

## james m. cain and the los angeles novel

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For Edmund Wilson, James Cain headed the list of West Coast “tough guy” writers he labeled “the Boys in the Back Room” in a 1940 group review.<sup>1</sup> Cain, who had come to Los Angeles to work as a screenwriter in 1931, had at that time written only one novel wholly about the region, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934).<sup>2</sup> Still to come were *Mildred Pierce* (1941) and *Double Indemnity* (published serially in 1936 and in book form in 1943). Although Cain’s career as a novelist continued for several more decades into the 1970s, he is best remembered today for his three L.A. novels. In 1969 the three were combined in a Knopf hardcover edition as *Cain X 3* with a roguish introduction by Tom Wolfe, and just recently the trio have reappeared in separate Vintage paperbacks. The film versions of all three, made in the mid-forties, show up frequently on late night television and have become regular offerings in campus and revival movie houses. *Postman*, moreover, provided the story line for Luchino Visconti’s *Ossessione* (1942), the film recognized now as the chief source of Italy’s Neo-realism cinema; Cain, thus, was an influence on the first significant new trend in postwar filmmaking.

While we are not, certainly, in the midst of a Cain renaissance, we are in a time when the rediscovery or, more accurately, the reinventing of thirties Los Angeles has become something of a minor industry in the seventies (witness the recent filming of Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust*, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Last Tycoon*, Horace McCoy’s *They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?* and the stream of movie remakes of Raymond Chandler’s novels). Cain, whose *Postman* is really the progenitor of the “tough” L.A. novel, takes on special importance at such a time. Kevin Starr, writing in *New Republic* a few years ago, noted Cain’s “brutal, elemental, and intrinsically pessimistic view” and linked it to the “vision of evil” which permeated the fiction of the region in the depression

decade and which Roman Polanski caught perfectly in his film *Chinatown*.<sup>3</sup> With the others in the back room (particularly West, McCoy and Fitzgerald), Cain wrote about the end of the American Dream in Southern California, where the myth of the New Eden on the Coast collided head-on with the realities of the Depression. As David Madden, who has written the only full-length study of the writer, has said, Cain “was interested in the way the high hopes of the westward movement collapsed on the Pacific shore in the vacant glare of a sunlight that gilds the cheapest artifacts of transient American technology.”<sup>4</sup> West’s 1939 novel, *The Day of the Locust*, has given us the single most powerful metaphor for the collapse of those high hopes, but Cain had pointed the way several years earlier.

Collapse, endings, breakdown—these have been the major themes of the Los Angeles novel, particularly in its flowering in the thirties and early forties. The product of outsiders—writers lured to the film capital by the studios in the early days of sound—the L.A. novel serves as a counter-myth to the youth-health-glamour-opportunity myth promoted by real estate developers and the movies. In the fiction the recurring messages are the breakdown of clear boundaries between reality and illusion, the chasm between expectation and actuality—promise and fulfillment—and the collapse of traditional values and standards in the frantic search for “the good life.” Violence, greed, deception and fraud are everywhere present in the fiction. The novelists make little attempt to analyze the causes for the collapse, but instead give us metaphors for it, concrete instances of shattered dreams. Cain in particular keeps close to the surface of experience. His first-person narrators seem incapable of analysis or introspection. This, perhaps, is why his novels have been turned so successfully into films; as Starr put it, Cain’s novels have the feel of a writer “who has left everything but narration on the cutting room floor.”

Yet his high-speed narratives are not without structure. Cain anchors his novels in time and place by recurring metaphors of cars, the highway and architecture—both of houses and work places. The automobile and the open road dominate the imagery of all three novels. Auto-mobility has been at the center of the California dream since the twenties, and Cain’s characters, behind the wheels of their cars, experience a brief, illusory sense of liberation both from the constraints of the Depression and the consequences of their acts. Fast driving provides release for his desperate people, an emotional and sexual stimulus. Joyriding across the vast Southern California landscape is a recurring occasion in the novels. Cain uses architecture most often in an almost opposite way, as counterpoint to the characters and actions. Houses, usually designed in the California stucco Hispanic style ubiquitous in the thirties and forties, present images of respectability, facades of solidity and success which contrast with the hunger and desperation of their inhabitants. In

a broader sense, houses, in their sameness of design and haphazard construction, serve as metaphors for monotony and exhaustion, for the failure of the West Coast promise. Related to the domestic architecture are the work places—roadside luncheonettes and short order restaurants, oil fields, insurance offices and real estate firms. If not exclusively or even typically the work places of Southern Californians, they are the symbolic enterprises of a region which has always promoted and expressed the dream of mobility and the detached house.

The reader coming to Cain for the first time is intrigued—if not dazzled—by the mass of details and (seemingly) factual information about a wide range of careers he dispenses in his fiction. His knowledge derived both from his own varied background and his work as a journalist. Born and educated in Annapolis, Maryland, Cain tried a number of careers before coming west to try his hand at screenwriting. He had been a high school teacher and principal, insurance salesman, journalist and even, for a brief time, a singer. His only real success came as a journalist. Throughout the twenties he wrote regularly for H. L. Mencken's *The American Mercury* and, under Walter Lippman, for Arthur Krock's *New York World*. He had a long string of articles (on everything from labor relations to the proper carving of a duck) in such magazines as *The Nation*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Esquire* and *Vanity Fair*.

In the Twain-Crane-Dreiser-Hemingway tradition, Cain successfully made the leap from journalism to fiction although he never abandoned magazine writing. Journalism not only provided him with some knowledge of a number of career fields but, more significantly for his craft, helped him achieve the compression, tautness and detached objectivity which, coupled with his sensational and brutal subject matter, characterize his writing and link him with other "tough guy" writers of the period. By the thirties a detached, cynical stance had taken strong hold in fiction, film and drama, connecting such genres as the "hard boiled" detective fiction of Dashiell Hammett and the *Black Mask* school; the leftist proletarian fiction pioneered by Mike Gold; Broadway plays like Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*, Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur's *The Front Page* (filmed in 1930 with Pat O'Brien), Robert Sherwood's *The Petrified Forest* (filmed in 1936 with Humphrey Bogart) and Clifford Odets' *Waiting For Lefty*; and the gangster film.

In the popular culture of the thirties the gangster became the consummate image of the American "tough guy." He served not only as a metaphor for the breakdown of American society but as the hero who could master—even if only temporarily—an environment in which most Americans saw themselves as victims. The gangster was a hero of protest. To Robert Warshaw in his well-known essay "The Gangster as Tragic Hero," the gangster represented to audiences of the thirties a part of the American psyche which rejected the strictures of conventional so-

ciety. W. R. Burnett's *Little Caesar* (1929), written before Hammett's tough guy novels, set the pattern. Mervyn LeRoy turned it into a film starring Edward G. Robinson in 1930—the first talking gangster film. The following year William Wellman made *Public Enemy* with James Cagney, and in 1932 *Scarface*, starring Paul Muni and George Raft, was filmed. While Cain's novels—and their film versions—don't adhere to the formula of the gangster genre, they reveal clearly its influence. By 1934, when Cain wrote *Postman*, he stepped into what had become a well-established “tough guy” tradition in fiction, on stage and in film.

Cain's L.A. novels, drawing on this tradition, express the collective and destructive fantasies of the depression decade and turn these fantasies into nightmares. All of his heroes and heroines are self-destructively driven by sexual passion, a too-consuming love or an overpowering desire for material possessions. Such hunger is always the force driving them to desperate acts. Cain's pattern is to give his protagonists the temporary illusion of victory and then to take everything away from them. Wilson said of the Cain hero: “His fate is forecast from the beginning, but in the meantime he has fabulous adventures—samples, as it were, from a Thousand and One Nights on the screwy California coast.”<sup>5</sup> Frank and Cora in *Postman* beat a murder rap and collect the insurance money but are unable to escape each other. Mildred Pierce rises from abandoned wife and waitress in a shabby coffee shop to owner of a string of restaurants and seems on her way to achieving her real goal—winning the love of her daughter Veda (that most vicious brat in a long literary line of stage-struck Hollywood brats), but Veda's treachery is greater than her own, and Mildred is dragged down just when the goal is within reach. Walter Huff in *Double Indemnity* nearly gets away with the “perfect crime” (his and Phyllis' brilliant scheme is almost the exact opposite of Frank's and Cora's botched murder of Nick), except that his accomplice-lover proves to be more ruthless than he.

Cain's women in the three novels are versions of the familiar American bitch—a type with a long literary history who surfaces regularly in the fiction of the twenties and thirties. While Veda Pierce in her unmitigated selfishness and opportunism is the most distasteful of Cain's bitches, Cora and Phyllis are even more elemental and cold-blooded in their pursuit of money, power and status. Hammett's Brigid O'Shaughnessy, whom Sam Spade, in order to preserve his professional “code,” mercilessly unmasks in the famous ending to *The Maltese Falcon*, is a close antecedent. The woman who uses men for her own ends, whose desires, ambitions and machinations match—or surpass—those of the male, is a stock figure in the crime fiction of the thirties and forties. She is, for example, a regular fixture in Chandler's detective fiction. Her forbears are in the fiction of the twenties, appearing in such guises as Brett Ashley in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* and in those beautiful bitches of Fitzgerald's early fiction, the corrupt Judy Jones-Daisy Bu-

chanan types who fuel the incorruptible dreams of the young heroes.

What defeats Cain's heroes, however, is not what defeats Fitzgerald's: the truth that the dream, once realized, can neither be preserved nor recaptured. For Cain the characters are defeated because their dreams are in direct conflict with those of others. Each character is yoked to, and set against, another—Frank and Cora, Mildred and Veda, Walter and Phyllis—and destroyed because the other is more ruthless, more clever or simply more determined. The pairs are suicidally tied to each other by passion, greed and jealousy. Frank Chambers tells Cora in *Postman*, "We're chained to each other. We thought we were on top of a mountain. That wasn't it. It's on top of us, and that's where it's been since that night."<sup>6</sup> There is never a chance they will get away with anything. Cain explained his formula by saying that "the reader is carried along as much by his own realization that the characters cannot have their particular wish and survive, and his curiosity to see what happens to them."<sup>7</sup>

*Postman*, the first of the three L.A. novels, presents the fable in its clearest form. Cora Smith has won a beauty contest in her Iowa hometown and with it a trip to Hollywood. One of the thousands who chased the Hollywood dream in the twenties, she is one more of its victims in the age of sound. "And when I began to talk up, there on the screen," she tells Frank, "'they knew me for what I was, and so did I. A cheap Des Moines trollop, that has as much chance in pictures as a monkey has'" (20). Frank Chambers is a drifter with no past, no possessions, no plans. He has tramped up the coast from Tijuana. "They threw me off the hay truck about noon," the first-person narrative begins, and from the opening page when he stumbles upon Cora at the Twin Oaks Tavern, a "roadside sandwich joint" outside Glendale, we are off on a high-speed journey leading from passion to murder, to escape, to destruction.

The road provides the central metaphor. The murder is committed on a road in the Malibu Hills, and Cora is killed in an automobile accident on the Pacific Coast Highway while Frank is rushing her to the hospital after a miscarriage. Frank is tried and convicted of Cora's murder. This is the postman's second ringing; having escaped punishment for the crime he *did* commit, he is punished for the one he didn't. The road thus becomes the death route for Nick, for Cora and ultimately for Frank. As one critic of the novel pointed out, the murder site itself is charged with symbolism. Nick is killed in the hills above Malibu, both the "worst piece of road in L.A. County," and also the route, Frank notes, to the homes of many famous movie stars.<sup>8</sup> The road which opens on the dream also closes it off.

The road leads nowhere, doubles back on itself, appears to be leading to freedom, but is actually circular, carrying Frank away from his future, back into the past. Caught up in the illusory freedom of the

California highway, he tells Cora, “I’m talking about the road. It’s fun, Cora. I know every twist and turn it’s got. And I know how to work it too. Isn’t that what we want? Just a pair of tramps, like we really are?” (21-22). But Cora knows the road too, and knows it leads nowhere. She wants outdoor tables, striped awnings and lanterns to attract highway traffic. Cora dreams the dream of commercial success, Frank of mobility and the open road. Both are versions of the American, and the Californian, dream, embodied in the polar images of home and highway, the two-car garage and the fast car in the fast lane.

In presenting his protagonist as the unencumbered drifter with his romantic dream of the open road, Cain provides not only a powerful depression image, but links his first novel to a long native literary tradition of the hero on the road stretching back to (and beyond) Cooper, Whitman and Twain. Moreover, he introduces what is to become a dominant metaphor in L.A. fiction in the years ahead. The vast and varied terrain of Southern California—foothill, canyon, shoreline, desert—provided regional novelists with ready-made images for fluidity, mobility and a deceptive sense of freedom. As L.A. became increasingly a city on wheels, the central figure in the L.A. novel became the man—or woman—in the driver’s seat. Raymond Chandler’s and Ross MacDonald’s private-eye heroes roam the landscape by car, and recently in such novels as Joan Didion’s *Play It as It Lays*, Roger Simon’s *The Big Fix* and John Gregory Dunne’s *True Confessions*, high-speed movement across an endless Southern California landscape is a recurring image.

In *Postman*, the Twin Oaks Tavern, where Frank and Cora make love and plot the murder which will secure the dream, is the perfect setting for high-speed adventure—the makeshift drive-in highway stop which combines a filling station, luncheonette, living quarters and “a half dozen shacks they call an auto court.” Obsolete now in an age of mass-produced Holiday Inns and Travelodges, the Twin Oaks is the consummate Depression representation of the dream, the meeting place of mobility and domesticity.

Like West in *The Day of the Locust* and Huxley in *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*, Cain uses the architecture of Southern California symbolically, but without their obsessive emphasis on the region’s exotic, surrealistic fantasy structures. In place of their focus on “gothic” castles, fairy tale cottages and Mississippi plantation houses, Cain typically uses the stucco and tile “Spanish Colonial” houses which dominated the Los Angeles architectural landscape of the thirties. In one sense, houses serve as ironic contrasts to the action, the “ordinary” against which the “extraordinary” events take place, the commonplace and domestic against which adultery, murder and extortion are played out. In another sense, houses, both exteriors and interiors, express in their banality the failures and betrayed dreams of their inhabitants. Houses externalize the mental states of their owners. Consistently, Cain underscores the

sameness and monotony of appearance. The Twin Oaks was "like millions of others in California." On the first few pages of *Mildred Pierce*, Bert Pierce, a real estate subdivider who went broke in the Crash and is about to walk out on Mildred, mows the lawn of his Glendale house, giving Cain an opening to establish the link between the Pierces and their house: "It was a lawn like thousands of others in Southern California. . . . The house, too, was like others of its kind: a Spanish bungalow, with white walls and red-tile roof." Inside was "the standard living room sent out by department stores as suitable for a Spanish bungalow," featuring a "crimson velvet coat of arms" and "crimson velvet drapes, hung on iron spears."<sup>9</sup>

The house, built by Pierce and "mortgaged and remortgaged," is a picture of withered middle-class elegance, the twenties' image of the good life, shattered by the Depression. Bert Pierce is a prototype of the California real estate developer. Having inherited 300 acres of land in Glendale during the boom of the twenties, he built Pierce Homes, a large subdivision which reflected the tone of the Southern California promise of that decade. The houses were "something of a luxury" and typically featured three bedrooms and a bath for each bedroom. His tract contained a sales office "built like a home, to stimulate the imaginations of customers."

Mildred's frantic scramble for material success after Bert moves out is portrayed metaphorically as a journey from Glendale to Pasadena's exclusive Orange Grove Avenue. The social distance between her present and the future she so aggressively seeks is expressed geographically as the distance between the two valley cities. The one symbolizes the limitations of the age, the other the freedom of the dream. Mildred bridges the distance and for a time seems to have gotten a solid hold on Pasadena, only to be dumped back into Glendale at the end.

Again the road is the key metaphor. In an important scene near the end Mildred is trapped in her car between Glendale and Pasadena in a flash flood and is forced to abandon her car and stagger home in the middle of the night "through the worst storm in the annals of the Los Angeles weather bureau." Like Frank in *Postman*, Mildred craves speed and the open road. Mobility means freedom; physical motion is translated into social power and sexual release. Behind the wheel of her car Mildred transcends her environment. "She gave the car the gun, exactly watching the needle swing past 30, 40, and 50. . . . The car was pumping something into her veins, something of pride, of arrogance, of restrained self-respect that no talk, no liquor, no love could possibly give" (94).

The three restaurants Mildred commands—stretched over a vast triangle from Glendale, to Beverly Hills, to Laguna Beach—connect and contain the opposing versions of the dream, mobility and domesticity. Her highway restaurants are, in fact, precursors of the "drive-in" res-

taurants which in the thirties sprouted up all along the miles of highway strips and “linear cities” of Southern California, with their giant neon-lighted signs to lure speeding motorists. The drive-ins have given way almost entirely now to the omnipresent “drive through” snack emporiums, but in the thirties they represented, along with the new streamlined supermarkets (built behind parking lots) and drive-in theaters, the characteristic commercial structures in an age and place dedicated to the marriage of business and the private auto. Mildred Pierce’s restaurants with their parking lots, conspicuous signs and highway locations acknowledge the automobile and anticipate the drive-in, but still retain the image of the traditional restaurant where patrons eat inside and are not served in their cars.

In *Double Indemnity*, most of the action takes place in cars. On the opening page, Walter Huff, an insurance salesman whose route covers the entire region, drives from Glendale to Hollywood to pick up an insurance renewal and almost immediately is involved in a murder-for-insurance scheme similar to that in *Postman*, but with higher stakes and carried out with considerably more ingenuity. Nirdlinger, like Nick Papadakis in *Postman*, is murdered in his own car, and Huff is shot by Phyllis while sitting in a car in Griffith Park waiting for her in order to kill her. The entire novel is a grand auto tour of Southern California, a fact not lost on Billy Wilder who did the superb film version in 1943 (with a Chandler screenplay). Few novels have given us so rich a sense of the varied landscapes of Southern California, the distinct textures of its different neighborhoods. Among Cain’s contemporaries, only Chandler—particularly in his first two novels, *The Big Sleep* and *Farewell, My Lovely*—has covered so much of the region’s terrain. Huff drives constantly in the novel. He drives downtown, to Long Beach, to Santa Monica (to park with Phyllis’ daughter Lola and watch the moon over the Pacific), to Glendale, Burbank, Hollywood and Griffith Park. The novel is a catalog of street names: La Brea, Hollywood Boulevard, Vine Street, Wilshire Boulevard, Los Feliz Avenue, Beechwood Avenue, Riverside Avenue.

While the novel takes place largely on wheels, the Nirdlinger house also plays an important role. Here, in what Huff calls the “House of Death,” he and Phyllis make love and plot the death of Nirdlinger. The house is located in “Hollywoodland”—a 1920s subdivision along Beechwood Avenue above Hollywood Boulevard, just below the famous sign<sup>10</sup>—but with few alterations it could be Mildred Pierce’s Glendale house moved a few miles south and west:

It was just a Spanish house, like all the rest of them in California, with white walls, red tile roof, and a patio out to one side. It was built cock-eyed. The garage was under the house, the first floor was over that, and the rest of it was spilled up the hill any way they could get it in.<sup>11</sup>

The description of the interior piles on more symbolic details:

I pitched my hat on the sofa. They've made a lot of that living room, especially those "blood-red drapes." All I saw was a living room like every other living room in California . . . nothing that any department store wouldn't deliver in one truck. . . . The furniture was Spanish, the kind that looks pretty and sits stiff. The rug was one of those 12×15's that would have been Mexican except it was made in Oakland, California. The blood-red drapes were there, but they didn't mean anything. All these Spanish houses have red velvet drapes run on iron spears, and generally some red velvet wall tapestries to go with them. (370)

The descriptions carry several suggestions. There is, first, the sense of the ordinary, the commonplace, the typical, which provides an ironic contrast to the violence plotted behind its conventional facade. The living room, though, despite its looking "like every other living room in California," is dominated by those "blood-red drapes run on iron spears"—a detail mentioned twice here and in *Mildred Pierce* as well, anticipating the bloody action of the novel. Then there is the element of deceit carried by the counterfeit "Spanish" architecture of the house and more specifically by the "Mexican" rug made in Oakland, California. Finally, there is the "cockeyed" haphazard arrangement of the details of the house as it "spilled up the hill," suggesting in broad terms the accidental, unplanned and undisciplined sprawl of Southern California. In all three L.A. novels, Cain uses architecture to reflect the states of mind of his characters, to contrast with the actions and to provide links between the characters and the vast unstable terrain of Los Angeles in the thirties. Architecture is an expression both of the physical and mental landscape.

Five years before John Steinbeck's *Joad* rolled into Central California in their dilapidated model-T and West's Tod Hackett discovered the bizarre fantasy architecture of Hollywood, Cain gave us the chief metaphors for the literary identity of Los Angeles. From *The Postman Always Rings Twice* in 1934 to the present time of, among others, Didion and Simon, automobiles and architecture have been the images Los Angeles writers have most insistently projected. The deceptive freedom of the fast car on the open road and the confusion of reality and fantasy symbolized by the masquerade houses of Southern California have been the chief means of conveying a sense of the insubstantial city. For Cain, who arrived in Los Angeles soon after the Crash and remained through the Depression, the city came to represent the betrayed dreams of the whole nation. In the boom years hundreds of thousands had come seeking their fresh starts and new beginnings—a detached house, open space, mobility, good climate, renewed health and a piece of the wealth. The dream seemed within grasp. Fortunes, real and rumored, were being made in real estate, restaurants,

oil and movies. Where the dream was most fervently believed and seemed closest to fulfillment, the collapse was more painful. Cain gave us a sense of what it was like to live, work and dream in Los Angeles in the thirties. His restless, driven and self-destructive heroes and heroines remind us of the hunger and the desperation that were a part of that not-so-distant past.

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### notes

1. Edmund Wilson, "The Boys in the Back Room," *Classics and Commercials: a Literary Chronicle of the Forties* (New York, 1950), 19-56. Among the other writers discussed are John O'Hara, John Steinbeck and William Saroyan. In a 1941 "Postscript," he added Nathanael West, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Budd Schulberg.
2. A second novel, *Serenade*, appeared in 1937 and is discussed by Wilson, but only a small part is set in Los Angeles. Most of it takes place in Mexico and New York.
3. Kevin Starr, "It's Chinatown," *New Republic*, 26 July, 1975, 31-32.
4. David Madden, *James M. Cain* (New York, 1970), 108.
5. Wilson, "The Boys in the Back Room," 21.
6. Cain, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (New York, 1934), 175. Subsequent quotations will be cited parenthetically.
7. Preface to Cain's *The Butterfly* (New York, 1947), xi.
8. Tom S. Reck, "J.M. Cain's Los Angeles Novels," *Colorado Quarterly*, 22 (1973), 375-87.
9. Cain, *Mildred Pierce* (New York, 1941), 3-4. Subsequent quotations will be cited parenthetically.
10. For years the "Hollywoodland" sign stood in gigantic white letters on the hill just above the subdivision. Eventually, it was shortened to "Hollywood." Recently the sign came down altogether, its foundations undermined by heavy rains. A community effort to raise funds to replace the sign has been successful, and a new sign is now in place.
11. Cain, *Double Indemnity* in *Cain X 3* (New York, 1969), 369. Subsequent quotations will be indicated parenthetically.