

Book Reviews

Lee Horsley

The Noir Thriller

Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2001. Pp. xi + 305. \$65.00

Reviewed by Martin Priestman

Like the world it describes, the English term “*noir*” is full of shadows, half-light, and ambiguity. Yes, it means “black,” but only in the context of a history that writhes from French translations of American crime novels through a specific group of early postwar films to its post-1970s application to almost anything dark or suspenseful. Leaving it open whether as a noun it denotes “a visual style, a tone, a genre, a generic field, a movement,” or “a cycle” (6), Lee Horsley’s title sensibly uses *noir* as an adjective “intensifying” the genre-term “thriller,” to indicate a range of twentieth-century works that immerse us and their protagonists in “a world gone wrong” (37).

Part of the kick of *noir* is the way it conveys highbrow French approval of lowbrow Anglo-American product. Part of the difficulty of discussing the meaning of the term is to know which level of brow to adopt, and Horsley’s knowingly intertextual opening does not initially flag up her compendious familiarity with the rougher end of the market. Jumping off from the cartoonist Martin Rowson’s conflation of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* with the idiom and iconography of Chandler’s private eye Philip Marlowe, she argues that *noir* is a version of absurdist modernism, with respectable antecedents in novelists like Conrad and many links with Existentialism. But though providing a key icon in the shape of Humphrey Bogart’s film portrayal, the chivalric Marlowe himself only represents the shallow end of the *noir* drowning pool, and hereafter Horsley largely ignores series detectives because of their contamination by “‘non-noir’ traits like integrity, loyalty and compassion” (189).

After the Second World War, the gangster anti-heroes of W. R. Burnett and depression losers of Horace McCoy and James M. Cain are replaced by monomaniac avengers (including Mickey Spillane’s detective Mike Hammer, who earns his place here through ill-focused violence rather than forensic ability), pathetic social climbers, and disengaged psychopaths—the last two types being used by Patricia Highsmith and others to expose the moral contradictions of postwar materialism. Less culpable outcasts increasingly include black men: in Charles Willeford’s *Pick-Up*, the reason for the hero’s

victimization is deliberately withheld until the very last lines reveal his skin colour (173).

Sandwiched among such male protagonists, a pivotal exploration of “Fatal Women” makes a strikingly positive case for the genre’s treatment of the *femme fatale*. Whereas the simplified morality imposed by censorship and the perceived public need for pat endings often makes *film noir* and its successors complicit in a simple virgin/villain split, the novels on which many of these films are based deliberately show how such stereotypes are imposed by the male protagonists’ own sorts of guilt and lust. Horsley’s own book cover—taken from Jim Thompson’s *Recoil*—shows a desperate male figure fleeing from the magnified siren’s face he himself seems to have projected.

In the book’s final part, Horsley identifies a new set of issues arising from the rampant consumerism of the last third of the twentieth century. The new protagonists are “Players”—like Elmore Leonard’s heroes as well as his villains—who see their lives as a more or less sick game; “Voyeurs” whose sexually voracious male gaze is confronted head-on by writers like Susanna Moore and Helen Zahavi; and “Consumers” of things and people, like Brett Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*. A last section, on gothic and futuristic thrillers, shows present, future, and past looping nightmarishly in works by William Gibson, J. G. Ballard, and Peter Ackroyd.

In constructing her constantly original argument, Lee Horsley rams unstopably through many hundreds of books and a good range of films; astonishingly, either by their positioning in her well-conceived categories or through more detailed analysis, she implies a fresh, carefully nuanced reading of each. This study of the twentieth-century thriller in all of its darker manifestations is from now on indispensable.

Helen Fielding

Olivia Joules and the Overactive Imagination

New York: Viking Penguin, 2004. Pp. 306. \$24.95

Reviewed by Nora Foster Stovel

Helen Fielding launched a whole new subgenre with her novel *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, closely followed by *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*. Both have been made into films. What is the literary equivalent of “chick flick”? “Fem fic,” perhaps? Olivia Joules is Fielding’s latest hapless but charming heroine. A cross between a feminine version of Ian Fleming’s James Bond and Kingsley Amis’s Lucky Jim, Olivia Joules makes every mistake in the book and still ends up with the job and the guy. Born Rachel Pixley in Worksop, and orphaned when she