

## From out of the grave: *Vintage reissues a crime classic*

### *Suspended Sentences*

by Jim Napier

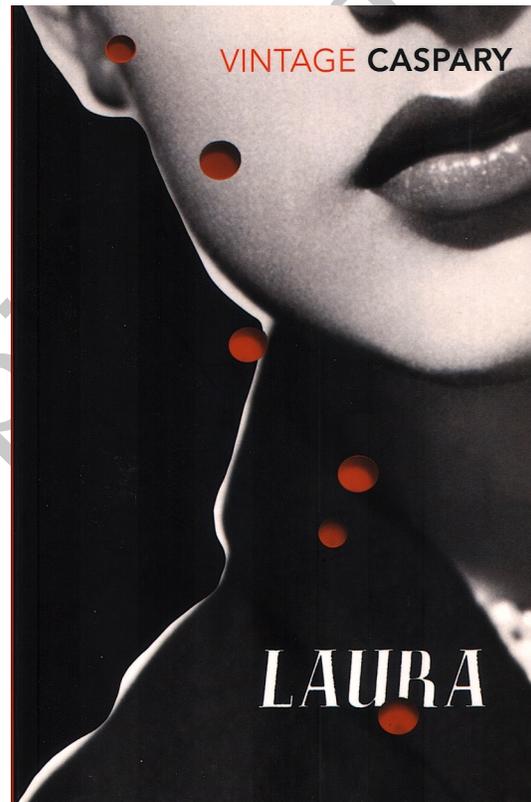
The nineteen thirties and forties are deservedly known as the Golden Age of American crime fiction, marked by the appearance of such memorable classics as Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*, Raymond Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*, and James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. In this august company belongs another writer—refreshingly, a woman. Her name was Vera Caspary, and although she authored many crime novels one of her works stands out as a classic, and was translated into an equally timeless film. That book is *Laura*, and seventy years later it has just been reissued by Vintage Books. Certain to be remembered by readers of a certain age, it deserves to be discovered by current generations of crime fiction fans.

#### **Vera Caspary, *Laura***

(Vintage Books, 2012)

New York City, 1942. A young woman lies dead in the doorway of a fashionable apartment on the Upper East Side. She has been brutally murdered, shotgunned in the face at point-blank range. Laura Hunt had carved out a promising career in a major advertising agency. She is mourned by her maid, her aunt, her

fiancée, and a well-known newspaper columnist.



Assigned to investigate the death is NYPD detective Mark McPherson. A rough diamond still recovering from a well-publicised shoot-out with a local thug, even he comes under her spell as he struggles to form a picture of the stylish, worldly woman, and figure out who would want to kill her—and why.

By all admissions Laura was well-liked, even admired. Her inner circle of friends and relatives included her fiancée, Shelby Carpenter, a co-worker at the advertising agency, a Southern gigilo with aspirations of grandeur. But Laura had also come under the influence of Waldo Lydecker, an influential columnist and dandy, who took a proprietorial, even controlling, interest in her life.

Set against the sophisticated backdrop of New York's beautiful people, and told from multiple points of view, *Laura* is the story of a ravishing enigma, her besotted mentor with an ego the size of Manhattan, a Kentucky gentleman who isn't quite what he seems, and a blue-collar cop clearly out of his element, and who increasingly comes under her spell.

At 170 pages *Laura* is a slim little book, its modest size eloquent testimony to the principle that size doesn't always matter. One of the many strengths of the book is Vera Caspary's dry narrative tone. When MacPherson tries to get a handle on the victim, he asks:

*"You knew her, Mr. Lydecker. Tell me, what kind of dame was she, anyway?"*

*"She was not the sort of woman you call a dame."*

Caspary also adroitly used what are essentially cinematic effects, clearly done in a bid for the movie version that would come. For example, when Laura's aunt enters the room Caspary writes:

*"In the mirror's gilt frame Mark saw the reflection of an advancing figure. She was small, robed in deepest mourning and carrying under her right arm a Pomeranian whose auburn coat matched her own bright hair. As she paused in the door with the marble statues and bronze figurines behind her, the gold frame giving margins to the portrait, she was like a picture done by one of Sargent's imitators who had failed to carry over to the twentieth century the dignity of the nineteenth..."*

We don't get much of that sort of florid, informed writing today, to our loss.

Originally published as a seven-part serial in *Colliers* magazine, *Laura* was Vera Caspary's fourth novel. She went on to write a total of two dozen crime tales, as well as three stage plays and a non-fiction work before her death in 1987. But none of her other works achieved the attention and praise of *Laura*; and none so closely paralleled Caspary's own previous career in advertising.

With clues, red herrings, and misdirection, *Laura* is a classic puzzle mystery of its day. But it is also that rarest of contemporary phenomena, a literate, even erudite plot-driven tale that actually engages readers and challenges them to keep up. *Laura* is, in short, a timeless classic, waiting to be discovered, and savoured, by a new generation of readers.

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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](mailto:jnapier@deadlydiversions.com)

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