

# A LIGHT IN THE DARK



## ELLA RAINES AND FILM NOIR'S WORKING GIRLS

**Imogen Sara Smith**

**S**he was the good girl who looked like a bad girl. With her enticingly knowing look, her dark sweep of hair and dazzling green eyes, Ella Raines could have been as dangerous as any of noir's killer dames. Instead, her type was the gallant rescuer of

trapped and helpless men. No domestic angel, she was a working girl, crisply tailored and coolly competent. Raines single-handedly subverts the accepted wisdom that noir's bad women are always stronger, smarter, and more exciting than its good women. And she raises a question: If it were true, as many have asserted, that the *femme fatale* was spawned by men's anxiety about women entering



Raines' signature role was as resourceful, resilient amateur sleuth Carol "Kansas" Richman in *Phantom Lady*, opposite Franchot Tone

the workforce during World War II, that the figure demonized emancipated women, then why is it that *femmes fatales* never work or want to, while noir's career girls often appear as saviors, the light of hope glinting in fate's darkest corners?

**ELLA RAINES WAS BORN** in the tiny town of Snoqualmie Falls, Washington, in 1920 (some sources say 1921), and had an outdoorsy, tomboyish upbringing as an only child taught by her father how to shoot, fish, and ride. She also studied piano and singing, and recalled that her interest in acting was piqued when she appeared in a high school play at age fifteen. Portraying an old maid, she stumbled on her entrance, fell, and drove a knitting needle through her knuckle. She got up and carried on, bleeding into a handkerchief. The experience sealed her dedication to performing. As a drama major at the University of Washington she supported herself by modeling, then headed for the New York stage in 1942, where she was quickly spotted and tested by David O. Selznick. She was snapped up by agent Charles Feldman, who sent her to Hollywood where she became the first actor under contract to B-H Productions, a company formed by Howard Hawks and Charles Boyer to discover, develop, and market new talent.

Smitten, Hawks whisked her off to his ranch for two weeks, and she credited him with teaching her about pacing and naturalism in

front of the camera. Though she never appeared in a film he directed, Ella Raines is a quintessential Hawksian woman: the no-nonsense directness, the slim rangy build, the slight swagger and fondness for

masculine tailoring, the ability to meet men on level ground. Her first two films, in 1943, were both war movies. In *Corvette K-225*, produced by Hawks and directed by Richard Rosson, she was Randolph Scott's love interest. Far more interesting is *Cry 'Havoc*, a gritty tribute to the heroism of civilian nurses in Bataan. The magnificent cast includes Margaret Sullavan, Joan Blondell, Anne Southern, and Marsha Hunt as women stoically coping amid bombings, malaria, food shortages, and the gradually creeping certainty of defeat. Wearing overalls, pushing trucks through the mud, dodging shrapnel and even shooting down enemy planes, they personify the Rosie-the-Riveter image of female gumption that was celebrated—at least as long as women were needed to churn out armaments and nurse soldiers. No male actor has more than

**She is a quintessential Hawksian woman: the no-nonsense directness, the slim rangy build, the slight swagger and fondness for masculine tailoring, the ability to meet men on level ground.**

a fleeting moment of screen time in *Cry 'Havoc*, but one man, who appears just long enough to die in Ella Raines's arms, is a very young Robert Mitchum, already expert at biting the dust with style.

B-H Productions cashed in on their successful discovery, selling Raines' contract to Universal. There she had the luck to fall in with producer Joan Harrison and director Robert Siodmak, who had recently



"Suspense builds as Kansas becomes the menaced prey, alone on an elevated platform with the man she may have pushed too far." With Andrew Tombes in *Phantom Lady*

met and joined forces. Harrison convinced Universal to let her produce an adaptation of Cornell Woolrich's novel *Phantom Lady*, directed by Siodmak. Though the resulting film is far from perfect, it contains passages of pure magic, and an avid energy generated by newcomers seizing their first real chance. It gave Raines her defining, and perhaps her greatest role, allowing her to try on several personae while playing a distaff version of the white knight detective pounding the mean streets. As Carol "Kansas" Richman, secretary to engineer Scott Henderson (Alan Curtis), she strides into the movie brisk and confident, keeping her head even when she learns that her boss, with whom she is in love, has been arrested on suspicion of murdering his wife. In her biography of Siodmak, Deborah Lazaroff Alpi writes that the character of Kansas was "quite obviously modeled on Joan Harrison," a lover of mysteries and thrillers who landed a job as Alfred Hitchcock's secretary in 1933, but soon became his creative collaborator.



Convicted and abandoned by his friends, Scott passively resigns himself to death, but Kansas sets out alone to find the mysterious, missing woman who can give him an alibi. In the film's two best sequences, she goes way out on a limb in her efforts to break the silence of witnesses bribed to lie about the "phantom lady." With the first, a bartender, Kansas takes the role of an avenging fury. She sits at the end of his bar night after night, unmoving, staring at him balefully; the slightest hint of a smile touches her lips when he is so unnerved he fumbles and drops a glass. In these scenes Raines' beauty seems almost vampiric, with her sharp widow's peak, arched black brows, and sultry mouth. Her eyes seem to glow in the dark like a cat's.

When the bar closes, she follows her quarry. It's a strange reversal: a young woman stalking a man through dark, empty streets, her heels stabbing the pavement. This silent, dreamily stylized scene beautifully evokes a still, humid





New York night after a summer storm, the streets glistening wet and a faint steam hanging in the air. Suspense builds as Kansas becomes the menaced prey, alone on an elevated platform with the man she may have pushed too far. The sequence ends sadly, introducing the Woolrichian theme of the black angel, a woman whose righteous quest turns her into a malevolent force.

With the next witness, jazz drummer Cliff Milburn (Elisha Cook Jr.), she takes a different tack, transforming herself into a cheap floozy and self-professed “hep kitten.” Stacked heels and fishnet stockings, tight satin dress, rattling dime-store jewelry, curls piled up on her head, beauty mark stuck under her lip—as soon as Cliff gets an eyeful he snaps at the bait. Kansas does far more than dress the part, she acts it: chomping gum with a toothy, open-mouthed grin, she radiates a vacuous, predatory eagerness. She lets the lecherous little guy paw and kiss her, shuddering with disgust, and when

he takes her to an after-hours jam session, she eggs on his orgasmic drum solo. Raines is a co-conspirator in one of the most blatantly suggestive sequences of the Code era. Excitedly urging Cook on and throwing her head back in demonic laughter, she suggests how far the sheltered Kansas will let herself go in the interests of justice.

Siodmak makes little effort to disguise the fact that he is much more engaged by the gratuitous stylization of the jam session—all tilted angles and rhythmic editing—than by the flimsy plot. The film is further weakened by the entry of Franchot Tone, who gives a performance so ludicrously hammy it feels like deliberate sabotage. Siodmak’s next film with Raines was far more consistently well-written and acted, though her role is far less interesting. She was thrilled to do *The Suspect* (1944) because of the chance to work with Charles Laughton, who gives one of his most restrained and subtle performances as a wife-killer.





In *The Strange Affair of Uncle Harry* Geraldine Fitzgerald battles with Raines' independent, sexually available career girl for the affections of her brother

In this period drama set in turn-of-the century London, Laughton plays Philip Marshall, a gentle and kindly man tied to a shrewish, hatchet-faced wife (Rosalind Ivan). He meets the lovely young Mary (Raines) when she comes to his office seeking employment, a girl on her own who knows how to use one of those new-fangled type-writing machines. The basic challenge for the filmmakers was convincing viewers that the gorgeous young Raines would fall in love with Laughton, whose own self-assessment was that he had a face like a “departing pachyderm.” But together, they sell it: Laughton makes Philip genuinely charming as well as kind, and Raines creates a lonely woman braced against men who see her only as an easy target; she’s truly glad to find a caring, respectful man with whom she feels at ease. Yet Laughton gradually reveals a cold, secretive, selfish side of this likable fellow, who commits two murders and feels no guilt about either one. Mary has no such layers; David Thomson calls her “the love of Charles Laughton’s imagination,” implying that she is literally too good to be true. She is undeniably worth killing for.

Joan Harrison was back producing Siodmak’s *The Strange Affair of Uncle Harry* (1945), and again Raines was cast in the role of a rescuer. Harry Quincy (George Sanders) is imprisoned by a small

town, a routine job in a textile mill, a gloomy old house, and two dependent sisters who smother him with jealous, clinging devotion. Sanders, the suave “professional cad,” gives his most sensitive and nuanced performance here, making Harry ineffectual and thwarted but conveying an edge of bitter sarcasm under his passivity and helpless soft-heartedness.

**Raines is at her most dashing and bold here, swaggering around in sexy high-waisted pants, teasing and flirting with the shy Harry.**

Salvation appears in the form of Deborah Brown (Raines), a glamorous fashion designer visiting from the New York office. Raines is at her most dashing and bold here, swaggering around in sexy high-waisted pants, teasing and flirting with the shy Harry. On their first date, they go to watch a women’s baseball team—a wartime touch that also underlines Deborah’s spirited, assertive character. Accustomed to New York wolves, she is amused by the naïveté of this repressed bachelor who innocently boasts of his nine-inch telescope, takes her up to his studio to show her Saturn, turns out the lights—and really *does* show her Saturn. Deborah makes it clear that she’s an

experienced woman, but Harry is so backward she has to threaten to go off with another man to get him to act.

*The Strange Affair of Uncle Harry* sets up a stark contrast between an independent, sexually available career girl and a family-bound, homemaking woman—and it is the *former* who is the





good angel, the latter the deadly succubus. She is Lettie (Geraldine Fitzgerald), Harry's younger sister whose possessive, incestuous love for her brother literally poisons his life. Feigning invalidism to get his attention, she lounges around in a sweltering greenhouse, wearing revealing negligees and nostalgically romanticizing the private, shared world of their childhood. She instantly recognizes the threat of Deborah, who arrives for tea in a smartly tailored tweed suit with a cropped jacket and striped necktie—the image of the modern, liberated woman. Deborah just as quickly grasps the jealous hostility behind Lettie's fussy, overbearing politeness.

When he has to make a choice between eloping to New York with Deborah and staying with Lettie after she fakes illness, he chooses his sister, unwilling to face the truth about her. When he realizes how he has been manipulated into giving up his one chance of happiness, Harry grows to hate Lettie so much that he tries to poison her. In a twisted irony, it is his older sister Hester who dies, and Lettie is convicted of her murder. The film was to end with Harry condemned to a life of disabling guilt and hopeless loneliness, but the studio demanded a new ending, a piece of heavy-handed meddling that led Joan Harrison to leave Universal. No one involved in the film made any effort to hide their contempt for the “it-was-all-a-dream” coda they disgustingly tacked on. Amazingly, it was chosen from five alternate endings previewed for New York audiences; it's hard to imagine

how the others could have been worse.

The last film Ella Raines made with Siodmak was by far the least. He was so reluctant to direct the silly, overwrought melodrama *Time Out of Mind* (1947) that he boasted of deliberately larding it with hyper-stylized visual effects, making it so bad that the studio would bury it. Here Raines plays a version of Lettie's character, the neurotically possessive sister of the troubled protagonist. She looks smashing with black bangs and Gilded Age gowns, but the film is a turgid bore. Brushing off this flop, Siodmak would go on to more triumphs, including *Cry of the City* (1948) and *Criss Cross* (1949). For Raines, however, somewhat inexplicably, the run of luck was over.

1947 was a turning point. Her contract at Universal ended and was not renewed. The same year she married Robin Olds in a studio wedding, wearing a Travis Banton dress and with Joan Harrison as her matron of honor. Olds was a handsome war hero and career army officer who eventually rose to the rank of brigadier general. They had a pair of daughters, and for two decades following her retirement from acting Raines would be a dutiful army wife. In 1975, however, they divorced, and she announced that she had “spent 30 years of my life with a man whom I must admit I dislike.”

**WHY ELLA RAINES' FILM CAREER** fizzled after such a promising start seems a mystery, but it coincided with the disappearance of her type—the working girl—from movie screens and cultural acceptance. By the 1950s, movies reflected the postwar shift that discouraged women from working outside the home, as can be seen in her last two films for Universal. In *The Web* (1947), a blithely paranoid tale of frames and double crosses, Raines first appears in her familiar role as a high-powered secretary with a private office and a sharp checked blazer. But when the brash lawyer played by Edmond O'Brien, mocking her air of importance, sneers, “Just goes to show how powerful a girl can get to be if she keeps her stocking-seams straight,” it is an indication how the movie views her. As the “personal secretary” of a ruthless tycoon (Vincent Price), she is mostly decorative, a sleek bauble to be coveted and possessed by men.

She has only one scene in *Brute Force* (1947), Mark Hellinger and Jules Dassin's bleak, violent prison picture; but that one scene distills the antithesis of the women she usually played. Appearing in a flashback, Raines plays the wife for whom meek, bespectacled Whit Bissell embezzled money—to buy her a fur coat. A housewife cooking



With Whit Bissell in *Brute Force*: the antithesis of the women she usually played



**Impact:** Brian Donlevy meets the world's most gorgeous grease monkey

dinner in a small apartment, she looks tired and dejected. Her eyes light up in ecstasy when she sees the mink; “All my life, the one thing I really wanted was a fur coat,” she intones reverently. This is American postwar marriage reduced to its brute essentials: men crushed by the obligation to provide for their wives, women for whom luxuries bestowed by a man are the only badges of worth. The consequences are cruel; when Bissell’s character learns his wife is divorcing him, he hangs himself in his prison cell.

Leaving Universal, Raines freelanced for a while, then signed with Republic in 1950, but the quality of her films steadily declined. She is lovely but underused again in *A Dangerous Profession* (1949), a George Raft vehicle about the bail bonds industry that covers its hopelessly murky plot with a breezy patter of wisecracks. *Impact* (1949), a hash of clichés starring a stolid Brian Donlevy, is a lackluster finale to Ella Raines’ career in noir, and her character is terminally wholesome and virtuous. However, she does play a garage owner who looks radiant in overalls, hair tucked up in a cap, tinkering with a greasy car engine: perhaps the ultimate image of a self-reliant woman as angelic redeemer.

In the ’50s, after some B westerns and the tedious plastic surgery drama *The Second Face* (1950), Raines moved into television, starring in the series *Janet Dean, Registered Nurse*, produced by her old friend Joan Harrison. In 1956 she made her last film; shot in England, *The Man in the Road* is a decent if uninspired Cold War thriller in which Raines plays a spunky writer of mystery stories who comes to the aid of an amnesia victim who suspects he’s being manipulated into a false identity. Twenty years later, Raines returned to work after her divorce, teaching acting in the last decade of her life, before dying of throat cancer in 1988. The headline of her *New York Times* obituary rather oddly labeled her “a Star of Westerns and Drama,” but

today she is remembered almost exclusively for the Siodmak noirs. That she is remembered despite such a small body of work is a tribute to what a striking presence she is—not just because of her beauty, but for the way she refuses to fit into the standard arguments about women in noir.

There have been many attempts to subvert the misogyny inherent in the *femme fatale* with feminist readings: these dames may be greedy, vicious liars, but at least they are strong, powerful women! *Femmes fatales* may be strong women, but they are shrewd enough to present themselves to men as damsels in distress. (“I’m so weak and afraid—you’re brave and strong. Help me, Mr. Spade...”) Far from being emancipated, they turn to men to get what they want, exploiting old-fashioned feminine wiles—sex appeal and appeals to chivalry. And men fall for it. They fall for women who exploit their romantic fantasies of femininity, often casting aside honest, intelligent, self-respecting girlfriends—like the one Burt Lancaster forgets about the moment he sets eyes on Ava Gardner in *The Killers*, or like the nurse in *Angel Face* who tells Mitchum off when he tries to come back after ditching her for Jean Simmons’s clinging, crazy rich girl. If only Scottie in *Vertigo* could see the value of Midge, the clever and loyal friend who tries to laugh him out of his neurotic obsession with rescuing Madeleine! In noir, as a rule,

romantic delusions trump common sense; the dream girl wins, even if she turns out to be a nightmare.

But noir has its share of women who combine the allure of temptresses with the dependability of good girls. They are smart, tough, wisecracking professionals who carry on the lineage of the 1930s’ great fast-talking dames. There is Lucille Ball in *The Dark Corner*, another secretary who helps her boss escape a frame; the worldly-wise and self-sufficient nightclub singers played by Ida Lupino in *The Man I Love* and *Road House*, or by Ann Sheridan in *Nora Prentiss*. And there is Ella Raines, most glamorous and chivalrous of all the working girls. ■

Noir has its share of  
women who combine  
the allure of  
temptresses with the  
dependability of  
good girls.

