

An Aftertaste of Dread: Cornell Woolrich in Noir Fiction and Film



Cornell George Hopley Woolrich (1903-1968) was among the most prolific of noir crime writers and in his lifetime the most adapted for film, radio, and TV. His admirers regret that he wasn't given the literary respect accorded to Hammett or Chandler, but this is probably because his language is often padded and subject to howlers, and his plots, which are his strength, test plausibility. He owes something to Edgar Allan Poe's terror tales, although most of his doom-ridden, twist-of-fate narratives are set in twentieth-century New York, where the inhabitants suffer guilt, anxiety, paranoia, and claustrophobic entrapment. The titles of the novels and stories convey their fraught atmosphere: *The Black Path of Fear* (1944), *Night Has a Thousand Eyes* (1945), "The Living Lie Down with the Dead"

(1936), "The Corpse Next Door" (1937), "I Wouldn't Be in Your Shoes" (1938), etc.

At its most effective, Woolrich's prose has the repetitive quality of an anxiously beating heart or the incessant drip of water torture. Consider the opening of *The Black Curtain* (1941): "Then he could feel hands fumbling around him. They weren't actually touching him; they were touching things that touched him."¹ Or this, from *The Black Angel* (1943): "He looked at the wall opposite him, and it wasn't to be found there. He looked at the ceiling, and it wasn't there. He looked at his empty hands, and it wasn't there."² Or the first chapter of *I Married a Dead Man* (1950), which keeps repeating "but not for us."³

It's a language of bewildered suspense or anxiety verging on hysteria, and the plots frequently duplicate the repetitive effect. In *The Bride Wore Black* (1940), the victims of a vengeful widow are disposed of like ducks in a shooting gallery. In *Black Alibi* (1942), a serial killer brutally murders people at random. In *The Black Angel*, a woman tries to save her husband from a murder charge by questioning four suspects whose names begin with the letter M; one of them refuses to talk until she goes on a frightening late-night errand involving four locations--a low-rent cafeteria, a bar, a dance hall, and an all-night movie theater--where she has to ritually repeat the same actions.

These serial events or repetitions are appropriate to Woolrich's obsessive characters, who suffer from amnesia, disability, and alcoholic blackouts, or who fall into situations in which nobody believes them. Many of the plots border on the fantastic and have an is-this-happening-or-am-I-crazy quality. In the short story "All at Once, No Alice" (1940), for example, circumstances force a husband and wife to spend their wedding night apart in an unfamiliar town where the hotel has only one extremely tiny available room; when the husband returns the next day, every trace of his wife is gone and everyone who saw her--the manager and staff of the hotel and even the Justice of the Peace who married her--says she never existed.

Like Dickens, the Surrealists, and Hitchcock, Woolrich is a master of chance and ironic coincidence. A rule of thumb for most writers is that a dramatic accident ought to come at the beginning rather than the end of the tale, where it can seem like a Deus ex Machina. But the rule can be broken, as it is in *Romeo and Juliet*. For his part, Woolrich salts accidental happenings throughout and usually reserves violent ones for the openings: In *The Black Curtain*, a man walking down the street is knocked out by

bricks falling from a building, and when he regains consciousness he realizes that he's been suffering from amnesia and may have killed someone; in *I Married a Dead Man*, two pregnant women who've never met share a seat on a train, and when the train suddenly crashes, the woman who survives changes identity with the one who is killed.

It's a world in which arbitrary events or strange meetings create shock, reveal hidden social connections, and suggest a malign fatality. In the story "Borrowed Crime" (1939), for instance, an impoverished man confesses to a murder he didn't commit in order to collect a thousand-dollar reward from a New York newspaper; his plan is to use the money so that his wife can take their extremely ill son to Arizona, where the boy's weakened lungs can benefit from the dry, sunny climate. The plan works, but while in jail the man discovers that his wife has been killed in an Arizona traffic accident. Woolrich's stories sometimes end happily, as this one more or less does, but even when they do, they leave an aftertaste of dread.

Woolrich specialized in mystery, suspense, and fear, but it was the sense of dread that made his pulp fiction distinctive. In certain respects, dread was also symptomatic of cultural modernism. Freud, for example, made an important distinction between fear and "Angst," which is the German word for dread. Fearful emotion, according to Freud, is a fight-or-flight response to a specific danger, such as a snarling tiger or a man with a gun. Suspense is also a fearful response, but it has a longer temporal span, arising from our awareness of an actual imminent danger that may or may not happen, but has a deadline. Angst, or dread, is more like a free-floating, global anxiety, and it pervaded post-World War I psychology, art, and philosophy. It can be found in Kafka, in German expressionism, and above all in Heidegger, for whom dread/Angst was an existential condition arising from knowledge that one's death is inevitable. Heidegger, in turn, was an influence on French existentialism during and after World War II, when Sartre developed his ideas of being and nothingness, and when writers like Woolrich became important for the popular media.

This isn't to say that Woolrich was an existentialist or that he was interested in any of the figures I've mentioned; the effect of dread in his work goes hand in hand with the kind of murder stories he wrote, and is an ambiance rather than a philosophy. But Woolrich's life was certainly dreadful, even tragic. Born in New York early in the twentieth century, he was a child of divorce and lived with his father in Mexico before moving back to Manhattan to live with his mother. He attended Columbia University

but was uninterested in English studies and took up writing imitations of Scott Fitzgerald's jazz-era novels. After a brief, unsuccessful stint in Hollywood, where he had a failed marriage and spent time cruising in a sailor suit, he returned to New York and began writing crime fiction, at which he became so speedy and proficient that he wrote under his own name and two pen names, William Irish and George Hopley. (In the discussion that follows, I'll refer to Woolrich as the author of all the fiction, because there are no clear-cut distinctions between him, Irish, and Hopley.) He and his mother lived in hotels until her death in 1957, when he moved to another hotel and became a recluse. A closeted homosexual, he was also alcoholic, emaciated, and diabetic. Because of an untreated foot infection (the delay in treatment ironically susceptible to pop-Freudian analysis), one of his legs was amputated and he spent his last years in a wheelchair.

During his early career Woolrich published a serialized novel in *College Humor* entitled *Children of the Ritz*, which was issued as a novel in 1927 and adapted as a Hollywood picture in 1929. The film version, which is now considered lost, was silent but may also have been released with a Vitaphone disk soundtrack; as for the novel, it's a tepid social comedy somewhat in the manner of Fitzgerald, involving a marriage between a rich girl and a poor boy, with no hint of the dark moods that characterized Woolrich's later crime fiction. When Woolrich first turned to the pulps he authored romance stories and a vampire tale, but the distinctive crime stories and novels he began to write around 1934 belonged to a genre known in the trade as "thrillers." These differ from the whodunits of the interwar years, most of which have a "what-will-have-happened" or future-perfect plot: a murder occurs, but we don't get the full story of the killing until it's reconstructed in the last chapter by a detective who has never been in personal danger. The hard-boiled thrillers of Hammett, Chandler, et al. change the pattern by giving us detectives who are subject to gunfire and violent beatings; they retain the mystery element, but give primary attention to action and descriptions of an adventurous milieu. "Wrong man" thrillers, which often have a travelogue or chase structure and became a Hitchcock specialty, go a step further, upping suspense by making the protagonist a victim, an investigator, and in the eyes of the law a killer. The Woolrich thriller, in contrast with these, typically begins as a mystery but creates suspense and a vague atmosphere of dread because the protagonist tends to be an inexperienced and highly vulnerable investigator--a female secretary, a housewife, a pregnant single mother, a traumatized veteran, an

unemployed father with a sick child, a pre-adolescent boy, or a man with a broken leg.

Francis M. Nevins, Jr.'s valuable bio-bibliography of Woolrich lists twenty-three Hollywood adaptations of his work between 1929 and 1984, plus an incomplete list of adaptations from Argentina, France, Germany, Japan, and the USSR. Woolrich was adapted not only by such major Hollywood directors as Hitchcock, but also by such Europeans as François Truffaut and Rainer Werner Fassbinder. In terms of frequency of adaptation, he isn't in shouting distance of Shakespeare, Jane Austin, or Conan Doyle, but he's accounted for more film noirs than anyone. Why so many? Obviously he wrote a great deal, but the situations he created also appeared at the right moment.

Woolrich has been described by his publishers as the "father" of literary noir, which makes no more sense than the claim that *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) was the first film noir. Dashiell Hammett's novel about the black bird was published in 1929, and James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* in 1934, so that both writers have better claims to the dubious status of fatherhood. France's Marcel Duhamel may have the best claim of all, because when he began editing the Gallimard publishing company's *Série noire* in the mid-1940s, he gave American writers and filmmakers a designation that had been known to France since the 1930s but didn't become widely known in America until the 1970s. Whatever the case, Woolrich is a key figure in a period we retrospectively know as America's noir decades, which extend from roughly the mid-1930s until 1960. His fiction deals with urban life during and after the Depression and World War II, and he's largely responsible for an especially dark strand of noir centering on vulnerable people in an apparently indifferent world whose lives are subject to events beyond their control.

As George Hutchinson has shown in *Facing the Abyss: American Literature and Culture in the 1940s* (2019), the wartime and post-war years in America were characterized by numerous literary evocations of dread. Starting in 1940, Woolrich, who isn't discussed by Hutchinson but is typical of the period, wrote six novels with "black" in the title, four of which were soon adapted into movies; and beginning in 1937, he published well over a hundred stories for *Black Mask* and other journals, many of which were also adapted. His work succeeded not only because it often centered on vulnerable female characters, but also because it participated in a 1940s and 1950s form of psychological suspense and macabre, almost darkly

humorous situations. Edgar G. Ulmer's celebrated B movie *Detour* (1945), which is based on a novel by Martin Goldsmith, is very close to the kind of low-rent desperation one finds in Woolrich, and the novels of Frederic Brown and Patricia Highsmith share in his bleak ironies (although Highsmith creates a sexually ambiguous world in which almost everyone is guilty).

One of the best places to find such fiction in the mass culture of the period was CBS radio's highly popular *Suspense* (1942-1962), which featured a galaxy of Hollywood stars in stories adapted from a variety of noir authors: James Stewart played a doctor who tries to escape his marriage by faking his death, Mickey Rooney played a murderous jazz musician who hears drums in his head, and Ida Lupino played a career woman whose ex-con husband threatens to shoot her. The show eventuated in over nine hundred episodes, many introduced by "The Man in Black," who was the inspiration for suave radio storyteller Claude Rains in Michael Curtiz's film noir, *The Unsuspected* (1947). Its most successful broadcast was Lucille Fletcher's 1943 drama "Sorry, Wrong Number," starring Agnes Moorhead. (A Woolrich-like plot, in 1948 it became a film noir starring Barbara Stanwyck.)



Woolrich was adapted over thirty times on *Suspense*, and more than once on *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, which resembled *Suspense* and was one of the most popular TV shows in America during the 1950s. In cinema, he's been adapted so often and in so many countries that adequate discussion of even the most important films would require this essay to become a book.⁴ Hollywood didn't always do him justice, because the classic studios tried to alleviate the most brutal violence and darkest moods of his fiction. On a few of the occasions when Hollywood gave Woolrich upbeat or happy endings, however, they left an aftereffect of something unresolved, because the conditions that had given rise to an atmosphere of anxiety weren't completely eliminated. Here, by way of illustration, and without the highly detailed criticism some of them deserve, are notes on seven of the best Woolrich-inspired Hollywood features of the noir decades, plus one TV show, arranged in chronological order:



One : Val Lewton and Jacques Tourneur's low-budget *The Leopard Man* (1943), based on Woolrich's violent serial-killer novel *Black Alibi*, was produced at RKO, which abandoned Woolrich's title in order to capitalize on

the sleeper success of Lewton and Tourneur's equally low-budget *Cat People* (1942), an innovative, supernatural horror picture that had earned significant profit for the studio. *The Leopard Man* isn't supernatural, but it shows the family relation between film noir and a cinematic tradition of estheticized, romantically poetic horror, mostly European in origin, to which Lewton and Tourneur made several contributions.

Produced at a cost of around \$150,000, the film was shot in roughly a month on sets representing New Mexico instead of the Latin-American locale of the Woolrich novel. Wikipedia describes it as the first serial killer movie, but the attempt to name the first film of any genre is always problematic; Fritz Lang's *M* (1930) precedes *The Leopard Man* by over a decade, and other serial-killer films have been traced back as far as 1909. In any case, *The Leopard Man* involves three murders, the first of which, though treated indirectly, is the bloodiest violence in any of the Lewton productions, suggestive of the more grim violence in Woolrich: A young Mexican girl is sent out at night by her mother to buy flour. En route, she experiences what Lewton called a "bus" moment--a term derived from a famous scene in *Cat People* when the sound of an arriving bus gives the audience a jump scare. The girl sees a leopard, spills the flour, and runs home in terror, pounding and screaming on her locked door. Tourneur cuts to inside the house. The mother, irritated with the child, is slow to respond, and blood trickles in under the door.

Nothing in the film afterward is equally disturbing, but as Joel E. Siegel has pointed out, Lewton's female screenwriter Ardel Wray, inspired by the serial structure of Woolrich's novel, achieved something unusual. *The Leopard Man* is a film without a strong central character, and it moves almost like a loosely connected anthology from one murder to another.⁵ It also has an unusual climax, less spectacular than in Woolrich but haunting in the manner of Tourneur, involving a nocturnal chase through a bizarre procession of black-hooded mendicants who are walking through a studio-recreated desert.

Two : A more celebrated Woolrich adaptation is Robert Siodmak's *Phantom Lady* (1944), produced at Universal by Hitchcock's talented associate Joan Harrison. Ella Raines stars as an intrepid secretary named Kansas (a character and name appropriate for Howard Hawks) who sets out to prove that her boss, on whom she has a crush, isn't guilty of murdering his wife.



The film gives this character more importance than she had in the novel; it not only changes her name and makes her a working woman, but also transforms her into a tough, relatively independent agent. Her search for a mysterious female in a flamboyant hat leads her through a studio-created, hallucinatory New York and a series of dangerous encounters with men, but she never shrinks. The most cinematically effective episode, filled with shadows and heels clicking on wet pavement, begins when Kansas goes to a crowded bar, stares down the bartender until the place closes, and then tracks him through the night until they're alone on an elevated train platform. Later, she impersonates a floozie in order to gain information from Elisha Cook, Jr., the quintessential noir character actor, who plays a sex-crazed jazz drummer. A midnight jam session featuring Cook's drumming is a delirious montage of low angles and lens distortions, creating the impression that jazz is a libidinal jungle music. Cook leers, Ella Raines smacks gum and shows her legs, and they exit together into the night. In the end, however, he's no match for her.

In one of *Phantom Lady's* most notable departures from Woolrich, we learn the identity of the killer before he's discovered by any of the

characters--a change of plot that turns the final third of the film into a pure suspense story. The culprit is revealed as a handsome, charming friend of Kansas's boss who has periodic migraines that turn his artist's hands into lethal weapons. Suspense mounts when he assists Kansas with the investigation. The concluding scenes, however, are relatively disappointing because the villainy is overplayed and the happy ending is cute, out of key with the rest of the film.

Three : *Black Angel* (1946), also from Universal, is given high praise from Woolrich biographer Francis M. Nevins, Jr., who declares, "If a single theatrical feature based on a Woolrich book could be preserved for future generations, *Black Angel* is the one I would opt to keep."⁶ But as Nevins explains, the film is different from the novel and Woolrich seems to have disliked it. When Columbia University's distinguished professor Mark Van Doren wrote Woolrich to say how much he enjoyed seeing the author's name in the credits, Woolrich went out to see the picture and wrote back, confessing that he felt nothing but shame and embarrassment: "I was so ashamed when I came out of there . . . All I could keep thinking in the dark was: Is *that* what I wasted my whole life at?"⁷



Black Angel is nevertheless skillfully directed by unsung auteur Roy William Neil, who was known chiefly for his modernized Sherlock Holmes films. (One of these, *The Woman in Green* [1945], has canted camera angles before Carol Reed ever thought of them, and could easily be termed a film noir.) *Black Angel* also preserves several distinctive qualities of the Woolrich imagination. June Vincent plays a woman whose husband is sentenced to death for the murder of his mistress; again we have a female searching for a killer, but she's aided throughout by an alcoholic pianist, played by Dan Duryea, who was once married to the murder victim and is subject to drunken blackouts. By fortuitous coincidence, Vincent was a professional singer before her marriage. Duryea stops drinking, Vincent forms an act with him, and they take a job in a nightclub where they can investigate the sinister, suspicious Peter Lorre, who plays his every scene with louche poses and a cigarette dangling from his lips. Suspense mounts during the investigation, and, as with *Phantom Lady*, the true killer is eventually discovered with a little help from a police detective. But *Black Angel* differs from *Phantom Lady* because the killer isn't a clichéd madman. The conclusion satisfies the demands of the Hollywood Production Code by punishing the guilty, rescuing the innocent, and preserving a marriage, but it has an ironically downbeat quality. June Vincent might have been happier with the murderer than with her philandering husband.

Four: Arthur Ripley's *The Chase* (1946), based on Woolrich's *The Black Path of Fear*, separates mystery addicts from Surrealists. Many viewers find it laughably absurd, but to me and others it's fascinating. Noir historian Eddie Muller, quoted on the jacket of the current DVD edition, is correct when he says it's the closest thing in the classic studio era to a David Lynch movie. Much like Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1997) and *Mulholland Drive* (1999), it achieves what French Surrealists Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, authors of the first and most important book on film noir, regarded as ideal noir-ness, which they described with five affective qualities: "oneiric, strange, erotic, ambivalent, and cruel." The second of these adjectives--"insolite" in French--is difficult to render in English but especially important; it refers to disorientation or loss of familiar guideposts, and has something in common with a family of strange-making effects, among them Freud's "uncanny," the Russian formalists' "defamiliarization," and Brecht's "estrangement." Like many filmmakers, Lynch achieves the "insolite" and other noir-like qualities by converting

familiar plots, characters, and iconography into pure dreamwork. *The Chase* is less sophisticated, and some of its strangeness was involuntary. But in a decade when Hollywood was influenced by Surrealist design and oneiric effects were fashionable, it has not only surreal décor but also the second longest dream sequence in all of noir, surpassed only by Fritz Lang's *The Woman in the Window* (1944).



The Chase was produced by the German émigré Seymour Nebenzal, who, while in Germany, had produced Lang's *M* (he also produced the 1950 Hollywood remake). Undoubtedly Nebenzal knew that in Germany Lang was given a chance to direct another lengthy dream: *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919). Lang was unable to take the job, but suggested the film should be given a framing narrative, or what the Germans call a *Rahmenhandlung*, motivating expressionist strangeness and distortions by explaining them as the dream of a madman in a mental institution. His suggestion was followed, and in some quarters has been severely criticized, most notably by Siegfried Kracauer in *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947), who regarded it as a

concession to authoritarianism. *The Woman in the Window* and *The Chase* employ more deceptive varieties of *Rahmenhandlung*, and they, too, have been criticized, for cheating their way to happy endings. But all three films can be defended because the framing scenes don't contradict larger aims or thematic elements. In *The Chase*, the strategy is particularly effective because there's almost no clue indicating the start of the dream, and waking life is just as surreal as sleeping life.

Philip Yordan's screenplay for *The Chase* adds to Woolrich's comparatively straightforward novel a long dream in which both the protagonist and the woman he loves are murdered. This turn of events is all the more shocking because, unlike other noir pictures that tried to fool the audience into accepting dream as reality (*The Woman in the Window* and *The Strange Affair of Uncle Harry* [1946], for example), *The Chase* lacks a clear "framing" moment--an ambiguous scene in which the leading character sits in an easy chair or reclines on a bed, to which we return at the ending of the dream. We do see the protagonist lying down and reading, but we cut away to another character, who goes to the protagonist's room and finds him gone. Once the dream ends and the protagonist awakes, things become equally bizarre; certain events of the dream repeat themselves in "reality," as if we were journeying again down the same black path of fear.

The dizzying film stars Robert Cummings, usually more effective in light comedy than in drama, as a newly discharged, unemployed veteran who suffers from bouts of wartime trauma, fever, and amnesia. At first sight, he seems comic. Standing outside a Miami café wearing an old suit with a ruptured duck in the lapel, he smiles as he watches a cook at work. ("Ruptured duck" was the name U.S. veterans of World War II bestowed upon a tiny lapel pin the government gave them; it was supposed to represent an American eagle, but the vets joked that it looked more like an injured duck.) Then he leans forward in hunger, mashing his hat brim against the window. Suddenly, in one of those coincidences that happen only in Hollywood and Woolrich, he notices an expensive wallet on the sidewalk at his feet.

After purchasing a big breakfast, Cummings returns the wallet to its owner, a Miami gangster played by Steve Cochran, who lives in a mansion that looks as if it were decorated by Salvador Dali. Cochran is a moody sadist who beats up his female manicurist for nicking his finger and at every opportunity abuses his beautiful wife (Michele Morgan). His equally sadistic assistant is played by Peter Lorre, once again with a cigarette dangling from his lips. Amused by Cummings' honesty, Cochran gives him a job as his chauffeur. Hidden on the back-seat floor of the gangster's Cadillac is a gizmo that belongs in a Saturday-afternoon serial: an extra gas pedal and break, with a switch enabling Cochran to take control of the car and almost bust the speedometer.

Cummings puts up with Cochran's dangerous practical joking, but feels concern for Morgan, who offers him a thousand dollars to help her escape to Havana. They soon fall in love and take a boat to Cuba, but danger awaits. On their first night in Havana, they travel romantically by horse and carriage to a popular nightclub, Cummings wearing the most glamorous white fedora in the history of film noir. While he and Morgan are together on the crowded dance floor, she's knifed, dying in Cummings' arms. The police find evidence that Cummings purchased the murder weapon in a Havana curio shop, and he goes on the run to prove his innocence and find the killer. Franz Planer's black-and-white photography creates a wonderfully shadowy, nocturnal Havana, especially in and around the curio shop where Cummings goes to find information about the knife. Hiding in the shadows is Peter Lorre, who has followed Cummings and Morgan to Havana, and who kills Cummings.

At this point we discover that Cummings has been dreaming; he awakes, sweating profusely, suffering from an attack of amnesia. More plot complications ensue, but Cummings eventually recovers his memory and goes to find Morgan so they can escape to Cuba. Meanwhile, Cochran has discovered their escape plan, and he and Lorre pursue them in the Cadillac. During the high-speed chase, Cochran accelerates to a hundred miles an hour, and when the car crosses a railroad track he and Lorre are obliterated by an oncoming locomotive. (The models of the car and train are unconvincing, but somehow in keeping with the weirdness and absurdity of the film.)

Now free, Cummings and Morgan board a ship and arrive in Havana, where everything is eerily similar to what we've seen in the dream: the couple arrive at the same nightclub as before in the same horse and

carriage, driven by the same slightly grumpy driver. Cummings is wearing the same white fedora. In the last shot he and Morgan kiss, as they did before. David Bordwell has remarked that the effect of all this is “Buñuelian.” (Bordwell has done impressive research on the production, examining revisions of the Yordan screenplay, a couple of novelizations, and the Nebenzal papers at the Munich Film Archive. Among his discoveries is that “most of the waking-up scene was shot during principle photography, but the opening shot of that scene, along with the falling-asleep scene, was filmed during retakes that Nebenzal ordered.” There was a plan to film a patriotic epilogue featuring Cummings and Morgan, but it was abandoned. The final clinch between the lovers outside the nightclub was cobbled together in haste, using footage from the dream. The result illustrates what Bordwell describes as “the unexpected virtues of accidental innovation” (davidbordwell.net/blog/2016/11/01/back-on-the-trail-of-the-chase).

Five: Two impressive films were derived from Woolrich stories about characters who claim they've seen a murder and can't find anyone to believe them.



The first, *The Window* (1949), based on “The Boy Cried Murder,” initially published in *Mystery Book Magazine* in 1947, is a modestly budgeted picture directed by Ted Tetzlaff and scripted by Mel Dinelli. It's the only screen

adaptation of Woolrich that gives documentary evidence of what areas of New York City looked like when he was writing. Symptomatic of Hollywood's turn toward location shooting after World War II, it belongs in company with an increasing number of documentary-style thrillers filmed in New York. Producer Frederick Ullman, who had previously worked with Pathé News, arranged for exteriors to be shot mainly along East 67th, 103rd, 106th, and the 3rd Avenue El. The film was completed in 1947 but not released until 1949, probably because RKO thought the unglamorous setting, lack of stars, and relatively simple boy-who-cried-wolf story would have little commercial appeal. It turned out to be an award-winning hit, popular with both critics and audiences. Bobby Driscoll, the child actor who plays the central role, was so effective that the Motion Picture Academy awarded him a miniature Oscar.

The boy played by Driscoll lives with working-class parents (Arthur Kennedy and Barbara Hale) in a tenement where everything is in disrepair. There's no air conditioning, and the city is in the midst of a heat wave. Kids improvise summer activity: they play stick-ball in the crowded streets, shoot marbles in the dirt at the bottom of abandoned buildings, and occasionally chase fire trucks. No girls are in sight. Mothers string wet laundry outside their windows and boys create imaginary adventure by scampering across rooftops and up and down fire escapes. (One title under which the reprinted Woolrich story appeared was "Fire Escape.") The film's only significant social inaccuracy is that the neighborhood seems all white, on the bottom edge of the proletariat but with no ethnic diversity.

The boy at the center of the action has a vivid imagination but a habit of telling tall tales. His father works nights, and one evening, when the boy and his mother are sweltering, he gets permission to take a pillow onto the fire escape so he can sleep in the night air. Searching for a breeze, he goes up to the next level, where, through a half open window, he sees the upstairs neighbors (Ruth Roman and the always excellent Paul Stewart) commit murder. He rushes back to tell his mother, but she's exasperated with his fantastic stories and tells him he's had a nightmare.

The murder is less violent than in the Woolrich story, the boy's parents more sympathetic, and the film as a whole less centered on the boy's point of view. As in Woolrich, however, one of the chief ironies and engines of suspense is that when the boy keeps insisting that he's telling the truth, his parents' efforts to discipline him put him in increasing danger of being killed by the neighbors. At one point the frustrated father puts the

boy in his room and nails the door shut to keep him out of mischief, thus making him easy prey. As tension mounts, another irony develops: the mean streets seem liberating, and the interiors of the tenement become a barred, caged trap--an effect heightened by Robert De Grasse's photography, which emphasizes slatted shadows and barriers. At the end, all is happily resolved and the boy's parents made proud. But only a moment of reflection should leave us uneasy about the cheerfulness: the father still works nights, the mother is still burdened by chores, and the neighborhood is still dangerous. As the boy complains at an earlier point, "There's no place to go."

Six: No Man of Her Own (1950), an expensive Paramount production directed by Mitchell Leisen and starring Barbara Stanwyck, is a blend of noir and family melodrama. Screenwriters Catherine Turney and Sally Benson (Benson was author of the stories that became MGM's *Meet Me in St. Louis* [1944]) remain relatively true to Woolrich's *I Married a Dead Man*, except at the closing.



Like the novel, the film has a flashback structure. It begins with Stanwyck and John Lund looking speechless and depressed, seated in the living room of an elegant old home, with an infant between them who seems to be theirs. Stanwyck's opening voiceover is similar to the opening lines in

Woolrich: the world of this little family seems to offer everything, she says, "but not for us." A flashback then takes us to a quite different scene. A visibly pregnant Stanwyck (a rarity in classic Hollywood), struggles with luggage up several flights of a shabby apartment building. She pounds on an unanswered door, cries, and pleads with the man inside-- he's handsome Lyle Bettger, the father of her child, who has a sexy new girlfriend. Ignoring Stanwyck's pleas, Bettger shoves a train ticket out of town and five dollars under the door.

The humiliated Stanwyck accidentally drops the money in the hallway but takes the train, which is so overcrowded she can't find a seat. Another pregnant woman notices her, nudges her husband to make room, and strikes up a conversation. In the most jaw-dropping accident and *coup de théâtre* in all of Woolrich, the two women are in the toilet and Stanwyck is for a moment wearing her new friend's wedding ring as the train crashes, killing both the newlyweds, who were on their way to introduce the husband's wife to his family.

To save her child, who is born immediately after the accident, Stanwyck assumes the dead wife's identity. She arrives in an idyllic Midwestern town and is welcomed into the arms of a wealthy, loving family who treat her as their daughter. As time goes by, a romance develops between her and the dead husband's brother (Lund), who suspects her false identity but recognizes her fundamental decency. Everything is perfect, but one evening at a country-club dance, just as Stanwyck and Lund are planning marriage, the smarmy Bettger appears from out of the past with blackmail on his mind.

One problem with the film is its treatment of social class. The Illinois family hasn't a trace of internal tensions, and is so devoted to Stanwick that the patriarch revises his will, bestowing a fortune on her despite her protestations. Even the family's friends at the country club seem welcoming to the newcomer. (The gently satiric *Letter to Three Wives* [1949], made at almost the same time as this film, is far more attuned to social tensions in an all-white country club.) Perhaps the filmmakers felt a need to idealize the upper middle class in order to heighten Stanwick's anxiety when Bettger reappears. Realizing that she'll soon be a wealthy heiress, he threatens to reveal her identity to the family unless she secretly marries him under her new name. This plunges her into a fully noir world (wisely free of non-diegetic music), taking her to the dark side of town and a cascading series of dangerous, suspenseful situations.

Bettger drives Stanwick to an out-of-state Justice of the Peace, and to coerce her into marriage uses a telephone, threatening to call the rich family. Stanwyck pleads with him, and he inadvertently leaves the line open. The mother of the Illinois household can hear their conversation, and she summons Lund, who attempts to come to the rescue. Stanwyck resists marriage until the very end, when she hears the last line of the vow: "till death do us part." Meanwhile, Lund is delayed by an attempt to trace the phone call, and further delayed on the road when his car is stuck in a snowbank. Late that evening, Bettger drops Stanwyck off at the rich family home, planning to stay away until the proper moment. She immediately goes to the empty library, finds the father's pistol, and calls a taxi. Upstairs, the mother of the house, who is suffering from a heart condition, hears the taxi arrive and senses what Stanwick might be planning. As the taxi departs, the mother grasps her heart.

Stanwyck arrives at a dark, silent street on the rough side of town and finds Bettger's newly established "office," located upstairs from a cheap dentist and an exterminating company, with his name scotch-taped to the door. Inside, Bettger reclines fully dressed on a bed, staring at the ceiling. He doesn't respond when Stanwyck speaks, and in her tense emotional state she fires the gun. When she tries to leave, Lund arrives; this leads to a desperate conversation, after which Lund sends her to his car, cleans up evidence, and begins the job of disposing of Bettger's dead body. Eventually, Stanwyck finds herself seated at the wheel of Lund's car, having narrowly evaded discovery by a police patrol, while Lund gets rid of Bettger. It's an ironic echo of a scene in *Double Indemnity*, in which a cold-blooded Stanwyck sits behind the wheel while Fred MacMurray does the dirty work; there's even a similar moment when it looks like the car might not start. (Billy Wilder, who had worked as a screenwriter at Paramount under Mitchell Leisen and intensely disliked him, probably wasn't amused.)

When Stanwick and Lund arrive home, they find that his mother has died of a heart attack after writing a death-bed confession that she killed Bettger. The film nevertheless finds a way to a happy ending. The Woolrich novel closes with the two leading characters free of the law but mutually suspicious, each feeling the other has killed the blackmailer, living in a state of perpetual guilt and dread. "I don't know what the game was," the woman narrator says. "I don't even know what the stakes are. I only know they're not for us" (254). In contrast, *No Man of Her Own* resolves everything with an improbable but amusing twist. The flashback ends,

taking us back to the scene that began the film. Three weeks have passed since the shooting of Bettger. A plain-clothes detective arrives at Stanwyck and Lund's door, and for a moment it seems he's going to announce their doom. Instead he informs them that Bettger was already dead when Stanwyck fired, and her bullet hit the mattress instead of the body. The real killer was Bettger's flashy girlfriend, whom we saw very briefly at an earlier point, unnoticed by the other characters. She's now sitting in the back seat of the detective's car, guarded by a policeman, lighting a cigarette and grumbling about what a swine Bettger was. The last shot of the film shows the exterior of the beautiful family home, with Stanwyck's voiceover saying that she and Lund can now "face anything." Probably some viewers will have doubts about this.

Seven : The best film based on Woolrich, and indeed one of the best films in history, is Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), which is derived from a novella originally published under the title "It Had to Be Murder" (1942). (The novella was subsequently published as "Murder from a Fixed Position," and, after the film appeared, as "Rear Window.")



So much has been written about this picture that little needs to be said here. It should be noted, however, that not everyone thinks *Rear*

Window is a film noir. In an interesting essay on Woolrich and urban space, David Reid and Jayne L. Walker declare flatly that it isn't--in part, they argue, because no movie with Thelma Ritter could possibly be called noir.⁸ (One assumes they haven't seen Sam Fuller's *Pickup on South Street*.) But there are better reasons why *Rear Window* seems only marginally noir-like. The most amusing and glamorous of Woolrich adaptations, it has Robert Burks' gorgeously colorful Vista Vision photography; a gigantic, charmingly pretty, doll-house set representing a Greenwich Village courtyard; a semi-bohemian but equally charming apartment; a series of open windows across the way framed almost like movie screens; and, to the delight of every voyeur, vignettes redolent of Hollywood movies--little "human interest" stories played in the windows, some comic, some sad, but spiced with sex and murder.

Whether or not it's noir, *Rear Window* has little of the characteristic Woolrich ambiance. In the original story, the protagonist, a lonely, bored man named Jeffries, has a broken leg, no courtyard, no camera, no telephoto lens, and no amusement when he looks out his window. His only company is a black servant named Sam, who prepares meals and goes home every night. When Jeffries becomes convinced that a man in a nearby building has murdered his wife, he sends Sam to investigate and rewards him with a drink for completing the dangerous mission: "you're as close to white as you'll ever be," Jeffries says.

Hitchcock eliminates Sam and adds Grace Kelly in designer dresses, plus Thelma Ritter, a specialist in working-class roles, as a wisecracking nurse from Brooklyn who gives James Stewart rubdowns. At the same time, Hitchcock achieves a cinematic tour-de-force--a sustained demonstration of the Kuleshov effect, a lesson in how to deploy several characters in a small room, and the elaboration of the Woolrich story into a fusion of romance, humor, and suspense. The last shot introduces a note of witty skepticism about the future of Kelly and Stewart, but doesn't approach the moody pessimism typical of Woolrich.

Plus One: Hitchcock is much closer to Woolrich in "Four O'Clock," a 51-minute telefilm broadcast in 1957 on NBC's *Suspicion*. Scripted by Francis Cockrell, it's an adaptation of a Woolrich story called "Three O'Clock" (1938). E. G. Marshall plays a small businessman who repairs watches and clocks, and who believes his wife (Nancy Kelly) is having an affair. (A bit role is played by an actor named Dean Stanton, later famous as Harry Dean

Stanton.) The result is a superb example of what Hitchcock termed “pure cinema.”



Hitchcock's style had derived from his experience in silent film, and early in this picture we have a long, mesmerizing, dialog-free sequence in which Marshall methodically goes through the entire procedure of making and testing a time bomb. Later, we have a dramatization of Hitchcock's famous distinction between surprise and suspense. In his interview with François Truffaut, Hitchcock described a scene in which two characters sit at a table chatting for several minutes about something innocuous, when suddenly a bomb goes off, blowing them to smithereens. The result, he said, is several minutes of boredom followed by an instant of surprise. But imagine the same scene, he added, if the audience is informed in advance that there's a bomb under the table: the result is several minutes of suspense.

When he spoke with Truffaut, Hitchcock may have been thinking of “Four O'Clock,” because it has exactly the second type of scene, with the suspense prolonged for a long time. The film might have been even more like “pure cinema” if it had dispensed with most of E. G. Marshall's unnecessary interior monologue in the last half. But as the clock on the time bomb reaches its deadline and the plot tilts toward madness, the imagery and editing are in their own modest way as good as the shower scene in *Psycho* (1960).

The Woolrich story that inspired “Four O’Clock” was adapted three times on TV and twice on radio, and all the other Woolrich fiction I’ve discussed was adapted more than once, sometimes by other media or other national cinemas, occasionally in surprising forms. *I Married a Dead Man*, the source of *No Man of Her Own*, became a French thriller (*I Married a Shadow* [1983]), a TV movie (*She’s No Angel* [2002]), and, believe it or not, a romantic comedy (*Mrs. Winterbourne* [1996]). Perhaps inevitably, however, a few of Woolrich’s many novels and stories have yet to be adapted, and some of the best have yet to become significant films. Among the latter group is the 1947 novel *Waltz Into Darkness*, which was the source of both François Truffaut’s un-Woolrich-like *Mississippi Mermaid* (1969) and Michael Cristofer’s somewhat underrated *Original Sin* (2001). The masochistic eroticism and period flavor of the novel were captured more accurately in the Cristofer film, which nevertheless failed at the box office. This failure, plus the major changes of the entertainment industry wrought by digital technology, may account for the fact that almost two decades have now passed without a Woolrich-based theatrical picture.

But the suspenseful situations Woolrich imagined will likely continue to be adapted. He never developed a highly successful series character such as Spade or Marlowe, who figured in many radio and TV shows not directly based on Hammett or Chandler, yet he left behind a trove of dark narratives that can be loosely adapted or reconfigured in a variety of ways. The sense of angst or existential dread he gave to popular fiction in the late 1930s and 40s has a perennial quality; old films based on him still have an audience, and he’ll remain a richer source of plots and characters than most writers of crime fiction. Indeed, in 2018, Mike Medavoy of Phoenix Pictures announced plans for a TV’s anthology series based on stories by Woolrich. In the era of streaming, this is a natural and excellent idea. Medavoy was able to clear the complicated rights from five owners of the papers in the Woolrich estate, and as of this writing his plans seem close to fruition. Even if the series doesn’t appear, we probably haven’t seen the last of Woolrich.

¹ *The Black Curtain* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982), p. 1.

² *The Black Angel* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2012), p. 87.

³ *I Married a Dead Man* (New York and London: Penguin Books, 1994), pp. 7-8.

⁴ For a book-length discussion of Woolrich adaptations, see Thomas Renzi, *From Pulp Noir to Film Noir* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 2006).

⁵ See Joel E. Siegel, *Val Lewton: The Reality of Terror* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), pp. 115-119.

⁶ Francis M. Nevins, Jr., *Cornell Woolrich: First You Dream, Then You Die* (New York: The Mysterious Press, 1988), p. 462.

⁷ Quoted in Nevins, p. 464.

⁸ David Reid and Jayne L. Walker, "Strange Pursuit: Cornell Woolrich and the Abandoned City of the Forties," in *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993), p. 87.