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## Cain, James M.

DAVID W. MADDEN

Remembered for his early novels and tough-guy style, James M. Cain was a prolific author whose career spanned 58 years as a journalist, playwright, screenwriter, short story writer, and novelist. Although he suffered from obscurity in his last 25 years, Cain's novels and the film adaptations of his works have continually fascinated audiences and spawned imitators. Key elements of this popularity are his swift-paced plotting, "hard-boiled" dialogue, and commonplace characters whose worlds change radically when confronted with the possibility of the fulfillment of their dreams.

Born July 1, 1892 in Annapolis, Maryland, Cain was the first of five children of James and Rose Cain. After graduating from college, he eventually settled on journalism and published some short stories in magazines. *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934) became a popular and critical success and illustrates some of the fictional practices central to his works. The outstanding feature is his "tough-guy" style, which relies upon a subjective realism of a lower-class world presented in the idiom of those at the bottom. Middle-class ethics and traditional morality are luxuries for Cain's characters; they represent individuals following overwhelming impulses, struggling in a world that frustrates the free expression of those drives.

A friend coined the term "love-rack" to describe these figures, and here Cain found his fictional formula. He often joins a pair of lovers out of lust or greed as they commit murder,

separate, and reunite, either triumphing or more often succumbing to some form of punishment. In Cain's world, the most ordinary, even law-abiding, people commit crimes because they dream forbidden dreams. In *Postman*, he blends these elements masterfully, producing a work that is as taut as any written by his contemporaries Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. A drifter, Frank Chambers, takes a temporary job, falls in love with his employer's wife, kills the man, and then escapes justice. When he and Cora reunite, they distrust one another, then reconcile, and she dies in an ocean accident. Chambers is executed for her death, though he is guiltless.

The novel's success led to a Hollywood screenwriting career and other compelling fictions, such as *Double Indemnity* (1936), which presents Walter Huff, an insurance agent who falls in love with a client's wife, sells her an accident policy on her husband, and then conspires to murder the man. Deciding that the wife will betray him, Huff plots her murder but is shot instead. Like his best works, *Double Indemnity* further explores the possibilities inherent in using a first-person narrator who reviews and evaluates his past actions.

*Serenade* (1937) centers on a destitute baritone, John Howard Sharp, who falls in love with a sultry Mexican prostitute and enjoys success in Hollywood but remains frustrated that he has betrayed his true talent. The novel is full of exaggerated homo- and heterosexual liaisons, distrust, and overripe melodrama that reinforce the Cain formula of individuals whose lives are suddenly transformed by overwhelming passion.

*Mildred Pierce* (1941), another of Cain's most famous works, is a novel that departs from previous fictions with its objective narrator and female protagonist. Pierce is a determined woman who divorces her feckless husband, raises two children, and eventually launches a successful business. When a former lover romances her daughter, Pierce descends into bankruptcy and reunites with her first husband. In spite of its melodramatic structure, the novel stands as a paean to the middle class struggling through the Depression and largely eschews the love-rack formula. Instead, the novel concentrates on an ordinary person's desire to rise above mediocrity and transcend individual limitations.

Exaggerated and improbable as the plot may be, *The Butterfly* (1947a) is the best of Cain's experiments in regional fiction, and its conciseness is a major reason for its success. Here Cain returns to a rapidly paced, first-person narrative, which emphasizes the rule that Cain is at his best with a subjective narrator. Replete with moonshine, sexual temptation, and incest, the novel is no match for Faulkner's, but Cain's inversion of the love-rack, to include family members, allows him to explore tortured characters who pay a steep price.

In 1948 Cain published the more ambitious *The Moth*, another chronicle of the Depression, whose plot extends over 35 years. The novel is a *Bildungsroman* that follows the fortunes of a child prodigy whose singing ambitions are thwarted and who is forced to embark on a life of rootless wandering. Through all his vicissitudes, like Mildred Pierce, Jack Dillon remains an optimist. *The Moth*, Cain's longest work, is nevertheless diluted by the realist's compulsion to include extraneous details that devolve into episodic rambling.

On October 27, 1977, at the age of 85, Cain died in Hyattsville, Maryland. Film adaptations of his works and an influential biography led to a resurgence of interest in his career in the 1980s. Cain will always be remembered as a writer who both defined and epitomized the hard-boiled style. As a technique, it represents a fitting fictional response to an era in which longstanding values and ideals were called radically into question.

**SEE ALSO:** Chandler, Raymond (AF); Hammett, Dashiell (AF); Modern Fiction in Hollywood

(AF); Noir Fiction (AF); Social-Realist Fiction (AF)

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## Canfield, Dorothy

JENNIFER PARCHESKY

From the 1910s to the 1950s, Dorothy Canfield was a leading figure in American literature and culture, authoring 11 novels, 18 non-fiction books (published under her married name, Dorothy Canfield Fisher), and hundreds of stories and essays. Her fiction focuses on individual psychological and moral development within realistic social settings. Although she explored controversial issues – gender roles, industrialization, war, and civil rights – her accessible style and ability to connect new ideas with traditional values of