BOOK vs FILM

Jake Hinkson

In her time, few mystery writers were as respected as Elisabeth Sanxay Holding. Raymond Chandler called her "the top suspense writer of them all," and critic Christopher Morley said her books were perfect for the "few like myself who find the purest refreshment in hallucinations and horrors, in damnation, dipsomania, and dismay." Morley's description nicely sums up your average fan of noir, yet today Holding is less well known than her contemporaries like Chandler or Dorothy B. Hughes.

The one Holding novel that every fan of noir must read is her 1947 masterpiece *The Blank Wall*. The book tells the story of Lucia Holley, a married mother of two who is raising her children alone while her husband is serving in the Pacific. Slipping away from her kids one day, Lucia drives the family station wagon to a cheap hotel in midtown Manhattan to see a man named Ted Darby, a sleazy charmer who's been seeing Lucia's teenaged daughter, Bee. Lucia wants Darby to stay away from her underage daughter, but when she confronts him, he tries to shake her down for a payoff. Later that night, he sneaks up to the Holley's lakefront home for a clandestine meeting with Bee.

The Blank Wall takes a dark turn when Lucia discovers Darby's dead body on the beach near her house the next morning. Lucia drops the corpse in the lake, unsure exactly what has transpired, but suspecting that Bee has murdered Darby. Soon, however, the body is discovered and the police begin a murder investigation that begins to point toward Bee. Things get worse with the arrival of a nervous hood named Donnelly who has some love letters written by Bee to Darby. He wants cash, he says, or he'll send the letters to the police.

The story of a woman desperately trying to hold her life together and protect her child from an ever-rising tide of danger, *The Blank Wall* demonstrates Holding's great gift as a writer, a precise emphasis on the inner life of her characters (she wrote "psychological noir" before that was a thing). Lucia Holley doesn't stop being Lucia Holley after the dead body shows up, she must still manage her public self:

No matter what happened to her, no matter how she felt, her first thought must always be how to face the world. Her little world, her children, her father.

She must still raise her children, run her house, and care for her aging father—all the

Elisabeth Sanxay Holding (pictured with her daughters) pioneered the "domestic noir"

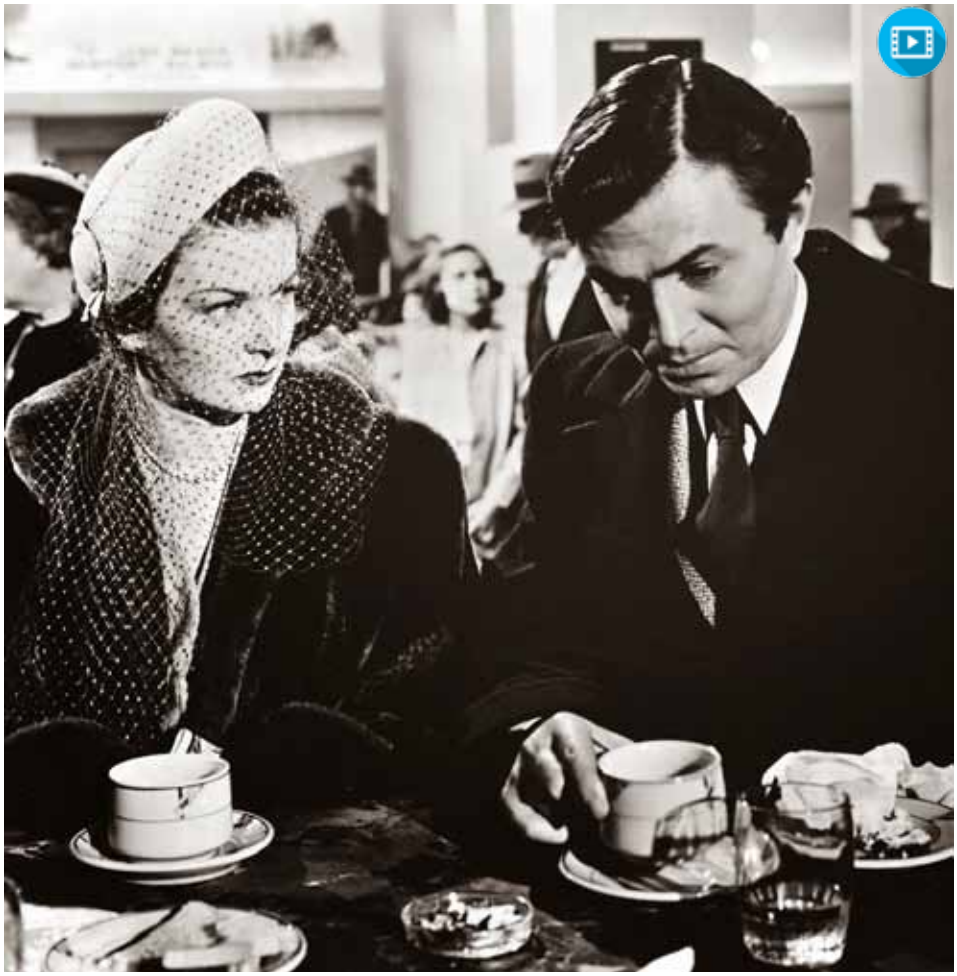
while trying to negotiate with blackmailers and avoid being caught by the cops who are investigating the Darby murder. The book dramatizes a favorite Holding theme: the crushing weight of familial obligation on women, with her characters trapped by family life, surrounded by the people they love yet alienated at the same time.

The Reckless Moment (1949)

In 1949, director Max Ophüls adapted *The Blank Wall* as *The Reckless Moment*, working from a script by Henry Garson and Robert Soderberg, first time screenwriters who had been writing for the CBS radio comedy *Junior Miss*. The real movers behind the project were star Joan Bennett and her husband, producer Walter Wanger, looking for a showcase for Bennett that was a break from her *femme fatale* image. Wanger had pitched the story of *The Blank Wall* to Warner Bros. as "*Mrs. Miniver* meets *Brief Encounter*," but Jack Warner had passed and the project wound up at Columbia. As Wanger assembled the production (including the addition of Burnett Guffey as cinematographer), Ophüls took screenwriters Garson and Soderberg under his wing showing them his previous films—the dark romance *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948) and the pitch-black noir *Caught* (1949). Together, they crafted a faithful adaptation of *The Blank Wall*, but one that also allowed Ophüls to explore the depths that Holding created.

The movie transports the action west, to Balboa, a quiet coastal town in California about fifty miles from Los Angeles. Ophüls and his screenwriters open up the narrative perspective. Whereas the novel stays in close on Lucia Holley (now Lucia Harper), the film lets us see the incident that leads to Darby's death. After Lucia and Darby meet at the cheap hotel, Darby calls Bea (changed from Bee) before Lucia can reach her and sets the girl against her mother. That night, he sneaks up to the Harper's waterside home for an assignation with Bea in the boathouse. Bea's no fool though, and soon enough she sees through Darby's manipulation. A struggle follows, and in a complicated sequence of events, Darby ends up dying without Bea realizing what has happened. She runs back to the house, swears to her mother that she's through with Darby, and goes to bed. Early the next morning, Lucia goes for a walk down on the shore and finds Darby's dead body.

The Reckless Moment adds emphasis to Lucia's relationship with the nervous blackmailer Martin Donnelly (played by James Mason), who has love letters written by Bea to Darby. He wants $5,000 (a heady sum in 1949) or the letters will go to the police. Donnelly is not a particularly good blackmailer—he's clearly charmed by Lucia, maybe even oddly protective of her—but he's working for a shadowy character named Nagel (Roy Roberts), and, unfortunately, Nagel *is* a good blackmailer. He's not



Producer Walter Wanger and star Joan Bennett envisioned *The Blank Wall* as "*Mrs. Miniver* meets *Brief Encounter*"

James Mason's morally conflicted blackmailer decides to part ways with partner Roy Roberts in *The Reckless Moment*

Joan Bennett, playing against her *femme fatale* image, gives one of her greatest performances as Lucia Harper in *The Reckless Moment*

In the showdown between Holding and the filmmakers who adapted her novel, everyone is a winner.

charmed at all by Mrs. Harper.

The Reckless Moment shows Ophüls, known for both his exquisite camera technique and for his sensitive treatment of female protagonists, in full command of his powers as a Hollywood filmmaker. His tracking shots, which are more like tracking glides, were simply the best in the business. Many directors move the camera; Ophüls's camera *floats*. If one only knows his lushly romantic pictures like *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948) or his European triumphs like *La Ronde* (1950), one might well wonder if his style could work in noir. That it works superbly is not so much a testament to how much Ophüls adapted to the material, as it is proof of how evocative and fraught with tension his style is to begin with. One look at the opening scenes—the way Lucia's meeting with Darby unfolds in graceful sweeping shots that create, in mere seconds, Darby's *demimonde* in that sleazebag hotel—and know in an instant that this is an Ophüls movie.

With this film, the director delivered another of his great "women's pictures." Holding's novel is a rich, dark story, and Ophüls seized on it as a way to tell the story of female entrapment in the postwar years.

As in Holding's novel, Lucia Harper is boxed in by her family—her daughter, her son, her father-in-law, and even the mysteriously distant husband, Mr. Harper, at work overseas "building a bridge" in postwar Europe. She loves her family (and they clearly love her), but that love only makes the weight of her commitments to them all the heavier. In fact, Lucia's chief difficulty in navigating the blackmail scheme is that her family is always watching her. She keeps stealing away to the city. Strange men keep showing up at the house. Questions arise about money. Exasperated

at one point, Lucia tells Donnelly, "You don't know how a family can surround you sometimes."

"You never get away from your family, do you?" he replies.

Staring out the window, she quietly answers, "No."As Lucia, Joan Bennett gives a stunning performance, all the more surprising if a viewer only knows her as the sexy bad girl from *The Woman in the Window* (1944) and *Scarlet Street* (1945). To see her trapped in Lucia Harper's world of tortured middle-aged motherhood and bourgeoisie asphyxiation might be a shock, but it's a bigger shock how well she pulls it off. She sinks into this role, portraying Lucia as a frantic, unhappy, but ultimately resourceful woman. Wanger intended the film as a showcase for her acting chops, and it is one hell of a showcase.

Margaret Hall (Tilda Swinton) discovers the body of Darby Reese (Josh Lucas) in 2001's *The Deep End*

The Deep End (2001)

Lucia Holley is such a great role for an actress, perhaps it was inevitable that she would return to the screen. In 2001, Scott McGehee and David Siegel adapted *The Blank Wall* as *The Deep End*. Their impressive remake stays remarkably close to the original, with the significant exception of changing the focus of the mother's worries and fears from her daughter to her son.

Tilda Swinton (in the role that brought her to a wide American audience) stars as Margaret Hall, a mother of three, caring for her children and aging father-in-law while her husband is serving on a ship "somewhere in the Pacific." As the film begins, her teenage son Beau (Jonathan Tucker) has been in a drunk driving car wreck, the result of a wild night with an older man named Darby Reese (Josh Lucas).

McGehee and Siegel have moved the action to Nevada, with Margaret rushing from her home in sunny Lake Tahoe to seedy Reno where Darby owns a nightclub called The Deep End. The filmmakers start the story in the same fashion as Holding and Ophüls, with the mother entering the city to warn the older man away from her child. It's a bracing first scene, with Margaret descending from the bathed-in-sunlight streets to the neon abyss of Darby's club.

The Deep End follows the same pattern as the book and previous film: Darby's accidental death, the mother's attempt to cover up the death by submerging the body in the lake, the sudden appearance of the soft-hearted blackmailer, and the inevitable confrontation with Nagel—the second, more vicious blackmailer. The weakest aspect of the film (and, it must be said, the weakest aspect of all three versions of the story) is the relationship between the mother and the blackmailer, here named Alek Spera and played by Goran Visnjic. Spera, even more than the previous incarnations of the blackmailer, never comes into focus as a character of his own, and, as a result, Margaret's sudden (the story unfolds over a few days) attachment to him feels forced. At the end, she is devastated by what happens to Spera after the violent showdown with Nagel, whereas the audience is thinking, "Well, that actually works out pretty good for you." Both film versions soften and sentimentalize the relationship with the blackmailer somewhat, whereas Holding ends the novel on a darker, bleaker note.

The big swerve in *The Deep End*, and in many ways the most interesting change that McGehee and Siegel bring to the material, is to have Margaret and Beau reconnect as mother and son at the end. Though the film is ostensibly about Beau's closeted homosexuality and the danger he faces as a gay teenager in 2001 (and, it is implied, some of that danger may come from his own absent father), mother and son never discuss these issues. Beau is as resentful of his mother's nurturing authority as Bee and Bea were, but his relationship with Darby is buried in an even deeper shame. It also helps that, by 2001, their relationship can be more explicitly sexual. Whereas the previous versions tiptoed around sex with talk of letters that linked the daughter to the dead man, Margaret is blackmailed with a videotape of her son having sex with Darby, a tape Darby shot himself, perhaps with blackmail in mind. By foregrounding these issues, McGehee and Siegel set up the end of the film, where Margaret and Beau reconcile, a scene that has no analog in the previous versions—making *The Deep End* the most redemptive incarnation of the story.

In the showdown between Elisabeth Sanxay Holding and the filmmakers who adapted her novel, everyone comes out a winner. Max Ophüls made one of the great feminist noirs of the classic era, a film that goes on the shortlist alongside works like *Mildred Pierce* (1945) and *Caged* (1950), while Scott McGehee and David Siegel took the 50-year-old material and turned it into one of the most original films of the neo-noir era. Of course, all of this reflects back on the strength of Holding's original masterpiece, perhaps the best domestic noir of the war years, a novel as resonant today as it was 70 years ago. ■