

NOIR: THE DARK SIDE

Is it time to try your hand at noir and put some narcissistic characters on the road to doom?

By Barbara DeMarco-Barrett

When my short story “Crazy for You” was published last year in the anthology *Orange County Noir*, my mother-in-law asked: “What is noir, anyway?”

She reads mysteries in which light triumphs over darkness and good wins out in the end.

“Well,” I began, “in noir the main characters want better things for themselves, but try as they might, they just keep making wrong choices and things go from bad to worse.”

“Oh, like real life,” she said, and we both began laughing.

There was more than a little bit of truth in her response. While most of us manage to stumble at times down paths of wrong choices, finding ourselves in messes we never imagined, the combination of sex, greed and murder—the main ingredients of noir—does not color our daily lives.

In noir, the main characters are on a path to doom and destruction, motivated by their narcissistic personality quirks. Think *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity* by James M. Cain (two of my favorite noir books and movies). In both, the main characters don’t intend to commit murder, but what drives them (lust, the desire for a better life, money) is what leads to their ultimate demise.

“There are two essential ingredients that separate noir fiction from the rest of the mystery-crime genre: a protagonist lacking a moral center and an unhappy ending. It’s definitely an acquired taste,” says Dick Lochte, an award-winning author and president of Private Eye Writers of America.



Paramount Pictures/Photofest

James M. Cain’s 1934 novel, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, stirred up a classic stew of noir ingredients—sex, greed and violence—and was adapted numerous times as a film. Above, an alluring Jessica Lange and a snarling Jack Nicholson in the 1981 film version.

Noir vs. mystery or suspense

Simplified, a mystery is a whodunit: Someone’s been murdered, and it’s the protagonist’s job to learn who the killer is. Fit the pieces together; mystery solved. We identify with the detective, whether a professional or amateur. Think Sue Gratton, Agatha Christie, Nancy Drew.

A suspense novel is more difficult to define. We identify with the victim (who may be a cop or detective, but isn’t necessarily). The victim is caught up in her own personal nightmare and needs to come up with new ways to survive—and fast. Think T. Jefferson Parker, Michael Crichton, Laura Lippman.

“Noir can incorporate either simple detection or active suspense,” says Norreen Ayres, whose story “Rust” is included in the *Best American Mystery Stories 2009*. “Its distinguishing feature is an alienated protagonist, a person who is on the edge

of moral breakdown or who has completed it, even though his or her actions may be understandable. The setting may be shoddy or upscale, but the internal conversation is bleak.”

Most of us are able to rise above our baser instincts, but not so for the main characters in noir fiction. “Noir is about us acting on our baser instincts, so we can’t help but be fascinated,” says crime writer Gary Phillips. “There’s a vicarious thrill that reminds us we could be one of the principals in a noir story, but we know we’d get burned.”

Elements of noir

Like all good fiction, noir incorporates fictional techniques including metaphor, simile and narrative. But two elements that are perhaps more noticeable, and important, in noir are dialogue and plot. In noir, dialogue is terse and snappy, and

is vital for moving the story along.

Setting, too: The well-chosen word or phrase does much to paint a scene, create a mood. The best noir writers make us feel the sun's heat, smell the beer-washed bar, see the dark, musty basement.

Susan Straight, whose noir story "The Golden Gopher" won an Edgar Award, says, "What I love about noir is how the plot moves things along, allowing the author to examine a society or landscape or family in ways that stay vitally adhered to the plot."

Story line is a biggie. "Writing noir mirrors the story line; you are totally in the moment," says Naomi Hirahara, author of the award-winning Mas Arai mystery series. "In contrast, when I tackle my mystery series, I have to pay attention to inserting red herrings and effectively braiding the problem-solving elements of the plot."

Getting started

For fiction writers, plot is challenging, to say the least. On my radio show, crime writers have said time and again that they turned from literary fiction to mystery fiction because in their novels, nothing ever happened, but in crime fiction plot is inherent.

When I was encouraged to write a story for *Orange County Noir*, it was anything but easy coming up with a plot. As I brainstormed, an old favorite movie, *Days of Heaven*, came to mind. At the start of the 20th century, a couple pretend to be brother and sister to scam a wealthy landowner, but the pretend sister falls in love with the landowner.

I moved the setting to the beginning of the 21st century in Orange County, Calif., where I live, and I made the wealthy landowner into a wealthy land developer, a type so prevalent in my area. While I culled from people and places I had known, it was truly a fictional story. (Still, my mother-in-law couldn't read it—she kept seeing me. "But it's fiction! I swear!" I said.)

Other writers use their personal experiences. Hirahara used an experience at a

Koreatown spa in Los Angeles to write her short story "Number 19," published in *Los Angeles Noir*.

"I had heard so much about the salt scrub and was looking forward to soaking in the tubs and getting a scrub down," Hirahara says. "But the assembly-line nature, with the masseuses wearing black bras and underpants, haunted me, their anonymity in a place where the rest of us were totally naked. I felt for the workers and attempted to engage in conversations. I even had a nightmare about the experience! I knew that I would have to eventually write about the spa, and the noir format worked perfectly."

The market

Noir appeared in the 1920s as a reaction to the cozy mysteries then popular. It soon distinguished itself from detective stories with its fast-paced storytelling, gritty scenarios, and use of sex as a means of advancing the plot. In the 1940s, film noir emerged, and in the 1950s noir fiction saw its heyday. It died down but is now popular once again, due in part to online publishing venues.

"Now with e-books, websites and e-zines for short stories and serialized novellas, it seems to me there's some lively venues for the stuff," Phillips says. "And some of this material eventually gets collected or rediscovered and sees print as well."

Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine, one of the leading mystery magazines, publishes roughly 25 percent noir, editor Janet Hutchings says. "A few years ago, *EQMM* brought back its Black Mask Department, which is exclusively for noir stories. *Black Mask* was the most famous magazine of its time for that area of the genre."

The magazine is also open to new

writers. "EQMM has a Department of First Stories, too, and we try to publish at least one story by a previously unpublished writer in each issue," Hutchings says.

At a time when book publishers feel the overwhelming need to categorize, it can be tough finding a place for your noir novel.

"I don't think traditional

publishing outlets know how to find a large audience for noir or dark fiction," Hirahara says. "This is where new imprints and small presses have filled this gap. Some enterprising writers have also joined together to create their own exclusive e-book imprints. Once a noir writer is known and has a large following, a big publisher can then come in and successfully widen the author's readership."

One publisher that has helped get noir back on the literary map is the Brooklyn-based publisher Akashic Books. Its noir anthologies based on specific cities started with *Brooklyn Noir* in 2004 and have expanded to more than 40 titles.

"Mystery bookstores, publications and readers are a very enthusiastic bunch, and have been very supportive of the series from the start," says managing editor Johanna Ingalls. "For us, the market for our noir books has been quite strong, and it has often been a bit easier to sell mystery/crime fiction than some of our literary fiction."

Are noir writers gloomy?

What sort of personality do you have to have to write noir? As Ayres says, "Noir is a perspective on the world. One can be a cheery enough person in daily life yet hold a grim view of it. Those who see a noir slant on the world are bifurcated souls: grateful and happy, yet owning a full supply of regret and sadness. Noir fiction stamps the world as a risky, quickly changing place, and we'd better be ready for it. Comedy recognizes absurdity and failure; noir confirms and alerts. Two sides of the same coin."

Consider giving noir a chance. As you lurk in the shadows, you may be surprised at how much you like it.

Barbara DeMarco-Barrett

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