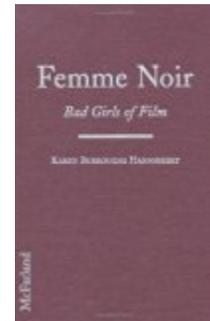


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Karen Burroughs Hannsberry. *Femme Noir: Bad Girls of Film*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1998. x + 633 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7864-0429-2.

Reviewed by Walter Metz (Montana State University)
Published on H-Film (April, 1999)



Classical Hollywood

Responding to Karen Burroughs Hannsberry's *Femme Noir: Bad Girls of Film* turns out to be more complex than it would at first seem. On the one hand, the book seems critically unassailable. To complain about its lack of intellectual rigor seems to miss the point, and to fall into a stereotype of the pedantic academic. For, the book is written innocently and enthusiastically from the point-of-view of a film noir fan in particular, and of classical Hollywood motion pictures in general. The author's excitement for the actresses who appeared in noir is forcefully stated and hard to argue with: "The actresses described herein depicted a multiplicity of fascinating femmes who won our admiration in spite of their infamy, devilish dames who enticed our cheers as well as some chills down our spines, and beguiling babes whose identities remain indelibly etched in our minds like blood on a white satin pillowcase" (p. 3). However, beyond praise for the author's vigor for her subject matter, there is little good to be said about this reference book.

Femme Noir is structured around forty-nine essays, each devoted to an actress who appeared in a few film noir during her career. The book's major problem is that it has no discernible methodology other than to present these actresses' biographies and filmographies. In the sparse three page Introduction, Hannsberry produces a typology of the kinds of female characters in noir: champions for male protagonists, innocent victims, gutsy but sincere women, and "females who use their wiles to get their way" (p. 2). Sadly, this is the most provocative analysis in the entire book, although unfortunately the author

never bothers to actually use this typology in her individual case studies. For example, she writes that "[Scarlet Street] offered [Joan] Bennett a prime opportunity to again demonstrate that she was up to portraying a femme of less than stellar repute" (p. 24), but never tells us why it matters to Lang's film that Bennett was chosen over one of the other potential actresses detailed in other parts of the book.

Beyond the lack of an attempt to link together the individual essays in this way, the book is also hurt because the individual studies of actresses are not interested enough in the photoplays themselves. In any given fifteen page essay, Hannsberry spends about a third of her time detailing the star's biography and the rest in producing plot summaries of a preponderance of the star's films. However, she does not limit herself to just describing the noirs in which the actress appeared, but gives a laundry list of films in all genres. Thus, an analysis of their relationship to noir gets short shrift in the book, making its title extremely misleading.

The annoyances caused by this shortcoming can best be explained by comparing Hannsberry's treatment of *Odds Against Tomorrow* in the Shelley Winters and Gloria Grahame chapters. In the Gloria Grahame essay, Hannsberry details the plot of the film, focusing on its thematic grappling with racism. The central protagonist, one of the perpetrators of a robbery, bristles at one of the men in the heist being African-American. Hannsberry describes the film's last scene, in which the crooks have been incinerated: "The following day, with the corpses laid out side

by side, one fireman asks another, "Which is which?" In a reply tinged with irony, his colleague tells him, "Take your pick" (p. 187). After this two-paragraph plot summary, Hannsberry informs us that "Grahame appeared in only two scenes in [the film], but although her minor part was an odd inclusion in the film, the actress displayed her usual talent ..." (p. 187).

In the Winters essay, Hannsberry begins her discussion of *Odds Against Tomorrow* with Winters' role: "After her successful performance in *Anne Frank*, Winters appeared in her final film noir, *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959). Here, Winters played Lorry Slater, who selflessly supports her ex-convict husband, Earl" (p. 579). Hannsberry again proceeds to describe the film's plot, cribbing the entire discussion of racism from the previous section of the book. No mention is made in either of these essays of what Winters' or Grahame's star personae, acting ability, or careers concerns the film's grappling with racism. Essays on Winters and Grahame serve as mere excuses for summarizing the plot of this film and all of the other photodramas that starred these actresses.

To return to the caveat with which I began, it is clear that complex connections between the stars' careers, acting styles, and the meaning of the films themselves are not of interest to Hannsberry. She is content to narrativize the biography and filmography of each woman's career. The reason this bothers me is that there is an in-

triguing book project that might stem from the material that Hannsberry presents. The role of female actresses in film noir does merit closer attention. E. Ann Kaplan's *Women in Film Noir* is a good book, but was written at a time when feminist film criticism was dominated by ideological and textual analysis. A rethinking of a project linking noir and women from the point-of-view of star theory and performance study could reveal a great deal about how and why noir films projected particular ideas about femininity.

Unfortunately, *Femme Noir* is content with a fan's interest in merely describing the private lives, and filmographies, of classical Hollywood actresses. As much fun as it is to read Hannsberry's juicy bits of gossip and have our memories jarred about long-since forgotten "B" noir films, the book offers little more than the biographies and filmographies available from the "Internet Movie Database" or from the *Cinemanía* CD-ROM.

This review is copyrighted by Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies and the Historians Film Committee, <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/~filmhis/>. It may be reproduced electronically for educational or scholarly use. The Film & History reserves print rights and permissions. (Contact: P.C.Rollins at the following electronic address: Rollinspc@aol.com).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-film>

Citation: Walter Metz. Review of Hannsberry, Karen Burroughs, *Femme Noir: Bad Girls of Film*. H-Film, H-Net Reviews. April, 1999.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3034>

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.