

# Noir Without Words

## Wordless Novels, the Great Depression, and the Passion of Dark Journeys

Don Malcolm

**B**efore there was noir, there was Expressionism. Influenced by European artists, Weimar filmmakers explored shadows and light in radical ways, applying a relentless, unsettling aesthetic of angularity from its roots in painting and setting it into motion.

Before there was Expressionism, there was Gothic. Its deep undercurrent of angst, forbidden love, and inchoate demonic forces encompassed the dark side of Romanticism as it swept over Europe in the nineteenth century.

Before there was Gothic, there was Piranesi. A frustrated architect, Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778) compensated for not receiving building commissions by creating what, at the time, were the world's most fantastic etchings. His sixteen *Carceri d'Invenzione* ("Imaginary Prisons") took architectural rendering into hitherto unimaginable realms of darkness.

The *Carceri* are the first depictions of what we now recognize as a noir world.





**Working in the Dark:** Frans Masereel intently developing one of his evocative etchings

These movements and individuals are all acknowledged today as noir's precursors. But there is another cluster of works from the early twentieth century with a claim to stake in the developmental lineage of dark art forms. These are the "wordless novels," tales told by woodcut artists not afraid to saturate their works with a hyperabundance of black ink, merging lurid, bold, and agitated figures in a tableau that screams "noir" even though there are no words or voices to be found in their pages.

There are only tenuous connections to be found between the artists who produced these astonishing works and the film noir canon as it emerged in the 1940s, but the influence of Frans Masereel and Lynd Ward, two of the earliest "woodcut novelists," is more directly traceable.

Their work, along with the others who will be discussed below, evokes the world of noir at its greatest level of kineticism. Consider these woodcuts to be "screen captures" from a highly Expressionist noir, or closeups with all the shattering emotional impact found in film.

The advice novelist Thomas Mann gave to readers in his preface to Masereel's 1919 woodcut novel *Passionate Journey* is as sound as it was when it was first written:

*Darken the room! Sit down with this book next to your reading lamp and concentrate on its pictures as you turn page after page. Don't deliberate too long! It is no tragedy if you fail to grasp every picture at once, just as it does not matter if you miss one or two shots in a movie.*

Though Mann doesn't mention it, wordless novels (like the graphic novels that would become so popular at the end of the twentieth century) have an advantage over film in terms of the audience's attention. They can always go back to reexamine the images in a wordless novel, which allows the details to linger more readily in the mind's eye. It could be claimed that noir on film is actually the lapsed form of the black-and-white wordless novel, which can plausibly be seen as the purest possible expression of the noir aesthetic.

## *Frans Masereel*

### Principal works

*25 Images de la Passion d'un Homme* (1918)

*Passionate Journey* (1919)

*The Sun* (1919)

*Story Without Words* (1920)

*The Idea* (1920)

*The City* (1925)

*Das Werk* (1928)



Masereel's *The City* perfectly captures the angst of urban life



**Masereel was the first** and most prolific of woodcut novelists. He set the tone of the genre in large part due to his early work as a political cartoonist, which influenced the style and tone of his drawings. As David Berona notes in his survey of the woodcut novel, *Wordless Books*: “It was from these early drawings that Masereel developed his style of characters wearing different coats of black and white that he would later use in his woodcut novels.”

*Passionate Journey* displays that rough-hewn style at its pulp-iest and most perverse: Masereel was not shy about depicting the hero of his story as a sensual seeker or a scoundrel (one of the most astonishing images in the collection is where the hero urinates from the top of two buildings—yes, he is larger than life itself—on the unsuspecting passersby below). The shocking denouement, in which the hero somehow defies his own untimely demise, pins itself on that precarious precipice between overzealous life and the siren call of the death instinct that we often see as opposed forces in noir characters.

*The City* pushes this ribald approach further, where Masereel takes Fritz Lang’s notion of “metropolis” and gives it a Rabelaisian twist. Continuing to favor the surprise ending, he brings the carnival-like nature of his city tour to a sudden shift in tone with a final woodcut depicting a woman with an expression of wonder and contemplation as she sits in an attic room, staring up into a star-filled night sky.

## *Lynd Ward*

### Principal works

*Gods’ Man* (1929)

*Madman’s Drum* (1930)

*Wild Pilgrimage* (1932)

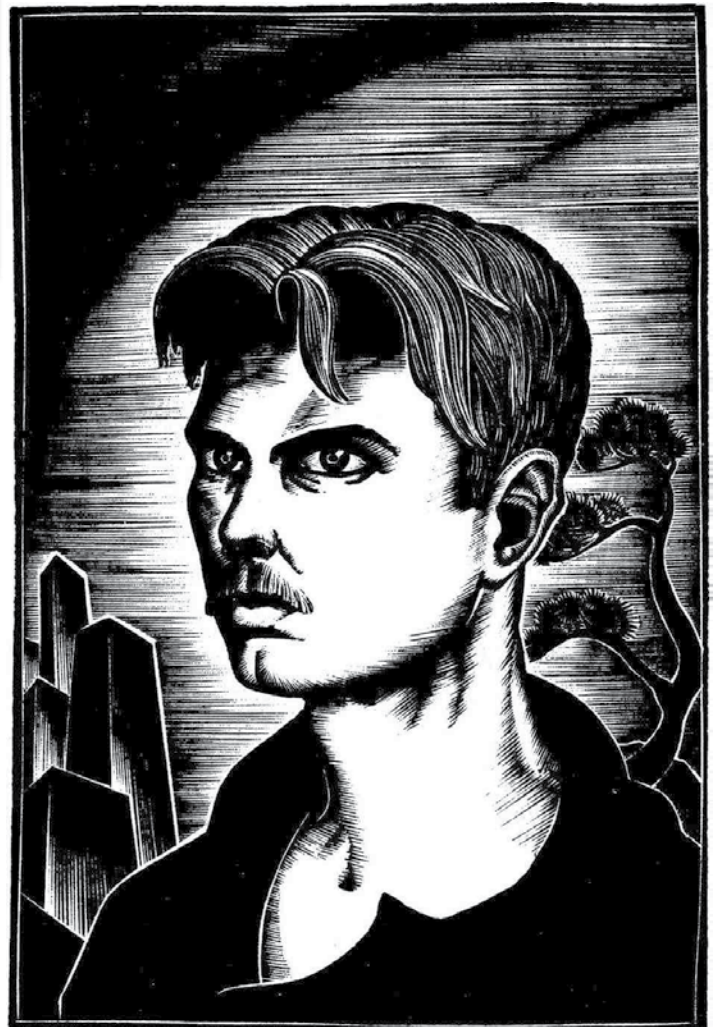
*Prelude to a Million Years* (1936)

*Vertigo* (1937)

**The strong political undercurrent** found in Masereel’s work is even more evident in Lynd Ward’s wordless novels: in his case, this can be attributed to the influence of his family (especially his father, a progressive Methodist minister who served as the first chairman of the American Civil Liberties Union). With such a background, it’s not surprising that Ward’s first wordless novel was entitled *Gods’ Man*.

Ward is a much more accomplished artist than Masereel, particularly in his rendering of the human figure (some of this is due to the fact that Ward created wood engravings, made from wood cut against the grain, which allows for smoother strokes and more subtle applications of ink). Ward’s use of chiaroscuro is much deeper and more striking than Masereel’s: readers suddenly know that they’ve entered a noir universe.

*Wild Pilgrimage* is further evidence of a noir sensibility at work.



Lynd Ward's wood engraving self-portrait



*Song Without Words* features Ward's "most accomplished and unsettling images..."

Ward tells two aspects of his story at the same time, much in the way that noir often plays with time or with notions of illusion vs. reality. A harsh, tragic tale of a man whose world has been destroyed by the economic blows of the Great Depression, *Wild Pilgrimage* has an ending darker than virtually any of the noirs made in Hollywood.

*Song Without Words* turns Edenic images into dark ruminations on the ongoing social ills in America and Europe in the 1930s. Ward insists on his unclad figures as lurid messengers for his cautionary themes, in a work that features his most accomplished and unsettling images to date. His depiction of the watchdogs of the two reigning politico-economic systems within the sockets of a large skull is an uncanny visualization of the themes coursing through Abraham Polonsky's noir masterwork *Force of Evil* (1948).

Like Alfred Hitchcock, however, Ward's masterpiece is entitled *Vertigo*, and as with the iconic British director, it's an epic work that represents the fullest embodiment of his themes and obsessions. Elongated agitation is emphasized in Ward's 230 wood engravings that track the story of three characters whose lives are affected by the Depression in significantly different ways. Most of Ward's illustrations are packed with dense, pulsing chiaroscuro elements that imbue each scene with a swirling sense of contrary motion.

Examining these works as they progress through the thirties, one cannot help but sense that Lynd Ward was, pictorially, the John Alton of the wordless novel. It's easy to agree with David Berona when he states that "...Ward established the basis for storytelling that is used today by artists of picture books and graphic novels."

### *Other Notable "Woodcut Novelists"*

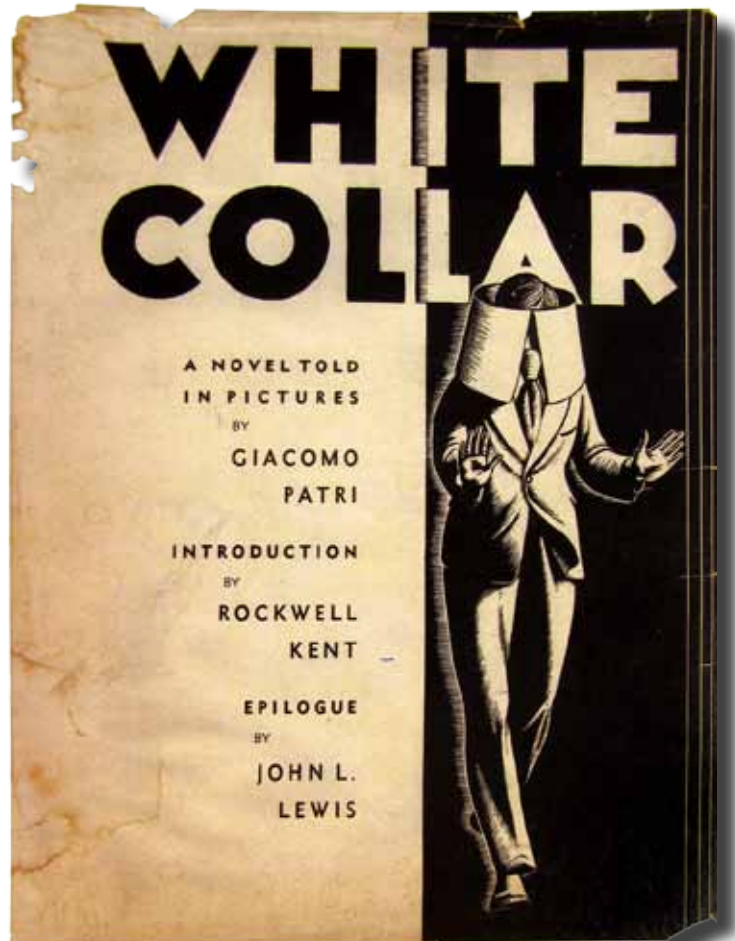
#### **Giacomo Patri**

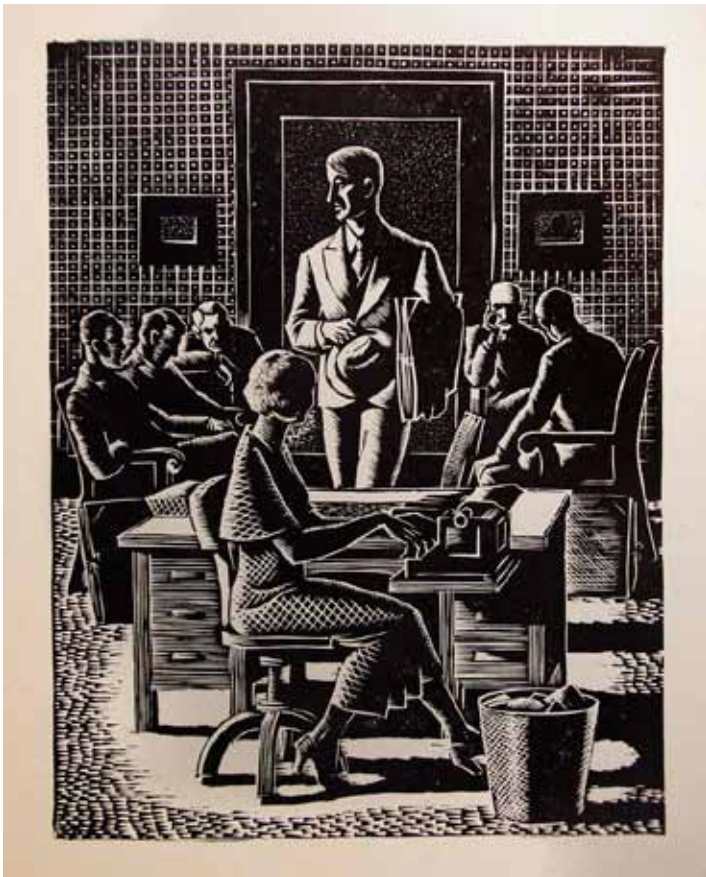
Rockwell Kent captured the power of Patri's *White Collar* (1940), another wordless novel that exposed the depths of the damage done by the Great Depression, in his stirring introduction to the book:

*A million novels could be founded on that crash, all different in plot and characters yet all alike in common tragic theme of sudden poverty, disrupted homes, of broken lives, of final and irrevocable hopelessness. A thousand lifetimes would be spent in reading them. One story might epitomize them all: this story does.*

Patri is a much more linear artist than Ward: his use of diagonals is limited to only those that provide equivalent visual power to his noir appropriation of Art Deco.

And Patri goes further than Ward in employing words on buildings, display windows, billboards, and flags as a thematic component in his illustrations. Occasionally, however, Patri comes up with a design that combines symbolism with a graphic directness in a way to





Giacomo Patri's affinity for Art Deco influenced his stark, sharp images of Depression-era capitalism

become iconic: his opening image, of a man trapped inside a giant white collar, is more than a political statement: it is a prophecy of the anarchic world that seems far away, but is much closer to becoming a noir-stained reality than anyone could possibly know.

Patri's own story of how the book was created, told in the 1975 edition of *White Collar*, captures this theme with exceptional eloquence:

*Misery was on all sides of us. Uncertainty and fear pervaded everywhere, and I, who had just left Art School, could not find a job. We, that is, my wife and three children, lived in a small room not far from San Francisco, for which we were making monthly payments. After many frustrating attempts to find a job, we finally moved to a shack in the City, renting out our home, of which we were very fond, in order to make the mortgage payments.*

Patri's book extolled the value of the labor movement to remedy the ills of the Depression; its crisp, classic design captures both the fervor and the logic of those who banded together to reverse the events depicted in its pages.

### Laurence Hyde

Hyde's wordless novel *Southern Cross* (1951) is the only one published in what we now call "the noir era," and its subject is one that would give pause to the *Lady from Shanghai's* (1948) scheming George Grisby and his plan to escape from an impending nuclear nightmare by faking his own death and disappearing to a South Sea island.

Hyde's inspiration for *Southern Cross* was the continuing nuclear bomb testing conducted by the United States in the South Pacific in the years immediately following World War II. It chronicles a Polynesian people whose idyllic island life is destroyed when American sailors evacuate them from their homes.

The gut-wrenching tragedy that Hyde adds to this scenario is embodied in a family who resists the evacuation. An island fisherman kills a drunken sailor who assaults and attempts to rape his wife; the couple then flees into the jungle with their child, and is left behind.

Hyde doesn't spare us the terrible details of the bomb and the effect that its detonation produces. The images of death from the blast are bleaker than any mere noir denouement.

**Four seminal wordless novels**—Masereel's *Passion of a Man*, Ward's *Wild Pilgrimage*, Patri's *White Collar*, and Hyde's *Southern Cross* were recently reissued in an anthology entitled *Graphic Witness* (edited by George A. Walker). It is an exceptional introduction to a literary genre that both evokes and transcends our concept of noir. ■



Laurence Hyde's *Southern Cross* details the "bomb and the effect its detonation produces"