



## The Asphalt Jungle

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**So successful in evoking [the city's] aura that the reader breathes the air of menace that emanates from its implacable personality and shivers at the unmistakable evidence that blind chance plays a considerable part in determining the course of every life within the city's confines - *New York Times***

**The Asphalt Jungle** is a gripping tale of the planning and execution of a jewellery store heist in a dark and corrupt Midwestern metropolis. Set amid a seedy urban wasteland of crooks, killers and con-artists, the various members of the gang are steadily undone by personal obsessions, double-crossing and cruel fate.

First published in 1949, W.R. Burnett's hardboiled classic was made into the definitive heist movie by John Huston in 1950, starring Sterling Hayden, Sam Jaffe and Marilyn Monroe. Its screenplay, co-written by Huston was nominated for an Oscar.

A master and pioneer of the gangster genre, W.R. Burnett is the author of over thirty novels - including **Little Caesar** and **High Sierra** - and sixty screenplays. He was twice nominated for Academy Awards.

## The Asphalt Jungle Details

Date : Published September 5th 1999 by Prion Books Limited (first published 1949)

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Author : W.R. Burnett

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## From Reader Review The Asphalt Jungle for online ebook

### Tony says

Burnett, W. R. THE ASPHALT JUNGLE. (1949). \*\*\*\*. I first read this classic crime novel about forty years ago, and it still holds up well. I also remember seeing the film in the theater when I was a kid. Since then, I've watched the film again. It was a classic, starring Sterling Hayden, Sam Jaffe, Louis Calhern, James Whitmore, and Marilyn Monroe in a bit part in her early days. The film was directed by John Huston and was nominated for four Academy Awards. This novel and subsequent film started the trend towards heist or caper stories, where the heist goes wrong. In this instance, the heist goes wrong because of some quirk present in each of the gang members. The quirks varied. In some it was plain greed; in others it was an over-reaching for success, or a need for recognition, or, the need for the one-last job that would allow them to go back to a former life forever. The story is simple: a criminal mastermind (a German doctor) has just gotten out of prison. He has a plan and a mission. His plan has been developed over the last several years and refined while he was in prison – how to steal half-a-million dollars worth of jewels from a prominent jewelry store in the downtown area. He also wants to use some of the loot money to help free his cellmate who is in for a life sentence. He is provided with a contact on the outside who can help him gather together the men and finances he needs to move forward. His contact then introduces him to the man with the money he needs – a district attorney for the city. It seems our DA has gotten himself into some trouble, though, by freely financing his relationship with a woman on the side. Although he still lives high, he is near bankruptcy. He can't refuse this offer, however, since it would be his way out of his dilemma. Another player is Gus, a hunchbacked owner of a diner and successful bookie, who helps select the men for the group. The focus of the book, however, seems to be Dix. He is the strong-arm man. He is ruthless and brutal, but is sentimental inside. He's had enough of the city and wants to get back to his country roots. Although meticulously planned, the heist goes awry through a series of random events that were beyond the control of the gang. From then on, they are all on the run, and each begins to show his true colors. Although somewhat dated, this is still an eminently readable book, and ranks up there with the author's other classic crime novels, "Little Caesar," "High Sierra," and "Scarface." Recommended.

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### Geoff Smith says

I did not like this book.

Too many characters.

Too little action.

Too much ugh.....

On the plus side it's short.

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### RJ says

The heist plot is nothing special but the atmosphere of corruption and decay in the Rust Belt big city (Pittsburgh) is what makes this post-WWII noir crime novel stand out. Although it's somewhat disorienting and slow in the early stages, the pace picks up by the halfway point and the conclusion is satisfying. Characters are well developed and have satisfying arcs that are typical for the genre, but Burnett clearly has contempt for some of them which doesn't play well for the reader.

## Jack Tripper says

Here's the 1955 Corgi Books mass-market paperback, not listed here (255 pages).

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## Tim Orfanos says

Αν θ?λει κ?ποιος να ξεκιν?σει να διαβ?ζει αστυνομικ? λογοτεχν?α με ?ντονα 'νου?ρ' στοιχε?α, καλ? θα ε?ναι να ξεκιν?σει με το συγκεκριμ?νο βιβλ?ο. Ο Burnett ψυχογραφε? με τ?τοιο πειστικ? τρ?πο τους χαρακτ?ρες και τον?ζει τη μοναδικ?τητ? τους, ?στε ο αναγν?στης νι?θει την επ?δραση των γεγον?των, ακ?μα, και αρκετ? ?ρα, αφο? ?χει ολοκληρ?σει την αν?γνωση.

Π?ρα απ? αυτ?, το συγκεκριμ?νο μυθιστ?ρημα αποτελε? κα? μια πειστικ?τατη κοινωνικ? καταγραφ? της μεταπολεμικ?ς Αμερικ?ς, μ?σα απ? τη γλαφυρ? στοιχειωτικ? ατμ?σφαιρα μιας μεγαλο?πολης, ?πως το Σικ?γο (1949).

Πρ?κειται για ?να απ? τα πιο 'στρωτ?' και ξεκ?θαρα στη δομ? της πλοκ?ς 'νου?ρ' μυθιστορ?ματα.

Βαθμολογ?α: 4,8/5 ? 9,6/10.

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## Jose Moa says

Perhaps for me one of the best noir novels ever written that inspired an excelent movie by John Houston

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## FotisK says

Εξαιρετικ? δε?γμα νου?ρ και απ? τα καλ?τερα του Burnett, απ? ?σα ?χω διαβ?σει μ?χρι στιγμ?ς τουλ?χιστον. Το μ?νο μειον?κτημα-βασικ?!- η ?κδοση του Παρατηρητ? που ?χω, η οπο?α καταφ?ρνει να καταστρ?ψει πολλ? σημε?α του ?ργου. Αν μπορε?τε, αποφ?γετ? την! Κρ?μα για την αξ?α του βιβλ?ου αυτο?.

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## Ed says

Saw the noir movie directec by John Houston. Great stuff. Marilyn Monroe lit up the screen in 1950.

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## Maria Beltrami says

Una tipica vicenda noir degli anni '50 dello scorso secolo, con una banda di balordi che mette a segno il colpo del secolo, un commissario apparentemente impermeabile a qualsiasi genere di umanità e ben deciso a sradicare la criminalità, nani e ballerine assortiti, e il caso, l'imponderabile, la sfiga per dirla tutta, che ci mettono il naso, e tutto va a rotoli.

Bello e nerissimo.

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## Tom Britz says

The Asphalt Jungle by W. R. Burnett was published in 1949. It is a tale of big city crime, specifically a jewelry heist. The city is as corrupt as any big city is and these other crimes are brought up as a periphery over-look. The author decided to narrow in on a big-time jewel heist, the largest within memory and the ineptness of the people that pull it off.

This novel was also made into a film it had a cameo by Marilyn Monroe in one of her earliest outings and directed by John Huston.

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## Algernon says

**"Well." said Riemenschneider, "we need a top-notch driver – in case of trouble. We need an expert toolman. And then, as always – sad to say – we need a hooligan."**

Heist stories are a dime a dozen. A lot of authors and film-makers have tried their hand at them, and robberies are about as popular today as they were in the heydays of the pulp fiction. Yet W R Burnett stands in a class of his own with this account of a daring heist at a jeweler shop in a big, unnamed Mid Western city. What is it that makes his tale feel both classical and modern? The tragic vibe that we associate with the original noir stories? Or the use of fast, rotating POV narration instead of first person hardboiled that I believe is well ahead of its time? It's a combination of factors, but the key ingredient can be found probably in the title: no matter how well drawn are the players in this charade with Fate, the main character in the novel is the city itself.

*River Boulevard, wide as a plaza and with its parkways and arched, orange street lights stretching off into the misty horizon in diminishing perspective, was as deserted as if a plague had swept the streets clean. The traffic lights changed with automatic precision, but there were no cars to heed or disobey them. Far down the boulevard, in the supper-club section of the city, elaborately glittering neon signs flashed off and on to emptiness. The night city, like a wound-up toy, went about its business with mechanical efficiency, regardless of man.*

Seen mostly at night time, the city is a living entity, remorseless and indifferent to the struggles of the puny humans who think they can control their own destiny. Once they are swallowed by the asphalt jungle they become prey, often crushed by the soulless gears of its administration or by the savagery of its hooligans. Hooligans who can often be disguised as high ranking police, lawyers or politicians.

**Too many of these fellows are drug addicts. They get greedy and scream about the take after it's made. Or they hound you later, claim you've cheated them. They are a no-good lot or they wouldn't be**

## **hooligans. Violence is a form of stupidity, and it's all they know.**

Herr Doktor Riemenschneider, the brains behind the heist, is literal in his appraisal of the hardman he needs, but his audience is quick to expand the definition to all the crooks thirsty for power in the city. (view spoiler)

The actual hooligan is Dix, a middle-aged gambling addict with a short temper and an inflated opinion of his honor, despite battery and armed hold-ups being his main source of income. Dix (from Dixie) is a nickname given to him because of his Southern accent and of his easily bruised ego. He starts as a side character, but as the events unfold he becomes the avatar of alienation, of what the jungle does to a man. (view spoiler)  
Ultimately all he wants to do is to escape, to go back to a lost garden of Eden – as his childhood spent on the family farm appears in retrospect.

*He threw a worried glance at the bedroom window, beyond which sprawled the huge city with its cliff-like buildings and its acres of hard cement. For a brief moment he felt a sort of terror – the terror of the exile abandoned to his fate far from home.*

This showing of the human side of a hardened criminal, seasoned with a doomed romantic interest, is another reason I consider the novel a modern one, one not satisfied with the cheap thrills of the daring robbery or with black & white separation between cops and robbers, but more concerned with the roots of the problem.

*"It gives you the jimmies sometimes looking at it like this," said Cobby, referring to the spread-out city. "You can really see how big it is, and you get to thinking about all the thousands of poor bastards conniving, fighting, biting, and scratching to make a living."*

Burnett is a hardboiled writer, but he is also a romantic who wants to find some hope of escaping the jungle, and a deft hand at sketching compelling characters in just a few paragraphs. All his characters are memorable and credible – there is not one that doesn't stand out, even if they have just one scene or two in the economy of the novel. Here's an example of Doll, the woman who fell in love with Dix, despite being regularly abused by him.

*The rough side of life was no mystery to her – she'd seen hardly anything else, as she'd been on her own for over twenty years; but she managed to keep herself aloof from the sordid fatalism of her associates, and she had fought a constant, tough, but inconclusive battle against the long, easy slide down into the mire.*

I mentioned earlier that most of the characters want to escape the jungle. One dreams of nubile girls in Mexico City, another of a new start in a foreign country, a young bimbo dreams of the sunny beaches of Florida, one lingers in bed all day with medication and cheap novels, and Dix yearns for the green hills of Kentucky. This being a classic pulp and not a modern blockbuster with A-list actors, most of them will not escape with the loot. The solution instead is presented by the two characters from the opening chapter: the cynical reporter Lou Farbstein and the slightly naive new Commissioner Theo J Hardy. These two refuse to accept defeat in the face of institutionalized corruption and still believe the system can be saved from within, not by running away from the jungle.

## **The worst police force in the world is better than no police force?**

Whether this statement is still valid today is something each of us has to reflect (and act) upon.

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After reading the book, I re-watched the John Houston movie, after about three decades of not being over impressed by it. With the original story fresh in mind, the movie becomes very close to a masterpiece also, with the main points about the city and alienation well made and with a stellar cast of characters. I

recommend both.

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### **Phillip says**

An author should be judged by how well he succeeds in what he sets out to do. Burnett set out to write a crime novel; he wrote one that grabs the reader's attention and doesn't let go. But it's in the depth of his characterizations that he excels; nobody is one-dimensional. With Dix and Emmerich the exploration is particularly probing. In the beginning both men are shown in an uncompromisingly harsh light; their considerable flaws loom large. But over the course of the book they take on layers of complexity until, by the end, they've become people we can understand and pity. And then there's Doll Pelky, a seemingly minor character. She clings to Dix: "She was crazy about this big tramp. Why – was no matter. She just was. If only he had a little kindness, a little understanding in his nature; not much, just a little." This is a woman who has reached the end of the line, and that end is Dix. She had known only the rough side of life for thirty-five years, had been engaged in a "constant, tough, but inconclusive battle against the long, easy slide into the mire." She had not taken on the "sordid fatalism" of the people around her. Doll has retained a core of decency. I was moved by her, and at the end I was left worrying about her. That feeling may best define Burnett's accomplishment.

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### **Kristopher says**

A fascinating read, if not of the greatest literary prowess. I'm still trying to decide if Burnett was providing an ironic critique of the city or an American-heartland, xenophobic rant against immigrants. Either way the highest it could get is a four.

The film adaptation is much better and, ironically, changes very little of the book. It just doesn't include the subtle xenophobic comments.

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### **Nigel Bird says**

Theo J Hardy is the new Police Commissioner. He's straight, determined and ready to clean up the act of the force he oversees. He has his hands full with his colleagues and the press, so when the infamous heist planner, Riemenschneider (aka Herr Doktor, aka The Professor) finishes his spell in prison, Hardy's not to happy that no one has noticed. Riemenschneider has disappeared into thin air and the cops have no angle to track him down.

I say thin air. That's not exactly the case. He's turned up at a gambling joint run by the shady Cobby and he's ready to put into motion the perfect crime. To put everything in place, Riemenschneider requires a team and a bank roll. In order to find these, he insists on seeing the biggest cheese and slipperiest scumbag on the block, Emmerich.

Now Emmerich's in a spot of bother. He's spent all his dough on a dame. As well as supporting his bed-ridden wife at home, he has another house in which his sexy young thing enjoys all the trappings of luxury that money can buy. The tax people are after him and the prospect of a huge hit on a jewellery store is irresistible. In order to keep the balls in the air, he has to come up with other alternatives and prepares various plans in which he will end up double-crossing someone or other.

Dix is the Italian Stallion. At least he used to be. He's been tamed by his wife and is besotted with his new

son. He's almost gone straight, but is keen to maintain his wealth to make sure his family are financially secure.

Dix and Brannon are hard men. Big tough guys who both play their cards close to their chests. Dix is battling for the gang, Brannon for Emmerich. There's a showdown in prospect and you can almost smell the testosterone and the blood from the first moment we sense the pair will come together. The ensuing battle doesn't disappoint and, as has to be, only one of them can walk away.

Gus is a hunchback. He works a diner counter. He has good beef for his friends and Grade B and C burgers for everyone else. He has a temper, a surprising power and he's connected to everything that happens in the underworld crime scene. As it happens, he's also a big fan of Dix's and will back him all the way and make sure that he stays safe, no matter how many cops or villains are after him. Gus's knowledge and connections spread everywhere like the sewers under the streets. There's not a corner he doesn't know or a sharp he hasn't come across.

What happens when all these characters come together and the heist is played out is gripping. The plot shifts as fortunes rise and fall and circumstance changes. The robbery itself is tension-fuelled and the police chase is always engaging. The highlight, however, is the interplay between the criminals and the observation of the ways their loyalties split and fuse while their world turns into dust.

In the end, I was rooting for almost everyone. If it were possible, it would have been great for the cops to succeed and for the robbers to get away (most of them, at any rate), but that can't happen.

The rounding off of each individual's journey is compelling and triggers an emotional reaction. It didn't all pan out in the way I hoped it might, but if it had it would have been much less of a book that it is.

A cracking read. Thoroughly enjoyable from start to finish.

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## **aPriL does feral sometimes says**

"I bring 'em into the world, and I bury 'em. The same ones," thought old Doctor Carmichael. "It's getting a little trying." - quoted from 'The Asphalt Jungle'.

In 2018, the year I have read this novel for the first time, 'The Asphalt Jungle' is written as if the plot and underworld characters are purposefully stripped down to folkloric essentials in the telling of what is a timeless tale of personal and economic failures. All literary fripperies, fads, flashbacks and inventive twists to make whistling bells out of the old bells and whistles that modern authors currently use are missing in this novel. Yet nothing was sacrificed in the minimal expository writing.

It was refreshing. I found myself experiencing jolts of literary pleasure with surprise and shock. W. T. Burnett, if you still were alive, I'd try to sing a few torch songs joining you in commiseration about societies of ambitious lowlives. Instead, gentle reader, I will include a link to a Carly Simon album, 'Torch', that I recommend you should have in the background as you read this excellent, if a bit sadly familiar (in several dimensions) 1940's noir novel:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X9GFj3...>

Not that many of these bad men in the book know how to love a woman, much less themselves, which appears to me to be an underlying theme (again, on several sadly familiar dimensions ...). Their girlfriends and wives certainly look at most of them with wistful longings and a sense of loss throughout. The best opportunity these guys have to take a pass on gambling, drinking to excess and crime is standing behind all of these guys - a woman. All of the good men (of which there are one or two, very much like Real Life today - \*snicker\*) have happy wives and kids.

Some fellows (and ladies, #metoo) when young find the shiny but expensive attractions of big cities more appealing than family life. Yesssss. So. The heist is born...

The list of characters (even the *names* the author uses are pure classic gold):

Manager of the heist “The Professor” Erwin Riemenschneider - A German who is a famous “heist artist”, recently released from prison, has a new proposition for a heist. He thinks with the right team of break-in experts, the biggest jeweler in the state, the Pelletier and Company with at least half a million dollars worth of gems, is easy pickings - if he can find a reputable fence, along with the best disreputable criminals renown for burglary. Unfortunately, who is available and ready to join in the plan are not exactly at the top of their game.

Alonzo Emmerich - apparently a very wealthy man with an invalid wife. He is a shady and expensive criminal lawyer with a taste for ostentatious spending. However, he is secretly on the point of bankruptcy - that little redhead Angela he is supporting, having spent thousands on her house, car, clothes and jewelry unexpectedly drained his accounts. He wants to be The Fence - if he actually had the money he is pretending to have. He is actually plotting a double cross. Can he do it? (view spoiler)

Charles ‘Cobby’ Cobb - “biggest non-syndicate bookie in the city” who introduces the Professor to Emmerich and Dix. He also is providing the initial front money secretly to Emmerich, having been talked into it by Emmerich. Of course Emmerich will pay him back - he’s rich, right? Emmerich is unable to get the funding for the heist right now, that’s all.

The “hooligan” Dix Handley - “...this big southerner — was a dangerous man, probably in one of the strong-arm rackets, a potential killer.” [Cobby says] ““Oh, he’s an out-of-work heavy—and crazy for the horses. My book beats him and beats him, and he keeps coming back for more.”” Dix, real name William Tuttle Jamieson, can’t stop thinking about going home to the farm, such beautiful country...he is old, in his fifties, and feeling tired, so very tired.

The Driver Gus Minisi - “little fat hunchback” who runs the all-night hamburger-and-newspaper joint near Camden West, a bad part of the city, a “downtown slum”. He did a stretch in prison, and he knows all of the players, “fronting” for them. The cops hassle him all of the time as a result, trying to make him “fink”, but he will never, right?

The Toolman Louis “Schemer” Bellini - trying to go straight, somewhat, after his marriage to innocent Maria and the birth of his year-old son. He has a job repairing appliances at an electrical-appliance store, but he still makes money “...in other ways...”

Bob Brannom - Emmerich’s right-hand henchman and a thuggish private detective.

On the good-guys team:

Lou Farbstein - wise and jaded newspaper reporter, “Like Diogenes, he’d been looking for an honest man for a long time...”

Police Commissioner Theo J. Hardy - no nonsense straight shooter, “...honest, able, hard-working, and with plenty of guts...”

The women - Dorothy ‘Doll’ Pelky, Maria Bellini, Angela Finley the redhead, Martha Hardy, May Emmerich, Frieda Farbstein - reflect loyalty, hearts of gold, or pure larceny, depending on their relationships

with their men.

Published in 1949, W. R. Burnett's 'Asphalt Jungle' seems to me THE master template for all heist novels ever written since the 1940's era when most classic noir stories were written. Whatever books or stories about heists which came before or after 'Asphalt Jungle', I think this novel is the one which perfected the genre standard and set in place the elements around which all other heist stories must weave their recapitulated medleys of plot.

For those who enjoy more quality, if modern, noir torch songs:

[https://youtu.be/AU\\_PuF59E5g](https://youtu.be/AU_PuF59E5g)

Or, if these ruined fellows make you angry, ladies, at the waste of your time (for balance, right?)

<https://youtu.be/z4DYciQ1v7M>

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