



## Crime Novels: American Noir of the 1950s

*Robert Polito (Editor) , Jim Thompson (Contributor) , Patricia Highsmith (Contributor) , Charles Willeford (Contributor) , David Goodis (Contributor) , Chester Himes (Contributor)*

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This *Library of America* volume, with its companion devoted to the 1930s and 40s, presents a rich vein of modern American writing, works now being recognized for the powerful literary qualities and their unique, sometimes subversive role in shaping modern American language and culture.

The five novels here are authentic underground classics:

Published as a paperback original in 1952, Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me*, is one of the most blistering and uncompromising crime novels ever written. Written from the point of view of an outwardly genial, privately murderous Texas sheriff, it explores the inner hell of a psychotic in daring and experimental style.

Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955) likewise adopts a killer's perspective as she traces the European journey of an American con man with a taste for fine living and no conscience about how to attain it. Highsmith's gift for diabolical plotting is matched only by the cool irony of her characterizations.

In his nihilistic early novel *Pick-Up* (1955), Charles Willeford follows the pilgrimage of two lost and self-destructive lovers through the depths of San Francisco, from cheap bars and rooming houses to psychiatric clinics and police stations.

David Goodis's *Down There* (1956) is a moody, intensely lyrical novel of a musician fallen on hard times and caught up in his family's criminal activities; it was adapted by François Truffaut into the film *Shoot the Piano Player*.

With its gritty realism, unrestrained violence and frequently outrageous humor, *The Real Cool Killers* (1959) is among the most powerful of Chester Himes's series of novels about the Harlem detectives Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones.

Each volume features newly researched biographies and notes, and an essay on textual selection.

### Crime Novels: American Noir of the 1950s Details

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## From Reader Review Crime Novels: American Noir of the 1950s for online ebook

### Bap says

I read three American Noir crime novels during my flight to and fro Las Vegas and during my ten day stay in sin city.

The Killer Inside Me by Jim Thompson, is a chilling account of a genial psychopath who is a policeman in a small Texas town who periodically snaps and kills. It is all told from the perspective of the killer. His characters are closely drawn and very believable.

The Talented Mr. Ripley by Patricia Highsmith is also told from the perspective of the killer who is a chameleon, who brings identity theft into a high art form. Asexual, craving to live the good life, and completely without remorse. The movie follows the book quite closely.

The Real Cool Killers by Chester Himes is about two Harlem detectives, Coffin Ed Johnson and Gravedigger Jones who encounter an apparent murder of a white man who was frequenting a Harlem bar and then chased out of the gin mill and down the street where he was shot and killed. Nothing is what it seems at first glance.

Thompson was a pulp fiction writer spinning out books in 8 weeks or less. He had been an oil field worker, a wobbly, a cop, a lawyer and a life long alcoholic.

Highsmith was a careful writer which captures Americans in Europe in the 50's and 60's. She would reprise the Ripley character five more times in future books.

Chester Himes had been sentenced to 25 years hard labor at age 19 for armed robbery. He survived a prison fire that killed 300 inmates. Began writing in prison, was paroled, became an expat in France where he wrote a series of detective and crime novels.

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### Geoff says

A fantastic collection of stories. Great range and variety, but they all fall under the same theme. Definitely have to be read in the context of their time, there's some interesting issues around race or gender, although often the author's awareness of those issues is as remarkable as the presence of them. Fascinating and entertaining little collection of dirty, bloody little stories. They aren't all equally good, but there were none I regret reading.

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### Jared Colley says

Another great collection of American pulp fiction. Typically, the word "pulp" connotes "low-brow" literature, but there's some serious literary excellence contained in these pages. My favorites: definitely Jim Thompson & Patricia Highsmith. Both novels function as compelling character studies of the criminal mind, and they succeed in their endeavors just as much as any work of "high" literature. I fully recommend this book.

## Amy says

The rare multi-novel edition that has legible text!

Jim Thompson, *Killer Inside Me*. Brilliant, but ultra-violent, so be prepared.

Patricia Highsmith, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. Excellent story, but saw the Matt Damon film version years ago, and this unfortunately colored my reading of it. But a friend just told me about a French version "*Plein Soleil*," which sounds great.

Charles Willeford, *Pick Up*. Heartbreaking and original work. The ending throws in a pointless plot twist, though.

David Goodis, *Down There*. Just found out that Truffaut's *Shoot the Piano Player* was based on this story.

Chester Himes, *The Real Cool Killers*. The first 5-10 pages of this are the wackiest fiction I have ever read.

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## Amy says

8/3 - Book #1: "*The Killer Inside Me*" - Jim Thompson. This book is told from the perspective of the murderer and I found the main character to share some similarities to the title character in the television series "*Dexter*." However, instead of working as a forensic expert, this killer works for the local police department. Lou (like Dexter) is a likable character, even when he's doing not so likable things. Short, fun, pulpy, and particularly interesting for the genre.

8/11 - Book #2: "*The Talented Mr Ripley*" - Patricia Highsmith. I was physically tense while reading this book at times. Tom Ripley can be such a pathetic turd, but one still gets nervous wondering if he will get caught. I can't really say much more without giving things away. An enjoyable, unconventional mystery.

8/16 - Book #3: "*Pick-Up*" - Charles Willeford. Least compelling of the stories so far. Takes place in San Francisco and follows a failed artist working dead end jobs, and his girlfriend with whom he develops an intense relationship. The most conventional story so far, with the possible twist during the penultimate sentence of the entire story that depends entirely on the reader's conceived vision of the characters.

8/24 - Book #4: "*Down There*" - David Goodis. This novel was the basis for Truffaut's "*Shoot the Piano Player*." Eddie has a checkered past and two older brothers that can't stay out of trouble. On top of that, this dumb broad keeps wanting to hang out with him, all though she's only serving to make things harder for Eddie and unsafe for herself. Eddie is more like the protagonist of "*Pick-Up*" than the lead characters of "*Ripley*" or "*Killer Inside Me*", in the way that he's not really a bad guy, and is maybe only guilty of losing it a bit when he fights.

8/27 - Book #5: "*The Real Cool Killers*" - Chester Himes. A story of cops, teenage gangs, racial tension, and perverts in Harlem. A man referred to as "the Greek" is shot at the beginning, and a young gang member is killed by the police. The rest of the story revolves around the police's search for the murderer...a search that crosses the paths of many characters and caricatures of Harlem.

## Christopher McQuain says

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## Scott says

This is an anthology of five 1950's crime novels that stand out (in the mind of the volume's editor, Robert Polito) from the crowd of pulp noir of the 1950's by being particularly memorable.

"The Killer Inside Me" by Jim Thompson - This creeped me out like nothing I've read in a long time. Psychopathic depravity in a West Texas town, where no one lives without a skeleton or three in the closet. High body count, strong writing style, unsavory ending.

"The Talented Mr. Ripley" by Patricia Highsmith - I never saw the movie with Leonardo DiCaprio. The book is excellent. I found myself wanting to be sympathetic with Tom Ripley, but when I stepped back and looked at what he did to get ahead, I came to the conclusion that he is a pretty bad guy that I hope I don't run into in this lifetime. Really good writing!

"Pick-up" by Charles Willeford - I was trying to figure out what was special about this story about a down-and-out artist in San Francisco and the alcoholic socialite he shacks up with, and I found out in the last two lines of the novel. DO NOT LOOK AT THE LAST PAGE UNTIL YOU FINISH. After reading the last two lines, I had to go back and re-think a lot of what I read.

"Down There" by David Goodis - I found this to be an interesting character study of an individual struggling to escape both his own personal tragedy and his sordid family past. There are other strong characters in the novel, set in Philadelphia and South Jersey. Great local color, and wonderful wise-crack dialogue.

"The Real Cool Killers" By Chester Himes - This was probably the hardest book for me to like, mainly because of the patent stereotypical descriptions of the people of Harlem. Almost every derogatory term (and several I unfortunately learned) for black people spews out of the mouths of not only the white cops, but also the black detectives Grave Digger Jones and Ed "Coffin" Johnson. However, when I got past the language I found a story that took unexpected twists and turns, until a final, surprise denouement that shows people making the best out of truly horrific circumstances.

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## Nolan says

This is one of those massive omnibus-type novels that, if dropped on a body part or on someone else's body part, would probably do serious and real damage. Every novel was a gripping, haunting experience. In "The Killer Inside Me" by Jim Thompson, a deputy sheriff who appears to be respectable outwardly is an internal horror of a creature. Before that novel ends, the deputy's girlfriend will die along with others. In Patricia Highsmith's "The Talented Mr. Ripley," a young American fast-talking con artist type commits murder and gets away with it. In Pickup, former art teacher Harry Jordan brings home a girl he meets in the late-night cafe where he's working, and his troubles grow based on that decision. This novel ends with a fascinating racial twist.

My only problem with this book was that it forever shattered for me the myth that the 1950s were some kind of sweet and innocent time. What do you think of when you think of the 1950s? A young President Eisenhower praying vocally at his inauguration perhaps? The pleasant tones of June Cleaver reassuring the Beaver in the midst of some kind of innocent juvenile angst? There's nothing of the sweet innocence of that decade in these novels, written in that decade. There's a higher dose of profanity in this collection than I would have thought one would read from stuff published in the 1950s; the sexual descriptions aren't explicit in the way you might think of when you think of a 21st-century writer, but it's not exactly Robert Young and Father Knows Best either. Think Ritchie Cunningham (*Happy Days*) gone wild, and you'll have some approximation. I found myself skipping paragraphs here and there. One of Highsmith's characters is rather blatantly homophobic, and that may have been a prevailing attitude of her time; but if that kind of character bothers you or offends you in some way, you may want to consider just dropping this one rather than reading it or perhaps simply leave it unopened.

That said, I must confess that these novels haunted and fascinated me. I read an audio version of this book, and the narrator did an outstanding job. If you also read the audio version, plan to spend more than 31 hours on this if you can't speed up your audio player in any way.

The bottom line: If you like mysteries, most of which became movies, and especially if dark mysteries appeal to you, this book may be what you're looking for, especially if length doesn't intimidate you. Just brace yourself to come away with a view of the 1950s that is far darker and seamier than you might have had going into this. The up side of this is that all of these authors are highly talented, and if you enjoy reading books that are carefully crafted with writing styles that keep you turning pages, this one may work for you. Just beware that the network editors who made sure that Lucy and Ricky slept in separate beds are nowhere to be found in this collection of novels. If you know that going in, you may well find the writing styles and the plots of these books interesting enough to keep you cruising toward the back cover.

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## Keith says

*The Killer Inside Me* \*\*\* – SPOILER ALERT – This is a masterwork of mood, psychology and brutality. It is in many ways a horrifying read, but the character of Lou Ford is a fascinatingly evil character. It's hard to put the book down despite its gory details and outrageous amorality.

It is full of holes, however. I count three murders that authorities allowed after they suspected Ford. That's some pretty incompetent police work. One could quibble about a psychopath who kills every 15 years. Then there's that first-person perspective of someone who dies at the end. (And appears to be telling the story to someone.) And finally, these are some pretty strange women who love Ford no matter what he does – and I mean no matter what he does. (Perhaps he learned to create female characters from Dickens.)

Overall, a great book for atmosphere, mood and psychology. (11/18)

*The Real Cool Killers* \*\*\* This is the story of a violent subculture (1950's Harlem) cordoned off by a society unconcerned about the suffering and degradation of those living within it. All the characters – black or white – show an almost complete disregard for the suffering of strangers. The violence is excessive and savage. A sense of being trapped permeates the novel.

For a detective story, it is interesting that the authorial voice goes back and forth across all the characters – not just the principle detectives. We see the lives of the people (mostly petty criminals) in Harlem and the

workaday violence they endure. The only thing not shown is a life of normalcy and safety. In this way, I think, Himes presents a devastating indictment of American culture and its treatment of African Americans.

The plot has the usual twists of a noir story and a somewhat surprise ending followed by the typical explanation (which includes a Q&A from the police statements of the accomplices). But I found the very last scene the most interesting. It features Sissie going to prison to visit one of the surviving characters of the story and, trying to go straight (?), they decide to marry. She then admits she's pregnant with Sheik's child, and the other character says they better get married as soon as possible. End of novel

This is an odd ending. Of all the characters, why end with these two? And does it represent the end of a cycle of violence, or the continuing of the cycle? Is it supposed to be presented as a misguided attempt to escape? Or is the reader supposed to be hopeful that everything will work out? My take is that it simply portrays the ongoing struggles of individuals in a segregated, violent society. A chapter ends, but the struggles and exhaustion continue.

Himes' style is graphic and highly wrought. Everything is very descriptive – sometimes to the point of absurdity. But it is noir. If you like a violent crime story, this is a gripping story that is well told. Although it lacks explicit social commentary, it does shine a harsh light on American society. (5/14)

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### **Marissa says**

It's hard to write a review for this collection considering that it is actually five different books put into one anthology, but I will say that all of the books were compelling and probably works I would have overlooked if they had not been included here. All of them were very much worth checking out if you enjoy old crime novels. I particularly enjoyed and was surprised by Pick-Up which has a lot of the elements that the French existentialists liked in American noirs around this period.

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### **Margaret says**

This book was a gift from my brother. When he gave it to me, I had just rediscovered Jim Thompson after a few years away and I was pretty excited about a new story. I didn't realize when I started the book that "The Killer Inside Me" was Thompson's most significant work. By the time I'd finished it, I was trembling...amazed, astounded, down right terrified. It was awesome, and not in the 80s music video kind of way. It was awesome like a ten foot wave about to break on your head. And that was just the first story in the anthology.

I must add that it is an odd collection because "The Talented Mr. Ripley" and "The Real Cool Killers" are parts of series and the latter title isn't the first story. I don't like to read out of order, but it was worth it. I found the rest of the Gravedigger Jones/Coffin Ed Johnson stories which are notable because of the hard-edged realism mixed with outrageous plots. Chester Himes had a gift.

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### **Greg says**

Take note: at a minimum, you'll see noir writers/authors in a new light. And, you just might find some new favorite American writers, as have I, with the companion volume entitled "American Noir of the 1930s and

40s". Best news of all: both volumes are probably sitting on shelves at your nearest library.

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## **Beanpod says**

I only read *The Killer Inside Me* and *The Real Cool Killers*, the former because the movie coming out got me interested and the latter because I read about the author, Chester Himes and his history and the recurring characters Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed interested me.

*The Killer Inside Me* was well written and worth reading. I loved *The Real Cool Killers*. The writing was perfectly spare. Himes once wrote that "realism and absurdity are so similar in the lives of American blacks one cannot tell the difference." The blurring of the two is played out in this short novella.

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## **the gift says**

anthology of roman noir from the 50s, selection of five novels given the lit crit approval of hardback republication by library of america, companion to one that covers the 30s and 40s... not much to say, critically, just that to fully appreciate these novels is to recalibrate what you value in lit- this is generally accessible and independent of prestige literature but by its plots, characters, themes, has perhaps more staying power...

doubt these are ever considered canonical works, you have here work people want to read... not books they have to read, you know, like joyce... popular fiction, democratic fiction, denigrated in its time and published only in the pulps...

i enjoy that i can talk with non-literary friends about these works, from the psychopathic narrator in *Killer Inside*... psychopath central character in *Talented*... the lost losers in *Pick-up*... the lost talented artist in *Down There*... the darkly comic vision of harlem in *Real Cool*... this is a great selection all through.

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## **Robin Friedman says**

Noir In The Library Of America -- 1950s

The books published in the Library of America series have the goal of capturing American writing and the American experience in all its variety. Towards this end, the LOA has published several volumes of noir novels, with some volumes by individual authors and other volumes collections of works. In 1997, the LOA published two volumes of the latter variety with the first including six noir novels by as many authors written during the 1930's and 1940's *Crime Novels: American Noir of the 1930s and 40s: The Postman Always Rings Twice / They Shoot Horses, Don't They? / Thieves Like Us / The Big Clock / ... a Dead Man* (Library of America) (Vol 1) and the second volume, which I am reviewing here, including five novels by five authors written during the 1950's. Robert Polito, a scholar and writer of noir, selected the books and provided biographical sketches of each of the authors included. The writers lived fascinating, unusual lives and most of them might well have been characters in their own novels. The two volumes are an excellent source for readers wanting to explore the best of noir literature.

Noir derived in part from cheap pulp and detective magazines. Many of the novels were first published in

paperback editions with gaudy, suggestive covers and were not expected to last. By the time the novels in this collection were published, the genre had a substantial history and was in danger of becoming formulaic and stereotyped. Yet the novels in this collection have their own distinctive characters. The six novels in the opening LOA volume were set in different places, but all took place during the Depression, a fitting period for a dark, crime novel. Each of the five novels included here is set in the 1950's following two major wars. The 1950's differed markedly from the Depression-era, and these novels, in their different settings, have the ambience of their era.

Jim Thompson's (1906 -- 1977) "The Killer inside Me" , written in 1952 is among the best in this collection. Set in a west Texas town called Central City, this book is a study of the internal life of a psychopathic killer, Lou Ford, 29, who narrates the story in the first person. Ford is an apparently mild-mannered and dull-witted deputy sheriff, but he is in fact highly intelligent and a brutal killer. The book delves insightfully into the sources of Ford's compulsion to kill. Thompson's sharply written novel captures Ford's growing sense of guilt and his deterioration into illusion and madness as he struggles to escape detection for his crimes.

The longest novel in this collection, Patricia Highsmith's (1921 -- 1995) "The Talented Mr. Ripley" (1955) is set primarily in post-WW II Italy and shows the strong influence of Henry James' classic novel "The Ambassadors". As in James' story, a young man is sent to Europe in the hopes of persuading someone he knows to return to the United States and to assume a life of responsibility. At the behest and expense of a wealthy businessman, a ne'r do well named Tom Ripley travels to Italy to retrieve the man's son, Dickie Greenleaf, from his dreams of becoming an artist. Ripley murders Dickie instead and tries to evade detection from shifting his identity back and forth between himself and his victim. Ripley is smooth and imaginative in this modernistic story of double identity.

Charles Willeford (1919-- 1988) had a long career as a writer and his 1956 novel "Pick-up" is an early effort. This book is set in the bars and rooming houses of San Francisco and includes as its chief theme a short love affair between a frustrated artist Harry Jordan, 32, and a woman he meets, Helen Meredith,33. Jordan narrates this story of loneliness and drifting, of city streets and suicide. The book also has a racial theme not far from the surface.

My favorite work in this collection was David Goodis' novel "Down There" (1956), which became a movie called "Shoot the Piano Player". Set during a cold Philadelphia winter, "Down There" tells the story of Eddie Lynn who makes a subsistence living playing the piano in a bar called Harriet's Hut. The book captures the atmosphere of lonely streets, shattered dreams, the power of love, family, and music. The LOA has recently published a volume devoted to Goodis (1917 --1967) David Goodis: Five Noir Novels of the 1940s and 50s (Library of America) in his own right.

The final novel in this collection, "The Real Cool Killers" (1959) by Chester Himes is the only one that is a who-done-it. Set in Harlem, the book centers upon two African American detectives, Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Jones, who investigate the killing of a white man, Ulysees Galen, who frequents the area's streets and bars. A street gang of African American young men also plays a major role in the story. The story features sadomasochistic sex, sharp dialogue and social observations, and many surprising turns of plot. The primary character of the book, however, is Harlem itself. Himes (1909 -- 1984) wrote this book while living in Paris where his works were considerably better received than in the United States.

While the books in this collection all have a noir atmosphere and involve crime, each has its own individuality. These books are fast-paced, tense, and show understanding of place and character. They deserve their place in a series devoted to the American experience and American literature. I was pleased to have the opportunity to get to know these books in this volume and in the LOA companion volume.

Robin Friedman

