

A Scandal in Suburbia

A newly-discovered novel by James M. Cain

Suspended Sentences

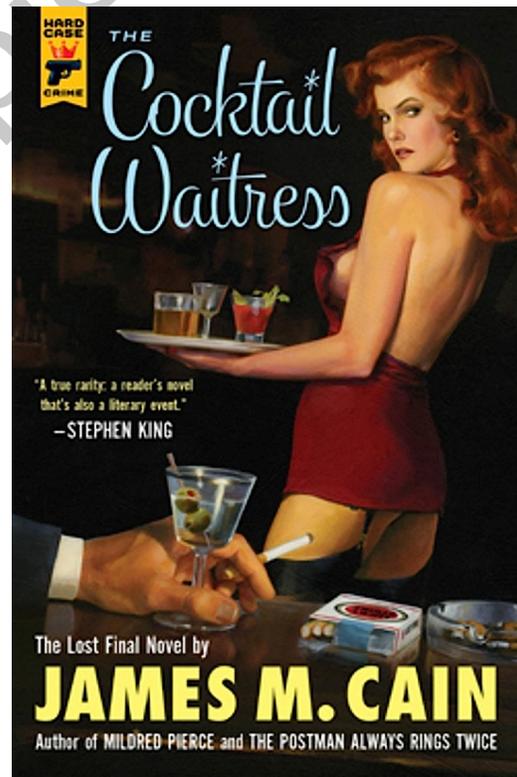
by Jim Napier

To fans of American crime fiction, the name James M. Cain conjures up the image of one of the greats, the author responsible for some of the classics of the genre, including *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Double Indemnity*, and *Mildred Pierce* — tales so iconic that when we read them we wish for just one more from the pen of this literary master. But all things must come to an end, and in twenty novels published between 1934 and 1985 (two of which were published after his death) we have a rich and uniquely American take on the genesis of crime and its corrosive aftermath.

Now, in a move that could have been scripted by Hollywood, we get our wish. A recently-discovered manuscript has been found among Cain's possessions. Written late in his life, and never before published, it is unmistakably Cain, drawing on elements contained in several of his previous works, to fashion a cautionary tale of ambition, greed, corruption, and their inevitable consequences. In short, it is vintage Cain.

Written from the perspective of the title character, *The Cocktail Waitress*

follows the life of a young widow, Joan Medford, from the day she buries her husband. After a quarrel her husband drove off, having had several drinks. When his body is found hours later, in the remains of a car, there is suspicion both by her sister-in-law and a police detective that somehow his wife had arranged his death.



James M. Cain,
The Cocktail Waitress
(Hard Case Crime, 2012)

But Joan has more than her husband's death on her mind. Now in financial straits and with a young child to provide for, she takes a job – the only one available to her – as a cocktail waitress at a local lounge. There she meets Tom Barclay, a callow young schemer, and a wealthy older man, both of whom take a personal interest in her. The tensions between them can only lead to trouble, and before it is resolved someone will die, and Joan will take front and center stage in what the police see as a clear case of murder. And in the polite, respectable suburban setting of Hyattsville, Maryland, Joan can expect about as much sympathy as a Salem witch at a PTA meeting. Combining elements taken from *Postman*, *Double Indemnity*, and *Mildred Pierce*, Cain offers readers a twist ending that will jar even the most jaded reader.

Just as Cain didn't shrink from portraying the seamier aspects of ordinary people's lives, so he drew upon his own often-flawed past in creating *The Cocktail Waitress*. The Hyattsville setting was one Cain was familiar with, having lived there after having moved from Hollywood. So, too, did he imbue the character of Earl K. White, the wealthy benefactor besotted with Joan, with angina, a painful disease that marked Cain's own final years.

As in so many of Cain's works, the theme here is to be careful what you wish for. With Cain the overarching theme is always cosmic justice: his flawed characters become the agents of their own destruction. Cain always insisted that he was not a crime novelist *per se*, and it's true that his stories do not feature detectives as their protagonists. But he was nonetheless a progenitor of what came to be known as Noir fiction, dominated by a darkly jaded point of view focused on human fallibility and its often tragic consequences. Cain shared many of the hard-boiled genre's conventions as well, from wisecracking tough guys to sultry seductresses, stories that take place in seedy bars and run-down diners and dark alleys, characters and settings that defined the American crime novel of their day, and continue to influence its development nearly a century later.

The Cocktail Waitress was Cain's final novel. His work of the 30s and 40s is arguably his best, but fans will find much to enjoy in this latest discovery, complemented by an informed afterword by award-winning novelist and editor Charles Ardai.

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Since 2005 Jim Napier's reviews and interviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and on such websites as *Spinetingler*, *The Rap Sheet*, *Shots Magazine*, *Crime Time*, *Reviewing The Evidence*, *January* magazine, and *Type M for Murder*, as well as on his own award-winning site, *Deadly Diversions*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com