



DENNIS LEHANE

SWEET SMELL OF SUCCESS

For the dialogue alone—"The cat's in the bag and bag's in the river" or "I'd hate to take a bite out of you; you're a cookie filled with arsenic"—this 1957 release would be one of my favorite movies of any genre. But as noir—heartless, acidic, terminally jaundiced—it's the benchmark. Never has craven desperation had a more insatiable yet self-loathing face than Tony Curtis as Sidney Falco; never has imperious (and, yes, incestuous) cruelty had the granite authority of Burt Lancaster's J. J. Hunsecker. Never has NYC looked lusher, sexier, or half as lethal as it does in James Wong Howe's silken black-and-white. The blacks are so black they're a corner in Hell's root cellar; the whites are so white they cut. I watch it at least once a year and it never gets stale.



SEXY BEAST

When the Brits do neo-noir, they get to something the American neo-noirs have mostly overlooked: evil. Scuzzy, nasty, avaricious, sexually depraved evil. We make bad guys kind of fun, romantic; they make bad guys the last fucking people you'd ever want to meet. And in *Sexy Beast* (2000), we meet two demons. The first is Don Logan (Ben Kingsley), popping over to sunny Spain to convince his old pal in crime, Gal (Ray Winstone), to do One Last Job in London. The only problem—Don Logan is far too psychotic to really have a "pal," and his shaky motives could further be knotted up in both his unrequited "love" for the wife of one of Gal's friends and/or fears of his own homosexuality. After Don exits halfway through the film (the exact nature of the exit is not made clear until the end) Gal is left to do the

job in London under the watchful and wholly dead eyes of Teddy Bass (Ian McShane), a cockney Anti-Christ. Teddy and Don represent the wholesale barbarism of urges left unchecked and souls left unexamined. Gal represents nothing less than love itself, and the only weapon he has against these monsters is his own open heart. Should I ever write a scene as perfect as the one where Gal, certain he's going to die, calls his wife to tell her how much he loves her, I'll die a happy man.



NIGHT AND THE CITY

Small-time hustler Harry Fabian (Richard Widmark) dreams of breaking free of his nothing life by becoming a wrestling promoter. All he has to do is convince the London underworld he's worthy of respect. He fails, and his fall from the curb into the gutter is one of the great tragic descents of a flawed man undone by his inability to stop believing in his own beautifully goofy dreams (1950).

ONE FALSE MOVE

A small town sheriff in Arkansas (Bill Paxton) prepares to do battle with three violent criminals (Billy Bob Thornton, Michael Beach, and Cynda Williams) who massacred several drug dealers in LA, took off with their product, and headed home to Arkansas. The sheriff, Dale "Hurricane" Dixon, is hopelessly overmatched. He's also hiding secrets from his own past that relate to the case. Cowritten by Thornton, this 1992 film is a true low-budget gem where both the sins of the past and the sins of the South refuse to lie still. The final scene between Dixon and a small boy is one of my all-time favorites.



OUT OF THE PAST

I almost left this off because it's so great and shows up on every best noir list that it's like one of the faces on the Film Noir Mt. Rushmore, along with *Double Indemnity* (which I did leave off simply because it's so perfect and such a given it needs no more praise from me.) But *Out of the Past* (1947) makes it because it was the one I discovered first, my St. Pauli Girl of film noirs. Best femme fatale of all-time for my money in Jane Greer as Kathie Moffat; best badass "hero" who's not as smart as he thinks he is in Robert Mitchum as Jeff Bailey. And once again, dialogue for the ages. "I don't want to die, Jeff," Kathie says. To which Jeff replies, "Neither do I, baby, but if I have to, I'm going to die last."

And because I don't really believe in lists, here are just a few of the other movies I left off that are just as good—*Double Indemnity*; *Get Carter* (1971); *Cutter's Way*; *Rififi*; *Thief*; *The Killing*; *Body Heat*; *The Big Heat*; *Gilda*; *Laura*; *The Maltese Falcon*; *The Big Sleep*; *The Limey*; *City of Industry*; *This Gun for Hire*; *Kiss Me Deadly*; *Menace II Society*, and *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*. ■

Dennis Lehane, a member of the Film Noir Foundation's advisory council, is the bestselling author of novels-turned-films Mystic River, Shutter Island, Gone Baby Gone, and this fall's The Drop, which he adapted from his prize-winning short story, "Animal Rescue." He was a regular cowriter of the acclaimed television series The Wire. His most recent novels are The Given Day, Moonlight Mile, and Live by Night.