



DARK CITY HIGH

THE HIGH SCHOOL NOIR OF *BRICK* AND *VERONICA MARS*

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Backstabbing, adultery, blackmail, robbery, corruption, and murder—you'll find them all here, in a place where no vice is in short supply. You want drugs? Done. Dames? They're a dime a dozen. But stay on your toes because they'll take you for all you're worth. Everyone is working an angle, looking out for number one. Your friend could become your enemy, and if the circumstances are right, your enemy could just as easily become your friend. Alliances are as unpredictable and shifty as a career criminal's moral compass.

Is all this the world of 1940's and 50's film noir? Absolutely. But, as two recent works—the television show *Veronica Mars* (2004-2007) and the film *Brick* (2005)—convincingly argue, it is also the world of the contemporary American high school.

That film noir didn't extend its seductive, deadly reach into the high schools of the forties and fifties is somewhat surprising, given how much filmmakers danced around the edges of what we now call noir when crafting darker stories about teens gone bad. A look back into dramas set in American high schools during the noir cycle reveals no shortage of juvenile delinquent (or "social problem") pic-

tures like the Glenn Ford vehicle *The Blackboard Jungle* (1955) and melodramas like James Dean's first feature, *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). But a noir film from the years of the typically accepted noir cycle (1940-1958) populated primarily by teenagers and set inside a high school simply does not exist. Perhaps noir didn't make it all the way into the halls of adolescent learning because adults still wanted to believe that the teens of their time retained an element of their childhood innocence—that they weren't beyond redemption.

What a difference a half century makes.



High school noir personified: the cast of the TV series *Veronica Mars*

WHEN THE PILOT EPISODE of *Veronica Mars* premiered on the now-defunct UPN on September 22, 2004, viewers probably didn't know what to think. In the opening shot, Veronica (Kristen Bell), a seventeen-year-old high school junior, is camped outside of the Hotel Camelot, a seedy, by-the-hour dive in Neptune, California, her textbooks by her side as she surreptitiously snaps some midnight shots of yet another cheating husband.

"I'm never getting married," she says via voiceover. "You want an absolute? Well, there it is. Veronica Mars, spinster. I mean, what's the point? Sure, there's the initial primal drive. Ride it out. Better yet, ignore it. Sooner or later, the people you love let you down. And here's where it ends up: sleazy men, cocktail waitresses, cheap motels on the wrong side of town, and a soon-to-be ex-spouse wanting a bigger piece of the settlement pie. That's where I come in. Forty dollars an hour is cheap compared to the long-term financial security sordid photography can secure for you, your offspring, your next lover. But do us a favor if it's you in there. Dispense with the cuddling. This motel tryst? It is what it is. Make it quick. The person sitting in the car across the street might have a calculus exam in five—make that four—hours, and she can't leave until she gets the money shot."

Slice off the last line of her opening monologue and change the character from a teenage girl to an adult male, and it would be easy to mistake it for world-weary detectives Philip Marlowe or Sam Spade. As she watches and waits to capture that perfect moment of infidelity, Veronica's thoughts set the stage for the noir-infused themes that weave their twisted way through the show's three seasons. The Mars family backstory is pure noir. Veronica's dad, Keith (Enrico Colantoni), was once the sheriff of Neptune, but in the course of his investigation into the murder of teenager Lily Kane (Amanda Seyfried), he fingered Lily's dad, Jake (Kyle Secor), as the perp. Bad move. Jake's a software billionaire with very powerful friends. The next thing Keith

knew, a former Kane software employee copped to the crime, Jake was a free man, Keith was out of a job, and his wife—who'd had an affair with Jake years ago—left him, disappearing into thin air.

With seemingly no other options, Keith hung up a shingle as a private investigator and, since that day, Veronica has been taking the cases he doesn't have time to handle. The once-powerful sheriff and his daughter, who was Lily's best friend and her brother Duncan's (Teddy Dunn) boyfriend, are now pariahs in the community that once embraced them. They've been reduced to living on the wrong side of the tracks, eking out a living by chasing down bail jumpers and snapping sordid pictures of dirty deeds.

But Veronica doesn't just work for her dad. She takes cases from the down-and-outers at her school, too. The show's first two seasons, which are set at Neptune High, feature a wide variety of mysteries that Veronica tries to solve. Almost every episode features a self-contained case, but seasons one and two also contain season-long mystery arcs. In season one, the two mysteries that the pilot sets up—Who killed Lily Kane? Who roofied and raped Veronica at a party?—dominate Veronica's time, whereas season two features no less than a half-dozen lengthy, convoluted mystery arcs.

What makes the show unique is how it takes advantage of its high school setting and teenage characters to tell stories shot through with noir. The world in which the high school students operate is perfect to explore noir's well-worn themes of corruption and betrayal, because it is easy for Neptune's teens to do whatever they please, morals and consequences be damned. Neptune is, as Veronica puts it, "a town without a middle class." If you live in Neptune, you're either very rich or very poor. You're either Logan Echolls (Jason Dohring), volatile son of action movie star Aaron Echolls (Harry Hamlin), or you're Eli Navarro, a.k.a. Weevil (Francis Capra), the leader of the PCH biker gang. The rich teens like Logan have the financial means,

the moral corruption, and the nihilistic attitudes that, in the original noir films, only manifested in adults. And the poor teens like Weevil? They may not inherit their money from rich parents, but they can just as easily steal from their rich classmates that do. In *Veronica Mars*, high school is no longer a time of relative innocence or coming of age. It is a time when the sins of the world have already put down deep roots in every student's soul.

A PERFECT EXAMPLE of how the show adapts noir's essential themes into the high school setting takes place in episode two ("Credit Where Credit's Due"), when the show sets out to prove that the average Neptune High teenager can be just as corrupt as, say, Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) in *Double Indemnity* (1944). Remember Neff's famous line in his opening confession, when he cops to his sins after his murderous plans went sideways? "I killed him for money and a woman. I didn't get the money and I didn't get the woman. Pretty, isn't it?" While Felix Toombs (Brad Bufanda), a member of Eli's gang and the episode's fall guy, doesn't go so far as murder, his story reflects Neff's in many ways.

The episode begins with a mystery—who has been committing credit card fraud in Eli's grandmother's name? Weevil enlists Veronica to get to the bottom of it. Like any good noir mystery, everyone seems to be a suspect, and the story features a number of dead ends and red herrings along the way. But eventually, Veronica gets to the truth. Like Neff, Felix fell for the wrong kind of woman. Financially, the girl is out of his league, but also like Neff, Felix—whose only valuable possession is his motorcycle—wants both the girl and the dough he needs to keep her interested. The girl, Caitlin Ford (played by, in a regrettable instance of stunt casting, Paris Hilton), keeps stringing him along, telling him after each expensive gift that one day, she will leave her rich boyfriend and run away with him. To afford Caitlin's expensive tastes, Felix decided that the quickest way to get the money was to root through Mrs. Navarro's mail, snag some credit card applications, get the cards and spend a pile of money he had no right to spend. But his world comes crashing down when Veronica outs him to both Weevil and Caitlin's rich boyfriend. Like Neff, Felix's femme fatale proved to be far less than truthful and much more interested in her own survival than in his. In the end,

Felix didn't get the money, and he didn't get the girl. All he got was a vicious beatdown, courtesy of Weevil.

Many of the show's episodes follow similar storylines, and many of them feature bad guys and deadly dames that are all under the age of eighteen. Yes, these teenagers still live in a world with plenty of parents around, but the teens prove time and again that they are just as evil as the worst adults. Inside the walls of a place that is supposed to promote the idea that with knowledge comes wisdom, virtually all of the people who populate its space have no hope for achieving such an ideal goal. For them, high school is their own version of the huge, unforgiving urban American landscape of the original noirs, a place where crime and corruption run rampant and lessons are learned not in the classroom, but only after someone stabs you—often figuratively, but sometimes literally—in the back.

THE ALL-ENCOMPASSING NOIR of *Veronica Mars* extends into Veronica and Keith's lives, too. One of them often plays Philip Marlowe to the other's Sam Spade, the two of them constantly fluctuating between Marlowe's white knight complex and Spade's much shadier character traits. For instance, Veronica sets fire to a police evidence room, impersonates a member of the sheriff's department, tampers with evidence in a murder case, breaks and enters, and lies to her father about her continuing level of involvement in her own investigation of Lily Kane's murder—all in the first three episodes. Keith often finds himself playing the knightly Marlowe role, but he is also not above finding himself victimized by a blackmail scheme after getting caught fooling around with a married woman (Laura San Giacomo) by Vinnie Van Lowe (Ken Marino), a rival P.I. with the scruples of a career con man. As Logan tells Veronica after she finds out some less-than-flattering details about his actions during a time when they weren't together, "if you dig deep enough, you're going to find that everyone's a sinner."

Of course, the noir themes that work their way into the show's characters and storylines do not exemplify noir, *per se*. But the show adeptly adapts noir's visual style coupled with the show's themes to craft distinctly neo-noir stories. No, the show isn't presented in black and white. But it was shot on 16mm film, and it regularly features low-angled viewpoints filmed through wide-angle lenses, giving the show's visual tableau the same kind of gritty, claustrophobic feel of classic film noir. In addition, many individual shots feature noir's iconic visual signatures (Dutch angles, characters framed in the shadows of Venetian blinds). Even the set design has its noir moments—the exterior of Keith Mars' office features a large, red, neon "MARS" sign.

Over its three-year run, the show fought a constant battle with the networks—first UPN, then the CW—over its pitch-black themes and shady characters. For example, the opening credits sequence in season three projects a much stronger noir vibe than the same sequence in seasons one and two, because UPN wanted to sell the show as a high school drama, not as a noirish



Kristen Bell tries out her best Sam Spade pose as the title character in *Veronica Mars*



re-envisioning of Nancy Drew. Basically, UPN network executives thought that the opening credits sequence needed to be more *Dawson's Creek* and less *Out of the Past* (1947). But while Thomas got his wish for the credits in season three, the CW network executives unfortunately interfered with the structure of the show's third season, attempting to dumb it down by featuring simpler, less convoluted mystery arcs in an effort to tailor the show for the same type of audience that tuned in to *Gossip Girl* every week.

Network interference, combined with the show's occasional winking self-awareness of the genre it was emulating, occasionally dragged *Veronica Mars* out of the shadows and into the "noir lite" category. A perfect example of how the program undercut its own seriousness takes place in "Return of the Kane," the sixth episode of the first season, in which Veronica and Keith spoof the hard-boiled dialogue of many noirs by mimicking both its style and diction. The conversation starts when Keith gets home one night.

Veronica: Tough day?

Keith: That ain't the half of it. See, this dame walks in, and you shoulda seen the getaway sticks on her. Says something's hinky with her old man.

Veronica: Did ya put the screws to him?

Keith: You ain't kiddin'. He sang like a canary.

Veronica: Well, you're in luck, Philip Marlowe, because it's desert-for-dinner night, and I've got a sundae thing set up here.

The show is peppered with other overt references and send-ups of the noir genre. In one scene, Vinnie Van Lowe disparagingly refers to Keith's office as a B movie set. When one of Veronica's friends asks her if she's had any interesting cases recently, she responds, "We're still trying to find that Maltese Falcon." And Keith and Harmony, the married woman who unwittingly drove Keith into Van Lowe's blackmail setup, actually spend one of their illicit evenings in the episode "Hi, Infidelity" attending a film noir festival together. When leaving the theatre after seeing a double bill of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *The Big Sleep* (1946), Harmony asks Keith, "Would you call that an accurate depiction of life as a private eye?" Keith answers, "Pretty close. I personally have never been hired to locate a Maltese Falcon, *per se*, but there was the case of the Maltese dog."

WHILE *VERONICA MARS* is willing to wink at its audience in self-aware recognition and even parody of noir's genre tropes, Rian Johnson's debut film *Brick* plays the game straight. Johnson's low-budget film (*Brick* was made for less than \$500,000, a fraction of what one episode of *Veronica Mars* cost) begins with Brendan (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) crouched down outside a drainage tunnel, staring at the dead body of his ex-girlfriend, Emily (Emilie de Ravin), floating in the water. Like many classic noirs, the film quickly moves into flashback mode, taking the viewer to a few days earlier, when Emily had called Brendan—who takes his calls in a phone booth—in a panic, mumbling incoherently about a brick and begging Brendan for help. By the time he tracks her down, it's too late—she's been murdered.

Brick tackles the noir sub-genre of the detective story head-on and with great respect for the material that inspired it. Unlike *Veronica Mars*, which was all too willing to wink at its audience from time to time, Johnson has asserted that *Brick* was not designed to be a deconstruction of the noir genre or a "meta" take on it. When speaking about the film's adaptation of noir's genre tropes, Johnson has explained that "we wanted to stay incredibly honest and never wink, even when the situations got to the point where you saw a bit of the absurdity of it. Those were especially the times that it was important that we were completely, honestly creating a real world with real people." So, for instance, when femme fatale Laura (Nora Zehetner) tells Brendan to get her a drink with the line, "Quit your yappin' and fix me one," the dialogue—which would have been delivered with





Joseph Gordon-Levitt: an adolescent Bogart for a new generation in *Brick*

self-deprecating parody on *Veronica Mars*—is served up without a hint of irony.

The film draws directly and straightforwardly from the noir well when doing everything from creating its overall mood to referencing specific moments in classic film noirs. Like *Veronica Mars*, many of the film's wide-angle shots angle up from street level, giving it film noir's trademark claustrophobic feel. In addition, the film's haunting, melancholy score often calls to mind a mix between a 1940s nightclub and the soundtrack from *Blade Runner* (1982), particularly in the scenes that feature interactions between Brendan and Laura. The film also plays up the Brendan/Sam Spade, Laura/Brigid O'Shaughnessy parallel by referencing a specific moment from John Huston's adaptation of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), which is the film—along with Dashiell Hammett's novel—that Johnson has cited as his primary noir influence. In Huston's film, Spade (Humphrey Bogart) tells Brigid (Mary Astor) that he'll signal her by using a long-short-long-short ring of the doorbell. In *Brick*, when Brendan needs Laura to signal him from outside a house, he tells her to use her car horn to make the identical long-short-long-short sign.

Brendan also operates much like Dick Powell's Philip Marlowe in *Murder, My Sweet* (1944). Powell's Marlowe spent most of his investigation getting beaten up, drugged and kidnapped, and Brendan endures much of the same. While he can hold his own in a fight, that doesn't mean that he's immune from getting smashed to a pulp and stuffed in the trunk of a car by Tug (Noah Fleiss), the muscle that answers to the local drug kingpin known only as The Pin (Lukas Haas). His beating at the hands of Tug is only the first of many scrapes he endures, and by the end of the film, Brendan is a bloody, limping mess who is coughing up blood and passing out from the pain he's

endured—all at the hands of his fellow high schoolers.

And that's what is notable about *Brick*: the near-complete absence of adults. All of the suspects in Brendan's investigation into Emily's murder are his own age, with the exception of The Pin, who is referred to in incredulous tones as a twenty-six year-old, as if that age makes him somehow ancient. Just take a look at Brendan's list of targets: Tug (Noah Fleiss), a hot-tempered goon who once dated Emily; Dode (Noah Segan), Emily's drug-dealing boyfriend; Laura (Nora Zehetner), who oozes both wealth and popularity; Kara (Meagan Good), one of Laura's friends who befriended Emily only to later cast her aside; and Brad Bramish (Brian White), a drug-addled football player who was dating Laura at the time of Emily's death. Each one of them—with the exception of The Pin—is one of Brendan's classmates, and so is The Brain (Matt O'Leary), Brendan's assistant in the murder investigation.

The only instance in which an adult pops into the narrative in any significant way takes place when Brendan gets called into the Assistant Vice Principal's office because Gary Trueman, the AVP (Richard Roundtree), wants some dope on some students he's looking to bust. The scene plays like the adversarial interrogation session in any number of noirs, in which the P.I. and the cops fail to see eye to eye:

Trueman: Okay, Brendan. I've been looking to talk to you. You've helped this office out before.

Brendan: No. I gave you Jerr to see him eaten, not to see you fed.

T: Fine. Very well put.

B: Accelerated English. Mrs. Kasprzyk.

T: Tough teacher.

B: Tough, but fair.

T: Okay. We know you're clean. And despite your motives, you've



Joseph Gordon-Levitt and Emilie de Ravin in *Brick*'s Bogart-Astor inspired tete-a-tete

always been an asset to this office. And you're a good kid.

B: Uh huh.

T: I want to run some names past you.

[Brendan abruptly gets up to leave.]

B: Hold it. We're not done here.

T: I was done here three months ago. I told you then I'd give you Jerr, and that was that. I'm not your inside line, and I'm not your boy.

B: That's not very—

T: You know what I'm in, if the wrong yegg saw me pulled in here?

B: What are you in?

T: No. And no more of these informal chats, either. You got a discipline issue with me, write me up or suspend me, and I'll see you at the parent conference.

For the most part, the dialogue plays like typical hard-boiled prose. But the mentions of an English class and a parent conference throw an otherwise familiar situation into unfamiliar territory, which is exactly what Johnson intended. When speaking about why he set his neo-noir in a high school and populated it almost exclusively with teenagers, Johnson has said that it was out of a desire to give the story “a different set of visual cues.” He elaborated on his reasoning when he explained that “at this point in our culture, everyone is so familiar with noir, and everyone is so familiar specifically with the visual cues of it—you see guys in hats, you see shadowy alleyways, you see dames and cigarettes. It's very easy to turn a big piece of your brain off once you see it.” Johnson has said that by placing a detective film like *The Maltese Falcon* into a contemporary high school, he wanted to insure that “you couldn't lean on your preconceptions of what detective movies were. We could take a much more straight-

forward approach to the genre and just make ourselves a ripping detective yarn.” As a result, the scene between Brendan and Truman—like every other scene in the film—is familiar but also fresh and unique, allowing Johnson to achieve his stated goal of putting *Brick* “in a place where you could come at this stuff on its own terms instead of just having it feel like a hollow echo of older, better films.”

ANY DISCERNING VIEWER of *Brick* would agree that Johnson made a “ripping detective yarn” that successfully follows in the footsteps of classics like *The Maltese Falcon*, while carving out its own unique space in the noir canon by setting the film within the world of the contemporary American high school. *Veronica Mars* attempted to achieve the same goal, just in a slightly different way. However, despite their differing approaches, both the show and the film set out to update the noir genre for a new generation of viewers by placing its tropes into a high school setting, and both succeeded in their own unique ways.

Brick opened to widespread critical acclaim and launched Rian Johnson's successful directorial career, with his most recent film, the sci-fi neo-noir *Looper* (2012), a worldwide critical and commercial success that reunited him with Joseph Gordon-Levitt. *Veronica Mars* is a success story all its own. After it was cancelled at the conclusion of its third season, Kristen Bell and Rob Thomas' tireless crusading for a *Veronica Mars* film paid off. On March 13, 2013, they launched a fan-funded Kickstarter campaign to raise the money needed to make the film. Their fundraising goal was \$2 million; by the end of the campaign, fans of the show had ponied up nearly triple that amount, making it the most successful film project in Kickstarter's history. *Veronica Mars: The Movie* completed principal photography in July 2013 and comes to theatres in March 2014, proving that the appetite for new ways of looking at noir, nearly seventy-five years after the cycle began, is alive and well. ■