

# BARTON LIBRARY

*Dare to know*

## Noir Fiction

*Fiction that features violence and treachery and a lack of distinction between criminals and heroes.*

A sub-genre in which the tone is a grim appraisal of the human condition (*noir* is the French word for black). Similar to the hard-boiled crime fiction from whence it came, noir features gritty urban settings such as New York City, Los Angeles, or San Francisco. The central distinction lies in noir's morally questionable protagonists, darker mysteries, and bleak and nihilistic outlook. Hard-boiled detectives may bend or break the law to solve the case, but their morally centered pursuit of justice ends with a reasonably clear conscience. In noir, the protagonists are driven by base desires—greed, lust, jealousy, or alienation—that entangle them in a web from which there is no escape. They are not required to be detectives, although crime is the preferred subject. Especially, one that leads to the downfall of the protagonists or other sympathetic characters. Crime fiction editor Otto Penzler succinctly commented, “noir is about losers.” A staple of the sub-genre is the *femme fatale*, a mysterious and seductive woman who uses her sex appeal to entice and entrap those who stand in the way of her goal. Graham Greene's *Orient Express* (1932), James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934), Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1935), Frederic Brown's *Here Comes A Candle* (1950), and Patricia Highsmith's *Strangers on a Train* (1950) are classic examples.

## Common Elements

Institutional corruption
Action
Intrigue
Flawed and complex characters
Femme fatale
General pessimism

Moral ambiguity
Human despair
Self-destructive behavior
Desperation
Futility

## Benefits of Reading

Offers to readers a view of a more realistic world devoid of satisfactory endings, neat resolutions, and simple motivations
Allows readers to see the inevitable

downfall of morally compromised characters
Provides readers with indication of behaviors and decisions to avoid

## Modern Literary Examples

<i>The Black Dahlia</i> (1987) by James Ellroy
<i>City on Fire</i> (2022) by Don Winslow

<i>Cottonmouths</i> (2017) by Kelly J. Ford
<i>Dark Chapter</i> (2022) by Winnie M. Li

<i>Dynamite Road</i> (2003) by Andrew Klavan
<i>The Holdout</i> (2020) by Graham Moore
<i>Kismet</i> (2022) by Amina Akhtar
<i>Little Deaths</i> (2016) by Emma Flint
<i>One Shot Harry</i> (2022) by Gary Philips

<i>Portrait of an Unknown Lady</i> (2022) by Maria Gainza
<i>Queenpin</i> (2007) by Megan Abbott
<i>The Killing Hills</i> (2021) by Chris Offutt

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