean streets of L.A. or New York.

In works of noir fiction set in the Midwest, urban areas such as Chicago are locations of corruption and violence, while rural areas such as Wisconsin represent an attempted refuge from that corruption and violence. Characters in such works seek safety in the rural. This, at first blush, seems to be a return to Romanticism's distrust of cities. However, this safety is illusory at best in most cases, perhaps reflecting a turn towards the Revolt from the Village movement or perhaps even a return to Naturalism. Sara Paretsky's use of Chicago and Wisconsin in *Indemnity Only* and Neil Gaiman's treatment of Wisconsin in *American Gods* are two authors/works that well illustrate this pattern, and the neo-noir films of the Coen brothers take it a step further.

As previously stated, noir is typically set in an urban environment. Chandler wrote about the mean streets that the hard-boiled protagonist must walk, not the dark forest path. Even so, there is a tradition of rural noir dating back to the earliest years of the genre. One of the earliest noir novels—some would say the first—is Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest*, originally serialized in *Black Mask* magazine 1927 and 1928. Critic William Marling argues that *Red Harvest* is “our watershed in the history of the American noir novel” (106). Hammett's protagonist, the Continental Op, travels to Personville, a small Montana mining town so rife with corruption that the locals call it “Poisonville.” The Continental Op himself becomes more corrupt as the novel progresses: “It's this damn town,” the Op tells the novel's femme fatale. “Poisonville is right. It's poisoned me” (137). Remarkably, in the watershed noir novel, a small rural town is, in fact, the corrupting element.

A few years later, Chandler wrote a short story called “Goldfish,” published in the June 1936 issue of *Black Mask*. Much of the story

takes place in Westport, a quaint little coastal town in northern California that could hardly be more different from the usual urban haunts of Chandler’s heroes. The detective in “Goldfish” has gone to Westport searching for a man who stole the incredibly valuable “Leander pearls”; the search is successful, and the thief dies in the attempt to protect his treasure. In noir, any escape from urban corruption is temporary at best.

This theme is perhaps given its most famous treatment in the 1947 film noir *Out of the Past*, directed by Jacques Tourneur. In this film, private detective Jeff Markham is hired to find Kathie, a gangster’s mistress, who has stolen \$40,000. Jeff finds her in Mexico but falls in love with her. They move to San Francisco and live anonymously until Jeff’s former partner, Fisher, finds them. Kathie kills Fisher and Jeff discovers evidence that proves she lied about the money (which she denied stealing). Disillusioned, Jeff moves to the rural town of Bridgeport, California. Eventually, he is found—accidentally—by one of the gangster’s men. Jeff tries to escape and make things right, but he is killed by Kathie (who then also dies trying to run through a police roadblock). Consider—Kathie stole \$40,000 and attempted to hide in a bucolic Mexican coastal resort town, but she is found. Jeff tries to hide in Bridgeport, but he is found. They die together on the forest road near Tahoe. Again, the rural settings offer no safety from the reach of urban crime.

Noir set the Midwest has one of its earliest treatments in Ernest Hemingway’s 1927 story “The Killers.” Set in Summit, Illinois, twelve miles southwest of Chicago’s Loop, this is the story of a pair of Chicago mob hit men looking for an aging boxer named Ole Andreson who has “got in wrong” with the wrong people (221). The boxer has been hiding in the small town of Summit, which had a population of about 6,500 in 1927. Though not exactly rural, it’s not Chicago either. Hiding from hard-boiled criminals is a delaying tactic at best. Ole Andreson seems resigned to this fate, saying “There ain’t anything to do now.” When Nick Adams suggests that Andreson might flee, Andreson says, “No, I’m through with all that running around” (221).

A much more recent example is Sara Paretsky’s first novel, *Indemnity Only*, published in 1982. This novel sets many of the patterns for Paretsky’s later work featuring hard-boiled feminist Chicago detective V. I. Warshawski. The story centers largely upon Warshawski’s search for a young woman named Anita McGraw.

Anita is on the run from Chicago gangsters who have reason to want her dead. Warshawski finally figures out that Anita has run for her life and is hiding out in Wisconsin, waiting tables at a diner in Hartford, a farming town of about 14,000 in “the beautiful moraine country, the heart of Wisconsin dairy farming,” thirty-five miles northwest of Milwaukee—and 140 miles from Chicago (264).

Warshawski knows that hiding in a small Wisconsin town offers only temporary safety. The only way to save Anita is to get her back to Chicago and confront the corruption directly and decisively. The danger is so great that, when Warshawski drives to Hartford to get Anita, she does so in the car of a friend—specifically to avoid notice from the gangsters who hope that Warshawski will lead them to Anita. Warshawski does find Anita and convinces her to trust her, telling her, “You can’t hide here forever, though, and I think that I’m tough enough, quick enough, and smart enough to get things settled so that you can come out of hiding. I can’t cure the pain, and there’s more to come, but I can get you back to Chicago . . .” (268). She does, and there is pain waiting—but they do survive. Anita is fortunate that Warshawski understands that escape to the rural merely forestalls the reach of urban corruption.

A similar pattern of hiding in small-town Wisconsin occurs in Neil Gaiman’s 2001 novel *American Gods*. Gaiman, though a British author, has a home in Menomonie, Wisconsin (a fact that he tries to keep secret by saying that he lives in a town near Minneapolis). It may seem odd to label a work of fantasy as noir, but many of the original reviews noted the noir elements. Laura Miller, writing for Salon.com, writes:

Shadow goes through some of the requisite hard-boiled experiences—getting kidnapped and beat up by the bad guys, discovering that his employer hasn’t been exactly honest with him and so on—along with a few others that never crop up in Chandler and Hammett Whatever its loftier intentions, *American Gods* is a juicily original melding of archaic myth with the slangy, gritty, melancholy voice of one of America’s great cultural inventions—the hard-boiled detective; call it Wagnerian noir.

The novel’s protagonist is a mysterious man named Shadow who has just been released from prison. A stranger named Mr. Wednesday offers Shadow employment. Though Shadow does not figure it out for quite a while, a reasonably perceptive reader will quickly (if not

immediately) realize that Mr. Wednesday is the Norse god Odin, the All-Father. Mr. Wednesday is traveling around America meeting with the old gods—Anansi, Czernobog, Eostre, Kali, Anubis, Thoth (and many, many more)—enlisting their support for a coming battle with the new American gods—the Internet, television, credit cards, and the like.

The new gods know that Shadow is a powerful player in this conflict and try to take him out. Mr. Wednesday sends him to the small town of Lakeside in the North Woods of Wisconsin to hide. This seems to work, but Shadow (in his unofficial role as hard-boiled detective) eventually figures out that the children who have been disappearing for years are the victims of an ancient Germanic kobold named Hinzemann, who has been posing as a kindly old man for generations. Shadow goes to Lakeside for safety and discovers a multigenerational serial killer—so much for the idyllic rural paradise.

In the end, setting (whether rural or urban) does not matter—a concept that Midwest filmmakers Joel and Ethan Coen seem to embrace. Perhaps their most famous neo-noir film is 1996’s *Fargo*, in which no one would argue about the depravity that a rural setting might hold; most viewers will likely never look at a wood chipper the same way again. After capturing the man who put his partner in crime into said wood chipper, police chief Marge Gunderson says, “So that was Mrs. Lundegaard on the floor in there. And I guess that was your accomplice in the wood chipper. And those three people in Brainerd. And for what? For a little bit of money. There’s more to life than a little money, you know. Don’tcha know that? And here ya are, and it’s a beautiful day. Well. I just don’t understand it.” The depravity of noir has intruded on Marge’s Minnesota town, and she struggles to make sense of this glimpse into darkness. The Coen brothers reinforce this theme in 2001’s *The Man Who Wasn’t There*, their beautiful tribute to *Double Indemnity*—a film set in a small town rather than in Los Angeles. And what of 2007’s *No Country for Old Men*? Forget rural—this is practically *wilderness* noir! Finally, I’d put forth 1990’s *Miller’s Crossing*, the Coen brothers’ tribute to, of all things, Dashiell Hammett’s *Red Harvest*. Obviously, this brings us full circle. It’s funny that the first noir novel uses a rural setting, and now we’ve returned to same—as if both Hammett and Joel and Ethan Coen understand that noir is not at its heart about the darkness of the mean streets, but rather of the human soul.

Perhaps, then, we must reject the traditional definitions of noir—including that of Raymond Chandler—in favor of the simpler (though more crude) definition put forth by contemporary noir author James Ellroy: “Here’s what film noir is to me: it’s a righteous, generically American film movement that went from 1945 to 1958 and expository one great theme. And that theme is, you’re fucked” (“Film Noir”). Such a condition is not predicated on setting.

University of Wisconsin-Baraboo

WORKS CITED

- Chandler, Raymond. “Goldfish.” *Collected Stories*. NY: Everyman’s Library, 2002. 473-521.
 —. “The Simple Art of Murder.” 1944. *Later Novels and Other Writings*. NY: The Library of America, 1995. 977-992.
- Fargo*. Dir. Joel Coen (and Ethan Coen, uncredited). MGM, 1996. Film.
- “Film Noir: Bringing Darkness to Light.” *Film Noir Classic Collection, Vol. 3*. Dir. Gary Leva. Warner Home Video, 2006. DVD.
- Gaiman, Neil. *American Gods*. NY: HarperCollins, 2001.
- Hammett, Dashiell. *Red Harvest*. 1929. *Complete Novels*. NY: The Library of America, 1999. 1-187.
- Hemingway, Ernest. “The Killers.” *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway: The Finca Vigia Edition*. NY: Scribner, 1987. 215-22.
- Marling, William. *The American Roman Noir: Hammett, Cain, and Chandler*. Athens, Georgia: U of Georgia P, 1995.
- Miller, Laura. “*American Gods* by Neil Gaiman.” *Salon.com*. Salon, 29 July 2013. Web. 22 June 2001.
- Out of the Past*. Dir. Jacques Tourneur. MGM, 1947. Film.
- Paretsky, Sara. *Indemnity Only*. NY: Dell. 1990.

LITTLE CAESAR: TOUGH GUYS DON'T DREAM

GUY SZUBERLA

Little Caesar (1929) was written after W.R. Burnett had lived in Chicago for a little more than a year. He had come to the city in 1927, carrying with him the manuscripts of a half dozen unpublished novels and a bag of unfulfilled literary ambitions. He was young—born in Springfield, Ohio, in 1899—and for writing credentials, had little more to show than a course or two in journalism at Ohio State University. Possessed by what he called “the old-fashioned Ohio ideas about right and wrong, remorse and all that stuff . . .,” he found the chaos and political corruption of Prohibition-era Chicago at once disturbing and fascinating. His first lessons about the city’s underworld began at the Northmere, a flophouse hotel where he worked as a desk clerk. There, a small-time mobster, an “Italian guy” calling himself Barber, taught him about gangland ethics and schooled him in the gangster lingo and Chicago slang that he would bring to *Little Caesar*, his first published novel. Burnett always insisted that Barber—not Al Capone—was the principal model for Rico, the title character of *Little Caesar* (McGilligan 49-50, 56-8).

Burnett also liked to say that, in *Little Caesar*, he showed “the world . . . through the eyes of the gangster. [It] had never been done before then” (McGilligan 58). His claim to primacy is somewhat overblown and certainly misleading, ignoring as it does Dashiell Hammett’s and the *Black Mask* writers’ similar treatments of the criminal consciousness in the 1920s.¹ Yet *Little Caesar* and Burnett did set a pattern for the plots and character types now identified with a noir vision.

The novel presents a fantastically cosmopolitan city and a dangerous underworld ruled by ethnic and foreign characters. This is Prohibition-era Chicago or Al Capone’s city as Burnett reimagines it.

Like the *Black Mask* writers and the lesser pulpsters of the 1920s, he identifies crime and corruption with the strangeness of big-city immigrants and ethnics (McCann 80). For close to a decade, from the first days of Prohibition, the city's papers and the national press have been turning Chicago's gang warfare into colorful and sensational copy. "Hymie" Weiss, George "Bugs" Moran, "Greasy Thumb" Guzik, and a rotating cast of hit men, bootleggers, and corrupt pols supply headline writers with an endless stream of copy. Chicago playwright Bartlett McCormack had introduced Broadway audiences to a bootlegger named Scarsi in a Broadway production, *The Racket* (1927); few could miss his allusion to Al "Scarface" Capone.² Burnett's novel mimics the scare headlines, burlesques the city's gangsters, and successfully exploits the public's fears of the city's growing violence and chaos. Elmer Davis, writing in the 15 June 1929 *Saturday Review of Literature*, placed it among "the flood of plays and novels about Chicago racketeers and gunmen." More recent critical opinion holds that *Little Caesar* is "the classic gangster story" (Grellos 191).

It is also, within an inverted frame, the conventional story of the young man from the provinces come to the big city to seek his fortune. Stranded in the backwaters of Toledo, Rico is spurred by the advice of an older, wiser gang leader: "Kid, you got big town stuff in you. What do you want around here?" (213).³ In *Chicago Dreaming*, Timothy Spears spoke of the "expectations and desires" prompting "small-town and rural Midwesterners to leave their homes and make a new start in Chicago between 1871 and 1919" (xiii). Rico's hopes and ambitions, fired by criminal cunning and violent emotions, lift him out of small-town obscurity. His dreams do not and cannot match those of the mostly middle-class, urban types Spears locates in the fiction of Ade, McCutcheon, Fuller, and Garland. Yet his restlessness and "single-mindedness," like that of more earnest strivers, brings him to Chicago searching for his "promised land" (162,132).

He does not put this vision of the future into words, never speaks of it to others. He is transient and placeless, and feels few traces of nostalgia for a lost past. His dreams will turn into nightmares, his desires into obsessions, and his hopes darken into the familiar nihilism and pessimism of noir literature. *Little Caesar*, or parts and pieces of it, can be read as socio-political criticism, understood as satiric attack upon the urban chaos and political corruption of the big city. But these strains of populism never amount to a sustained or coherent attack on any system. Burnett, I will argue, sets out to dra-

matize a noir sensibility, Rico's apparently rational response to a violent, hostile, and irrational world. In short, Rico represents a new urban type: an *isolato*, alienated and estranged. Here is the rough-formed archetypal pattern for the noir hero.

I

The plot of *Little Caesar*, viewed in its largest and most formulaic outlines, fits into what the critic John Cawelti called the "Mythology of Crime" or "gangster tragedy." These, he argues, can be summarized as a melodramatic "story of a great rise and fall." Like Al Capone himself, like Burnett's Rico and Tony Guarino of *Scarface*, the mythicized gangsters of the 1920s and '30s rose from the slums of urban America. Their sudden fall from power and prominence, Cawelti says, punctuated the last chapter of a cautionary tale with all the expected "traditional moralistic" lessons. And yet these figures of corruption and avatars of urban violence—crude, aggressive, and alienated—held faithfully to one "endearing" virtue through every step of this "great rise." According to Cawelti, the "Capone hero" of 1930s films never pretended to a social grade above his "lower-class social origin" (60-1). In *The Noir Thriller*, Lee Horsley makes much the same point about certain gangster novels. He contends that gangster heroes, including Rico, faced a "noir identity crisis." They were forced to choose between a "past or present identity," between family, old friends, neighborhood, ethnicity, and a newly invented self (54).

Whether Horsley's or Cawelti's formulations explain Rico is an open question. He never is shown facing a clear-cut choice between his past and some other identity. There's no moment when we see him choosing between being the "Youngstown yegg" he was and the "new Rico" he invents (256, 110). He is throughout this story a transient, void of nostalgia for Youngstown or any other place out of his past. Because he is seldom reflective, much less introspective, clues to his sense of identity come mostly through the scattered observations of others or his own calculated and theatrical self-dramatizations. In one rare and extended flashback, though, he does think back on his past. Flush with his success at a meeting with "the Big Boy," lifted by a promise of new territory, he rides down Michigan Boulevard, smokes an expensive cigar, and drifts off into unwonted recollections:

Things were sure to God looking up! Five years ago he wasn't nobody to speak of; just a lonely yegg; sticking up chain-stores and filling-stations . . . in Toledo . . . [T]hen he hit the rods with Otero . . . They didn't have a good pair of pants between them, and a bowl of mulligan tasted better than the stuff he ate at the Big Boy's. Well, here he was riding taxis and hob-nobbing with guys like James O'Doul, who paid one grand for a bunch of crockery. Yeah, here he was! (Burnett 213)

This sounds like the telling of a rather well-worn rags-to-riches story (even though Rico is dressed in a borrowed and ill-fitting tuxedo). Telling himself about his rise from humble beginnings, he makes no mention of hard-working immigrant parents or an ethnic neighborhood, the expected stage pieces for such stories. He seems to have struck from memory what William Boelhower, in his study of immigrant literature, calls "the originating world" (105).

Rico consistently denies that he is an Italian, hotly resents being called a dago or a wop (294, 136). Even the flattering attentions of his girlfriend, Blondy Belle, rile him, when she suggests, as she works the pedals of a Pianoloa, that he might like "Eyetalian" music. He angrily tells her that he likes jazz better (135). When she replies that she was playing opera, he answers that he does not, cannot speak Italian: "You'd think I was a regular wop to hear you talk," said Rico; "Say, I was born in Youngstown and can't even speak the lingo." "Well I guess I wasn't born in the old country either," said Blondy" (136).

Following his holdup of the Casa Alvarado nightclub, he reads over and over the news clippings that describe him and his daring murder of police captain Courtney. The two newspaper accounts agree: witnesses remember him as "a small, pale foreigner, probably an Italian." He tears up the papers in anger, and throws them away (69-70). Given his own self-definition, he has reason to be confused and resentful of this insulting public identification.

For the long stretch of the novel charting his rise, Rico dreams that he can transform himself and become a "new Rico" (110). Strange as it may seem, this hard-boiled and trigger-happy gangster takes to reading magazine stories about high society. He daydreams over one "story about a rich girl who fell in love with a bootlegger." "Fascinated" by the society pages, he reads "everything he could find" about this "stratum of existence which seemed so remote and unreal" (78). When he puts on a borrowed and flashy tuxedo, he is "dazzled" by the image of himself in a mirror, and, prompted by a

henchman, thinks that he “looked like one of them rich clubmen he read about in the magazines” (207). In detailing Rico’s social ambitions and his naïve ideas of high society, Burnett often drifts towards the broadly comic and sharply satiric, as he does in this tale of the borrowed tuxedo and a half dozen other scenes where Rico acts the part of parvenu or awkward upstart.

On the other hand, Burnett stresses that putting on a front or passing had become the rule in the fluid social world Rico inhabits. Prohibition-era Chicago, the violent city reimaged in *Little Caesar*, had overturned law and order, subverted traditional moral values, and, in the process, recast accepted social codes and roles. It’s worth repeating an observation of the Capone biographer, Laurence Bergreen: “[I]n the Chicago of 1927 black was white, truth was falsehood, everything was public relations, even the gang wars” (263). In this urban chaos, Rico can mask his predatory character, play for headlines, and try to disguise his past and his origins.

For the sons and daughters of immigrants coming of age around World War I, especially in the turbulent 1920s, the desire for a new, nonethnic identity and the rich modern life it represented could be compelling. Rico’s desires and illusions, if not in their obsessive form, were common. From one perspective, we are also reading the familiar story of a would-be social climber, an earnest follower of the American dream, whose quest, by turns, seems comic, grotesque, and even faintly heroic. In the anonymity and freedom of the city, in the age of celebrity gangsters he can, if for only a few days or a dozen months, reinvent himself and dream of a rich and satisfying success.⁴

Like the *Black Mask* writers and the lesser pulp writers of the 1920s, Burnett identifies crime and corruption with the strangeness of big-city immigrants and ethnics. Vettori’s gang, which becomes Rico’s gang, includes Sicilians, Italians, and a Mexican. They control “Little Italy,” do battle with a rival Jewish gang and Irish cops, hold up a night club owned by Czechs, and, in a comic turn, are mistaken for Poles (75). Otero, a Mexican, is nicknamed “the Greek”; Olga Stasoff, a beautiful dancer, is a “little hunky”; a Czech night-club manager has “a swarthy complexion”; and Little Arnie Worch hides behind a “sallow Jewish mask” (126, 43, 182). Blackie Avezzano is dark enough to be “taken for a mulatto” (79). Burnett takes pains to tell us that Blondy Belle, Rico’s woman, “was a handsome Italian” whose “complexion and eyes were dark, but her hair, naturally black, was blondined” (122). Blondy differs little from the

young girls of Little Italy who are described as “trying to look up-to-date and American” (101-2). Masking ethnicity and mistaking ethnic identity seem an ordinary and expected part of a modern social life and a defining feature of Chicago’s inverted reality.

Within the theatricalized spaces of night clubs and gambling casinos—the exotically named Club Palermo, Bronze Peacock, and Casa Alvarado—characters make what amount to costumed appearances as they present new and masked identities. Here the Italian American gangsters, Irish cops, Jewish cabaret owners, a Czech maître d,’ and a stray WASP character or two meet and mix on the dance floor and in back rooms. Joe Massara, a gangster and a dancer at the Peacock, symbolizes this world of illusions and deception. Vain of “his resemblance to the late Rudolph Valentino,” “Gentleman Joe” likes to slick back his hair, dress in evening clothes, and show off his well-manicured hands and his diamond ring (6). During most all his waking hours, he wears a “mask of nonchalance” (45). He performs at the Peacock, hiding his hoodlum past and ignoring his gangland friends. He finds it easy to seduce society women and to win the good opinion of the rich sugar daddy John C. Willoughby. When he is arrested, the gentlemanly Willoughby vouches for him, saying “I’ve known him for nearly a year, and as far as I know he’s a nice young fellow” (225). Joe, “a swell Italian” who could “pass anywhere,” had been assiduously readying himself to pass into the genteel and upper-class circles Willoughby represents (15).

Rico mimics Joe Massara. He copies his clothes, takes to “wearing a big ulster like Joe’s and a derby also like Joe’s” (110). Massara, who is an accomplished con man, once “passed himself off as a count and hooked a rich widow for plenty” (15). Rico’s efforts to put on an effective “front” or to “pass” are animated by a quite different intention. He dreams of inventing a “new Rico” (110). Not too surprisingly, his moves toward a new social identity turn out to be as much self-deception as self-definition. At the Club Palermo banquet held in his honor, Rico believes the news photographer who promises to place his picture in a Sunday magazine series on Chicago’s society people (129). The tabloid style of the published magazine story tells another tale: “ITALIAN UNDERWORLD CHIEF GIVEN BIG FEED” (144).

In another episode, when he enters a nightclub, the manager takes his measure: “DeVoss looked [Rico] over thoroughly, positive that he was out of his element in an atmosphere as exclusive as that of the

Bronze Peacock The big ulster he was wearing hid the loud striped suit and a plain dark muffler hid the loud striped tie. No, sartorially Rico could pass at the Bronze Peacock. But there was something vulgar and predatory about him that did not escape DeVoss” (145). This quick glance contains a fairly conventional piece of social satire, the parvenu exposed to knowing ridicule. Rico’s “loud striped suit” and matching tie, cloaked by an opulent coat and scarf, both hide and place him on display. DeVoss sees the vulgarity of his appearance and, with a maître d’s practiced eye, correctly senses that Rico wants to pass, to assume a socially elevated identity. He ends with a ready conclusion, spoken to himself: “That’s a bad one there . . .” (145).

Rico’s darkness and his strange driving obsessions lie hidden within. Like the typical noir heroes in 1930s and ’40s fiction and film, he’s driven by fears and anxieties, and carried along by his compulsions and desires:

Rico lived at a tension. His nervous system was geared up to such a pitch that he was never sleepy, never felt the desire to relax, was always keenly alive. He did not average five hours sleep a night and as soon as he opened his eyes he was awake. When he sat in a chair he never thrust out his feet and lolled, but sat rigid and alert. He walked, ate, took his pleasures in the same manner. What distinguished him from his associates was his inability to live in the present. He was like a man on a long train ride to a promised land. To him the present was but a dingy way-station This was the mental attitude of a man destined for success. (132-33)

Burnett adds to this psychological profile that Rico had contempt for women, and trusted no man: “he was temperamentally suspicious” (133-4). Alienated and estranged from the present, he cannot say, in any clear or constant way, just what his dreams of a promised land might be.

In this indirect way, Burnett anticipates the pessimistic critiques of the city and the modern world that appear so often in Chandler, Woolrich, and many other authors of hard-boiled noir. Raymond Chandler once said, in now famous lines, that his characters “lived in a world gone wrong in which . . . the streets were dark with something more than night” (*Simple Art* viii). Cornell Woolrich gave the city much the same monstrous and malevolent force. In his *Deadline at Dawn*, the taxi dancer Brickly says the “city can turn you into some-

thing you never wanted to be” (Woolrich 341). Against Chandler’s poetic indictment of the modern city and the macabre frissons of Woolrich’s imagined metropolis, Burnett’s characterization of Chicago’s violent streets and the tawdry pleasures of its night life as a “dingy-way station” seem flatly prosaic. But it is precisely that image, his affectless view of violence and pleasure, that reveals Rico’s peculiar mental attitude.

He possesses—or is possessed by—a single-mindedness. Burnett goes on to define this habit of mind or monomania as an obsessive “energy” and “self-discipline,” but in context, in the terms more usually applied to the noir hero, he seems displaced and dislocated, a stranger in his own community (162). Even to those in his gang, Rico seems strangely different, remote and hard to figure out. Sam Vettori, the Chicago gang chief he supplants, first sees him as “an unknown Youngstown wop” (116). The “wise boys in Little Italy,” the gangsters around Halsted Street on the Southwest Side, cannot understand him, wonder about an underworld leader who “did not swagger” or display a “maniacal temper.” He has none of the “inhuman vitality” expected of the fearless gang leader. “The qualities he possessed,” Burnett says, “were qualities they could not comprehend.” When the Halsted Street gangsters compare him with “legendary” gang leaders, he seems inferior: he lacks their great strength and “the dash and effrontery” that made them legends (161-62).

Nearing the end of the novel, when Rico is wanted for murder, the police issue a handbill with his photo and a description: “Cesare Bandello, known as Rico Complexion: pale. Hair: black and wavy. Eyes: light, gray or blue. His face is thin and he walks with one foot turned in. Does not take up with strangers. Solitary type, morose and dangerous. Reward . . . for capture dead or alive” (270-1). Though the language veers toward a comic parody of police procedurals and the thin face and crooked step evoke a Byronic hero, the final emphasis falls on the words that set up a simple textbook exposition of the noir hero: “solitary . . . morose and dangerous.”

The urban ethnic gangster—in that line of type characters running from Tony Guarino of *Scarface* down to Puzo’s Corleone family—had held tightly to family ties and, at weddings and on feast days, remembered his cultural roots in the Old World. That is one foundational myth defined by our popular culture, as John G. Cawelti has noted in defining the “Capone hero” (61). But the solitary Rico glories in and sometimes suffers from a splendid isolation and

estrangement. When the police begin to pursue him, and he fears he must leave Chicago, the thought of returning to Youngstown, the place of his origins, fills him with fear and self-loathing: "He was nobody, nobody. Worse than nobody. The bulls wanted him now and they wanted him bad. Goodbye dollar cigars and crockery at one grand, goodbye swell food and Tuxedos and security. Rico was nobody. Just a lonely Youngstown yegg that the bulls wanted. His face was ghastly" (256).

The props of his self-dramatization, — jumbled catalog of cigars, crockery, "swell food," and sharp clothes—had once held together the identity he fought, schemed, and killed for. Losing these, trivial and tawdry as they are, he fears that he will once more be reduced to a nobody from Youngstown. The film version of *Little Caesar* excises these lines and blots out all mention of the fears and the anxiety beneath them. Instead, in keeping with the coming Hays Code for film, Rico dies a drunken and ranting skid row bum, gunned down by the Chicago police. The film's memorable final scene thus serves up a simple didactic lesson, ending a story of crime with a satisfyingly violent punishment. Burnett's novel, following Rico's life as a fugitive, presented something far more dark and strange: a prototype for the 1940s and '50s noir hero.

II

Rico's flight from Chicago marks the beginning of his return to the past. Pursued by the police and his enemies, he shaves off his moustache and disguises himself as garage mechanic. He drives through the night to Hammond, Indiana, where Sansotta, an old gangster friend, gives him a hideout. Calling himself Luigi DeAngelo, he soon earns the nickname Youngstown Louie. To himself, he has become a "nobody. Just an unknown wop" (273). Hiding out in Hammond and then Toledo, he lives in their Little Italys, confronting and placating the immigrant fathers he had for so long spurned, defied, and forgotten. When he meets an old Italian in Toledo, a man with "crinkly gray hair [who] wore earrings," Rico stumbles as he asks for directions. He speaks as if he had become an immigrant himself: "No speak English?" (288). Wandering lost through the streets of this Little Italy, the forgotten world of his past, Rico returns to his ethnic beginnings, to Boelhower's "originating world" (105). His fugitive wanderings prefigure the conventional

“dark passage” of 1940s film noir, those stylized returns to some traumatic memory or haunting piece of the past (Silver and Ward 4).

The atmosphere of the world Rico now inhabits, even during moments of apparently safe refuge, seems strange and oneiric, somewhere on the edge between bad memories and recurring nightmares. In a room above a speakeasy in Hammond:

Night after night Rico lay awake looking at the arc light outside his window. His mind was filled with resentment and he went over and over the incidents which had led to his fall.

. . . his sleep was full of dreams and he would toss from side to side and wake up with a start . . . [H]e would awake in confusion and stare at the unfamiliar arc light a long time before he could realize where he was. (272-73)

He has entered this place after having been led “down a long dark hallway” to meet Sansotta, “a small, bowlegged Italian with a dark, scarred face” (269). Because of the scar and his power, he bears a passing resemblance to Al “Scarface” Capone. Within the context of the novel, his function is different. He guards the dark secrets of Rico’s past—he is the only one of the local gangsters who knows what his aliases and masked identity hide.

A sinister order rules this dark underworld. Through a series of strange and improbable chances, Rico runs into enemies out of his past, Chicago gangsters he had wronged long ago. Though he bests them in a gunfight and loses them in a chase through back alleys, he now knows he can no longer hide his identity in Hammond. He has already concluded that in Hammond he was “a lonely Youngstown yegg in a hostile city without friends or influence” (282). Forced to pull out of Hammond, he decides to go back to Toledo where he had started. He takes a ride from an unnamed character running dope: “The dope-runner dropped Rico at the edge of town. It was about five o’clock in the morning and still dark. A heavy fog had come in from Lake Erie and a damp, cold wind was blowing. Rico walked up and down to keep warm while waiting for a car. He felt pretty low” (285-6).

Driven through the night by a dope-runner, it follows that his journey should end in fog and darkness. We are entering a surreal landscape, a city of shadows and hallucinations, the back alleys and half-lit locations of film noir. The night Rico is shot and killed, he cannot find his way through the labyrinth of dark streets and back alleys. This may be familiar ground for him, but he is trapped and

killed in a blind alley, calling out to the “Mother of God,” asking in a much-quoted final line if this “is this the end of Rico?” (307-8). In his frantic state, Rico never knows whether it’s Flaherty the Chicago cop or Scabby the gangster who guns him down. All he can see is a “big man in a derby hat” raise his arm to shoot (308). He feels himself overwhelmed by a “vague power.”

Before the terms “film noir” and “literary noir” became almost as common as drinking black coffee, Burnett was already codifying many of the genre’s leading conventions and dominant myths.⁵ He would create—in his thirty-eight novels and some forty-eight screenplays and adaptations—dozens of noir characters, fugitives trapped by fate, chance, and dark forces, doomed by their own desires and obsessions. His novels *High Sierra* (1941) and *Asphalt Jungle* (1949) were translated into classics of film noir; he further defined the genre in countless adaptations, the most notable among them include screenplays for Armitage Trail’s *Scarface* (1932) and Graham Greene’s *This Gun for Hire* (1942). *Little Caesar*, his first published novel, typifies the pessimism, the violence, and urban chaos of gangster noir. In writing *Little Caesar*, he found certain core ideas about fate, chance, and mysterious dark forces that, over the next fifty years or more, he repeated and refined into a formula for noir film and fiction.

Dashiell Hammett, reacting to *Little Caesar*’s runaway sales in mid-summer 1929, classified it as a novel about “gunmen and racketeers,” adding that gangsters would be “sour literary material” within a year (50). The first reviewers of the book had said much the same. In fact, Burnett had refashioned the gangster novel—he had undone the traditional and moralistic patterns of crime and punishment. What he invented in *Little Caesar* was the narrative of a new urban type: the *isolato*, uprooted, estranged, and placeless. He made visible the dark and strange world of Chicago and the Midwest in the nightmares of Rico. The history of Midwest noir has yet to be written, and the idea and the literary form can seem as shadowy as the figures in film noir. What seems certain is that *Little Caesar* and the fugitive Rico point the way into this dark passage.

Notes

¹*Black Mask* was a pulp magazine published from 1920-1951 that featured the work of hard-boiled crime writers, including Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler.

²Laurence Bergreen, in *Capone: The Man and The Era*, says that the mayor, “‘Big Bill’ Thompson prevented a touring company from presenting the play in Chicago . . .” (523).

³All references to W.R. Burnett’s *Little Caesar* will be given parenthetically in the text.

⁴According to Bergreen, by 1925, Capone had become “a national phenomenon,” endowed with “a certain grisly glamour” (213).

⁵See, for example, Raymond Borde and Etienne Chameton’s chapter on “The Sources of Film Noir,” where they cite *Little Caesar* as one of the early sources for the genre (15).

WORKS CITED

- Bergreen, Laurence. *Capone: The Man and the Era*. NY: Simon and Schuster, 1994.
- Boelhower, William. *Through a Glass Darkly; Ethnic Semiosis in American Literature*. NY: Oxford, 1987.
- Borde, Raymond and Etienne Chameton. *A Panorama of American Film Noir: 1941-1953*. San Francisco: City Light Books, 2002.
- Burnett, W.R. *Asphalt Jungle*. NY: Knopf, 1949.
- . *Little Caesar*. NY: Literary Guild, 1929.
- Cawelti, John G. *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1976.
- Chandler, Raymond. *Simple Art of Murder*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1950.
- Davis, Elmer. “Modern Day Bravos.” *Saturday Review of Literature* 5 (15 June 1929): 1110.
- Grello, George. “The Gangster Novel: The Urban Pastoral.” *Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties*. Ed. David Madden. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1968.
- Horsley, Lee. *The Noir Thriller*. Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001.
- Layman, Richard and Julie M. Rivett, eds. Hammett, Dashiell. *Selected Letters of Dashiell Hammett: 1921-1961*. Washington, D.C.:Counterpoint P, 2001.
- McCann, Sean. *Gumshoe Nation: Hard-Boiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism*. Durham: Duke UP, 2000.
- McGilligan, Pat, ed. *Backstory: Interviews with Writers of Hollywood’s Golden Age*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1986.
- Silver, Alain and Elizabeth Ward. *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style*. Woodstock, NY: Overlook P, 1992.
- Spears, Timothy. *Chicago Dreaming: Midwesterners and the City*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005.
- Woolrich, Cornell. *The Best of William Irish: Including Phantom Lady, After Dinner Story, Deadline at Dawn*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1960.

THE HORROR OF A SIMPLE MAN: MIDWESTERN EVIL IN SCOTT SMITH'S *A SIMPLE PLAN*

SCOTT D. EMMERT

The title of this article uses some problematic words: “horror,” “evil,” “Midwestern.” But then the *Miscellany* in which this article appears, and to which I am privileged to have been invited, takes as its focus another thorny and contestable concept: “noir.” First applied to film and later to literature, “noir” has frustrated easy definition. In his foreword to *The Best American Noir of the Century*, Otto Penzler acknowledges the difficulty of explaining the precise nature of the genre. “Curiously,” he writes, “*noir* is not unlike *pornography*, in the sense that it is virtually impossible to define, but everyone thinks they know it when they see it” (ix original italics).

There seems, then, to be nothing simple here at all. Indeed, even the word “simple” itself can be deceptive, and it is in Scott Smith’s novel *A Simple Plan* (1993). By turns noir, country noir, and Midwestern noir, *A Simple Plan* dramatizes how through his use of a single word a reputable man can rationalize greed and murder. Repeated in the novel, the word “simple” often justifies evil and allows it to flourish; it functions as a linguistic mask to disguise a lurking menace. The motivations driving protagonist Hank Mitchell are especially chilling because they are portrayed as bland, assured, unexamined, simple.

A Simple Plan was published in 1993 to favorable reviews. Smith’s first novel was called “a taut page-turner of murder and mistakes” (Saari) and “a masterful probe into human morality” (Sobczak). In 1998 it was made into a Hollywood movie directed by Sam Raimi from a screenplay by Smith. The movie is an entertaining thriller that features an extraordinary performance by Billy Bob Thornton. Both Thornton and Smith were nominated for Academy

Awards, and the film has resonated with a number of scholars, who have analyzed it extensively.¹ But the movie is also a curiously reticent adaptation because it leaves out not only a number of murders but also much of the novel's exploration of how an ordinary Midwestern man comes to kill so many people. Perhaps, as often happens with popular fiction or drama, the movie adaptation has inevitably supplanted the original material, but it is unfortunate that this novel has attracted little critical attention.

The book is well worth the time, especially for readers who appreciate noir when they see it. In the best noir tradition, *A Simple Plan* is brutally deterministic. It tells the story of Hank Mitchell, a feed store clerk, and his brother Jacob. Together with Jacob's friend Lou they discover a small airplane in a snowy wood in rural western Ohio. In the plane is a dead pilot, the crows that have been feeding on him, and a duffel bag with \$4.4 million in one hundred dollar bills. The "simple plan" of keeping this fortune lures all three men—especially Hank who is abetted by his wife Sarah—to betrayal and murder. Eventually, Hank will matter-of-factly kill his brother and six other people, including residents in his small town who think they know him, and two strangers in a liquor store who could incriminate him.

Ultimately these murders lead to no material advantage: in the end Hank burns the money after he discovers that the FBI has recorded enough of the bills' serial numbers to track anyone who spends them. Never arrested for his crimes, Hank will escape neither his hometown nor his conscience. In the end, he and Sarah are left feeling that they are "not so much living now as simply existing, moving from one day to the next with a hollow, bewildered feeling, trying all the time, but never with much success, not to remember what has happened" (416).

To be sure, the novel shares noir's interest in what James Elroy calls "the nightmare of flawed souls with big dreams and the precise how and why of the all-time sure thing that goes bad" (xiii). And it supports Penzler's observation that noir literature features a "tone [that] 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" (x). *A Simple Plan* can also be labeled "country noir," most apparently because it is set in the fictional small town of Ashenville, west of Toledo. If the term "country noir" designates a crime story set in America's hinterlands, one

that stages human treachery on empty rural roads instead of in dark urban alleys or just outside the radius of a farmyard light instead of below fog-enshrouded street lamps, then *A Simple Plan* certainly fits the category.

More interesting than the mere fact of the novel's setting, however, is its dramatic and thematic effect. Smith uses the rural setting to heighten suspense and to suggest the futility of his characters' efforts. For example, as Hank and Jacob drive to Lou's house with a plan to blackmail him—a plan that sets in motion gruesome, escalating violence—Smith employs the night and Jacob's barely functional pick-up truck to suggest the men's false sense of control, the noir theme of humankind's pathetic ambitions within an indifferent universe:

It was one of the coldest nights of the year. There were no clouds. The moon was just rising, a thick, white sliver, like a slice of cantaloupe, sitting cocked against the edge of the horizon. Above it hung a brilliant infinity of stars, high and bright in the deep blackness of the sky. The road out of Ashenville was empty of traffic, and Jacob's one functioning headlight, the left one, made it look narrower than it actually was. As we drove, the wind whipped through the cab, buffeting us, tugging at our jackets, and cracking the plastic window back and forth behind our heads like a bullwhip. (201-202)

The narrow road, the weak light in the dark, the cold wind, the thin sharp moon and far-off stars: these images are more than atmospheric, more than foreshadowing; they suggest the existential danger all noir characters face, what Penzler calls "their isolation from their own souls" (xi).

More intriguing still, the novel can be seen as Midwestern country noir because it derives much of its shock value from its narrator's Midwestern ordinariness, from Hank's "simplicity" and regular-guy appearance. While we readers and viewers of crime stories have come to expect that America's city dwellers can be corrupt (or at least corruptible), we do not necessarily extend that expectation to America's rural areas, especially its Heartland, which we may imagine as populated by folks of stalwart morality who act upon purer, simpler values. Smith relies on this view of an uncomplicated and unassuming Midwestern life and identity to expose greed and murderous violence as collective human failings. Moreover, his novel suggests that a denial of one's complex humanity in favor of a "sim-

ple” view of the self can serve as a justification for our darkest deeds. In the end, readers are horrified by the narrator, and he is horrified by himself.

Among the motivations for Hank’s crimes is what may be seen as a common, though not of course simple, Midwestern impulse: the desire to escape a perceived drab rural life for a more exciting, urban, non-Midwestern one. Smith suggests this urge in Hank’s thoughts about Ashenville: “[it] was a small, ugly town, just two streets really, Main and Tyler, with a blinking yellow light to mark their intersection . . . There was a gray uniformity about the buildings, a seemingly universal dilapidation that inevitably depressed me whenever I saw them” (71-72). Later, Hank stands before his family cemetery plot that now holds a stone with Jacob’s name etched upon it, and he is relieved to think that his name will never be on the marker:

I was going to be buried a long way from here, under a different name, and thinking this gave me an instant’s rush of happiness . . . We were escaping our lives. That cube of granite had been my fate, my destination, and I’d broken away from it. In a few months, I’d set out into the world, free from everything that had formerly bound me. I would re-create myself, would chart my own path. I would dictate my destiny. (296)

The longing to escape current circumstance through the big score is a hallmark of noir characters; here that desire is particularized in Hank’s dislike of his rural Midwestern life.

Significantly, Hank and Sarah are not much connected to the people in their small community. After Jacob’s funeral, as the neighbors offer condolences, Hank is surprised by their generosity, and he suddenly realizes, “we had no friends” (270). About Jacob—his older brother who never went to college, as Hank did, and who was closer to their parents than Hank was—Hank gradually discovers a great deal. He learns, for instance, that Jacob yearned to be a farmer so he could have a family of his own. He is shocked to realize that his father and mother committed suicide and did not die in a traffic accident, something Jacob has always known because he was always aware of his parents’ despair over their debts.

To others in Ashenville, Hank appears to be a friendly man, as Sarah says while encouraging him to continue with their simple plan: “Think about how people see you . . . You’re just a normal guy. A nice, sweet normal guy. No one would ever believe that you’d be

capable of doing what you've done'" (291). But this appearance masks a man who chooses to keep an emotional distance from others—and from himself. Again and again, to commit murder and to keep the money, Hank refuses to think, at least for very long, about the moral consequences of his actions. He chooses not to acknowledge his guilt, to "control it, discipline it, compartmentalize it" (277), to keep things simple.

Although Hank slowly recognizes the complexity of human relationships, this knowledge does not deter him from his simple plan, nor does it save or redeem him. Instead, it restores to him his conscience. It strips away the illusion that he is a simple man doing what is best for himself and his wife. After Jacob's funeral, he briefly entertains a series of "perhaps" thoughts: "Perhaps we weren't the normal people trapped in extraordinary situations that we'd been pretending to be. Perhaps we'd done something ourselves to create these situations. Perhaps we were responsible for what had happened" (270). When he opens the trunk in which Jacob had preserved family mementos and an outdated book on farming he had been studying, Hank feels a complex "grief" that is "layered" with memories and potential insights (275). Throughout the novel, Smith uses the word "simple" and its variants to suggest the deliberate choice Hank makes to prevent his consciousness from fully apprehending the horror of his deeds. His actions are often conducted "simply," and he views others as "simply" motivated by this or that.

But the density of human attachment also begins to dawn on him. At one point he thinks, "If I could kill my own brother, then I must be capable of anything. I must be evil." He could, he imagines, kill his daughter and his wife: "It'd simply be a matter of my mind telling my hands what to do" (324). The "bloody images" of how he could kill drain away, however, when he sees Sarah, awake and alive, and he concludes, "*I love them both so terribly*" (324).

Hank Mitchell, then, is not essentially evil. He chooses to act evilly in much of the novel, and he can excuse these acts through a perception of himself as "normal" or "simple," a perception that is reinforced by Sarah and by many of his Midwestern neighbors. His soul is bared to us in the end. We readers are his confessors, disturbingly enough the ones who come closest to him. With pity, then, we read the novel's closing paragraph:

When things get especially bad, I force myself to think of Jacob. I picture him as he was the day he took me out to our father's farm. He's in his gray flannel slacks, his leather shoes, his bright red jacket. His hairless head looks cold without a hat, but he doesn't seem to notice. He's spinning on his heels, pointing out where our barn used to be, the tractor shed and grain bins. In the distance, when the wind blows, I can hear the creak of our father's windmill. I return to this moment again and again because it always makes me weep. And when I weep, I feel—despite everything I've done that might make it seem otherwise—human, exactly like everyone else. (416)

Curiously, counter-intuitively perhaps, this is what noir—literary, cinematic, urban, country, Midwestern—offers us in its tales of betrayal, mendacity, murder: an irrefutable assertion of our fraught humanity. And there is simply nothing simple about that.

University of Wisconsin-Fox Valley

NOTE

¹See, for example, articles by Armstrong, Edwards, Goldsmith, Hill, and Skoble.

WORKS CITED

- Armstrong, Richard. "Within the Woods: *A Simple Plan*." *Screen Education* 40 (Autumn 2005): 109-113.
- Edwards, David. "Textual Transfor-Mations in *A Simple Plan*." *Australian Screen Education*. 31 (Autumn 2003): 99-103.
- Ellroy, James, and Otto Penzler, eds. *The Best American Noir of the Century*. Boston: Mariner Books, 2011.
- . Introduction. Ellroy and Penzler xiii-xiv.
- Goldsmith, Ben. "Something Rotten in the State of Minnesota." *Metro*. 121/122 (Jan. 2000): 134-138.
- Hill, Jane. "Ambition and Ideology: Intertextual Clues to *A Simple Plan*'s View of the American Dream." *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities* 24.1 (Fall 2004): 62-70.
- Penzler, Otto. Foreword. Ellroy and Penzler ix-xi.
- Skoble, Aeon J. "Justice and Moral Corruption in *A Simple Plan*." *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*. Ed. Mark T. Conrad. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2007. 83-90.
- Saari, Jon. Rev. of *A Simple Plan*, by Scott Smith. *Antioch Review* 52.1 (Winter 1994): 174.
- Smith, Scott. *A Simple Plan*. NY: Vintage Books, 1993.
- Sobczak, A.J. Rev. of *A Simple Plan*, by Scott Smith. *Magill Book Reviews*. (Jan. 1994): 1.

THE DARK FAIRY TALE IN THE FICTION OF BONNIE JO CAMPBELL

MARCIA NOE, MOLLEE SHANNON, AND LAURA DUNCAN

Bonnie Jo Campbell's fiction will break your heart. Her characters are damaged people, misfits and outcasts: some afflicted with debt, poverty, and addiction; some born into dysfunctional or abusive families; some burdened with bad or absent parents; some un- or underemployed in the disappearing factories and foundries of the upper Midwest or struggling to keep their failing farms alive. These characters live from day to day, thieving, whoring, and hurting each other, trapped in the need and hopelessness of their hardscrabble existences, in and out of jails, bars, hospitals, and mental institutions. A typical Campbell protagonist might be a foundry worker in a Carhartt jacket and a John Deere cap driving a pick-up truck with trash flying out of the back, or a spray-tanned, bottle-blonde barfly, subsisting on child support and dodging Social Services. Struggling to survive in an environment characterized by disorder, filth, deterioration, and decay that reflects and contributes to their despair, they are people who, fifty years ago, would have been able to earn a living wage in industry or agriculture; today they are life's losers, cast adrift on the tide of corporate greed that has driven the political and technological changes of our time.

Campbell's fiction belongs to what Douglas Johnstone calls "the burgeoning genre of American rural noir" (59). In his foreword to *The Best American Noir of the Century* (2011), co-editor Otto Penzler describes stories that can be classified as literary noir: "[They 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”

Campbell gives the noir genre a new twist through the device of the anti-fairy tale. Like a number of writers such as Anne Sexton and, more recently, Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter, Campbell throws a contemporary spin on classic fairy tales. Her chief strategy is to invert the traditional fairy tale’s conventions and add elements of noir fiction to put an ironic tone, a dark mood, and a naturalistic orientation in the service of cultural commentary. Jack Zipes, who has done much to illuminate the political dimension of fairy tales, emphasizes the ways in which they can effect social critique and political protest. Writing about the German romantic writers of fairy tales, Zipes asserts that they “sought to contain, comprehend and comment on the essence of the changing times in and through the fairy tale, and this common goal has stamped the contours of the fairy tale up to the present” (*Breaking the Magic Spell* 42).

Similarly, Justyna Deszcz discusses Angela Carter’s short story “Pantoland” as an example of the ways in which postmodern authors reconfigure classical fairy tales, harnessing their resulting transgressive power to motivate critical reflection on the status quo (“Beyond the Disney Spell, or Escape into Pantoland” 90). More recently, Cristina Bacchilega in *Fairy Tales Transformed?* has explored the ideological foundations of twenty-first-century fairy tale adaptations, arguing that they are complex, multivocal, and multivalent texts that can challenge as well as reinscribe the values of consumer capitalism and globalization (27-29).

Like the texts that Zipes, Deszcz, and Bacchilega discuss, Campbell’s fairy tale-based stories have a political dimension; they interrogate contemporary socio-economic inequalities, updating classic fairy tales to comment ironically on the destructive forces of American late capitalism. Her contemporary revisions of these tales might come off as facile and reductive, somewhat like “Fractured Fairy Tales,”¹ were it not for the noir elements that ground these stories in unforgiving settings where doomed characters endure lives filled with crime and violence that are excruciating to witness. These elements call our attention to serious American problems such as homelessness, corporate greed, addiction, poverty, un- and under-employment, juvenile delinquency, rampant consumerism, and the patriarchal oppression of women, problems that Campbell implies a country so rich in resources should be able to address more effec-

tively and equitably. Thus, in combining inverted fairy tale conventions with elements of noir, Campbell produces the kind of biting irony that is so effective in social critique.

It is often autumn or winter in Campbell's fiction, and the setting, not infrequently, is a junkyard, an apt metaphor for the human detritus left in the wake of the American Dream's demise. The title character of "King Cole's American Salvage," a story replete with irony, is not a merry old soul, enjoying the pleasures of his pipe, his bowl, and his fiddlers three but a little old man who deals in scrap auto parts and gets brutally beaten, robbed, and left "lying beside the driveway like a bundle of frozen, bloody rags (*American Salvage* 119). King Cole has nothing like the power and wealth of a king, and by the story's end he is crippled, weakened, and brain-damaged, as well as old and poor. Instead of merrily calling for his pipe, he gets hit in the head with one! Wanda Jones, a meth addict with dingy teeth who loses her kids to Social Services, stands in ironic contrast to fairy tale princesses like Snow White and Sleeping Beauty; after she motivates her out-of-work boyfriend, Willie Slocum, to beat and rob King Cole, she describes Willie as "a regular knight in fucking shining armor," ironically alluding to another fairy tale convention. (*American Salvage* 118).

The name of King Cole's junkyard reflects Cole's stubborn and perhaps misplaced loyalty to American-made vehicles, seen in his unwillingness to deal in foreign car parts, although his nephew Johnny wears a VW cap and has pointed out to him that Volkswagens and Toyotas are now made in the United States. The junkyard's name further suggests that the desperation that drove the down-and-out Willie to beat and rob King Cole is linked to the disappearance of good manufacturing jobs, such as those that the auto industry used to provide to working-class men and women like Willie and Wanda, now in danger of losing their home to foreclosure. King and Johnny Cole wear bomber jackets displaying an American Salvage logo that underscores the story's point: all that's left of a country that used to make things are the junkyard remnants of an erstwhile manufacturing economy that used to provide a decent life for many Americans. Moreover, "American Salvage," the name of the story as well as the junkyard, also denotes Willie, Wanda, Johnny, and King Cole himself, tossed on the human trash heap of an America of winners and losers that no longer offers a path of upward mobility through well-paying factory jobs or self-sustaining family farms.

In “The Trespasser” Campbell extends her critique of capitalist America to emphasize the toll it takes on its youth, in many cases doomed before adulthood through no fault of their own to a life of poverty and drugs. In this story, “a curly-haired blonde departs unseen from the back door, descends the stairs, and heads for the river” (*American Salvage* 1). Then a mother, a father, and a teen-aged daughter return to their vandalized vacation cottage to confront the mess. But these Three Bears don’t ask, “Who’s been sleeping in my bed?” They wonder, “Who’s been cooking meth in our kitchen?” However, while the modern-day Goldilocks escapes in a stolen rowboat, Baby Bear’s counterpart, the swim champion daughter, discovers that Goldilocks has, indeed, been sleeping in her bed when she finds her mattress, covered with blood and jism, flung onto their porch, evidence that the teenaged intruder was either raped (in the worst case scenario) or was trading sex for drugs.

Rather than blaming the blonde perpetrator of this vandalism, Campbell employs indirection to create sympathy for her with a catalog of negatives that directs the reader’s attention beyond her destructive acts to suggest the causes for her criminal behavior and imply that the blonde intruder, too, has been victimized and deserves the reader’s sympathy as much as, if not more than, the middle-class owners of the vandalized cottage. The following paragraph, by describing deprivations that the swim champion daughter has never had to endure, subtly creates more sympathy for the young vandal than Campbell would have evoked had she engaged in a more direct description of the latter’s difficult life:

The daughter has made it more than thirteen years without having spent a night with her dresser pushed up against her bedroom door to keep her mother’s friends out; nobody has ever burned her face with a cigarette, and she has never burned her own arms with cigarettes just to remember how terrible it feels. The swimming daughter has never tried to shoot up with a broken needle, never spent time in the juvenile home or in the filthy bathroom of an abandoned basement apartment, has never shaken uncontrollably on the back seat of a car all night long. The daughter has never broken a window to crawl into somebody else’s place or has never needed something so badly that she would do anything for three men, strangers, to get it. (“The Trespasser” (3)

Campbell creates sympathy for the nameless intruder in yet another way. The middle-class family returns to their vacation cottage to find that not only has their kitchen been destroyed, but their cottage has been inhabited for several days by the young visitor. Their living room furniture has been arranged in a conversational grouping, and an assortment of dolls, Teddy bears and stuffed animals have been placed in ways that reflect the innocent and carefree childhood that the teenaged intruder never enjoyed but still longs for and poignantly attempted to replicate. The final scene in the story, in which the swim champion daughter dreams that she encounters her own body in bed in a stranger's bedroom, further emphasizes that she and the young vandal who has been vicariously living her life are two sides of the same coin. Thus, despite the protections that her family and middle-class status offer, she is, at bottom, a young female vulnerable to patriarchal violence and thus ultimately not so different from her less-privileged counterpart.

Another story that inverts a well-known fairy tale, "Shotgun Wedding," opens, rather than closes, with a magical kiss between a bride and a groom. The latter is far from a handsome prince; the first-person narrator, who is the bride's older sister, tells us that he is "more accustomed to lugging hay bales and veal calves" (*Women and Other Animals* 56). She goes on to say that she fears that this kiss, instead of awakening the princess to a wonderful new life, will not end, and that her sister's eyes will "remain in the sleep of that kiss, as though covered with a milky effluent, something the fairies would make in their mouths and spit onto those they favor" (*Women and Other Animals* 56-57). She compares her sister to Cinderella, Snow White, and the protagonist of "The Princess and the Pea"; however, the most appropriate analog is Sleeping Beauty.

Reflecting on a night when she was thirteen and home alone with her little sister upstairs in bed, the narrator tells of watching an unshaven vagrant in work boots and a flannel shirt walk through their yard and onto their front porch. The antithesis of the rescuing handsome prince, this menacing stranger turns the doorknob half way, and, in response, the narrator clicks her shotgun against the glass, persuading the man to turn and run. Instead of returning to her bed, the narrator goes to her sister's room: "Hour after hour, while I kept watch, her princess hair curled onto her pillow, and all night her long dark lashes rested against her cheeks, beneath eyes clenched firmly in dreams" (*Women and Other Animals* 61). While this modern-day

Sleeping Beauty slumbers, her teenaged sister deals with the consequences of pervasive unemployment in an America that breeds desperate intruders instead of heroic rescuers.

A story that turns the Hansel and Gretel story on its head and employs the resulting ironies to comment on the excesses of the American consumerist culture and the spiritual and emotional hollowness at its center is "Eating Aunt Victoria." The main characters, Bess and Hal, are bereft of parents like their fairy-tale counterparts; however, Campbell throws in a gender twist. Bess, the contemporary Gretel, is a security guard at a dying mall who took shop class in high school and wants to join the Navy; Hal, a modern-day Hansel, is a community college student who thinks he might be gay. They live with the wicked witch figure, Aunt Victoria, a morbidly obese cook at the local Waffle House, who was their deceased mother's lesbian partner. Instead of a quaint gingerbread cottage in the forest, a tumbledown tarpapered shack by a railroad crossing that lacks gates or flashing lights is their home. The bleak emotional landscape of their lives is mirrored in the decay and dysfunction of their environment, seen in the decrepit shack and its chipped, broken, and dirty furnishings.

Bess and, to a lesser degree, Hal attempt to compensate for the loss and emptiness of their lives through physical gratification: they smoke, eat, and seek out sexual encounters throughout much of the story. Food is a dominant motif, foregrounding its theme of obsessive consumption. Hal and Bess often talk about, steal, and share food. Bess is constantly hungry and devours the leftovers Aunt Victoria brings home nightly from the Waffle House, as well as the snacks that Hal offers her. Hal attempts to break into Aunt Victoria's locked food cupboard and in frustration spells out d-y-k-e in mashed potatoes on the kitchen counter.

In the original fairy tale, the wicked witch locks Hansel into a cage and tries to fatten him; in "Eating Aunt Victoria" the fat wicked witch figure ironically entraps not the Hansel character, but herself when the floor of their rotting front porch collapses under her immense weight and immobilizes her, a startlingly apt enactment of the consequences of rampant American consumer appetites. Bess and Hal scarf down the ice cream and chocolate-covered nuts she had brought home and then raid her locked food cupboard and gorge on snacks, all three characters functioning as symbols of a voracious consumerist culture. Nearby, a septic-pumping truck has collided

with an Amtrak car, and the stink of leaking septic fluid and feces wafts over them, a pungent allusion to the by-products of American corporate greed.

As its title suggests, Campbell's second novel, *Once Upon a River* (2011), is the work in which she most extensively weds fairy tale conventions to noir motifs to add a level of complexity and an element of social critique to her story. The novel brings a plethora of water-based fairy tales to mind: "The Little Mermaid," "The Water Babies," "The River Maid," and "The Goose Girl at the Well," among others, and through the book, Campbell alludes to several fairy tales, myths, and legends, including Sleeping Beauty, Rumpelstiltskin, Donkeyskin,² and Leda and the Swan. But this is no happily-ever-after tale; *Once Upon a River* features a rape, a suicide, two shootings, child abuse and abandonment and a drug-running gang of river outlaws.

Campbell's teenaged protagonist, Margaret Louise (Margo) Crane, resembles the heroines of myth and fairy tale in a number of ways. In her passion for hunting, she reminds us of the goddess Artemis, or Diana; when she climbs a tree to witness a confrontation between her father and her uncle, we are put in mind, not only of Daphne, but of the heroine of "The Six Swans," who is chased up a tree by the king's huntsmen; and when her grandfather nicknames her "River Nymph," we are reminded of a Nereid, or water sprite. Margo's grandfather gives her a teakwood boat that she names "The River Rose," calling to mind the rose picked by Beauty's father in "Beauty and the Beast" that entralls her in the beast's mansion as his punishment, as well as the names of fairy tale heroines Briar Rose, and Rose Red (16). One character calls her a river princess (105); however, Margo resembles, not a princess in need of rescue, but the male questing hero of the typical fairy tale.

Fairy tale scholars are in general agreement that the fairy tale is, in the words of myth scholar Mircea Eliade, "in the last analysis . . . reducible to an initiatory scenario" (qtd. in *Fairy Tale as Myth* 2). In *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim argues that most fairy tales are coming-of-age stories that can help young people work through their own maturation processes:

[W]hat happens to the heroes and heroines in fairy stories can be likened—and has been compared—to initiation rites which the novice enters naïve and unformed, and which dismiss him at their end

on a higher level of existence undreamed of at the start of this sacred voyage through which he gains his reward or salvation. Having truly become himself [sic], the hero or heroine has become worthy of being loved. (278)

Zipes describes this process largely in masculine terms: “The protagonist, generally a male, is displaced, becomes homeless in a world without community. His goal is to transcend the alienating world, i.e. to seek or even create a new world more responsive to his needs . . .” (65). Except for the protagonist’s gender, Zipes’s description accurately characterizes the initiation theme of *Once Upon a River*; however, Campbell inverts the fairy tale convention that places a male protagonist at the center of the story and focuses instead on an orphaned sixteen-year-old girl who sets out on western Michigan’s Stark River after her father dies to find the mother who abandoned the family, finish growing up and, in her words, “figure out how to live” (115).

The feminist debate about the fairy tale has engaged many participants. While some have argued that fairy tales teach girls to be passive, beautiful objects of desire (Lieberman, Rowe, Bottigheimer), the prevailing opinion has been offered by scholars who have viewed the genre as a particularly female art form, transmitted from generation to generation by wise, strong-voiced women who tell of active, brave heroines as well as sleeping princesses, offering a perspective from which contemporary women can draw strength as well as insights into their own life changes and conflicts (Gould, Kolbenschlag, Bacchilega 1997, Desczc 2004). Campbell’s novel exemplifies well the latter feminist view of fairy tales. Utterly bereft of the magical elements that move the plot of most fairy tales, *Once Upon a River* nevertheless includes another hallmark of the genre: transformation. Desczc supplies a feminist perspective from which to read Campbell’s retelling of the quest tale in her discussion of Salman Rushdie’s novel *Shame* when she argues that postmodern transformations of patriarchal fairy tales can become powerful tools “to counteract those stories that have so often been used against women. Such stories are powerful because they position unquestioned fairytale gender configurations in new contexts that allow for the tradition of male supremacy, which the old fairytale texts sustained, to be debunked (“Salman Rushdie’s Attempt at a Feminist Fairytale Reconfiguration in *Shame*” 31). The inversions and ironies

that Campbell employs as she relays the story of Margo's transformation from girl into woman expose the destructive effects of patriarchal capitalism on women and the environment, especially the physical and emotional havoc it can wreak on vulnerable young women.

In Campbell's novel, as in many fairy tales, the number three is a structural principle upon which the tale is built; for example, the hero must accomplish three tasks or is granted three wishes. Likewise, plot points in fairy tales are often built on a sequence of three: in "Snow White," the wicked queen offers Snow White a poisoned lace, a poisoned comb, and a poisoned apple. Three is also a common character constellation; many tales feature three sisters, three brothers, three spinners, three Billy Goats Gruff, Three Little Pigs. *Once Upon a River* is built upon the three sexual liaisons that Margo forges with men who are utterly wrong for her, serve as poor role models, and represent bad paths for her to follow on her journey to adulthood: living outside the law, as does drug dealer Brian; conforming to the norms of corporate America, exemplified by power company employee Michael; and behaving in an unprincipled and inauthentic way, as seen in the actions of her Native American lover. Each encounter brings about a damaging, life-changing outcome for Margo: she is raped by Brian's brother, Paul; murders Paul to save Michael; and is impregnated by the Native American.

Nevertheless, these experiences are key parts of Margo's maturation, and through them, she learns many important life lessons: men are usually trouble, revenge is futile and anger debilitating, killing another human being is an experience not to repeat, and deciding to have a child entails deciding to commit to it and be responsible for it. Throughout the novel, Margo reiterates that she is trying to figure out how to live, and through her adventures on the Stark River, Margo functions as would the male protagonist of an initiation tale such as Jack the Giant Killer or Little Tom Thumb. As Zipes explains, "The quest of the hero, his course of movement, is characterized by an active questioning of what makes man, which suggests the reverse: how can man make society so that man knows and controls the forces acting on him? . . ." (*Breaking the Magic Spell* 65).

Margo, in the end, begins to find answers to these questions as she locates her mother and comes to terms with the latter's fecklessness and immaturity and as she becomes involved with a fourth man, an elderly paraplegic nicknamed Smoke. This final section of the

novel evokes Madame Le Prince de Beaumont's "Beauty and the Beast," a didactic tale intended to school young French females in the codes of civility, virtue, and duty (*Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale* 30-40). In caring for and coming to love this crippled, obnoxious, smelly, and cantankerous old man, Margo reminds us of Beauty and her acceptance of the Beast in his animal form, for Margo learns that an important part of figuring out how to live is learning how connect with other people and treat them, no matter how different, unpleasant, or difficult, with compassion and respect for their personhood.

Yet Campbell undercuts Margo's resemblance to Beauty in a number of ways. "You look like an angel, but you smell like a rutting buck," her father tells her (36), and when Margo shoots a deer and crawls under its carcass to drag it home, Beauty literally becomes the Beast. In the French tale, Beauty's compassion and devotion to duty are rewarded when Beast turns into a handsome prince who becomes her husband, bearing out Ruth Bottigheimer's dictum that "The conclusion and goal of the fairy tale is always marriage . . ." (21). Campbell yet again subverts fairy tale convention, for Margo remains single and pregnant, and the only transformation that Smoke undergoes is accomplished by his suicide. Margo does not achieve the traditionally fairy tale feminine objective of marrying well and happily; she achieves the traditionally masculine objective of growing up by undergoing difficult experiences and accomplishing challenging tasks that teach her how to live as an independent, competent, and responsible adult. Thus, in *Once Upon a River*, inversion and irony effect a critique of patriarchy distinguished by a counter narrative in which a female protagonist takes center stage in what is usually constructed as a male initiation story.

In an interview in the *New York Times Book Review*, Arnold Schwarzenegger described his terrifying childhood encounter with fairy tales:

We also constantly read these terribly violent stories by the Grimm Brothers. I mean, the cleaned-up versions of these are nowhere near the horror stories we used to read. It's no wonder my brother was a total scaredy-cat and afraid to walk home alone after you realize he had been exposed to the tales of the Grimm Brothers. (December 30 2012, 9)

In the fiction discussed above, Bonnie Jo Campbell proves that she is more than the Grimm Brothers' equal in horror, cruelty, and violence. Her work reminds us, as David Platten has written, that "genuine *noir* fiction should always be teetering on the edge of the abyss, tugging at the masks that hide the chaos of our lives" (126). These works of fiction relay a message for our time: the American Dream is a lie and anybody who says otherwise is telling you a fairy tale. Poor farm boys don't capture the golden goose. Kitchen workers don't marry the handsome prince. Nobody lives happily ever after.

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

NOTES

¹"*Fractured Fairy Tales*" was a segment on the popular cartoon show *Rocky and Bullwinkle*, which aired from 1959-64. The show featured familiar fairy tales and children's stories rewritten for comedic effect with updated story lines and modern settings.

²"Donkeyskin" is a French literary fairy tale written in verse by Charles Perrault, first published in 1695. It is the story of a princess who escapes the lascivious glances of her father. Her father had promised her mother that he would not remarry unless he could find another who measured up to her beauty and goodness—apparently his daughter is the only one who is beautiful enough and kind enough to replace his wife. The prince, not wishing to marry her father, runs to her fairy godmother who tells her to ask for several impossible things as a prerequisite for the marriage. The last item she asks for is the hide of a gold-pooing donkey who resides within the confines of the palace. Once she is given the hide, the princess dons the revolting item and runs away to become a kitchen servant in a different royal palace. While the princess is trying on some of her former glamorous clothing the prince of the castle spies her through the keyhole and contrives a Cinderella-like test to enable him to marry her. Meanwhile her father has found a widow to marry. And, naturally, everyone lives happily ever after. In *Once Upon a River* Margo's donning the deer carcass to drag it home alludes to this seventeenth-century tale.

WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED

- Atwood, Margaret. *Bluebeard's Egg*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1983.
- Bacchilega, Cristina. *Postmodern Fairytales: Gender and Narrative Strategies*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1997.
- . *Fairy Tales Transformed? Twenty-First-Century Adaptations and the Politics of Wonder*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2013.
- Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Use of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. NY: Knopf, 1976.
- Bottigheimer, Ruth. *Grimm's Bad Girls and Bold Boys: The Moral and Social Vision of Fairy Tales*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1987.
- Campbell, Bonnie Jo. *American Salvage*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2009.
- . *Once Upon a River*. NY: W.W. Norton, 2011.
- . *Women and Other Animals*. NY: Simon and Schuster, 2002.
- Carter, Angela. *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*. London: Gollancz, 1979.
- Deszcz, Justyna. "Beyond the Disney Spell, or Escape into Pantoland." *Folklore* 113.1 (2002): 83-91. *JSTOR*. Web. 4 Feb. 2013.

- . “Salmon Rushdie’s Attempt at a Feminist Fairytale Reconfiguration in *Shame*. *Folklore* 115.1 (Apr. 2004): 27-44.
- Gould, Joan. *Spinning Straw Into Gold*. NY: Random House, 2005.
- Johnstone, Doug. “Girl on a Boat.” *Sunday Herald* [Glasgow] 15 Jan. 2012:59. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 7 Feb. 2013.
- Kolbenschlag, Madonna. *Kiss Sleeping Beauty Goodbye: Breaking the Spell of Feminine Myths and Models*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1979.
- Lieberman, Marcia R. “‘Someday My Prince Will Come’: Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale.” *College English* 34.3 (1972): 383-95. *JSTOR*. Web. 26 Mar. 2013.
- Penzler, Otto. Foreword. *The Best American Noir of the Century*. Ed. James Ellroy and Otto Penzler. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2011.
- Platten, David. “Into the Woods: The Contemporary ‘Roman Noir’ as Modern Fairy Tale.” *Yale French Studies* 108 (2005): 116-30. *JSTOR*. Web. 9 Jan. 2013.
- Rowe, Karen E. “Feminism and Fairy Tales.” *Women’s Studies* 6 (1979): 237-57.
- Schwarzenegger, Arnold. Interview. *New York Times Book Review*. December 30, 2012: 9.
- Sexton, Anne. *Transformations*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971.
- Zipes, Jack. *Breaking the Magic Spell*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1979.
- . *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale*. U of Kentucky P, 1994.

DANIEL WOODRELL'S NEW AMERICAN ADAM: MYTH AND COUNTRY NOIR IN *WINTER'S BONE*

JOSEPH J. WYDEVEN

Daniel Woodrell has been writing about backwoods country life in the Missouri Ozarks for well over two decades. He started his career writing three detective novels featuring Rene Shade, set in Louisiana, as well as a Civil War novel, *Woe to Live On* (1987, adapted as a film, *Ride with the Devil*, 1999), directed by Ang Lee. However, Woodrell did not hit his stride until the publication of *Give Us a Kiss: A Country Noir* in 1996, followed by three more country noir tales, including *Tomato Red* (1998), *The Death of Sweet Mister* (2001) and the very best, *Winter's Bone* (2006), a novel beautifully adapted and filmed by Debra Granik and released in 2010, earning four Oscar nominations, including those for Best Picture, Best Actress (Jennifer Lawrence), and Best Supporting Actor (John Hawkes).

Woodrell is the novelist who coined the term “country noir,” a term that must be distinguished from the urban noir of hard-boiled detective fiction and the ubiquitous expressionistic film noir with its shadowy black and white chiaroscuro visual effects and clipped, mean-streets dialogue. Woodrell told Jeffrey Trachtenberg that “country noir” is “a noir story set in rural America rather than an urban area. It’s a term I made up largely to combat the mystery label that had gotten strapped on me. I wanted a counter label. Then I realized I’d painted myself into another corner” (WSJ).

At the risk of unnecessarily overcomplicating a loosely defined set of terms—“noir,” “film noir,” and “country noir”—it should be noted that in a conversation with Woodrell, Craig McDonald wrote that “[noir] as a term has become almost valueless as it is so liberally applied by those who don’t have a good working definition.” This statement is certainly true, but it argues rather for a firmer definition

of noir than for its erasure. Woodrell's response does not appear helpful: for him, noir "has to end tragically, that's all. It just has to end tragically to be actual noir." According to his view, his "stricter definition . . . makes it discrete from all the other forms of dark fiction," although he admits that he sees "noir" used to describe books "that would not be in the least noir by my standards" (McDonald). The problem here is that "*country noir*" appears to have fallen out of the equation. It must be remembered that it was Woodrell himself who applied the term "*country noir*" as a subtitle to *Give Us a Kiss*.¹ More helpful in this regard is Lee Horsley's acknowledgement of country noir in her book-length study, *The Noir Thriller* (2009); in her introduction she asserts that she seeks "to establish a much broader understanding of literary noir and of the many different protagonists who go down small-town Main Streets and country roads as well as down mean streets and dark alleyways" (1,3).

Although Woodrell disparages the term now, "country noir" seems to me to be an appropriate way to describe a whole range of fiction by writers such as Woodrell, Donald Ray Pollock, and Bonnie Jo Campbell, among others—writers who deal with the hard physical facts and social conflicts, petty crime and close-to-the-land living of certain extremes of hard country experience. This essay attempts to grapple with the term "country noir" as it applies to Woodrell's 2006 novel, *Winter's Bone*. I argue here that significant elements of noir—most notably its emphasis on crime, with its attendant violence, combine with the novel's setting—the harsh, forbidding landscape of the Ozarks—to heighten and deepen protagonist Ree Dolly's plight, complicate her successful transition to adulthood, and give this coming-of-age novel a special intensity and resonance. Moreover, these elements, combined with the novel's quasi-biblical mythology, function to construct Ree as a new kind of American Adam: a new Adam who offers an alternate ethic of Christlike caring, compassion, and forgiveness to oppose the Old Testament code of remorseless retribution practiced by the Dolly clan, and who functions as a Christlike savior in the heroic effort and selfless sacrifice she makes on behalf of her family.

The classic American Bildungsroman enacts the coming of age of a young male. Be he Huckleberry Finn, Holden Caulfield, Augie March or Ike McCaslin, he is initiated into the harsh realities of American life with which he will have to contend as an adult through his encounters with evil as he struggles to come to terms with an

imperfect world. R.W. B. Lewis describes this character type, the American Adam, as “an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources” (5).

But the protagonist of *Winter's Bone* is female, and *Winter's Bone* is Ree Dolly's story through and through, a story of her courage and strength in the midst of adversity, and a story of her journey from innocence to experience as she successfully navigates the world of the rural meth trade in her quest to locate her father, Jessup Dolly, who has been charged with cooking meth. His court date is imminent and the police are looking for him. If he does not appear for trial, Ree and her family will lose their home and timberlands, which Jessup has put up as part of his bond. Ree must either find Jessup or proof of his death to prevent this catastrophe.

The key to *Winter's Bone* is the problem of Jessup's weakness, his betrayal of some of his relatives or neighbors to the law—we never find out who they are, or what he said, nor is it important to know. He has obviously broken an olden cardinal rule against snitching. There is no set of standards to apply outside the clan, no community law to apply to, and so the clan itself is responsible for enacting its revenge. The retaliation must be carried out without regard to ulterior consequences—though with carefully measured precautions. The main obstacle that Ree constantly encounters is the males' refusal to tell her anything at all about what they know concerning Jessup's case.

This is the only one of Woodrell's eight novels from a female point of view and consciousness. It is also the most serious and the most dire of his works, for Ree has many responsibilities to which she must attend in addition to her quest to find her father within the intractable Dolly clan. Ree meets Lewis's standards of self-reliance, self-directedness, and readiness to confront whatever befalls her with her own resources. She is sixteen years old and in charge of her household and the family. Her mother is no longer of sound judgment and is emotionally unable to take any further responsibility for her children. It falls to Ree to bring up her two younger brothers, Sonny and Harold, in her “grand hope . . . that these boys would not be dead to wonder by age twelve, dulled to life, empty of kindness, boiling with mean” (8)—as are the other males in the Dolly clan, who serve as little more than mean-spirited object lessons in boorishness and incivility. But she differs from the

typical American Adam protagonist, not only with respect to her gender, but also in her connections to family and clan; she is far from “happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race . . .” (Lewis 6). These connections will both frustrate and enable her as she perseveres to complete her daunting task.

Though *Winter's Bone* is Ree's story, that story is imbedded firmly in her clan, the Dollys. “There were two hundred Dollys, plus Lockrums, Boshells, Tankerlys, and Langans, who were basically Dollys by marriage, living within thirty miles of this valley” (8). Ree knows they are a difficult, complex set of relatives, but it is to some of them that she must apply for information about Jessup—as tight-lipped and stubborn as they are. “Some lived square lives, many did not, but even the square-living Dollys were Dollys at heart and might be helpful in a pinch. The tough Dollys were plenty peppery and hard-boiled toward one another, but were unleashed hell on enemies, scornful of town law and town ways, clinging to their own” (8).²

Ree's story is thus impacted by her gender and her clan connections, and the noir elements function to heighten this impact. Although Woodrell agrees with McDonald that “the word *noir* is defined so many different ways by so many people that it is essentially useless as a descriptive term” (6), two elements of noir seem to be so widely in evidence, not only in *Winter's Bone* but in many books considered examples of the genre, as to argue for their inclusion in any definition of country noir: crime and crime-related violence, and a harsh, punishing landscape in which the criminal activities that take place in that environment are impacted by Nature and its weather.

As distinct from noir found in urban areas, country noir is likely to focus on naïve crime, including the widespread production and sale (and theft) of meth and marijuana, petty grievances amongst friends and neighbors, and the constant stir of small-time pecuniary ambition—as Woodrell puts it, whatever crime looks easiest tonight is what they will be arrested for tomorrow (“How Much of the Ozarks Is in Me?” 3).³ Crime and violence are givens in Ree's world, where jailhouse beatings, random shootings, spousal abuse, drug-related deaths, and retaliatory murder for snitching or stealing are part of everyday life. Connie, Ree's mother, comes home from dates with a black eye or bruises and explains that “a beau did [that], sayin' goodbye” (41). Ree subsequently muses that “a great foulness was afoot

in the world when a no-strings roll in the hay with a stranger led to chipped teeth or cigarette burns on the wrist" (42).

Crime lies at the core of *Winter's Bone*, permeates the culture of Ree's community, and dictates a code of survival for its inhabitants, most of whom are involved in the lucrative crystal meth trade. The lifestyle of these characters is fast and loose, and there are distinctive gender roles within it. By the time they are thirty, the men are hardened and given to secretive lives of petty crime. They have little interest in their neighbors or most of their clansmen, and they tend to think of women as consistently available to them. They seem to have little self-consciousness of their conditions, but do obeisance to ancient rules without discussing them, or their implications, very much.

One rule is to avoid talking to the law, and the clan is structured in some regard to keep law enforcement officers and other outsiders from penetrating too deeply. This tactic is employed, for example, in the naming of male children:

To have but a few male names in use was a tactic held over from the olden knacker ways . . . the great name of the Dollys was Milton, and at least two dozen Miltons moved about in Ree's world. If you named a son Milton it was a decision that attempted to chart the life he'd live before he even stepped into it, for among Dollys the name carried expectations and history. Some names could rise to walk many paths in many directions, but Jessups, Arthurs, Haslams and Miltons were born to walk only the beaten Dolly path to the shadowed place, live and die in keeping with those blood line customs fiercest held. (61-62)

Obviously, for an outsider to seek information about a Milton Dolly invited considerable obfuscation, designed to doom the outsider's task to failure.

The male code, if written down, might read like this: mind your own business, keep a tight lip, don't let women know too much, seek revenge when custom is broken or betrayed. The female version might stress the following rules: don't antagonize men any more than necessary, keep a tight lip and acquiesce when necessary, don't let men know too much about your own sexual desires or behaviors, leave revenge against men up to men to negotiate. True, women can talk back to husbands and male neighbors, but they need to pick their targets carefully. For example, Ree's spunky attempt to communicate with Thump Milton, a locus of power in the community, proves dangerous for her. Ree chastises her best friend, Gail Lockrum Langan,

for not standing up to her new husband, but Gail has already been browbeaten into understanding that when Floyd says no, there is little further recourse. It may be a pattern set for life.

Crime and violence are also important in *Winter's Bone* because they set the plot in motion and recur at each plot point. The novel begins with a missing person, and Ree's quest to find him dictates the structure of the novel, which comprises visits to nearby relatives, most of whom are involved in the meth trade and who casually use illegal substances like weed, crank, or cocaine. These persistent inquiries, directed to people who she believes should be able to tell her about her father, are continually met with ominous silence and attacks upon her person. Throughout her quest, Ree smokes weed, gets knocked around by various male members of the Dolly clan, undertakes a dangerous car chase through the Ozark hills, gets brutally beaten by three female Dollys, and, upon locating her father's murdered corpse, hacks off his hands with a chain saw. An analeptic scene reveals that after ingesting magic mushrooms, Ree had engaged in sexual intercourse (statutory, if not actual, rape) with Little Arthur, one of her many far-flung Dolly kinsmen.⁴ Moreover, two transgressive relationships dominate the novel: Ree's sexual/emotional attraction to Teardrop, her father's brother, for whom these feelings appear to be mutual, and her sexual interlude with Gail. Scenes depicting Ree's often perilous adventures with various Dollys as she continues her search alternate with domestic scenes in which she cares for her invalid mother and teaches her two young brothers how to live.

Another important element found frequently in country noir is a close attention to the landscape upon which the stories play out. Other writers in the country noir mode keep a steady focus on geographical place. Place is so important to Donald Ray Pollock, for example, that he employs the name of the town—Knockemstiff [Ohio]—that he actually grew up in for his title, and he appends a map of “Knockemstiff” to help readers orient to space and place in the short stories that follow. Place names and locations, like Schott's Bridge, Dynamite Hole, and Hap's Bar abound as Pollock's characters criss-cross their way through the stories. Attachment to place in *Knockemstiff* is frequently enunciated. For example, Jake Lowry, evading military service in World War II says he “wasn't afraid of the fighting as much as I was scared of leaving the holler”; afterwards, he expresses a fairly universal sentiment: “I never could get rid of that

feeling that I wasn't much welcome nowhere in the world" (15, 17). Bonnie Jo Campbell is another Midwestern noir writer who provides depth of experience in her work through substantive descriptions of place. Like Pollock, she, too, employs a map in her novel, *Once Upon a River*, and writes with an insider's knowledge of her home location of Kalamazoo, Michigan, its environs and its water systems.

Like Pollock and Campbell, Woodrell writes of his home location with authority derived from lived experience. This landscape, as is typical of country noir novels, plays a significant role, so much so in *Winter's Bone* that its agency makes it almost another character in the novel, an effect heightened by Woodrell's frequent use of personification. The Ozark terrain, along with its weather, is almost always portrayed as hostile to humans: challenging them, making them miserable, complicating their lives, offering one more obstacle with which to contend. As Ree chops wood to keep her family warm, she is assaulted by a snowstorm: "[t]he snow fell first in hard little bits, frosty white bits blown sideways to pelt Ree's face as she raised the ax, swung down, raised it again, splitting wood while being stung by cold flung from the sky. Bits worked inside her neckline and melted against her chest" (9). To counteract the harshness of the natural obstacles that challenge her, she plays tapes that reflect a more beneficent Nature: *The Sounds of Tranquil Shores*, *The Sounds of Tranquil Streams*, *The Sounds of Tropical Dawn*, and *Alpine Dusk*.

Detailed geographical descriptions are found in Woodrell's earlier novel, *Give Us a Kiss*, exhibiting the same sense of agency in Nature that is seen in *Winter's Bone*:

Our region, the Ozarks, was all carved by water. When the ice age shifted, the world was nothing but a flood. The runoff through the ages since had slashed valleys and ravines and dark hollows through the mountains. Caves of many sizes are abundant in the cliffs and hill-sides . . . These mountains are among the oldest on the planet, worn down now to nubby, stubborn knobs. Ozark mountains seem to hunker instead of tower, and they are plenty rugged but without much of the majestic left in them. (5)

This rough terrain requires extravagant sacrifices to farm successfully: "Here and there chunks of land have been cleared by the type of person who has no quit in them at all. Clearing a farm in this terrain often takes generations of bickering and blood blisters to get done, and these hillbillies stuck with it . . . squeezing a living from

chickens and dogs and stony fields of red, feckless dirt” (5). Sacrifice so urgent comes to have quasi-religious dimension, powered by myth, as seen in abundance in *Winter’s Bone*.

The latter novel’s mythology and the landscape upon which it takes place effect a nearly chthonic quality. This mythic framework, biblical in nature, further combines with a geography that not only carries the background past into the near-present, but does so with imagined sounds—clashings of stone against stone as if from underground bodies and voices, coupled with events that remain ultimately ambiguous and mysterious, adding a powerful dimension to Ree’s quest and supplying something of a support system to her search—even if that support system is ultimately loosely constructed. Nothing remotely similar to this quality appears in any earlier Woodrell work—unless we count the figure and function of Imamu in *Give Us a Kiss*: “[o]ne of my past-life voices (the girl on ancient Crete who milked goats and was barren)” (26), she who sends Doyle Redmond warnings and obscure messages that promise assistance but need deciphering.

The Dolly clan’s mythology begins with prophet named Haslam, Fruit of Belief (61-62), “who’d found messages from the Fist of Gods written on the entrails of a sparkling golden fish lured with prayer from a black river way east near the sea . . . The sparkling fish had revealed signs unto him and him alone, and he’d . . . led them all across thousands of testing miles until he hailed these lonely rugged hollows of tired rocky soil as a perfect garden spot, paradise as ordained by the map of guts sent to his eyes from the Fist of Gods” (65). Haslam’s mission is that of an archetypal Moses leading his people to a Promised Land, and it does seem that he is successful in leading his flock to the Ozarks—as unlikely a “garden spot” as can possibly be imagined; however, the arrival in this Canaan takes place amidst questionable behavior, the Original Sin of the Dollys.

Some thirty years after the arrival—a generation perhaps—another event occurred, one that Woodrell calls “the great bitterness” and “the bitter reckoning.” What happened exactly is shielded from the present by historical confusion, but the evidence persists still in the stones tossed from one another across the fields: “The walls of the old places had been pulled apart, the stones torn asunder and tossed furiously about the meadow during the bitter reckoning of long ago. The stones had ever since been left lay where they fell and now raised scattered white humps across three acres.” Still, people continue to

live in the dwellings found in this meadow: "The new places had smoke churning from chimneys and footprints in their yards" (49).

What Ree knows about the bitter reckoning is severely truncated, and Woodrell limits the reader's knowledge to what resides in Ree's consciousness. We know only that what happened had something to do with a big man, a lie, and a woman (65-66). This quasi-biblical occurrence transpired near Hawkfall, where so many events take place that are crucial to *Winter's Bone*, including Ree's denial by Thump Milton Dolly, the beating she sustains from Mrs. Thump Milton Dolly and her two sisters, and the final discovery of her father's body in the dark pond. It is in the caves near Hawkfall that Ree sleeps when she is first turned away by Thump—and it is then and there that she ponders the Dolly clan and considers her birthright. After the bitter reckoning, the Dollys had fled to these same caves and lived in exile there. "The new part of Hawkfall was old to most folks, but the old part of Hawkfall seemed ancient and a creepy sort of sacred" (49). In this pivotal chapter of the novel, after Ree reflects on the mythic heritage of her clan, she comes to a full understanding of her situation: her father is dead and she must find proof of his death if she is going to be able to save the family home place and acreage.

These biblical echoes are new to Woodrell's work—and in fact they are found only infrequently in contemporary fiction. There was no trace of such ancient drama in any of Woodrell's previous seven novels—and this goes a long way to explain how powerful *Winter's Bone* is in the Woodrell canon. Religious imagery in the novel in one place echoes that of the Romantic poets: "Pine trees with low limbs spread over fresh snow made a stronger vault for the spirit than pews and pulpit ever could" (38)—and this from a writer who does not choose to incorporate church structures or rituals of worship into his work! The structures of houses in this region also employ biblical memory: "Most places still had two front doors in accordance with certain readings of Scripture, one door for men, the other for women, though nobody much used them strictly that way anymore" (49).

Four significant time periods govern the story that *Winter's Bone* relates, and correlate with the mythology of the Dolly clan. The first period is the present, in which Ree works out her destiny and rehabilitates her family following Jessup's transgression and abandonment. The second time period is the ancient past, when the Dollys, like the ancient Israelites, wandered for six thousand years before the prophet Haslam, Fruit of Belief, attempted to reform the Dolly clan

by walking them to a new Paradise. In this ancient past there occurred “*that great snarling tribal anger that Haslam [would try] to preach away from their hearts and habits*” (67). This period intersects with Ree’s search in the present: “*It was those brute ancient ways that broke fresh over her world at every dawn and sent Dollys to let the blood drain from Dad’s heart and dump his flesh somewhere hidden from path and cloud*” (66).

The third period of time, of uncertain length, encompasses Haslam’s journey and his desire to tame his clan. This journey is, like everything else in this mythology, vague and ambiguous. We are told that “Haslam had been born from a god’s water spit on knacker seed, shaped for manhood by a fugitive faith and sent among the Walking People to rally them and all like tinker flesh and to make a new people he’d guide to that garden place chosen by the Fist, mapped inside the sparkling fish, where they could rest their feet after six thousand years of roaming and become settled people” (65). All we know is that Haslam felt a kind of biblical conviction to reform his people and take them on an extensive journey into a new Paradise.

The fourth period, again of unclear duration, accounts for the clan’s arrival in the Ozarks and their subsequent failure, culminating in “the bitter reckoning of long ago” (49), the evidence of which is still visible in the scarred acres near Hawkfall. The failure is a major sign of the continual fall into time founded on Original Sin. Ree’s faith derives from her pity for the old ones—extended into the present: “With her eyes closed she could call them near, see those olden Dolly kin who had so many bones that broke, broke and mended, broke and mended wrong, so they limped through life on the bad-mend bones from year upon year until falling dead in a single evening from something that sounded wet in the lungs.” (28). The clan’s physical condition is continuous, founded on the bad blood among them and on a consequent inability to help each other through cooperation. This confluence of time patterns emphasizes the ethical divide between the Dollys, ancient and contemporary, and Ree.

The complicated time frame of the novel also helps to establish Ree as the New Adam, the Savior come to fulfill Haslam’s failed mission, much as Christ came in consequence of Adam’s sin to save humanity. Ree offers a new ethic to counter the code of relentless silence and retribution that the Dolly clan practices. Illuminating the Old Testament quality of this code, Teardrop asserts, “The Dollys around here can’t be seen to coddle a snitch’s family—that’s always been our way. We’re

old blood, us people, and our ways was set firm long before hotshot baby Jesus ever even burped milk 'n shit yellow" (150).

By contrast, Ree practices an ethic reflective of New Testament values. She tries to instill habits of responsibility and caring, as well as survival skills, in her younger brothers; she lovingly cares for her mentally exhausted mother and for Gail, who is trapped in a loveless marriage with an authoritarian husband. By the end of the novel, Ree has been tested, has persevered and prevailed. She has successfully accomplished the most difficult test of adulthood with which she was faced: locating her father's dead body, cutting off his hands, and thus, in providing proof to the law of his death, saving her family home place and timberlands, her mother from incarceration in a mental health facility, and her brothers from foster care with the Dollys and their unforgiving, violent ways.

Although Ree has harbored dreams of escaping from this soul-destroying environment by enlisting in the military, her response when her brothers ask what she will buy with Jessup's unclaimed bail bond money is "Wheels" (193). A bit earlier, bailsbondsmen Satterfield offered her a job with the stipulation that she would need a way to drive to neighboring towns. Ree's one-word reply suggests that she will sacrifice her dream of bettering herself and achieving independence through a military career. Instead, she will remain in her community and, through her new role as head of the family, protect her mother and teach her brothers an alternate ethic that substitutes for the Dolly clan's eye-for-an-eye code, a way of life grounded in forgiveness and compassion. Whether Ree's sacrifice and subsequent new role will ultimately change anything beyond the rehabilitation of her family is uncertain, but surely Woodrell means to suggest a connection between Haslam's sacrifice and Ree's faith, persistence and loyalty to her family. The geography of Hawkfall, old and new—related to Ree's faith and courage—was changed after only thirty years of arrival, when "walls tumbled and flew, old ways returned ravenous after the decades of sighting, and the Fist of Gods took seats in the clouds to sulk and reconsider" (66). Teardrop's comment to Ree after he describes the Dollys' time-honored way of dealing with a snitch offers further hope: "[T]hat shunning can change, some. Over time. Folks have noticed the sand you got, girl" (150).

NOTES

¹Woodrell adds that according to his “stricter definition, *Winter’s Bone* cannot be a noir novel. My argument, an attempt to salvage the term “country noir” for further, more or less generic, use is more potentially confusing than I like: *Winter’s Bone* is both noir and country noir, but it is only noir if it is first seen as a country noir novel—having the essential ingredients indetified in my more detailed discussion in this essay.

²Readers first encounter the Dollys in *Give Us a Kiss*, where they are foils to the protagonist Redmond brothers. In that novel’s past, Panda had killed Logan Dolly, “a worthless piece of shit” (14), with three bullets; and justice had to be served with bribes and deals that ultimately depleted the Redmond land. In the novel’s present, two Dollys team up with a character named Springer to horn in on the Redmonds’ field of marijuana. In his foreword to the novel, Pinckney Benedict refers to the Dollys as “near-simian” (xv).

³Intriguing attempts to define the term “noir” are found in *The Best American Noir of the Century* (2010)—in the foreword by Otto Penzler and in the introduction by James Ellroy, the editors of the anthology. Not only do the two writers have differing, contradictory definitions of noir, but they are given to too-easy exaggerations. For Ellroy, noir as a “subgenre officially died in 1960. New writer generations have resurrected it and redefined it as a subgenre . . .” (xiv). The two do not, of course, deal with country noir, but neither of their definitions resonates with *Winter’s Bone*. For a looser and much more descriptive analysis of noir, see Lee Horsley’s *The Noir Thriller* (2009); Horsley discusses Woodrell and *Winter’s Bone* briefly on pages 270-71.

⁴For another, quite different account of a young woman’s response to rape in a country noir novel, see Bonnie Jo Campbell’s *Once Upon a River*, in which protagonist Margo Crane is lured into a shed by her uncle, who tells her that he wants to teach her how to skin a deer. Later in the novel, Margo is raped by her boyfriend’s brother.

WORKS CITED

- Benedict, Pinckney. Foreword. *Give Us a Kiss: A Country Noir*. 1996. Back Bay Books, 2012. xi-xv.
- Campbell, Bonnie Jo. *Once Upon a River*. NY: Norton, 2011.
- “A Conversation with Daniel Woodrell.” Appendices to *Winter’s Bone*. 2006. Boston: Back Bay Books, 2007. 3-8.
- Ellroy, James and Otto Penzler, eds. *The Best American Noir of the Century*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010.
- Horsley, Lee. *The Noir Thriller*. 2001. NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Lewis, R.W.B. *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*. 1955. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1959.
- McDonald, Craig. “Casting Light on Shade: A Conversation with Daniel Woodrell.” April 25, 2011. [Online]
- Pollock, Donald Ray. *Knockemstiff*. NY: Doubleday, 2008.
- Rawson, Keith. “A Conversation with Daniel Woodrell.” LitReactor.com, October 5, 2011. [Online]
- Trachtenberg, Jeffrey A. “Daniel Woodrell Explores Rural America’s Dark Side.” *Wall Street Journal* August 17, 2006. [Online]
- Woodrell, Daniel. *The Death of Sweet Mister*. 2001. Boston: Back Bay Books, 2012.
- . *Give Us a Kiss: A Country Noir*. 1996. Boston: Back Bay Books, 2012.
- . “How Much of the Ozarks Is in Me?” Appendices to *The Death of Sweet Mister*. 2001. Boston: Back Bay Books, 2012. 3-7.
- . *Tomato Red*. 1998. Boston: Back Bay Books, 2012.
- . *Winter’s Bone*. 2006. Boston: Back Bay Books, 2007.

NOIR ON THE CHICAGO STAGE: KEITH HUFF'S *A STEADY RAIN*

ARVID F. SPONBERG

While film noir can boast a number of canonical works—*The Maltese Falcon*, *Double Indemnity*, and *The Big Sleep*, to mention only three of the best known—the opposite is the case with respect to American drama; there are few classic works of theatre to which noir conventions can be linked. None of our most frequently taught and performed major plays—those by O'Neill, Wilder, Odets, Williams, Miller, August Wilson—have been written in this mode. Only three plays—their authors once famous but now less well known—come to mind: Robert Emmet Sherwood's *The Petrified Forest* (1935; 197 Broadway performances); Sidney Kingsley's *Detective Story* (1949-50; 581 Broadway performances), and Joseph Hayes's *The Desperate Hours* (1955; 212 Broadway performances, Tony Award for Best Play).¹

Keith Huff may be coming to the rescue with *A Steady Rain*, a two-hander that premiered professionally at Chicago Dramatists in the fall of 2007 and transferred to Chicago's Royal George for a multi-month run to packed houses, winning Joseph Jefferson awards for best new work, best actor, and best production. In September of 2009 it opened on Broadway for a twelve-week run starring Hugh Jackman and Daniel Craig; since then it has been produced at numerous professional and amateur theatres around the country.

The play makes for interesting study because, on the whole, it successfully adapts noir conventions to a simple stage setting. Police corruption, threatening urban streetscapes, class tensions, betrayals of professional and romantic trust all figure in Keith Huff's nonlinear story. More importantly, Huff finds linguistic counterparts to many cinematic hallmarks of noir camera work, lighting, and sound.

At the same time, because the play is a duologue incorporating many lengthy speeches, the effect for both readers and theatregoers seems more akin to reading or hearing a naturalistic novel rather than reading or seeing a play or motion picture because Huff's play, like many noir films, owes a debt to literary naturalism. The complications implied by this similarity are explored in Jeff Jaeckle's "American Literary Naturalism and Film Noir," the final chapter of the recently published *Oxford Handbook of American Literary Naturalism*. Here Jaeckle argues that film noir has been shaped by literary naturalism:

It might come as a surprise . . . to learn that few scholars have investigated in any serious detail the parallels between literary naturalism and film noir. This critical gap is especially remarkable given the wealth of scholarship on the origins of film noir. Scholars readily acknowledge that film noir—whether categorized as a genre, cycle, or style—is the culmination of several filmic, literary, and cultural influences, most notably German Expressionism, 1930s Hollywood gangster films, hardboiled detective fiction, existentialist philosophy, and psychoanalysis. Most scholars make only passing observations, however, about the influence of literary naturalism. (484)

In analyzing the reasons for this sinkhole in our scholarship, Jaeckle cites the ingrained dependence of three generations of critics on the films based on novels by hardboiled writers such as Hammett, Chandler and Cain:

These writers' use of first-person narrators, contemporary slang, witty dialogue, detective and femme fatale characters, and sensationalist narratives of crime and sex laid the foundations for these films. In striking contrast, naturalist works such as *McTeague* (1899) and *Sister Carrie* (1900)—with their detached third-person narrators, stilted and sprawling prose, and characters that verge on the symbolic or allegorical—seem to bear little relation to the fast-paced and gripping features commonly associated with film noir. Not surprisingly, scholars often point to these stylistic distinctions when arguing for the influence of hardboiled fiction over naturalism. (484)

However, Jaeckle argues that in assessing the role of hardboiled fiction and other influences on the practice of noir, scholars have ". . . referred to the centrality of determinism—be it fate, environmental constraints, instinctual urges, or atavism—in film noir narratives, yet have failed to identify these conventions as naturalist" (485).

Jaeckle then quotes briefly from articles by seven critics published in the last twenty years which, he asserts, fail to make explicit links between film noir and naturalism but which, Jaeckle argues, “*tacitly* suggest that the plots, settings, and character types of film noir draw heavily upon the core conventions of naturalist fiction” (485, my emphasis). Quoting from the Significant Seven, he enumerates these conventions:

- plots in which “everyday people come to bad ends despite their best efforts” [Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo]
- characters who are “monsters, criminals, or victims of illness; nothing excuses them, and they act as they do simply because of a fatal inner evil” [Jean Pierre Chartier]
- characters “doomed by temperament and circumstance to face irrevocable consequences for bad actions” [Andrew Dickos]
- environments “given an equal or greater weight than the actor . . . [creating] a fatalistic, hopeless mood” [Paul Schrader]
- characters who “act from inchoate, unknown, or pathological motives” [R. Barton Palmer]
- a sense that characters are “trapped in circumstances that they did not wholly create and from which they cannot break free” [Steven M. Saunders] (485)

Jaeckle then singles out for praise Christopher Orr’s “Cain, Naturalism, and Noir”:

Orr . . . makes explicit what scholars have often left implicit: the plots, character types, visual styles and aural patterns of these movies suggest that film noir is not merely an inheritor of literary naturalism but, more significantly, a form of cinematic naturalism . . . these films often blend naturalist narrative conventions with key cinematic devices: environmental constraints, emphasized through staging, high-contrast lighting, and low-angle cinematography; instinctual urges, emphasized through dialogue, costuming, blocking, and close-ups; and fate as a determining force, emphasized through dialogue, voiceover, and flashbacks. These conventions and devices find concrete expression in the thoughts and actions of the films’ protagonists, who negotiate their desires for money and sex in the contexts of harsh

environments, such as the criminal underworld, the private-detective business, an unsatisfying job, or a failed marriage. These negotiations often conclude with the characters succumbing to their greed and sinking into depravity or death; on rare occasions, however, these negotiations end with a hazy yet significant glimmer of hope. In each case, these movies attest not only to the power of film noir but also to the richness of cinematic naturalism. (486)

Theatre scholars who wish to remedy the lack of critical attention to noir on the American stage should take a hard look at Keith Huff's *A Steady Rain*, which employs a strongly narrative plot, realistic characterizations, and gritty dialog to establish a noirish atmosphere; these elements also reveal the strong influence of literary naturalism. Indeed, the characteristics of naturalism that Jaeckle's seven critics identify in noir films are clearly in evidence in *A Steady Rain*.

Oliver and Trigo's assertion that naturalism features "plots in which everyday people come to bad ends despite their best efforts" fits *A Steady Rain* to a T. The play's protagonists, Denny Lombardo and Joey Doyle, have been friends since they grew up together on Chicago's South Side, are now partners in uniform on the Chicago police force, and have each other's backs on the streets and in the squad room. Joey is single but eats at Denny's house four to five nights a week. Denny thinks Joey will have a better chance to stay sober if he's married, so he invites Rhonda, a prostitute acquaintance, to his home for dinner; his successful matchmaking, Denny figures, will also have the desirable effect of helping Rhonda get out of the life. You see the logic, to use Denny's favorite phrase. The dinner doesn't go well. Joey is not happy with Denny's choice of a life partner for him, and Denny's wife, Connie, is very unhappy to have Rhonda sitting at her dinner table with her kids, Noel and Stewart.

In any case, when Joey refuses to take Rhonda home, the task falls to Denny who, shall we say, stays a lot longer than he ought to but not longer than he wants to. Meanwhile, Joey, at home with Connie, sets the stage for the catastrophe that will follow:

After Denny stormed out to drive [Rhonda] home, I went upstairs to give Connie his message [that he's taking Rhonda home]. She was in Stewy's nursery looking out the window. She looked so beautiful holding him, you know, the way moms do. Room was dark. Moonlight on her face. Stewy conked out on her shoulder. I tiptoed over, brushed Stewy with the back of my finger on the cheek and saw out the window what Connie saw. Denny was out in the driveway

with Rhonda. She was crying full out by then. Denny was, you know, consoling her. Connie didn't like that one bit. It started to rain that night, I remember. I don't think it let up more than a minute or two till this whole mess was over. (17)

The "mess" to which Joey alludes is the chain of bad outcomes that begins with that ill-fated dinner, a chain that stems from Denny's failed attempt to do something good, a pattern of behavior that marks both Joey's and Denny's actions. Although Denny tries many times to rehabilitate Rhonda, he never makes any headway with his plans for her to go to "secretary school" and his scheme to fix her up with Joey so that she can be redeemed by the love of a good man backfires. For his part Joey claims that he helps Denny hold on to his job by keeping his particular style of enforcing the law within limits; moreover, he ultimately volunteers to take the fall for their mishandling of a case. Despite Denny's efforts to improve the quality of Joey's life and curb his drinking habit, and Joey's efforts to keep Denny on the straight and narrow and cover for him when he strays from it, their entanglements with pimps, prostitutes, police department bureaucrats, and a serial killer and his victim lead to Denny's betrayal of Connie with Rhonda, Joey's betrayal of Denny with Connie, both men's professional disgrace, and Denny's psychological unraveling and suicide.

As protagonists, Joey and Denny fill Dickos's bill of "characters doomed by temperament or circumstance to face irrevocable consequences of bad actions." Hot-tempered, obstinate, and impulsive, Denny's bad choices get him in trouble when he initiates a car chase that ends in the death of a Puerto Rican man, whom Denny suspects, without much evidence, of shooting into his living room and critically injuring his son. Denny's chain of impulsive, poorly thought out actions eventually ends in his suicide. Joey, for his part, is doomed by the circumstance of having to work with an unreliable partner who drinks, uses drugs, continually violates police protocol, and unexpectedly takes off in their squad car after the Puerto Rican, leaving Joey to deal with the naked, crying Vietnamese boy. Without a squad car to transport the boy to safety, Joey reluctantly turns him over to a man who says he is a relative. When the man is found to be a serial killer and a cannibal, Joey and Denny are blamed by the department and the news media for breaching protocol because they failed to apprehend him and take the Vietnamese boy into protective custody. Their suspension results partly from their being in the wrong place at

the wrong time and partly from Denny's impulsive decision to leave the scene in the squad car.

Chartier's description of naturalistic characters as "monsters, criminals, or victims of illnesses; nothing excuses them, and they act as they do simply because of a fatal inner evil" applies well to *A Steady Rain*, which opens with an attack on Denny's home. On the very night when the Lombardos have become a Nielsen family,² a bullet shatters the living room picture window, destroys the new 52-inch television, and critically wounds Denny's son, Stewart, an act of retaliation, Denny believes, by Walter Lorenzo, a pimp who resents Denny's attempt to reform Rhonda. This incident, which precipitates the subsequent events of the play, shatters more than the living room window and TV; it emphatically bursts Denny's bubble of illusion in which he tells himself that he and his family are normal middle-class Americans, a belief that has recently been validated, in Denny's mind, by their being chosen as a Nielsen family. Throughout the play, Joey and Denny contend with other unsavory characters besides Walter: drug dealers, a prostitute who winds up stabbed to death in her bed, a naked Vietnamese boy whom Denny and Joey find climbing trash cans in an alley, and an older man who claims to be the child's uncle and turns out to be a cannibal.³

Schrader's dictum that naturalistic noir film employs environments "given an equal or greater weight than the actor . . . [creating] a fatalistic, hopeless mood" can be seen in the mean Chicago streets that Denny and Joey walk, inundated during the course of the play by the eponymous "steady rain" that casts a pall of gloom over everything and impacts the tragic sequence of events that unfolds. Denny describes this environment as a world that is "bubbling over with bloodshed . . . madmen fuck kids and eat their livers, bury their victims by the droves under their suburban houses, light them on fire, take pot-shots at 2-year-olds through their front windows" (42). The climactic incident in the play, in which Denny and Joey find the Vietnamese boy attempting the Sisyphean task of escaping from his cannibal captor, is set in a dead-end alley from which escape is nearly impossible:

Denny: So Joey and me, we pull up this alley off Deviant Corners. Right away in the headlights is this kid, this Vietnamese kid, stoned outta his fuckin' mind. Not a stitch of clothes. He's fumbling through the garbage cans, trying first to climb 'em and then to stack 'em up

and make like this stairway to heaven over a tall, wood fence. He climbs up, the rotten planks of the fence give, he falls, dipshit does it again (31).

Palmer describes a naturalistic work of film as having characters who “act from inchoate, unknown, or pathological motives” an apt description of Denny’s sexual liaison with Rhonda and Joey’s betrayal of Denny with Connie. Joey’s explanation for why he slept with Connie, “the worst thing I could have done I did at the worst possible time” is “I just let it happen and blamed it on the rain . . . We both just fell into it and couldn’t let go . . . We both needed to be inside something other than our own skins that night” (44-45). Similarly, Saunders’s belief that a noir film creates a “sense that characters are trapped in circumstances that they did not wholly create and from which they cannot break free” is an excellent description of the vicious circle in which Denny and Joey find themselves enclosed; the injustices and cruelties they have to deal with fuel their anger and resentment, which, in turn, contribute to actions they take that result in more injustices and cruelties. Denny’s continual pleas for logic ring hollow in the violent and inchoate world of the play. As he concludes, “. . . without a common logic, it’s every man for himself and fuck your neighbor as you would expect your neighbor to fuck unto you. Is this a civilization or what?”(39). Joey’s take on his situation is, “We’re all doing hard time at the Rock, Denny.”(12).

Denny’s longing for logic, as well as his pathetic sense of pride in being chosen to be a Nielsen family, reveals his overwhelming desire to live a life governed by middle-class norms of respectability and order, a dream that seems all the more poignant given the outcome of the play. His repeated efforts to find a wife for Joey and reform Wanda are further evidence of his striving to improve himself, his family and his friends, efforts that come to naught because his temperament and circumstances trap him in his own misery. His and Joey’s efforts to achieve promotion to detective seem similarly futile, at least from Denny’s point of view, because of circumstances beyond their control: “Fifty guys upped to the ranks of dickhood with not only lower scores and less service but who just all happen to be a lot more ethnic than me and my bog-hopping amigo paisan over here.” (9).

The determinism that Jaeckle identifies as a hallmark of naturalism is clearly seen in *A Steady Rain* in its characterizations and plot; another element of naturalism is the play’s dialogue. Denny and

Joey's speech—sometimes crude, sometimes fragmented, often profane and abrasive, but never dull and always painfully authentic—creates much of the suspense in the play. Following the advice of one of the nineteenth-century's noir precursors—that hardboiled New England investigator, Emily Dickinson—Denny and Joey tell the truth but they tell it slant.⁴ Taking turns, little by little, Denny and Joey relate the chain of misery unleashed by the bullet fired into Denny's living room that culminates in betrayal, humiliation, disgrace, and death. Joey's description of the race to the hospital with Stewart after he is shot is typical of Huff's down-to-earth dialogue:

Talk about nuts, it was nuts too the way Denny wouldn't let me or Connie hold Stewy while he was at the wheel, crazier the way he was driving, up on sidewalks, playing chicken with pedestrians. Even me, working the streets, I'd never seen so much blood. The blanket Denny had wrapped around Stewy was soaked like a sponge and Denny, driving like a madman, one-handed. Three people were hurt in that collision with the ambulance he caused when he charged a red light, the very ambulance that was on its way to help us. (23)

Keith Huff, a product of the Iowa Writers Workshop, has been based in Chicago for many years as an editor for the American Medical Association. He has written seven other plays, including two which form a trilogy with *A Steady Rain*. The second, *The Detective's Wife*, is a dramatic monologue by the widow of a murdered Chicago policeman that premiered at the Writer's Theatre in Glencoe, Illinois, on May 24, 2011. The third play, *Big Lake, Big City*, premiered on June 24, 2013, at Lookingglass Theatre in Chicago in a production directed by David Schwimmer. *Big Lake, Big City* features ten actors playing thirty parts and grimly mocks noir conventions even as it energetically deploys them. The reviews have been sharply critical—too much like television—they have said, an understandable condition given that Huff has been writing episodes of series for HBO, AMC, and Netflix. For the last, he has written for *House of Cards*, which just became the first Internet-distributed series to win an Emmy.⁵ As a theatrical mode, noir continues to encounter difficulties, but on both the large and small screen, it appears to be enjoying a healthy life thanks, in part, to a writer with deep Midwestern roots.

Late of Valparaiso University

NOTES

¹Possible candidates for noir plays include works by David Mamet, especially *American Buffalo*, and *Top Dog/Underdog* by Susan Lori Parks.

²Huff here refers to the Nielson Corporation Watch Division's polling of a large random sample of American families to record the television shows they watch during a given week and, thus, arrive at the ratings for each show.

³Huff may have based his story on the 1992 Jeffrey Dahmer, a.k.a. the Milwaukee Cannibal, case in which police apprehended a man who had been raping, killing, and eating his young victims and storing their remains in his freezer from 1975-1991. One young victim escaped and appealed to police for help but they mistakenly let him go.

⁴By the way, I'm not joking about Emily. My two favorite Dickinson poems—"I like a look of agony" and "I felt a funeral in my brain," contain enough noir elements to make Hammett, Cain, and Chandler bow their heads with respect.

⁵In 2013 David Fincher won a Best Director Emmy for *House of Cards*, which also took home Emmys for casting and cinematography. The show is widely favored to win the Emmy for best dramatic series in 2014.

WORKS CITED

- Chartier, Jean Pierre. "The Americans Are Making Dark Films Too." Palmer. *Perspectives*, 25-27,
- Dickos, Andrew. *Street With No Name: A History of the Classic American Film Noir*. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2002.
- Huff, Keith. *A Steady Rain*. NY: Samuel French, 2011.
- Jaeckle, Jeff. "American Literary Naturalism and Film Noir." *The Oxford Handbook of American Literary Naturalism*. Ed. Keith Newlin. NY: Oxford UP, 2011. 483-97.
- Oliver, Kelly, and Benigno Trigo. *Noir Anxiety*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003.
- Orr, Christopher. "Cain, Naturalism, and Noir." *Film Criticism* 25.1 (2000): 47.
- Palmer, R. Barton. *Hollywood's Dark Cinema: The American Film Noir*. New York: Twayne, 1994.
- Palmer, R. Barton, Ed. *Perspectives on Film Noir*. NY: G.K.Hall, 1996.
- Saunders, Steven M. "Film Noir and the Meaning of Life." *The Philosophy of Film Noir*. Ed. Mark T. Conrad. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2006. 91-105.
- Schrader, Paul. "Notes on Film Noir." Palmer, *Perspectives*, 99-109.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Contributors are sought for a collection of short essays, each focused on a poem by Theodore Roethke, to be published by a university press. Intended for a readership of students and teachers as well as scholars, the book will advance Roethke criticism by presenting original and highly specific commentary on individual poems. Essays are to be about 2000 words in length and must involve close textual reading of a single poem. Writers may explicate a short poem or a passage from a long poem, or analyze one aspect of a poem (such as diction, imagery, figurative language, symbolism, sound devices, meter, etc.). All critical approaches are welcome, including historicism, gender studies, reader-response, and ecocriticism. Essays should reflect knowledge of relevant Roethke scholarship, in most cases briefly quoting secondary sources. Deadline for submission is August 31, 2014. Send proposals and inquiries to Dr. William Barillas, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, at wbarillas@uwlax.edu.