

THE GRIM “ENTERTAINMENTS” OF GRAHAM GREENE

Sharon Knolle

In the noir landscape, nestled between hard-boiled writers synonymous with the genre—Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain—are the works of literary giant Graham Greene, who parlayed his own experiences with the British Secret Service into novels that included *Our Man in Havana* and *The Quiet American*. The classic film noir films based on his work—*This Gun for Hire* (1942), *Ministry of Fear* (1944), *Brighton Rock* (1947) and *The Third Man* (1949)—all bear his particular brand of profound cynicism and moral conflict.

Made by four different directors, these films reached the screen with varying degrees of fidelity to their sources. Greene himself wrote the screenplay for *The Third Man* and cowrote *Brighton Rock*'s script with

dramatist Terence Rattigan (*Separate Tables*). Not surprisingly, Greene was happiest with those adaptations.

The world-weary way Greene ended most of his novels was typically considered too downbeat for moviegoers; the films based on his books have endings ranging from slightly less bleak to positively upbeat. The final shot of *The Third Man*—where after Harry Lime's funeral, Anna (Alida Valli) walks inexorably toward an increasingly optimistic Holly Martins (Joseph Cotten) ... and then right past him, without breaking stride—remains one of the most stinging bitter endings in film history.

Oddly, it was Greene who advocated for a finale in which Anna and Holly end up together. For once, Greene was the odd man out in desiring a happy ending.



Greene set *A Gun for Sale* in the British city of Nottingham, where a munitions magate hires an assassin to kill a British minister; the film version, starring Veronica Lake and Alan Ladd, moves the story to California, undermining the book's geopolitical relevance

THIS GUN FOR HIRE (1942)

As Greene writes in his 1980 autobiography, *Ways of Escape*, this 1936 novel was born out of a sense that patriotism—and his favorite John Buchan novel, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*—had lost their appeal. “It was no longer a Buchan world,” wrote Greene. “The hunted man of *This Gun for Hire*, which I now began to write, was Raven, not [Richard] Hannay: A man out to revenge himself for all the dirty tricks of life, not to save his country.” Transplanting the film to 1942 America changed things considerably: now patriotism was the point and Raven (Alan Ladd, in his breakout role) dies with a smile, having furthered America’s cause in the war as his last redemptive act. The novel’s harelipped assassin is transformed on-screen into the strikingly handsome Ladd, who now, instead of facial disfigurement, has a deformed wrist, the result of an abusive childhood.

“Raven the killer, seems to me now a first sketch for Pinkie in *Brighton Rock*,” Greene reflected in *Ways of Escape*. “He is a Pinkie who has aged but not grown up. ... They have something of a fallen angel about them, a morality which once belonged to another place.”

The screenplay for *This Gun for Hire* was cowritten by Albert Maltz (later one of the Hollywood Ten) and W. R. Bur-

nett, who wrote such classic crime novels as *High Sierra* and *The Asphalt Jungle*.

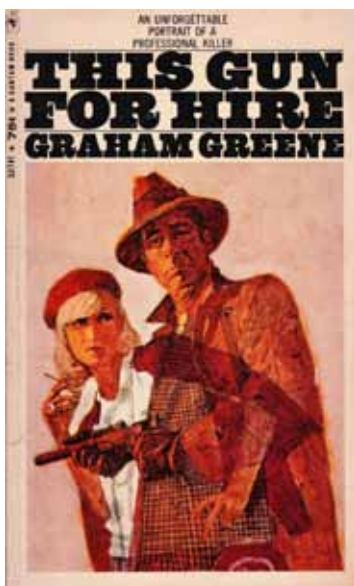
In a 1983 interview, Maltz, who earned his first screenwriting credit on this film, dismissed it as “a creaky melodrama” and “very contrived.” He recalled telling director Frank Tuttle, “Well, you can’t do a thing like that, it’s ridiculous,” and Tuttle responding, “We’ll find an answer.” Added Maltz: “Well, we did find answers, but they were very contrived.” Many of these contrivances are in the novel itself, however, with everyone involved—the hired gun, the damsel in distress, the Nazi schemer who betrays Raven, and the policeman on Raven’s trail—all constantly crossing paths. The novel was published the year after Alfred Hitchcock’s film of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* came out, a film Greene felt “ruined” the novel. In his side job as a film reviewer, he accused Hitchcock of an “inadequate sense of reality” and “‘amusing’ melodramatic situations”—some of the same faults one could argue hinder *This Gun for Hire*.

MINISTRY OF FEAR (1944)

Greene categorized his books as either “entertainments” or “novels.” Among his “entertainments” he considered his 1943 book *Ministry of Fear*, in which a man recently released from a mental institution for the mercy killing of his wife becomes embroiled in a Nazi plot, his favorite, although he wished “the espionage element had been less fantastically handled.”

Per Glenn Kenny’s Criterion DVD film notes, at a retrospective in 1984 “Greene counted *Ministry of Fear* as one of several ‘very bad’ adaptations. He told an anecdote where the film’s director, Fritz Lang, approached him at a bar years later and personally apologized for having made it.”

As Lang told Peter Bogdanovich in 1968, he hated the film, say-



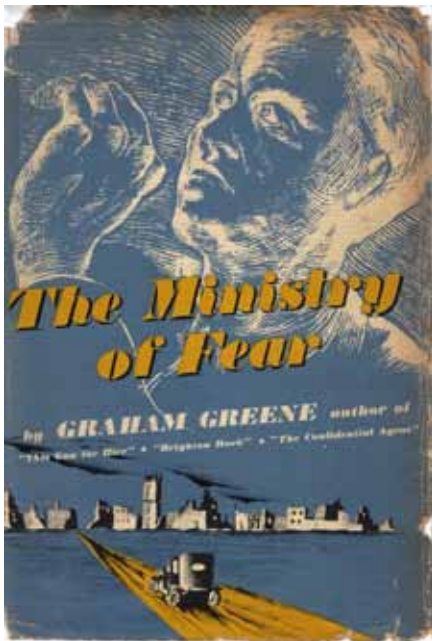


ing he was “terribly shocked” about what had been done with the script and that he had tried and failed to get out of his contract. “I saw it recently on television where it was cut to pieces, and I fell asleep,” the director related. Lang’s first biographer, Lotte Eisner, dismissed screenwriter Seton I. Miller, who won an Oscar for cowriting *Here Comes Mr. Jordan* (1941), as “a former saxophonist and bandsman.” But noir fans might consider him partially redeemed by 1950’s *The Man Who Cheated Himself*, which he cowrote with novelist Philip MacDonald. (He also shared an Oscar nomination for the 1930 screenplay of *The Criminal Code* and was a major contributor to the Warner’s bullpen in the 1930s.)

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Lang scholar Joe McElhaney notes (in an interview on the Criterion DVD) that Miller was also the producer of the film, one who was “reportedly not intimidated by Lang at all.” By some accounts, Miller was brought in by Paramount specifically to hold a tight rein on Lang in terms of time and budget.

The biggest omission in the screen adaptation is the novel’s amnesiac hero Arthur Rowe (changed to “Stephen Neale” in the film) discovering he’s in a mental hospital run by Nazis; this would have been rich material for the director of *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*. These were also Greene’s favorite scenes, but they never made it into the script. Still, Lang elevates the film with his visual style. An eerie



Although the film version takes liberties with Greene's novel that remove much of its noirness, Lang's visual elan provides for a fast-paced thriller in which the artifice of the art direction lends a stagebound surreality to the affair

séance where the medium reveals that Milland's guilt-ridden character killed his wife is on par with anything Lang ever shot, recalling the operatic sense of the sinister shown in his Dr. Mabuse films.

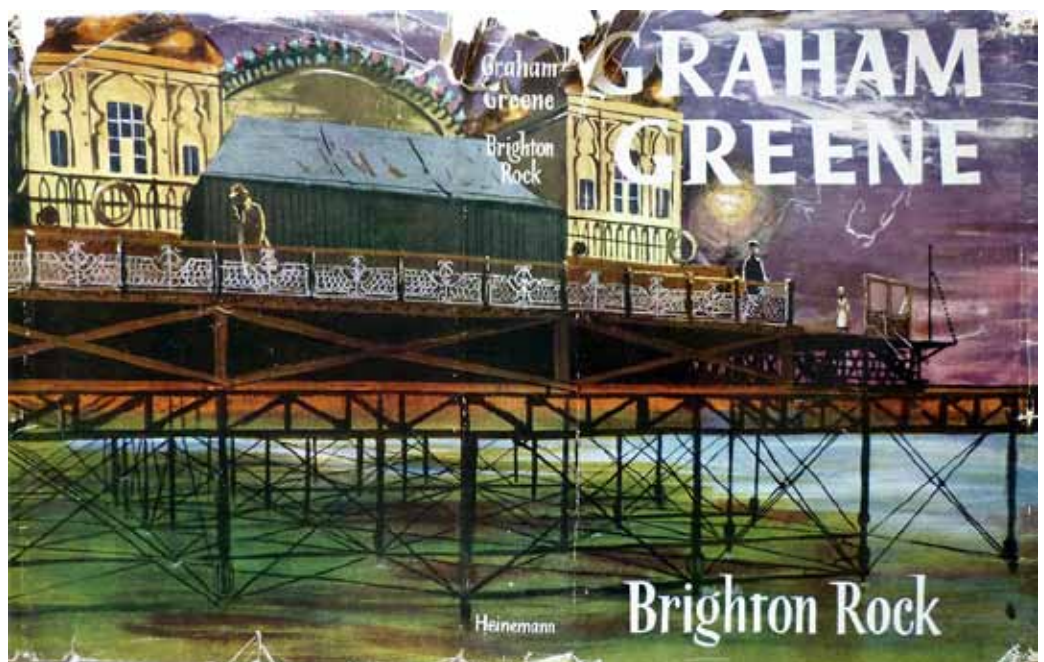
Near the finale, when Milland has tracked the Nazi spy ring to a tailor shop where villainous Dan Duryea works, Langs adds a macabre flourish. Duryea pretends not to recognize Milland, then makes a phone call and delivers a calm speech about his not being able to "repeat the trousers"—exactly as written in the book. Except that Lang has Duryea dial the phone with a ridiculously oversize pair of scissors—which he'll employ momentarily to commit suicide off-camera. Duryea's final line, "Personally, sir, I have no hope ... no hope at all," is one of the most faithful moments to Greene's book, and one that speaks for the entire story.

Other major omissions from the novel include the main character's oddly proud identification as a murderer. After he's nearly killed for the cake he's won at a county fair, he hires a detective, Mr. Rennit, to track the people responsible. It's a ridiculous story, but he's angered that Rennit fails to take him seriously. He demands, "In all your long career as a detective, have you never come across such a thing as murder—or a murderer?" Rennit responds, "Life isn't a detective story. Murderers are rare people to meet. They belong to a class of their own." Rowe then boldly states, "*Perhaps I ought to tell you that I am a murderer myself.*" He seems to take pride in the notoriety, saying, "That's what makes me so furious. That they should pick on me, *me*. They are such amateurs."

The novel's ending is also radically different: after Nazi spy Willi Hilfe

kills himself, Rowe, who's fallen in love with Willi's sister, Anna, is left wondering whether she is as innocent as she seems. In the film, Anna (renamed Carla and played by Marjorie Reynolds) shoots her own brother to save the man she loves. There's no question which side she's on. Cut to Milland and Reynolds driving happily by the seaside, discussing their upcoming wedding. She declares she wants a "big cake." "Cake?" yells a horrified Milland in the film's comedic final line.

Contrast this to the novel, where Rowe knows that by not questioning Anna further after her brother's death, he is "pledging both of them to a lifetime of lies... they had to tread carefully, never speak without thinking twice; they must watch each other like enemies because they loved each other so much. They would never know what it was not to be afraid of being found out."





Although 25-year-old Richard Attenborough wasn't exactly the callow youth of Greene's novel, his performance as devout Catholic crook Pinkie Brown was a revelation. His poignant relationship with Rose (Carol Marsh) is the tragic heart of the tale

BRIGHTON ROCK (1948)

Pinkie Brown, the vicious 17-year-old who takes over his small-time Brighton gang, is one of Greene's most memorable antagonists. He was played—to Greene's satisfaction—by Richard Attenborough in the 1948 film version, directed by John Boulting. A grimly religious Catholic in his own way, Pinkie strides through life with a purity of purpose that lends him an almost God-given right to his crimes.

The novel is not just told from Pinkie's perspective; but also from the viewpoint of newspaperman Fred Hale, whose murder sets the entire story in motion; Ida, the blowsy good-time girl who's determined to get to the bottom of Hale's death; and Rose, the naive waitress whom Pinkie must marry to secure her silence. Although his pursuit of Rose is purely mercenary, Pinkie sees in her the same purity that he believes sets him apart from the rest of the lowlifes. When he spots her rosary, he tells Rose, "These atheists don't know nothing. Of course it's real. Hell, damnation, flames, torments."

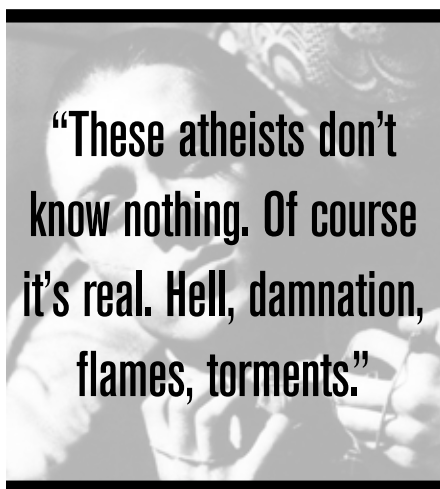
In the novel, Pinkie always carries a bottle of vitriol (acid) in his pocket, often caressing it as if anticipating the moment when he can use it next. On his first date with Rose, in which he tries to determine how easy she will be to intimidate, he mentions another woman whose looks were "spoiled" after she got "splashed" and reaches into his pocket briefly. But the vitriol, which actually speaks to him

little slut. You make me sick."

Pinkie nearly succeeds in convincing Rose to commit to a suicide pact—in which only she'll die—on the lonely Brighton pier. With the police on their trail, she panics and throws the gun into the ocean. As the police close in, a trapped Pinkie falls to his death over the railing.

To please the censors, the film ends with a ray of hope for Rose: as she listens to the record for the first time, it sticks on the phrase "I love you..." and keeps repeating.

The ever-cynical author later said, "Anybody who had any sense would know that next time Rose would probably push the needle over the scratch and get the full message."



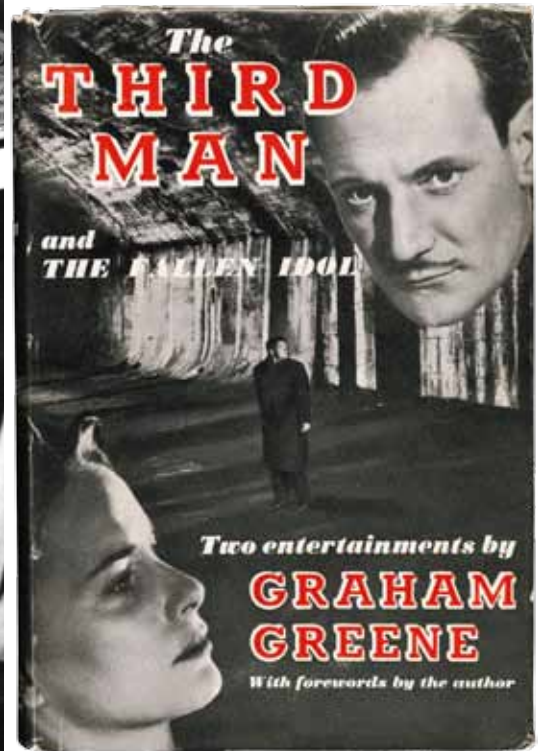
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THE THIRD MAN (1949)

As a reviewer, Greene had trashed Alexander Korda's work just as thoroughly as he'd trashed Hitchcock's. Despite that, the two got along like a house on fire once they met. After the success of their collaboration with Carol Reed on *The Fallen Idol* (1948), Korda asked Greene if he had a thriller up his sleeve.

Greene had something he'd penned on the back of an envelope—the opening lines of what would become *The Third Man*.

It was Korda's idea to set the film in the Four-Power Allied occupation of Vienna. "So to Vienna I went," Greene wrote, to soak up the necessary atmosphere. He didn't intend *The Third Man* to be a book, merely "the raw material for a picture," one he had to flesh out by actually getting to know the postwar city.



Greene never intended for the *The Third Man* to be a novel, only grist for a film. Although he'd eventually adapt it to literary form, he conceded the film was much better; Orson Welles, not Greene, wrote the famed "cuckoo clock" scene on the ferris wheel, one of the film's high points

It would have been a completely different film if David O. Selznick had had his say. According to Greene, on his and Reed's first meeting with Selznick the legendary producer said, "I don't like the title. Listen, boys, who the hell is going to see a film called *The Third Man*? ... What we want is something like *A Night in Vienna*, a title which will bring them in."

Reed stopped Selznick there by saying, "Graham and I will think about it." Greene would hear that sentence repeated frequently, because as he explained "the Korda contract had omitted to state that the director was under any obligation to accept Selznick's advice. Reed, during the days that followed, like an admirable stonewaller, blocked every ball." Among the changes Greene agreed to, however, was renaming Joseph Cotten's naive writer. Cotten objected to the name "Rollo," which is what Holly Martins is called in the novel. "To this American ear [it], apparently involved homosexuality," Greene noted.

For a novelist who embraced the bleakest side of humanity, it's surprising that Greene favored a happier ending than did Korda and Reed: "I held the view that an entertainment of this kind was too light an affair to carry the weight of an unhappy ending." The original ending, in which Martins joins Anna in silence and they walk off together, Korda regarded as "unpleasantly cynical," coming right after Harry's second (and this time real) funeral.

Greene was sure no one would sit through the long take of Anna walking toward and past Martins, but he admitted, "I had not given enough credit to the mastery of Reed's direction." After viewing the completed film, he added that the choice "proved triumphantly right." In a 1972 interview, Reed noted that Selznick also objected to the bleak ending, saying "Jesus, couldn't we make a shot where the girl gets together with the fella?" As Reed told the interviewer, "The whole point with the Valli character is that she'd experienced a fatal

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However, according to Charles Drazin's 2007 Criterion article "Behind the Third Man," Reed's notes indicated that Selznick argued against the "happy ending" of Greene's story, in which Martins and Anna unite after Martins kills Harry: "Selznick felt this very strongly, that Anna's love for Harry should be fatal, especially since it seems impossible for her to be with Rollo immediately after the shooting of her lover."

In his memoir, Greene charitably acknowledged that Reed's film is better than his novel: "The reader will notice many differences between the story and the film, and he should not imagine these changes were forced on an unwilling author: the film in fact is better than the story because it is in this case the finished state of the story." ■