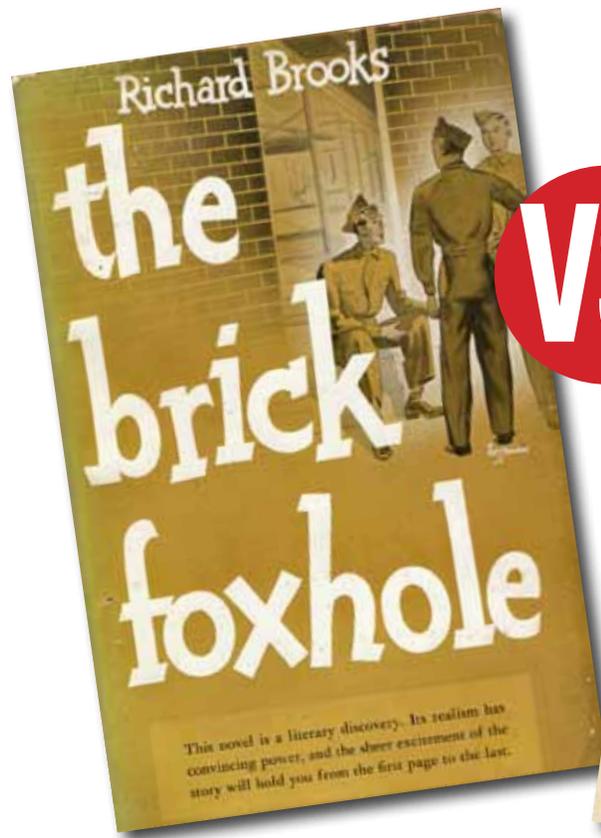


# BOOK vs. FILM

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VS.



Richard Brooks's novel *The Brick Foxhole* was published in 1945, near the dawn of his long career as a writer and director of a wide range of Hollywood movies. An examination of a group of soldiers stationed in a military barracks in the eastern United States during World War II, the book is a fascinating, well-developed look at homophobia, racism, and anti-Semitism in the armed forces.

In an author's note, Brooks, who wrote *The Brick Foxhole* while he was a Marine stationed stateside, notes that while the novel is not autobiographical, the men in it are real "in the sense that, although I have never known any of them in the flesh, I know that men like them do certainly exist." He explains the pressures that can bring out the worst in those he writes about: "From day to day he wonders whether he will be able to hold up under the corroding strain of slow disintegration. He is too far away from the battlefield and at the same time too far removed psychologically from

the home front to become conditioned to either. He lives in a limbo of his own where he is bedeviled by frustration, loss of dignity, and all the most fantastic shapes that rumors can breed."

Corporal Jeff Mitchell, the first soldier we encounter in Brooks's novel, is very much "bedeviled by frustration," not to mention paranoia and insecurity; he's pining for his wife in California. An omniscient narrator tells us that Mitchell, a Disney animator in civilian life, is a sensitive sort who can't adjust to the intolerant attitudes of some fellow soldiers. He gravitates toward Peter Keeley, a hard-drinking combat veteran marking time after serving as overseas correspondent for a military newspaper. When Mitchell is framed for the murder of a civilian, Keeley assumes the role of surrogate older brother and works to exonerate his hapless friend.

Keeley casts a jaundiced eye on his fellow soldiers, musing that "many of the men who had fought on Eniwetok and Kwaja-

lein and Guadalcanal had peculiar ideas about liberty and freedom which sounded like white supremacy and Protestant justice. The Americans' skill and ability to fire artillery had helped him win . . . not the desire to free a handful of natives in the Solomons and on New Georgia." This indifference to the plight of non-white civilians is demonstrated in the dialogue of the two scariest characters in the book.

White supremacy permeates the minds of Floyd Bowers and Monty Crawford, two hate-filled soldiers Mitchell makes the mistake of drinking with off-base. Bowers and Crawford let fly with racist slurs against Blacks and Latinos, and call Jews "Christ-killers" and Catholics "papist bastards." But when they cross over to homicide, their victim is a gay man, whom they lead into a fatal trap. Crawford is only too happy to pin the murder on Mitchell, but the frame-up is foiled by the dogged determination of Keeley, aided by a civilian cop named Finlay.

The US military was not pleased by the



Joseph Samuels (Sam Levene, center) attempts to connect with Floyd Bowers (Steve Brody, right) as Montgomery (Robert Ryan) watches intently

publication of *The Brick Foxhole*, especially as Brooks did not comply with regulations requiring submission of the book for clearance. He was consequently notified to appear for a court-martial. As Brooks's biographer Douglass K. Daniel notes, the official attitude was not improved by a prominent *New York Times* review that concluded, "His account of military life in barracks and on leave in Washington is shocking and revolting."

But Brooks, still an active Marine, did not back down. With the help of his editor at Harper and Brothers, the fledgling author secured the support of prominent writers Richard Wright and Sinclair Lewis, both of whom agreed to testify on Brooks's behalf. The court-martial did not proceed. "I never heard from the Marine Corps about it again," Brooks later recalled. "They did take my typewriter away, but that's all."

Lewis gave *The Brick Foxhole* a positive review in *Esquire*, calling Brooks "a really important new writer." (Brooks subsequently told Lewis he'd love to turn his 1927 novel *Elmer Gantry* into a movie—which Brooks scripted and directed in 1960.) Lewis's assessment was on the money; Brooks was unsparing in his dissection of the bigotry rife in the US military, and he also provided caustic takes on midcentury commercialism and the hypocrisy of organized religion. Although the book is grim, it includes flashes of edgy humor about life

in the United States, as in this description of an annoying radio ad: "The best quartet in the world (self-professed) had sung the best jingle in the world (announced as such) about the best soft drink in the world (could there be any doubt about it?) which was 'Good for life.'"

*The Brick Foxhole* made a strong impression on actor Robert Ryan. Ryan, also a Marine, met Brooks at Camp Pend-

leton, California, and told him he wanted to play Monty Crawford onscreen because "I know that son of a bitch. No one knows him better than I do." After the war, Ryan got his wish. RKO bought the rights to *The Brick Foxhole* for \$12,000 and a film adaptation, renamed *Crossfire*, went into production under the supervision of producer Adrian Scott and director Edward Dmytryk. Ryan was then a contract player at RKO and the role would be his breakthrough to star status. Released in 1947, *Crossfire* preserved most of the characters from the novel along with many of its plot elements. But there were several major differences between the book and the movie. One major change was that the soldiers in the film had all seen action overseas, unlike most of the men in the book, who remained housed in their "brick foxholes." In addition, the murder victim in *Crossfire* is killed for being Jewish, not gay.

Also striking is how often in *The Brick Foxhole* the bigots use the N-word, whereas in *Crossfire* no Black people appear and there is zero mention of anti-Black prejudice. Confining the bigotry in *Crossfire* to anti-Semitism (and hatred of the Irish) was not simply timidity on the part of Dmytryk, Scott, or screenwriter John Paxton. The filmmakers could certainly have cast at least one Black actor, but neither the Breen office nor RKO would have given a pass to a film featuring racial slurs or other depictions of



Montgomery (Robert Ryan) puts up a reasonable front while Sgt. Peter Keeley (Robert Mitchum) and Capt. Finlay (Robert Young) attempt to piece together events leading to *Crossfire's* central murder

anti-Black racism. Furthermore, the use of the word “homosexual” was not allowed by Hollywood censors in 1947.

From the outset, *Crossfire* radiates noir intensity. The film opens with a man being savagely beaten. No faces are shown—the action is presented via shadows cast on a wall by a single overturned light. Scenes throughout the film repeat variations on this bare-bones lighting scheme, an approach Dmytryk later explained was a function of the film’s low budget. Other classic noir tropes include flashbacks and a character who struggles with hazy, incomplete memories.

Ryan, projecting both balled-up fury and obsequious scheming, dominates the movie. Dmytryk described the actor as “the most liberal man on the set,” but Ryan fully embodied the hateful bigot. Dmytryk used Ryan’s severe features to full effect in tight shots and close-ups, sometimes swabbing the actor’s skin with coconut oil to make his face glisten malevolently.

Robert Mitchum (Keeley), Robert Young (Finlay), and Sam Levene (Samuels, the victim) also excelled in their roles. Paul Kelly added oddball charm as a compulsive serial prevaricator, and Gloria Grahame is scorching as usual as B-girl Ginny, a performance for which she received an Academy Award nomination as Best Supporting Actress.

Ryan was also nominated for Best Supporting Actor, and *Crossfire* received nods for Best Picture, Best Screenplay, and Best Director. It performed well at the box



Robert Young speaks earnestly with Robert Mitchum while cinematographer J. Roy Hunt adjust the focus and director Edward Dmytryk (standing, second from right) looks on

office, earning \$1,270,000 for RKO, and was named “Best Social Film” of the 1947 Cannes Film Festival.

The social conscience of films such as *Crossfire* would not survive the 1950s intact. When the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) called film industry professionals to testify about connections to the Communist Party, Dmytryk and Scott found themselves part of the group of “unfriendly witnesses” who became known as the Hollywood Ten. Both men served prison sentences for contempt of Congress and were blacklisted within the industry.

In 1951, after being released from jail, Dmytryk gave HUAC twenty-six names of former acquaintances and others whom he said had been members of the Communist Party. Although Dmytryk claimed that the names he provided were already known to HUAC, he was the first to mention the names of two directors and one writer, and the only person to name yet another writer. He also testified that Scott had pressured him to put communist content into his movies. Dmytryk was able to continue working in Hollywood, while Scott did not have his name credited on another film until 1970. In 1963, Scott was asked if he was bitter about the blacklist. He replied, “Only for sixteen years.”

Although Thomas Doherty recently wrote in *Show Trial: Hollywood, HUAC, and the Birth of the Blacklist* (2018) that

“*Crossfire* was faux-controversial: fearlessly wrestling with an issue most Americans had already pinned to the ground,” the movie remains a classic noir that holds up well. It doesn’t pack the social justice wallop of *The Brick Foxhole*, but it’s hard to think of a movie from the late 1940s that does. Despite Doherty’s breezy assumption that the issues tackled in both book and film have been “pinned to the ground,” recent events suggest otherwise; the message, unfortunately, is one that requires constant repeating. ■



Robert Ryan projects malevolence in his impressive performance as Montgomery



Richard Brooks, who wrote the novel *The Brick Foxhole* while still an active Marine, went on to have a successful career as a screenwriter, director, and producer