

# American Cool

W. R. Burnett and the Rise of Literary Noir

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**W**ITH MOST SCREENWRITERS, the work lives well after the name is forgotten. So it is with W. R. Burnett, who is all but lost in public memory, and yet the long narrative reach of this screenwriter and forgotten novelist extends to half a dozen key pop-culture tropes, especially cable drama's dependence on tortured suburban outlaws—Tony Soprano, Walter White, Nancy Botwin. Burnett's narrative innovations helped shape the arc of a century's worth of popular culture, starting with his first novel, *Little Caesar*, a surprise bestseller in 1929 that was adapted into Hollywood's first gangster film; together with *Scarface* (Burnett wrote the 1932 screenplay), these two films remain gangster boilerplate. A decade later, he helped create film noir through director John Huston's adaptation of Burnett's novel *High Sierra* and his own screenplay for Graham Greene's *This Gun for Hire*. Burnett also has a solid claim to inventing the heist film with 1950's *The Asphalt Jungle*, a novel-turned-noir classic (again by Huston) that even had a Blaxploitation remake a generation later, called *Cool Breeze*. His last screenplay was for *The Great Escape*, the acclaimed 1963 World War II film that established Steve McQueen as an icon of cool: His character's nickname was "The Cooler King," in reference to his ability to maintain his dignity and sanity even in solitary confinement (that is, even in "the cooler"). Five years later, Burnett's last novel, *The Cool Man*, was a swan song for his most original contribution to American cool: the existential criminal. This admirable figure was an independent, ethical man within his own code, riveting for his contradictions, and ultimately doomed as someone who,

to paraphrase Bob Dylan, lives outside the law because he assumes himself honest.

In 1927, after writing five novels and dozens of short stories—all unpublished—in his hometown of Springfield, Ohio, Burnett moved to Chicago for a change of scenery and to shake up his life. He'd been raised by small-town political operatives. His literary models were the French Realists Balzac and Maupassant—he aspired to write an American version of *The Human Comedy*. But the big city impressed upon him the alienation and chaos of modernity and led him to two "literary revolts," as he termed them, through which he developed a new template of rebellion in the American arts.

His first epiphany was that American novels needed to be told and heard in the contemporary urban vernacular. "Novels were all written in a certain...literary language and [had] so much description. Well, I dumped all that out; I just threw it away. It was a revolt, a literary revolt. That was my object." In Chicago, he worked as a hotel night clerk and heard the vitality of American working-class slang—the rich, diverse jargons of gangsters, boxers, hobos, journalists, waitresses, prostitutes, and unemployed factory workers. "I wanted to develop a style of writing based on the way American people spoke—not literary English. Of course, the fact that Chicago slang was all around me made it easy to pick up."

Burnett's prose reminds us—in terms of style, attack, and tempo—of what must have been the shock of Chicago's modernity to recent immigrants and migrants up from the South. For example, here's mob boss Sam Vettori explaining a job in the first chapter of *Little Caesar*: "If



things go right, nobody in the place'll know it's been stuck up, except maybe some yaps in the lobby. Get the idea? With all them horns tooting and all that damn noise, see? All right... The manager's a goddamn bohunk and there ain't an ounce of fight in him. See? Scabby give me the lowdown." Burnett described the effect the city had on him as a newcomer: "On me, an outsider, an alien from Ohio, the impact of Chicago was terrific. It seemed overwhelmingly big, teeming, dirty, brawling, frantically alive. The pace was so much faster than anything I'd been used to; rudeness was the rule... [there was] no time to desist for one moment from whatever it was they were pursuing." Burnett learned Chicago's urban vernacular almost as a second language and approached it as a stylized literary jargon particularly effective in long scenes of pure dialogue. Here's an exchange between three gangsters about a change in leadership:

Pepi said: "We know you went yellow, Sam, when Tony blew his top and started after Come-to-Jesus McConagha. We know all right."  
Vettori looked up at him.  
"What the hell I got you guys for anyway! Who hands out the cush?"  
Rico paused.... "Don't get rough, Sam. [And] spill it quick because I ain't got all night."  
Vettori sighed profoundly.... "All right, but why the strong arm stuff, Rico? Sit down, you guys, and I'll have some drinks sent up."

This exchange sounds clichéd since it became the lingua franca of 1930s gangster films and, in public memory, a key aspect of the urban white working-class vernacular, but it was Burnett who introduced this style of speech to the masses.

Thirty years later, Burnett reflected back on Chicago in 1928: "Broke, jobless, a nobody, I fought hard to *keep my balance* in one of the most blankly indifferent, one of the toughest cities in the world." To be cool is to project a sense of control, of self-possession, no matter the circumstances, especially if you're just a working-class nobody in a "blankly indifferent" society. In Burnett's hands, Chicago became a representative

setting for what soon became cool: an admirable stoic masculine pose of public toughness in a gritty, noisy, dangerous industrial environment.

Burnett's first literary revolt fit in with an expanding modernist appreciation of the American vernacular that started a decade earlier with H. L. Mencken's *The American Language* (1919), a declaration of linguistic independence from Great Britain, Standard English, and upper-class WASP diction more generally. In the late 1920s, more than 30 percent of the population of large American cities like New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Philadelphia were non-native Americans, and perhaps an additional 10 percent were recent migrants up from the South or from rural counties or small towns. The urban jargon that took shape over these forty years—from around 1890 to 1930—became the tough, masculine American voice immortalized in Hollywood crime films and hard-boiled novels.

Ironically, the American urban vernacular gained strength during the Great Depression, due to its validation on the big screen. The young ethnic toughs of gangster films—James Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, Paul Muni—were set against the unattainable aristocratic ideal of actors such as John Barrymore or Douglas Fairbanks, in effect *kicking their asses* in the cinematic marketplace and putting an end to upper-class WASP bearing and diction as an American beau ideal. Instead, here were young white ethnic men from the streets in a nation then full of first- and second-generation immigrants. Humphrey Bogart embodied this shift in a different way as the sole WASP among them: He became a gangster type for Warner Brothers by imitating the white working-class speech of the streets. Raised on the Upper West Side of Manhattan in boarding schools, Bogart, too, learned the new urban vernacular like a second language.

More important, Burnett picked up one of the most unusual muses of twentieth-century letters, an Italian gangster named Barber, a bagman and assassin for Terry Druggan, one of the leaders of Chicago's Valley Gang. At first, Barber thought Burnett was a journalist and was suspicious of him; but when Burnett told him he was writing novels, the gangster just thought

him crazy. “I was writing books about, as he put it, things that never happened; he thought that was ridiculous. He couldn’t understand why anybody would want to write or read a novel.” Once they became friends, Barber spoke of his criminal life freely. “What I got from him was a viewpoint. I’m not a gangster; he really was. I had the old-fashioned Ohio ideas about right and wrong, remorse and all that stuff, which to him was utter nonsense.”

Burnett once asked Barber how he felt after killing a man. The mobster shrugged: “How do soldiers feel?” He thought of himself as an officer in an ongoing street-level battle for power. “To him it was [just] a war,” Burnett told many interviewers. Burnett and Barber were seen

the world similarly to the way your characters saw it?”

“Very little difference,” Burnett told him.

“Do you see yourself as an outsider?”

“Oh, definitely.”

“Outside the literary establishment?”

“Outside everything.”

**TO BURNETT**, the key to *Little Caesar*’s success—its “smack in the face,” he called it—was in rendering the world from the criminal’s point of view. Little Rico was an ambitious, disciplined man striving for the top of the gang ladder, who believed that women, liquor, and gambling sapped one’s energy and focus; he was the iconic private detective’s obverse. He

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together often enough that the writer thought he was being followed, and he soon realized “[I could get] myself killed for nothing.” The night of the St. Valentine Day’s massacre, Burnett was one of the first people on the scene, and here he found his limit: “I couldn’t go inside.... It was a slaughterhouse...I got one look at it and I said, ‘uh uh.’”

Burnett’s second literary revolt was to deploy the criminal’s perspective, which he learned from Barber, as a surrogate for authorial critique. In doing so, he consciously upended the then-prevalent Horatio Alger myth with its capitalist fantasy of meritocratic luck-and-pluck to its raw powerplays of economic reward and punishment. Existential criminals were rebel figures uninterested in middle-class respectability who enabled Burnett to portray a corrupt society without seeming amoral as an author. “I found I could give a picture of the world as *I saw it* and not shock the hell out of everybody [because that’s] the way criminals and gangsters were expected to act.”

One interviewer asked him: “So you saw

was pointedly not a vessel of evil, a bad seed, a sociopath, or a redeemable lost soul. “It was the world seen completely through the eyes of a gangster. It’s a commonplace now [sic], but it had never been done before then. You had crime stories but always seen through the eyes of society. The criminal was just some son-of-a-bitch who’d killed somebody and then you go get ‘em. I treated ‘em as human beings. Well, what else are they?”

With Little Rico, Burnett was “reaching for a gutter Macbeth” to show how the rise to power wasn’t much different in 1920s Chicago than in the Renaissance. He even appended an epigraph from Machiavelli that baffled reviewers—“The first law of every being is to preserve itself and live. You sow hemlock and expect to see ears of corn ripen”—who thought the young author was putting on intellectual airs. Burnett was dead serious, and translated it this way: “If you have this kind of society, it will produce such men.”

How radical was *Little Caesar* in film and literature in 1930? Director Mervyn LeRoy thought the novel a gift from the literary gods

and convinced Jack Warner to buy it: “Until then, nobody in Hollywood had ever done anything like it,” the director noted in his autobiography. Studio heads thought the public wanted escapism during the Depression, but LeRoy felt that “the public was more mature than we had given them credit for.” He insisted that, despite the crushing economic circumstances—or, rather, because of them—people would “pay money to see a film like *Little Caesar*, a film that wasn’t escape but more a mirror of truth...it might shake them up, but perhaps they needed to be shaken. They were [certainly] aware of the existence of gangsters—Al Capone was a household word.” In fact, many people assumed *Little Caesar* was a fictionalized account of Capone’s life.

Soon after receiving the script, Edward G. Robinson insisted on the role of Little Rico: He instantly understood *Little Caesar* as “a Greek tragedy” since here “was the drama of the humblest, the most dispossessed, seeking to break his way out of the anonymity of ignorance, toward [being]...a man on his own.” The film played around the clock in New York for several months. In the 1960s, Robinson reflected that in *Little Caesar*, “I probably expressed a feeling that millions of people had about their own lives.” In other words, the gangster film became a key cultural pressure valve during the Great Depression.

Burnett did not think of *Little Caesar* as pulp fiction or a gangster novel, but as more of “a slang novel, even a proletarian novel.” Its opening chapter consists of a conversation among members of a mid-level Chicago gang during Prohibition as they discuss an upcoming job. There is no framing for the reader, nor judgment of the characters. Such a matter-of-fact narration of criminals as human beings in conversation was decades ahead of its time, whether looking forward to the garrulous thugs and heist films of Quentin Tarantino, or television’s serial-crime dramas such as *The Wire* or *The Sopranos*, or the crime novels of George Pelicanos and Dennis Lehane. The book sent shock waves through the publishing industry and was tailor-made for the new talkies, with its staccato verbal rhythms and coded criminal jargon, its sirens and screeching tires, its machine-gun fire and screaming female

victims. Burnett did not think of *Little Caesar* as a work of genre fiction and always refuted the idea that he wrote mysteries or crime stories.

Burnett is the writer most responsible for crafting the criminal as a metaphor for his times. Tony Soprano is a metaphor for rapacious, respectable capitalism, *The Wire*’s Stringer Bell for structural racism, and Walter White (of *Breaking Bad*) for the loss of national ethics, social purpose, and dignified work—these are all Burnett’s great-grandthieves. Through detached narration and cinematic omniscience, Burnett employed gangster characters to mirror political graft, corporate theft, and the collusion of power elites. “In short, I never judge them [the gangsters] because often their own corruption is reflected elsewhere, all the way to City Hall.” These contemporary outlaws are heirs to the Depression-era gangsters set loose in the social machine to reveal the hypocrisy of its arbitrary vision of right and wrong in government, law, justice, and business.

Burnett’s rebel, the metaphorical criminal, is what unifies his work, from *Little Caesar* to *The Cool Man*, a romantic fantasy figure inextricable from the concept of American cool. The popularity of this figure began in the Great Depression, resonating with white working-class rebels, African American men of the Great Migration, and immigrants, all of whom thrilled to hear their own vernacular on the big screen spoken by streetwise survivors. As Ian Hamilton once observed of Burnett’s oeuvre, “He knew how tough guys talked.” (In fact, *Little Caesar* brought men back to the theaters, after a drop in attendance in the late 1920s.) Burnett created a new masculine power chord by translating the Western gunslinger of dime novels and frontier mythology into white ethnic urban outlaws (first), then noir, heist, and cool—inflections he adjusted with just enough nuance to reflect subtle historical shifts. His debt to the Westerns was repaid when he created the legend of Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday for Hollywood with his first Western novel, *Saint Johnson*, for which he traveled to Tombstone, Arizona, spoke with old men who claimed to remember the iconic shoot-out, and participated in “a drunken recreation of the shootout at the OK Corral.”

Burnett often begins his novels and screenplays focused on the disciplined habits of a successful rogue protagonist—whether gangster, cop, outlaw, or prisoner—then narrates his inevitable downfall. Burnett honed his rebel figure (always a man) to a sharp outsider point for his threefold critique: first, of a corrupt urban social order; second, of the Faustian bargain of modernization and the myth of progress; third, of the inadequate responses of literary modernism. After William Faulkner read *Little Caesar* and saw the film, he wrote a gothic noir (*Sanctuary*, 1931) that used a gangster (Popeye) as a metaphor for the predatory, industrial society then leveling the traditional social order so beloved of the Southern Agrarians.

The gangster was both Burnett's surrogate point of view and a victim of his own excess, of a lack of balance. Either life was a social war, it was boring, or you adhered to the ancient Greek ideal of moderation: "Nothing in excess." The most admirable protagonists in Burnett's works are criminals who become independent through intelligent, planned crimes that do no harm to others unless necessary for self-preservation: Doc Riedenschneider in *The Asphalt Jungle*, Willie Madden in *The Cool Man*, Clinch in *Underdog*. His antiheroes are solitary men attempting to maintain control of their daily lives (no bosses) and their appetites. Yet each is caught and punished when an overpowering desire disrupts the discipline of their success, whether for sex, money, or violence. Burnett's message is neither that justice prevails nor that solitary rebellion (or subjective truth) is its own reward; rather, the moral of his stories is that an inability to live within limits will always send you to an external cage (prison) to replace your internal romantic fantasy of personal transcendence.

**FILM NOIR HAS OFTEN** been called a pulp existentialism. Noir cool was an American artistic version of that philosophy. Cool was a state of thoughtful relaxation conveyed by stylized expression of stoic resilience. In the case of movies or novels, cool is measured by a character's ability to project dignity through style in the face of overwhelming economic and social forces. V. S. Naipaul wrote that Trinidadian men

worshiped Humphrey Bogart and always greeted his first appearance in a movie with shouts, applause, and cries of "That is man!" Bogart's charismatic grizzled style and nonchalance conveyed both individual dignity and a mastery over life cherished by audiences in the mid-twentieth century. It's no accident that the familiar Bogart persona first emerged in the actor's portrayal of gangster Roy Earle, the protagonist bank robber of Burnett's *High Sierra*.

The role of the criminal in cool can hardly be overestimated. The Beats modeled their search for nonconformist kicks on the grifter Herbert Huncke, the car thief and delinquent Neal Cassady, and the genius junkie raconteur (and accidental wife-killer) William Burroughs. In *The Wild One*, Marlon Brando leads an out-

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law biker gang that tears up a boring town; Elvis Presley started his film career as a convict in *Jailhouse Rock*. Miles Davis crafted his pose in part on the pimp and hustler, the archetypal "bad niggers" of urban African American culture. In France, Sartre worshiped the thief and male prostitute Jean Genet and praised him for his "saintliness" in a 600-page tome; Camus's Meursault is a murderer turned into a model of stoicism in *The Stranger*. Norman Mailer fetishized criminals—they represented the unleashed masculine id thrusting against a static society—and it started with "The White Negro," an essay invested in African American criminality as a leading edge of cultural rejuvenation. (The essay's working title was "Dialectic of an American Existentialist.")

Yet asked in an interview if his work was "consonant" with the French existentialists, Burnett said, "I couldn't stand Sartre." Asked about Camus, he spit out: "I liked *The Plague*,

but I didn't like Camus." Asked if his own work was existential, Burnett gave his best one-liner: "No. I'm too Irish. I have always had to struggle to keep from being a comic writer." He thought Camus's concept of the absurd simplistic ("Life is, of course, absurd and it is ludicrous to take it seriously"), considered Samuel Beckett "an Irish hoaxer," wrote off Ionesco's works as "degenerated" and "aberrant." He disagreed with Hemingway's "write what you know" philosophy as a fictional method: "You'd have to go out and shoot somebody before you know how it feels to shoot someone." Throughout his life, he believed in Realism as the self-evident best practice for the literary novel. "My primary purpose was always the same as Balzac's: to give the most realistic picture of the world around me that I could." His own existential approach came from an Irish fatalism mixed with French Realism: "I have a very good grip on reality so I pretty much know the limitations of humanity and the possibilities in life, which aren't very great for anybody. You're born, you're gonna have trouble, and you're gonna die. That you know. There's not much else you know."

In literary noir, the protagonist's cool functions as an artistic rendering of individual rebellion in opposition to traditional ideas of social status, economic success, or bourgeois morality—being a criminal makes for a natural entry point. Literary noir offered its male readership a literary romance of rogue existential freedom, a fantasy with inherent emotional costs: alcohol abuse, unbearable loneliness, the dismissal of women as objects of sex, dependence, and superficiality. Yet even Simone de Beauvoir was a fan of what the French called "the American novel" or "the tough novel." On a visit to America in 1947, she was shocked to find that most liberal intellectuals and journalists disliked hard-boiled fiction and preferred novels of middle-class life. "In the American novels we like," she wrote that same year, "reality is described through strongly felt convictions involving love, hate, and rebellion. Life is revealed...through the hero's consciousness." In these novels, the protagonist's values were "implied through silences," de Beauvoir reflected, and in this way, the American novel managed to "express...

inner life with the greatest truth and depth." In addition, there was neither authorial command nor moralizing and no overt social critique. It was for the reader to figure out.

**NEARLY EVERY MALE** author writing within a framework of literary noir thought of himself as a freethinking rebel, but Burnett wore the term like a badge of honor; he even called his artistic method "belligerent non-commitment." He was apolitical and averse to soapbox morality, superficial political resistance, modernist experimentation, or class consciousness. He delineated rebel from revolutionary to describe himself and John Huston (and few others): "Huston was like me, a rebel. A revolutionary is a politician who is out of office. And a rebel is a guy who is suspicious of all authority, left or right." More important for his career, the revolutionaries in the Hollywood of his time were Leftists and often Communists, another reason he did not have a cohort of friends. "I'm very anti-Communist due to the fact that I'm a rebel. I couldn't possibly live under a Communist government." Like Mencken, he enjoyed living in the US since it is a "democracy that verges on anarchy." He despised the liberal ethos and "literary snobbery" of the American literary community. "If it's a Western, it can't be literary," he remarked, in part because literary snobbery ensured that "almost all novels are written from the liberal standpoint." Burnett's work was taken more seriously in Europe than in the US because, as he saw it, "my work does not exude liberalism. It's not anti-liberal, it's not anything—it's the way I see the world."

And yet all this was pure professionalism. Burnett was a stable family man with a strong work ethic who settled comfortably in suburban Glendale, California, in the early 1930s; his rebel sensibility was primarily aesthetic. He never hung out in pool halls or rail yards, did not serve in either world war, hated to travel, and never learned to drive. He dedicated his novels to his wives and children. He once admitted to being an archetype himself: the country boy nostalgic for a simpler time even when he knows that world is irretrievably gone. His best novels are set in unnamed small midwestern cities much

like Springfield and Columbus. He wanted to be a jazz musician and wrote two good novels about jazz, *The Giant Swing* and *It's Always 4 O'Clock*. His sole vice was gambling on horses and dogs.

Burnett worked in a genre category he alone called “the novel of commerce.” He read everything but cared little for literary movements or modernist experimentation. He thought of *Little Caesar* as “a revolt against *Ulysses*,” and thought Joyce ruined the social functions of reading literature by taking it in a “completely subjective” direction (and method) as opposed to the “objective” models of his literary mentors. Burnett apprenticed himself to the nineteenth-century French Realists—Balzac, Maupassant, Anatole France—since he believed they had created an important formula for making the novel a relevant art form. Here are the narrative elements of “objective writing”: omniscient third-person narration with limited psychologizing or interiority; sociological context through profiling, often related within ongoing dialogue; an efficient use of dramatic action through frequent shifts in setting. As it has often been noted, the “visual novels” of serial drama auteurs such as David Simon or David Chase are indebted to the serialization of novels of commerce by Balzac and Dickens. Burnett’s view is a precursor to Tom Wolfe’s infamous essay from 1989, “Stalking The Billion-Footed Beast,” in which, following his best-selling *Bonfire for the Vanities*, Wolfe advised writers to reclaim social realism as the natural mode of the American novel or journalists (like himself) would steal it. The journalistic works of Michael Lewis—*The Big Short*, *Liar’s Poker*, even *Moneyball*—are nonfiction novels of commerce, in their documentarian way, that add contemporary strength to this argument about literary relevance.

Burnett’s success was in creating a two-way mirror that dissolved the false dichotomies of liberalism in terms of right and wrong, legal and illegal, good and evil. Police violence and criminal violence, corporate theft and bank robbers, individual rebellion and political reform—through Burnett’s renderings, a reader could understand that life itself was a matter of perspective. Burnett may not have created an American version of Balzac’s *Human Comedy*

but he did, in his own evaluation, “show the mechanism of corruption...the infrastructure of the city’s politics—which makes all criminal activities possible,” and that was the key to his success on the page and on the screen. With a few exceptions—like Ilona Vance, a quite original Burnett femme fatale in *Vanity Row* who outsmarts all the men trying to control her—women remained either beside the (narrative) point or sexual interests, secretaries, or waitresses. Here’s Vance’s response to a cop who assumed her rich escorts were sugar daddies: “I am not a very good subject for domination, never have been.”

In a typical Burnett narrative, a free-thinking, independent man is trapped in a social prison he understands to be a game with irrational rules invented by the creators of the game and enforced by bureaucrats. From *Little Caesar* to *The Great Escape*, the ethical rebel loner changes shape from ethnic Other (Little Rico, Italian gangster, socially disapproved) to Anglo sex symbol (Steve McQueen, romantic ideal), but the critique of bureaucracy, political corruption, corporate control, and bourgeois complacency (and complicity) remains the same. Burnett wrote the book on this method and it became an unconscious template for the archetype of American male rebels. Like the concept of cool itself, it became part of the metaphors by which we think about coming-of-age.

By his own account, Burnett was lucky and successful “until the 1960s, then the world changed.” He lost the sense of outsider and insider once an entire generation put “the establishment” or “the system” on trial. “Obviously there was a revolution—in manners, morals, you name it.” He kept writing, but his literary landscape disappeared into the suburbs. Two generations removed from hippies, biker rebels, or black activists, Burnett lost his traction on rebellion. And as he perceived of the shift in terms of using the criminal as metaphor: “Everybody’s an outsider now.” Still, his Irish dark realism neither failed him nor created the kind of resentment that led to avenger antiheroes such as Dirty Harry or Charles Bronson’s Paul Kersey in the *Death Wish* films.

By the early 1980s, cool had simply become an outlaw sensibility for a consumer culture. ■

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