

Encyclopedia of Film Noir

Geoff Mayer and Brian McDonnell

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ENCYCLOPEDIA OF FILM NOIR

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Preface: The Problem of Film Noir

Consider the following statements:
From Linda Williams:

Melodrama is the fundamental mode of popular American moving pictures. It is . . . a peculiarly democratic and American form that seeks dramatic revelation of moral and emotional truths through a dialectic of pathos and action. It is the foundation of the classical Hollywood cinema.¹

And Steve Neale:

As a single phenomenon, *noir*, in my view, never existed. That is why no one has been able to define it, and why the contours of the larger *noir* canon in particular are so imprecise.²

Or Alain Silver:

Questions of phenomenology aside, film history is as clear now about *film noir* as ever: it finds its existence as obvious as Borde and Chaumeton did forty years ago. If observers of *film noir* agree on anything, it is on the boundaries of the classic period which began in 1941 with *The Maltese Falcon* and ends less than a score of years later with *Touch of Evil*.³

Again, Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward:

With the Western, film noir shares the distinction of being an indigenous American form. It is a self-contained reflection of American cultural preoccupations in film form. In short, it is the unique example of a wholly American film style.⁴

Finally, James Naremore:

If we abandoned the word *noir*, we would have to find another, no less problematic means of organizing what we see.⁵

These statements, each from a respected scholar, highlight the difficulties in discussing film noir. Williams, for example is correct: melodrama, as a form that seeks the dramatic revelation of moral and emotional truths, is the fundamental dramatic mode of Hollywood cinema. The narrative trajectory of mainstream American cinema, as she points out, is ultimately concerned with the “retrieval and staging of virtue through adversity and suffering.”⁶ However, while most non-noir films produced in the 1940s and 1950s conform to this pattern, film noir does not and its most representative examples refuse to unequivocally endorse the prevailing moral norms. For example, *Criss Cross*, Robert Siodmak’s 1949 film for Universal Studios starring Burt Lancaster as Steve Thompson: Thompson is virtuous and innocent. He is also selfish, obsessive, morally weak, covetous of another man’s wife, and vulnerable; his demise at the end of the film is humiliating. Yet, like most Hollywood films, he is the audience’s entry point into the film as the director is careful to bind the viewer into Thompson’s experience through a protracted series of point of view shots. Thompson is, in effect, both good and bad and the film’s moral stance is compromised as a result. This pattern is evident in many noir films.

A more compelling problem, as seen in the conflicting views offered above by Steve Neale and Alain Silver, involves the intrinsic questions of what film noir is and what its historical parameters are. Containing film noir to one or two neat periods—such as 1939 to 1958, or 1981 to the present—and to assume that films produced during these periods share a rigid set of common characteristics is difficult. It is a much more volatile mode than this. Similarly, this volume shows that film noir is not a unique American form and that other film cultures, such as the British, have a strong legacy of noir films.⁷ *The Encyclopedia of Film Noir* celebrates the vitality and depth of British film noir through an extensive selection of representative films.

Furthermore, *The Encyclopedia of Film Noir* does not limit itself to the large budget films produced by major studios, such as Paramount and Warner Brothers; we have tried to include a representative selection of low budget films produced by so-called Poverty Row studios, such as Republic, Monogram, PRC, and Film Classics. While the significance of seminal noir films is emphasized throughout the book, we also acknowledge the importance of many low budget films to the

experiences of filmgoers. Many low-budget noir films have disappeared from film history. Large films like *Double Indemnity*, for example, benefited from Paramount's extensive financial resources and its large network of theatres situated in prime locations throughout the United States, as well as efficient distribution overseas. The availability of films such as this, and the frequent scholarly analysis of them for the past forty years, has resulted in a biased history of film noir. Low budget films, on the other hand, often had to fend for themselves with little promotion and sporadic distribution. This meant that films such as *Decoy* (Monogram, 1946), *Blonde Ice* (Film Classics, 1948), and *The Great Flamarion* (Republic, 1945), disappeared under the critical radar and are absent from many studies of film noir. Hence, this volume not only provides an entry on *Double Indemnity* but also PRC's *Apology for Murder* (1945), starring Ann Savage, Hugh Beaumont, and Charles D. Hicks, in the roles played by Barbara Stanwyck, Fred MacMurray, and Edward G. Robinson in Billy Wilder's film. Both films were based on the same real-life incident—the 1927 murder of Albert Gray by his wife and her lover—which, in turn, inspired James M. Cain's novella. Similarly, less obscure low budget films, such as *Detour* (1945), which was filmed in days (as opposed to weeks or months) on a miniscule budget, and *Gun Crazy* (1950), which had a slightly higher budget but extensive distribution problems, are included alongside films produced by the major studios, as these Poverty Row productions are as important, if not more so, in providing an authentic representation of film noir in the 1940s and 1950s.

The Encyclopedia of Film Noir is designed to provide an accessible yet scholarly, user-friendly but research-informed, comprehensive account of the phenomenon of film noir—both the *classical* film noir cycle (approximately 1939–1959) as well the modern, or *neo-noir*, period, which constitutes films produced after 1959. The encyclopedia presents this survey of film noir in two main ways. First, it offers five substantial overview essays in which the authors investigate significant aspects of film noir and the various contexts within which it developed. These essays explore the contested nature of noir, as evidenced above in the radically different position taken by Neale and Silver; in the vexed question of whether it can be considered a film genre; in its relationship to hard-boiled crime fiction; in its iconic presentation of the American city; in political and cultural influences associated with the post-war and Cold War periods (including the activities of the House Committee on Un-American Activities); and in film noir's distinctive visual style.

Thereafter, the encyclopedia presents an alphabetically organized set of detailed entries on the films together with significant American and British directors and actors associated with film noir. Each actor or director entry contains a selected filmography that is designed to be inclusive, rather than exclusive, and many so-called borderline noir films are listed alongside more familiar ones. Similarly, each film entry provides details on cast, characters, and filmmakers together with a contextual overview and critique of its themes, narrative structure, and relevance.

The selected bibliography has been compiled as a guide to help the reader find specific books on specialized aspects of film noir. We tried to cater to both the

novice reader—who requires an introduction to film noir—as well as to the more experienced noir devotee seeking to extend his or her knowledge of this fascinating period in film history. Each reader, we assume, is interested in the anarchic spirit of film noir and this volume is designed to satisfy this demand.

NOTES

1. Linda Williams, “Melodrama Revised” in Nick Browne (ed.), *Refiguring American Film Genres*. Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1998, p. 42.
2. Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*. London, Routledge, 2000, pp. 173–174.
3. Alain Silver and James Ursini (eds.), *Film Noir Reader*. New York, Limelight Edition, p. 11.
4. Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward, *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style*. New York, The Overlook Press, 1992, p. 1.
5. James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts*. Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1998, p. 276.
6. See Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White From Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 15.
7. See, for example with regard to the British cinema, Robert Murphy, *Realism and Tinsel: Cinema and Society in Britain 1939–1949*. London, Routledge, 1989; Andrew Spicer, *Film Noir*. Harlow, Pearson Education Limited, 2002; Geoff Mayer, *Roy Ward Baker*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2004.

PART I

ESSAYS

Introduction: Readings on Film Noir

Geoff Mayer

THE FILM NOIR MYTH

Film noir is more than just 1940s and 1950s crime films infused with a higher quotient of sex and violence than their 1930s counterparts. There is, however, as Andrew Spicer (2002, vii) argues, a prevailing noir myth that “film noir is quintessentially those black and white 1940s films, bathed in deep shadows, which offered a ‘dark mirror’ to American society and questioned the fundamental optimism of the American dream.” There is, of course, some truth contained in this so-called mythology, although it is more complex than this. Film noir is both a discursive construction created retrospectively by critics and scholars in the period after the first wave of noir films (1940–1959) had finished, and also a cultural phenomenon that challenged, to varying degrees, the dominant values and formal patterns of pre-1940 cinema.

Within this mythology, there is generally agreement as to the influences that shaped film noir and provided its parameters. For example, most studies followed the lead of the French critics in the 1940s and pointed to the importance of the pulp stories and hard-boiled fiction of writers such as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, and Cornell Woolrich. Later, other writers, such as W. R. Burnett and David Goodis, were added to this list. Often this took place because the novels and short stories from these writers were used as bases for a number of key noir films in the 1940s—notably Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *The Glass Key* (1942); Woolrich’s *The Black Curtain* (1941, which was filmed as *Street of Chance* in 1942), *Phantom Lady* (1944), and *The Black Angel*

(1946); Cain's *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Mildred Pierce* (1945), and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946); Burnett's *High Sierra* (1941); and Goodis's *Dark Passage* (1947). However, it was not as simple as this, and it is not entirely correct, as discussed later, to assume that the dark, nihilistic vision expressed by many of these novelists was merely replicated in the film versions.

A significant aspect of the film noir myth is its formal style, especially the chiaroscuro lighting with its low key and frontal lighting setups that produced dark areas interspersed by extreme brightness. This style, which was largely the result of restricting the use of fill lights, thereby accentuating the harsh effect of the key light, was often associated with the influence of German expressionism on film noir. This visual style, reinforced by the fragmentation of space through set design and camera compositions that produced unstable lines and surfaces, was perceived as suggesting a dislocated world permeated by alienation and human despair.

These tendencies found in German expressionism were, it was argued, imported into Hollywood by German émigrés who had fled Germany after Hitler assumed power in 1933. This included directors such as Fritz Lang (*The Woman in the Window*, 1945), Otto Preminger (*Fallen Angel*, 1946), Billy Wilder (*Double Indemnity*, 1944), and Robert Siodmak (*Criss Cross*, 1949) as well as German-born cinematographers such as Karl Freund, Rudolph Maté, John Alton, and Theodore Sparkuhl. Again, the significance of film noir style and the role of the German émigrés is not as simple as some studies suggest. German expressionism peaked almost 20 years before the proliferation of film noir in Hollywood, and these German émigrés worked on many Hollywood films that had no relevance to film noir. Also, there were many noir films produced in Hollywood in the 1940s that did not have German filmmakers working on them.

WHAT IS FILM NOIR?

Prolific American writers Alain Silver and James Ursini ask in their book *Film Noir*, What is noir? Their answer includes a familiar list of themes, archetypes, and influences. They cite, for example, Dashiell Hammett and the "hard-boiled school of detective fiction" as well as "existentialism and Freudian psychology" because "these theories helped promote a worldview that stressed the absurdity of existence along with the importance of an individual's past in determining his or her actions. . . . Two of the most important themes of the noir movement, 'the haunted past' and 'the fatalistic nightmare,' draw directly from these two sources" (Silver and Ursini 2004, 15).

They also argue that the 1941 version of *The Maltese Falcon* was the "first noir adaptation of writer Dashiell Hammett's work, starring Humphrey Bogart, and the 'official' beginning of the noir movement or classic period" (p. 187). The aim of their book is to condense and catalogue accepted explanations and evaluations in the development of film noir. It is often assumed, for example, that because Hammett's novels were the basis for the 1941 version of *The Maltese Falcon* and the

1942 version of *The Glass Key*, his cynical view of the world provided, at least in part, the philosophical basis for noir in general and for these two films in particular. Second, it is also assumed that his so-called noir sensibility is not found in the 1931 version of *The Maltese Falcon* or the 1935 version of *The Glass Key*.

Does this mean that film noir did not begin until 1941? No, but there are significant differences between the 1930s and 1940s versions in terms of style, motivation, and the intensity of the despair and psychological turmoil experienced by protagonists in the 1940s. This delineation between the 1930s and 1940s brings us back to the question, What is film noir? Silver and Ursini (2004) address this issue by dividing noir into separate formal, thematic, and philosophical elements. Out of this, they argue, a movement called “film noir” emerged with the 1941 version of *The Maltese Falcon*, as discussed previously. However, as Steve Neale (2000, 173) argues, as “a single phenomenon, noir . . . never existed.” Many of its so-called characteristic features, such as the use of voice-over and flashback, the use of high-contrast lighting and other expressionist elements, the downbeat endings, and the culture of distrust between men and women, which often manifested itself in the figure of the femme fatale, are “separable features belonging to separable tendencies and trends that traversed a wide variety of genres and cycles in the 1940s and early 1950s” (p. 174). Neale (2000, 174) concludes that

[any] attempt to treat these tendencies and trends as a single phenomenon, to homogenise them under a single heading, “*film noir*,” is therefore bound to lead to incoherence, imprecision, and inconsistency—in the provision of the criteria, in the construction of a corpus, or in almost any interpretation of their contemporary socio-cultural significance.

Film noir, as we know, is unlike other studies of Hollywood genres or cycles as it was not formed out of the usual sources such as contemporary studio documents. It is, in essence, a discursive critical construction that has evolved over time. However, despite its imprecise parameters and poorly defined sources, it is, as James Naremore (1998, 176) points out, a necessary intellectual category, for if “we abandoned the word *noir* we would need to find another, no less problematic, means of organizing what we see.” The contemporary term used by reviewers to describe films now classified as noir was *melodrama*—as Steve Neale (1993) points out in his intensive survey of American trade journals from 1938 to 1960, nearly every film noir was labeled or described in the trade press as some kind of melodrama. This included key films such as *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *This Gun for Hire*, *Phantom Lady*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *The Killers*, *Scarlet Street*, *Detour*, *Gilda*, *Raw Deal*, *Out of the Past*, and many other detective, gothic, gangster, or horror films enveloped by the noir label.

The reviewers, in an attempt to signify that these films were somehow different from other Hollywood melodramas, often attached the terms *psychological*, *psychiatric*, or even *neurotic* to the *melodrama*—this included films as diverse as

White Heat, *This Gun for Hire*, *My Name Is Julia Ross*, *The Gangster*, *High Wall*, *Secret Beyond the Door*, and *On Dangerous Ground*. These labels indicated a shift in dramatic emphasis. No longer was the focus only on external obstacles confronting the hero or heroine, a characteristic of simple melodrama, but also the internal conflict *within* the protagonist. Thus film noir went beyond presenting the drama as a simple or unequivocal conflict between good and evil. Instead, they shifted the dramatic focus to the “psychological” conflict that emanated from an ambivalent presentation of moral norms.

This tendency was recognized by French writers Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton (1966) in the first book-length study of film noir. Courage and heroism were often superseded by doubt, despair, and vulnerability. While this did not render the traditional melodramatic quest for moral legibility irrelevant, and it did not mean, as some have suggested, its replacement by an ethically irrational universe, it did represent a shift in (some) Hollywood films in the 1940s. Unlike novelists such as Dashiell Hammett and Cornell Woolrich, the films were ultimately reluctant to abandon all hope of a moral world and rational universe.

A change in the Hollywood crime film was noted by French critics such as Nino Frank and Jean-Pierre Chartier, who, in the summer of 1946, were exposed to a sudden influx of Hollywood films that were not available in France during the German occupation. Frank (1999), who coined the term *film noir*, or more precisely, “films, ‘noirs,’” argued that films such as *The Maltese Falcon*, *Murder My Sweet*, *Laura*, and *Double Indemnity* presented a different moral sensibility than so-called museum pieces such as *The Letter* (1940) and *How Green Was My Valley* (1941). In a similar, if less spectacular, manner, Hammett scholar and professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University Steven Marcus (1975, 12) described the effect that John Huston’s 1941 version of *The Maltese Falcon* had on him when he first viewed it as a 12-year-old:

What was striking about the event was that it was one of the first encounters I can consciously recall with the experience of moral ambiguity. Here was this detective you were supposed to like—and did like—behaving and speaking in peculiar and unexpected ways. He acted up to the cops, partly for real, partly as a ruse. He connived with crooks, for his own ends and perhaps even for some of theirs. He slept with his partner’s wife, fell in love with a lady crook, and then refused to save her from the police, even though he could have. Which side was he on? Was he on any side apart from his own? And which or what side was that? The experience was not only morally ambiguous; it was morally complex and enigmatic as well.

Double Indemnity also had a similar effect on Jean-Pierre Chartier in Paris in 1946, although he was much less complimentary than Marcus when he wrote that “it’s hard to imagine story lines with a more pessimistic or disgusted point of view regarding human behaviour” (Chartier 1999, 21).

NOIR IN LITERATURE AND FILM: THREE CASE STUDIES

Film noir is difficult to describe, let alone define. Most studies cite the 1941 version of *The Maltese Falcon* as the first major film noir, although there is some support for RKO's low-budget *Stranger on the Third Floor*, which was released in 1940. However, *The Maltese Falcon* occupies a key place in the canon of film noir. The fact that it was based on Dashiell Hammett's novel, a point emphasized by Nino Frank in 1946, established an early association between film noir and American hard-boiled fiction. The 1941 film, however, was not the first version of Hammett's 1930 novel. In 1931, Warner Bros. released a version that was closely based on Hammett's story and starred Ricardo Cortez as Sam Spade, with Bebe Daniels as Ruth Wonderly and direction by Roy Del Ruth. This version is often overlooked, and few writers consider it a film noir. A second version of Hammett's novel, *Satan Met a Lady*, was released in 1936, and it was directed by William Dieterle and starred Bette Davis as Valerie Purvis and Warren William as private detective Ted Shane. This film tried, unsuccessfully, to transform Hammett's novel into a broad comedy, and it has little relevance to film noir.

The fact that there are two very similar versions of the same novel, 10 years apart, provides an opportunity to distil, or at least discuss, those qualities that are traditionally emphasized as noir in the cinema and those that are not. It is also useful to distinguish between the noir elements in Hammett's fiction and the film adaptations of his novels as the first critical analysis of film noir came from the French in the mid-1940s, and they readily linked Hammett's fiction with the noir elements in the Hollywood cinema.

This comparison is assisted by the fact that in 1931, Hammett's next novel, *The Glass Key*, was published, and two film versions, produced by Paramount, followed. A 1935 version starring George Raft and Edward Arnold closely followed Hammett's novel, and in 1942, Paramount released another version starring Alan Ladd and Brian Donlevy. Most studies of film noir include the 1942 version but reject the 1935 film as an early example of film noir. Again, this pattern of inclusion and rejection assists in at least isolating the noir qualities of the 1940s films. A third case study, of the 1946 Columbia film *Night Editor*, is also included as this film, one of many variations that followed the success of *Double Indemnity*, clearly shows the way dramatic emphasis in the 1940s was internalized as films focused less on the external problems confronting the male protagonist and more on the psychological turmoil and guilt raging within.

The Maltese Falcon (1941)

Warner Bros.'s third production of Dashiell Hammett's novel *The Maltese Falcon* began on Monday, June 9, 1941. The studio, which purchased the rights for \$8,500 in 1930 just five months after the publication of the last installment in *Black Mask*,

allotted a budget of \$381,000 and 36 days to the film. This was a tight schedule for a first-time director. John Huston's preparation, however, was meticulous, and he sketched out the shooting angles for each scene weeks before the start of filming. He also shot the script in sequence, and so over three days and a long Saturday night in the middle of July, Huston filmed the final confrontation between Sam Spade (Humphrey Bogart) and Brigid O'Shaughnessy (Mary Astor). On July 18, following the burning of the studio "ship" the *La Paloma* on the back lot and a brief scene between Bogart and Sydney Greenstreet on Stage 19, the picture officially closed two days ahead of schedule and \$54,000 under budget.

There was, however, one more scene in Huston's script to shoot. This was the epilogue in Spade's office where the detective tries to explain to his secretary Effie Perine (Lee Patrick) why he handed Brigid over to the police. Huston's script ends with him preparing to greet his mistress, Iva Archer (Gladys George), the widow of his dead partner. Effie stands by the window, mouth twisted, eyes reproachful:

Effie You did that, Sam, to her?

Sam She *did* kill Miles, Angel. . . .

Effie Don't, please—don't touch me.

A doorknob rattles in the corridor. Effie goes out to see, comes back, and announces Iva Archer. The story ends on a note of defeat and self-recognition as Spade, with a shiver, accepts Iva, whose seedy amorality matches his own: "Send her in."

This scene was never shot as Huston and producer Henry Blanke decided to end the film outside Spade's apartment. Jack Warner, vice president and head of production, agreed with this decision, and a week later, Huston restaged Brigid's arrest. The reshot sequence begins with Lieutenant Detective Dundy (Barton MacLane) escorting Brigid O'Shaughnessy out of the apartment while Spade remains behind with Detective Tom Polhaus (Ward Bond). As Polhaus gathers up the evidence, the Maltese Falcon, he asks Spade, "What is it?" The detective replies, "The stuff that dreams are made of." Spade walks into the corridor and then pauses to watch Brigid enter the elevator. She, however, stares straight ahead as the shadows formed by the bars of the elevator grate stretch across her face and body. The film ends with Spade, holding the worthless statue, walking down the stairs as the elevator begins its descent.

Warner Bros. released 51 films in 1941. *The Maltese Falcon* was not regarded by the studio as a so-called prestige production in the same category as Frank Capra's *Meet John Doe* or Howard Hawks's *Sergeant York*. A week before the release of the film, executive producer Hal Wallis changed the title to *The Gent from Frisco*. However, after one of the film's previews, Jack Warner changed it back to *The Maltese Falcon*. While Huston and Jack Warner were pleased with the film, and it was one of the 10 nominees for best picture in 1941, box office receipts were only average as the studio never spent much money on promotion of the film.

Roy Del Ruth's 1931 version of *The Maltese Falcon* follows Hammett's novel closely and, due to a more liberal censorship policy in Hollywood in the early 1930s, included two key scenes not found in the 1941 film: after Spade has sex with Wonderly, he searches her apartment while she is sleeping in his bed. In the second scene, Spade forces Wonderly to take off all her clothes in Gutman's hotel room to find out whether she has stolen a \$1,000 note given to Spade by Gutman; Wonderly resents Spade's lack of trust. Yet most studies of film noir ignore or dismiss the 1931 version. Andrew Spicer (2002, 8), for example, asserts that Huston's film is the first adaptation of Hammett true to the spirit of the original as it "began to close the gulf between the hard-boiled tradition and its screen equivalent." "Huston's adaptation," Spicer (2002, 50) maintains, "was much closer than previous versions to the cynical tone of Hammett's hard-boiled novel, retaining as much of Hammett's dialogue as possible." He rejects the 1931 version, which he groups with *Satan Met a Lady*, as they "significantly modified Hammett's style, softening the characterization of the detective so that he became the much more respectable figure of the gentleman amateur" (p. 8). On the other hand, James Naremore (1998, 61), while not quite so dismissive of the 1931 film, praises Huston's ability to make the 1941 film both romantic and humorous as the "wit is just sly enough to humanize the action without destroying its power as melodrama."

Frank Krutnik (1991) insists that of all the Hammett adaptations, only two are recognizably hard-boiled—John Huston's 1941 version of *The Maltese Falcon* and the 1942 version of *The Glass Key*. He attributes the dearth of hard-boiled films in the 1930s to the "strengthening of the Hays Code self-regulatory form of censorship in 1933 and 1934 which required the studios to 'play it safe' in matters of sexual content and violence" (pp. 35–36). While this may offer a possible explanation for the shortage of hard-boiled films in the second half of the 1930s, it does not affect the 1931 version of *The Maltese Falcon* as it was produced in a more liberal censorship environment than the 1941 version, and it does not explain the noir qualities in the 1935 version of *The Glass Key*.

William Luhr (1995, 7–8), in his book-length celebration of Huston's film, approaches this aspect in a slightly different way. He concludes that

when sound came to dominate Hollywood around 1930, however, detective films flourished, but they employed thematic norms quite different from the "hard-boiled" fiction popular at the time, even when they used that fiction as their source. . . .

This pattern is evident in the first two versions of *The Maltese Falcon*. In each, the detective . . . is a happy-go-lucky, wise-cracking two-fisted ladies man. The films give as much attention to comedy and seduction as to the mystery and, in many ways, the mystery is really an excuse for comedy and seduction.

Huston's film is altogether different in tone and points to a major trend for detective films to follow. . . . Spade [in the 1941 film] does not happily juggle a plethora of women but is bitterly involved with only two. . . . For him, sexuality is not carefree but dangerous and guilt-ridden. The mystery and the evil world it reveals dominate

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