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Nightmare Alley

Mark Osteen

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Desperate young lovers on the lam (*They Live by Night*), a cynical con man making a fortune as a mentalist (*Nightmare Alley*), a penniless pregnant girl mistaken for a wealthy heiress (*No Man of Her Own*), a wounded veteran who has forgotten his own name (*Somewhere in the Night*)—this gallery of film noir characters challenges the stereotypes of the wise-cracking detective and the alluring femme fatale. Despite their differences, they all have something in common: a belief in self-reinvention. *Nightmare Alley* is a thorough examination of how film noir disputes this notion at the heart of the American Dream.

Central to many of these films, Mark Osteen argues, is the story of an individual trying, by dint of hard work and perseverance, to overcome his origins and achieve material success. In the wake of World War II, the noir genre tested the dream of upward mobility and the ideas of individualism, liberty, equality, and free enterprise that accompany it.

Employing an impressive array of theoretical perspectives (including psychoanalysis, art history, feminism, and music theory) and combining close reading with original primary source research, *Nightmare Alley* proves both the diversity of classic noir and its potency. This provocative and wide-ranging study revises and refreshes our understanding of noir's characters, themes, and cultural significance.

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