

7 Noir Novels For Your Inner Bogart and Bacall

The noir genre has carved out a unique place in our literary and cinematic cultural history — a place painted in high-contrast monochrome and populated by deceptively rich character archetypes just brushing the edge of caricature. The word “noir”, of course, refers to more than just a tastefully understated colour scheme; it represents the dark themes present in the works, the moral ambiguities and the descent into shades of grey in pursuit of the greater good.

Crime thrillers of the noir genre offer a safe, snugly catharsis for our own moral ambiguity, and they help us understand something about human nature when faced with an inherently flawed world. More than that, they give us hope that no matter how dark and broken the world may feel, there are still people with the capacity to do some good within it.

Let’s look at some of the classic and contemporary stories that have shaped noir literature.

The Maltese Falcon (1929)

by Dashiell Hammett

Dashiell Hammett was arguably the first writer to acknowledge [the detective story as a literary form](#) — a bold perspective which influenced the place that the genre holds in the literary world today. The story follows tough-cut private eye Sam Spade as he and his partner investigate a case brought to them by the svelte and mysterious Miss Wonderly (not, to absolutely no one’s surprise, her real name). It doesn’t take long for Spade’s poor partner to end up dead, and suddenly an easy-money job has turned dangerously personal. Our hero falls deeper and deeper into a web of deception and betrayal in 1920s San Francisco as he and a cast of emerging cultural archetypes chase after a priceless falcon statue.

Diamond Lil (1932)

by Mae West

Originally written as a glittering stage play by Mae West (Yes, [that Mae West](#)), this script was later adapted by the author into a novel. An early predecessor to the smart, sensual, diamond-dizzy dame later popularized by Marilyn Monroe, *Diamond Lil* follows the brash and unapologetic kept woman of a corrupt politician and saloon owner, Gus Jordan. She navigates an underworld of greed, politics, betrayal, and romance, learning more about herself

and her own shifting moralities along the way. Thrown into the mix is the pious and very handsome boy-next-door Captain Cummings, who wants to help Lil leave her depravity behind *and* bring down Gus Jordan while he's at it.

The Big Sleep (1939)

by Raymond Chandler

Raymond Chandler's cult classic novel — which, seven years later, became the film that would solidify [Hollywood's original power couple](#) — builds on Dashiell Hammett's private eye character archetype while lighting the fire under the noir genre's slow-burn trend of complex, dynamic female characters. Almost as enduring as the central character, Philip Marlowe, is the female lead Vivian Regan. She's not quite a *femme fatale*, nor a damsel in distress, nor a convenient love interest, but something more: a woman fighting to protect her family in a morally corrupt world. Chandler's novel uses a mastery of language along with unexpected twists, powerful themes, and breakneck pacing that makes it a joy to read.

Laura (1943)

by Vera Caspary

Vera Caspary's *Laura* answers that most ancient of deep, philosophical questions: can a red-blooded American detective fall in love with a dead woman? Although the titular main character, Laura Hunt, is pronounced dead before the novel even begins, it's her multifaceted relationships with the people in her life that power the story forward. Caspary's novel takes the dark, gritty landscape of classic noir and transposes it onto high society Manhattan in the 1940s. Following the detective Mark McPherson as he investigates Laura's fiancé, her career patron, and her friends and family, this novel is full of twists and turns that make it a standout of the genre.

L.A. Confidential (1990)

by James Ellroy

Described as “neo-noir” and a “dark portrait of Los Angeles”, this novel follows three conflicting police officers through 1950s Hollywood as they navigate the aftermath of a coffee shop massacre. Ellroy explores themes of police brutality, corruption, and the innate human weaknesses that feed off of urban demons like power, status, and celebrity. Ellroy's novel combines real and imagined historical events alongside a dizzying cast of characters, all

struggling with the balance of morals and survival in a society that's fundamentally broken. This later addition to the noir genre's literary archives paved the way for new writers, blending old-world storytelling with a fresh new energy.

Devil in a Blue Dress (1990)

by Walter Mosley

Devil in a Blue Dress brings a BAME perspective to what has traditionally been a very white-dominated genre in the form of war vet and detective Ezekiel "Easy" Rawlins. Easy is hired to find a missing white woman known to frequent black speakeasies. His search takes him through the Los Angeles underworld, from corrupt investment firms to illegal jazz clubs, through a myriad of characters all with their own secrets and stakes in Easy's search for the missing woman. While Mosley's novel shares many themes in common with classic noir literature, it also brings in themes of identity, prejudice, and racial segregation.

The Girl on the Train (2015)

by Paula Hawkins

Paula Hawkins' bestselling novel about an alcoholic divorcee makes use of the crime genre's greatest underutilized literary device: the unreliable narrator. The novel follows a struggling alcoholic woman, Rachel Watson, who has hit rock bottom following her painful divorce and the subsequent loss of her job. Each morning she rides the train to a non-existent workplace and watches the homes passing by the window — especially one home in particular, where she imagines the couple living there to have a beautiful, perfect life. When the woman goes missing, Rachel has to pull apart her drunken blackouts and fractured memories to dig up the secrets hiding in her subconscious. This modern thriller carries on the noir tradition with its multilayered plot and cast of double-edged characters.