

Book Review

In Lonely Places: Film Noir Beyond the City
Imogen Sara Smith
McFarland Press, 2011

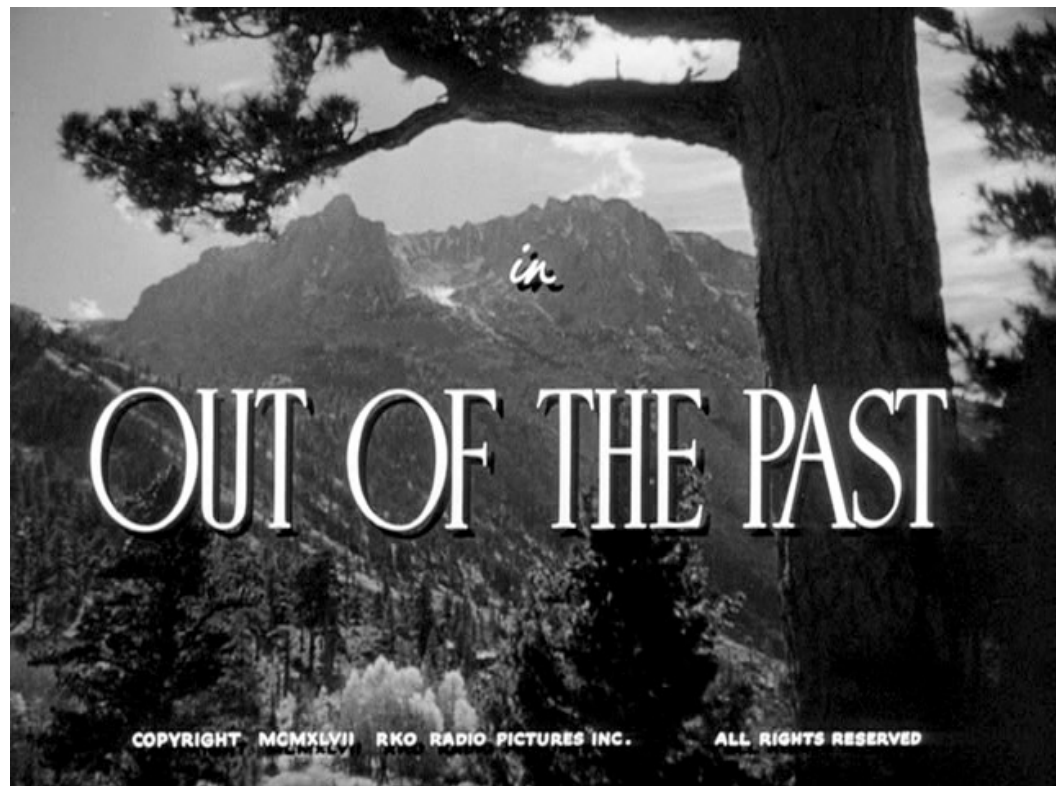
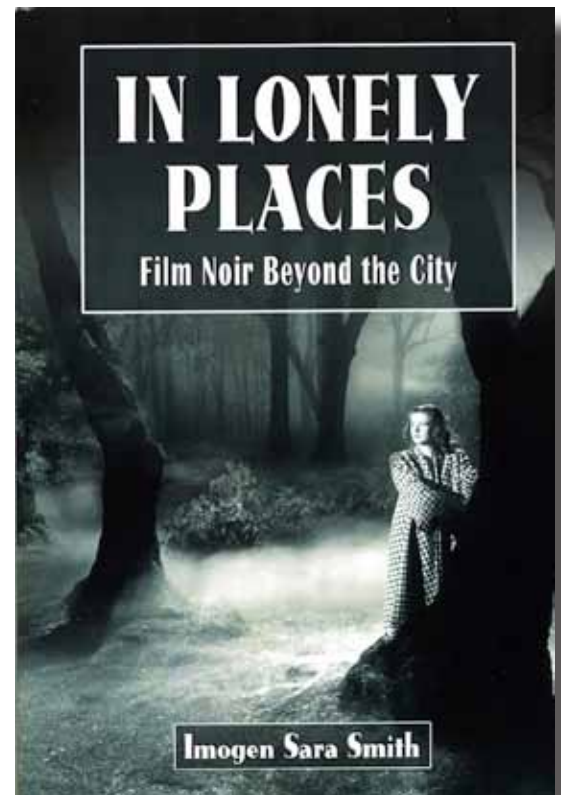
Dressed in a trench coat and fedora, Jeff Bailey (Robert Mitchum) walks down a fog-shrouded San Francisco street. From Jacques Tourneur's *Out of the Past* (1947), it's the iconic image of film noir. Noir and the city, they're attached at the hip. Just ask *Noir City* founder Eddie Muller. As an adolescent, he scoured *TV Guide* for old movies with "City" in the title and hit pay dirt more often than not. There's *Cry of the City* (1948), *Naked City* (1948), *Night and the City* (1950) and *While the City Sleeps* (1956), to name a few. In the shadows of Dark City's high rises, that's where noir lives, right?

In her new book, *In Lonely Places: Film Noir Beyond the City*, Imogen Sara Smith is our guide to the heart of noir's less traveled outback. It's a well-organized, comprehensive work that presents over 100 films where the urban jungle is not the main event. As a *Noir City* contributor, Smith classes up the joint with her thoughtful and erudite essays. She applies the same level of skill to this groundbreaking study.

When we first encounter Mitchum's character, Smith reminds us, he's in the great outdoors, a milieu more Ansel Adams photograph than Edward Hopper painting. A rugged guy in a rugged setting, there's no indication that he belongs anywhere else. Here, riffing like a jazz fiend, Smith identifies him as both citified *flâneur* and freight-hopping vagabond, taking us on a dizzying road trip: "For Jeff Bailey in *Out of the Past*, places form and dissolve like perfect smoke-rings. He drifts through them like a sleeper through a series of fitful dreams: hotels and campsites, racetracks and bars, dark alleys and sun-blinded Mexican piazzas, plush apartments and simmering jazz clubs, a mansion at Lake Tahoe and a cabin off a dirt road in pine-dark woods. He comes to rest in the town of Bridgeport, California, a bleak cluster of white frame houses dwarfed by high, bare mountains. Its main street could be the backdrop for a western, except that the stranger blowing into town wears a black fe-

dora and drives a convertible."

Bailey's local Bridgeport girl, Ann (Virginia Huston), is without a conning bone in her body. Look up "femme fatale" and you'll find Jeff's partner in deceit, Kathie (Jane Greer), literally dressed to kill. Away from the city, would she be as decent and good as Ann? Smith argues no, that it isn't the city itself that corrupts. Dangerous ground can lie beneath your feet, anywhere. In an earlier draft that appeared in the *Bright Lights Film Journal*, she wrote: "But look outside the city: at the apple orchard in Jules Dassin's *Thieves' Highway*, the beach-side hamburger stand in Tay Garnett's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, the bleak snowbound country of Nicholas Ray's *On Dangerous Ground*. Desert ghost towns, tourist lodges in the mountains, fishing villages, New England hamlets, mansions in Beverly Hills have all been settings for films noirs. These movies



How ironic: The most iconic of films noir begins with ... a majestic landscape? Where's the city skyline?

weaken the argument of John Huston's *The Asphalt Jungle*: that the city itself is the corroding force, that if only men stayed on the farm where horses graze in green fields, they would never turn to crime."

Smith examines the historical context, how the great American cities were shaped by greed and declined into criminal breeding grounds. Even for the law-abiding, like the protagonist of King Vidor's proto-noir *The Crowd* (1928), there's a desperation to claw one's way out of the rat race, usually to no avail. A national malaise, we're told, came alongside postwar prosperity and seeped into classic film noir along with that desperate, pit-of-the-gut gnawing. The nation's rural past was sentimentalized into a Garden of Eden while the suburbs became the new utopia. That's until darkness falls, the power fails, and the lights go out.

In the chapter "Blind Highways: Noir on the Road," we encounter an assortment of grifters, drifters and *Gun Crazy*'s pistol pack-in' lovers on the run. The noir road movie plays to the longing for escape from the daily grind. The lure of the West, Smith tells us, is as old as the nation. Of the opening credit sequence of *Detour* (1945), she writes: "The highway—Route 66—running through flat, scrubby desert dotted with prickly pears, is shot from the back of a moving car: it's not the point of view of someone driving, but of someone passively riding, and watching if he's being followed . . ." The road isn't kind to female characters. Ann Savage in *Detour*, thumbing her way to oblivion, Jan Sterling in *Ace in the Hole*, trying to wash that man and the Albuquerque dust right out of her "bottle-blond" hair, and Lana Turner in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* who, to paraphrase Smith, looks more Saks model than hash-slinger, all wait for salvation at the end of the trail.

Noir cognoscenti may be tempted to skim through the recaps of familiar films. Witnessing the travails of Al and Vera, *Detour*'s "born in the same gutter" twins, was bad enough the first time. Who'd want to live through that again? More careful readers will be rewarded with Smith's engaging prose and tidbits gleaned from her painstaking research.

With a wealth of black-and-white photos, *In Lonely Places: Film Noir Beyond the City* is a cinematic treasure map ranging from off-the-beaten-track locales to those very close to home. The front cover is a gorgeous, tinted publicity still of Joan Bennett as

Celia Lamphere in *Secret Beyond the Door* (1948). Celia, who believes that her husband is trying to kill her, is lost in a misty forest, panic setting in. Maybe, the nightmare is only a dream: maybe not. One thing's for certain—she's alone, terribly alone. And as Smith's book reveals, sometimes the darkest, most lonely places are waiting there in the imagination.

—Dan Akira Nishimura



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