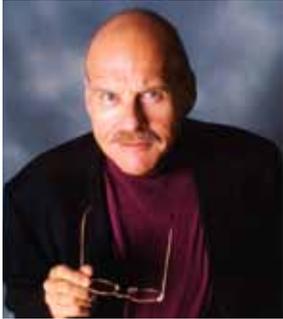




LAWRENCE BLOCK



Ah, noir. I was going to reach for Potter Stewart's observation regarding pornography (can't define it, but knows it when he sees it) but was relieved to discover that Michael Connelly had already done so. Well, I can't define noir either, and I'm not so certain I can recognize it on sight. It means too many different things to different people. Sometimes it seems to me that any crime story that takes place at night, or in a city, is going to get the word slapped on it.

Best definition I've heard of noir is Charles Ardai's, and God knows he's published enough of it at *Hard Case Crime* to hold an opinion. Noir, he says, is crime fiction written by a pessimist. (I'd amend that slightly, to incorporate the writer's ability to imagine and to project: crime fiction written as if by a pessimist. Oh, never mind.)

Here are five films that come to mind:

THE GRIFTERS

The Grifters (1990), directed by Stephen Frears, screenplay by Donald E. Westlake, based on the novel by Jim Thompson. Proof that noir needn't be filmed in black and white. Don initially turned down the job on the grounds that the book was too bleak. Frears got him to see—I don't know, the bright side? Wonderful performances by John Cusack, Anjelica Huston, and Annette Bening. Both women got Oscar® nominations, as did Frears and Westlake. Deserved all around—I can't recall a single false note. Hard to believe it's almost 25 years since I saw this one. Probably time I saw it again.



THE GLASS KEY

The Glass Key (1942), directed by Stuart Heisler, screenplay by Jonathan Latimer, based on the novel by Dashiell Hammett. This version, with Alan Ladd, Veronica Lake, and Brian Donlevy, was a remake of a 1935 George Raft film which I haven't seen. Hammett's novel takes a good look at municipal corruption, much of which gets short shrift in the film, but what winds up on the screen is solid, with Ladd as Ed Beaumont, Donlevy's right-hand man and fixer. (He's Ned in the book, Ed in both remakes.) In 1990, the Coen brothers remade the film yet again and called it *Miller's Crossing*—but without crediting the source. One wonders why. My guess: they couldn't find someone in a position to sell them the rights. Whatever their reason, it's *The Glass Key* again, with Gabriel Byrne and Albert Finney, and I thought highly of it when I saw it.

THE MALTESE FALCON



The Maltese Falcon (1941), written and directed by John Huston, based on the novel by Dashiell Hammett. Based on? The film *is* the novel, period. It's hard to find a line in the film that's not in the book, and—aside from some keep-the-Hays-Office-happy editing—all the dialogue in the book is reproduced essentially verbatim. (With the exception of Spade's digressive anecdote about a chap called Flitcraft. It's one of my favorite passages from the novel, but in Huston's place I'd have cut it, too.) *Falcon* had been filmed twice before, first in 1931 with the title retained and Ricardo Cortez as Sam Spade, then as *Satan Met a Lady* (1936), transformed into a comedy with Warren William and Bette Davis. (I haven't seen either of those versions, and God willing I never will.) The third time around they got it brilliantly right, by doing exactly as Hammett had hoped. He'd actually written the book as a prose screenplay, purposely making it something that could be adapted effortlessly. The cast is iconic—Bogart, Mary Astor, Peter Lorre, Sydney Greenstreet, Elisha Cook Jr.—and the resolution epitomizes noir.

D.O.A.

D.O.A. (1950), directed by Rudolph Maté, screenplay by Russell Rouse and Clarence Greene, based on the stage play *Der Mann, der seinen Mörder sucht* (The Man in Search of his Murderer) by Ernst Neubach. The set-up's classic: Edmond O'Brien, who's been fed a lethal dose of poison, stalks through the hallways of a police station to report his own murder. A flashback takes us through his own investigation, racing the clock to solve the case before the "luminous toxin" finishes him. I know it's been well over half a century since I saw this film, and I've only seen a fragment of it since, but it's stayed with me. In fact I suspect it triggered a story of mine, "And Miles to Go Before I Sleep," in which the narrator returns from a near-death experience, knowing the wounds he's sustained will soon kill him and determined to identify his killer while he still has a pulse.



D.O.A.'s been remade (in 1988, with Dennis Quaid) with only the premise retained, and in 2011 the Overtime Theater staged *D.O.A.—a Noir Musical*, which sold out its five-week run. Go know.



THE LAST SEDUCTION

The Last Seduction (1994) directed by John Dahl, screenplay by Steve Barancik, and starring Linda Fiorentino as the ultimate noir bad girl. It was filmed on a shoestring and ran on HBO prior to its theatrical opening, which disqualified it from Oscar® contention; otherwise Fiorentino would very likely have been nominated. She's brilliant in it, manipulating everyone and pulling it off perfectly—so perfectly that it struck someone as a good idea to follow it five years later with a sequel, imaginatively entitled *The Last Seduction II*. (Joan Severance replaced Fiorentino in the sequel, and is in Barcelona now, up to her old tricks, while a relentless private detective pursues her. I haven't seen the sequel, nor have I been able to find anyone who has ever had a good word to say about it.)

I have a noir novel, *The Girl with the Deep Blue Eyes*, coming out in September 2015 from Hard Case Crime. My film agent tagged it "James M. Cain on Viagra." I think Hard Case ought to put the line on the cover. The protagonist, Doak Miller, is an ex-cop from New York now stretching his pension as a P.I. in a small town in Florida, and there's a sequence in the book where he's lying on the couch watching noir films on TCM. I'll tell you, the research was a pleasure...

Lawrence Block is a living legend among crime fiction authors, author of innumerable novels and short stories, including 18 in the acclaimed Matthew Scudder series. He was named a "Grand Master" of the form by the Mystery Writers of America.