Leigh Brackett is best remembered as a science fiction writer and Hollywood screenwriter: she contributed regularly to golden-age science-fiction pulps and later to the paperback houses, and she worked on the scripts of many famous films, including The Big Sleep, Rio Bravo, The Long Goodbye, and The Empire Strikes Back. Less commonly known is that she also wrote original crime fiction. In the 1940s, she published a series of short stories in crime pulps such as New Detective Magazine, Thrilling Detective, and Flynn’s Detective Fiction, and her first novel—No Good from a Corpse (1944)—was a detective story. She published several more crime stories (including two novels) in the following decade, and crime and detection plots frequently appeared in her science-fiction writing. She was influenced by the hard-boiled school of crime writing, and her own crime fiction is oftenimplicitly appraised in terms of its fidelity to the hard-boiled model. For example, it is sometimes noted that her crime writing “stands up to anything her male contemporaries dreamed up” (Hamilton 13), while it is at other times noted that she never “cracked Black Mask” (Smith). This approach to Brackett’s crime fiction may ultimately be limiting. While Brackett greatly admired hard-boiled crime writers such as Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and James M. Cain (Carr 39, Briney 259), her own crime fiction is not bound by this influence. Certain recurring features of her stories deviate from hard-boiled conventions and suggest narrative priorities different from those of her predecessors.

The hard-boiled influence is perhaps most evident in Brackett’s 1944 detective novel No Good from a Corpse, whose protagonist, Edmond Clive, is a tough, hard-drinking private eye in a rainy Los Angeles brimming with violence and corruption. “Don’t trust anything,” he coolly advises a young admirer. His investigations lead him into dangerous, atmospherically-drawn confrontations:

The bullet hit the rotten step and kept going. The gun fell out of Beauvais’s hand almost onto the hole. The mist snared the noise of the shot, wrapped it up, and threw it away far out in the empty night. Clive kicked the gun off toward the canal and dropped back down the stairs. ‘Hold it,’ he said. ‘Just take it easy’ (131).

Shortly after its original publication, No Good from a Corpse famously found its way into the hands of director Howard Hawks, and Hawks hired Brackett to work with William Faulkner on the screenplay for the 1946 film adaption of Raymond Chandler’s The Big Sleep. Hawks is said to have been surprised upon learning that “Mr. Brackett” was a woman (Macklin 220), but Brackett proved herself to be a highly adept crafter of the kind of “tough” story that had risen to popularity first in the pulp magazines and then in popular cinema. On the basis of such writing, Brackett has frequently been anthologized as one of the hard-boiled genre’s earliest female practitioners.
John Cawelti’s 1976 study of “formula stories” remains one of the most ambitious attempts to identify and describe common patterns that structure diverse categories of popular fiction, including the hard-boiled detective story. Cawelti organizes a wide variety of detective heroes into the category of “hard-boiled” partly on the basis of certain recurring character traits and plot elements, among them the detective’s wise-cracking style, his personal commitment to the pursuit of justice, and the physical hazards of his investigation. Cawelti identifies the latter as one of the hard-boiled detective’s most significant differences from his classical counterpart, but he also notes that the hard-boiled detective does not sustain the kind of wounds that might “spoil his function as a fantasy hero” (161).

The nature of the hard-boiled detective’s appeal was well understood by the writers themselves. Dashiel Hammett, in his introduction to the 1934 Modern Library edition of The Maltese Falcon, described Sam Spade as a “‘dream man [...] able to take care of himself in any situation, able to get the best of anybody he comes in contact with’” (105), and Chandler drew his own hard-boiled detective as a kind of urban knight errant, a “man of honor,” but one who will take “no man’s insolence without a due and dispassionate revenge” (18).

Tony Hilfer comments on this basic invulnerability of the hard-boiled detective in his 1990 study, The Crime Novel: A Deviant Genre, in which he identifies hard-boiled traits—“an ‘alienated posture,’ emotional detachment, ‘sardonic knowingness’”—as markers of individual “control” (8-9). The appalling physical abuse to which the hard-boiled detective is sometimes subjected actually serves to underscore this control, to demonstrate that the detective “can take it” (33). Even when plunged into a world of violence, he exhibits a large degree of insulation from terror, hope, agony, and sorrow.

Brackett was a great admirer of Chandler and Hammett, adopting the hard-boiled mode in much of her writing, and populating her stories with jaded tough-guy investigators, but her protagonists do not exhibit the same degree of psychological insulation as their predecessors, and the violence to which they are subjected is of such greater frequency and severity as to be different in kind. For example, the protagonist in Brackett’s 1944 story, “I Feel Bad Killing You” is an ex-police detective investigating his own brother’s murder, and his investigation is greatly impeded by his paralyzing fear of fire. This fear dates back to an episode in which he was tortured by gangsters—the same gangsters who now mockingly threaten him with matches, causing him to tremble and scream. He ultimately prevails, but he spends a good part of the story terror-stricken, physically bound, or unconscious. In Brackett’s 1957, “So Pale, So Cold, So Fair,” the protagonist, an investigative journalist, has developed the nervous compulsive habit of fingering the scars on his face—scars resulting from a brutal beating at the hands of racketeers who objected to his reporting.

To the extent that these stories do not succeed with readers, it may be that they set up expectations with their hard-boiled investigators that are then disappointed when these protagonists are, in spite of ultimate success, depicted in past or present states of physical and psychological incapacitation. Thus an Amazon.com reviewer of a 1999 collection of Brackett’s crime fiction begins by identifying himself as an enthusiast of early hard-boiled crime fiction, and of Chandler especially, but complains that “Brackett’s heroes [...] seem never to be in control of a situation in the way Marlowe or Spade or the Continental Op or even Hammer were” (Doghouse King “eddie_denman”).

Across her fiction, Brackett seems to have delighted in hurting her tough-guy heroes into fantastically horrible situations—situations that strip away insulating defenses. Her science fiction, especially, afforded her with a wide variety of means by which to ratchet up the awfulness of the torments her tough protagonists might endure. In her 1953 novel, The Big Jump, a Bogartesque protagonist investigating his childhood friend’s disappearance during a space mission is confronted with radioactive forces that sap men’s minds and souls. In The Sword of Rhiannon, an archaeologist-turned-mercenary, while treasure hunting on Mars, falls through a hole in the space-time continuum and into the Martian past, where he is compelled into hard labor on an early Martian slave ship, and later has his body taken over by an ancient god. In “Beast Jewel of Mars,” deep-space pilot Burk Winters is reverted to an earlier evolutionary stage, forced (albeit temporarily) to pursue his investigation of his girlfriend’s disappearance with an ape-like consciousness.

In a 1944 essay for Writer’s Digest, Brackett identified as an important source of character vitality, the confrontation with “the realities of pain and hunger and fear.” Her topic was science fiction writing, but she could just as easily have been describing her crime fiction when she characterized her own stories’ heroes as “hard” but “not invincible” (25). Brackett’s primary commitment was to entertaining storytelling rather than to psychological realism; however, in service of the goal of writing engaging stories, she championed the drawing of characters as “genuine three-dimensional men and women” (25).

It is precisely this quality that some found to be lacking in the screen version of The Big Sleep that Brackett co-scripted with William Faulkner. This film became the occasion for a 1947 review essay by John Houseman, titled “Today’s Hero,” in which he expressed dislike for and impatience with the era’s “tough” heroes and the absence from the “tough” movie of “personal drama,” and therefore of “personal solution or catharsis” (163). For Houseman, there was something “repugnant” (and revealing of problems in the broader culture) about the fatalistic detachment that served as the tough hero’s source of cool self-possession.

Whether or not Brackett shared this view, it’s worth noting that she saw her screenwriting as a kind of “journeyman” labor quite distinct from her original fiction writing (“Leigh Brackett: Journeyman Plumber” 26). She populated her own crime stories with protagonists who ardently hope, hate, love, and fear. Often introduced as standard-issue tough-guy protagonists, they reveal themselves to possess traits—frailties, personal demons, etc.—that rupture their...
veneer of cool and propel character transformation. Clive Edmond of No Good from a Corpse struggles to make his peace with past personal betrayals. The protagonists of “I Feel Bad Killing You,” “So Pale, So Cold, So Fair,” and Stranger at Home must overcome the psychological damage of past violent victimization in order to successfully pursue their investigations.

Years later, in praising Robert E. Howard’s fantasy novel Sword Woman, Brackett notes Howard’s “blow-by-blow” account of the protagonist’s character development, contrasting Howard’s Agnes with Catherine L. Moore’s Jirel of Joiry, in which “we never really know why or how she came to be a sword woman” (6). Brackett does not present this as a critique of Moore, but her comments do suggest that she found the distinction meaningful. It certainly seems to have informed her own writing, in which she endowed even her most thinly drawn heroes with back stories. For example, in her 1943 story “The Halfling,” murders in an interplanetary carnival are investigated by a fairly standard wise-cracking and self-interested protagonist, but Brackett opens the story with him reflecting on his boyhood pleasures and dreams, now lost. Similarly, the Chandleresque detective hero of No Good from a Corpse has his toughness perforated by elegiacal interludes in which we learn about him before the onset of cynicism, as an innocent “boy in overalls who had not seen anything yet but the brightness and the cleanness and the soaring gulls” (128).

[see next page: Errata-last paragraphs of article]

Works Cited
The Crime Fiction of Leigh Brackett

In the crime novels Brackett published in the 1950s, she dispensed with hard-boiled protagonists and built her stories around ordinary mid-century family men thrown into extraordinary—and extraordinarily violent—circumstances. In *The Tiger Among Us*, a man is beaten by teenage hoodlums and becomes obsessed with revenge, and with overcoming the fear and anger the attack has instilled in him. In *An Eye for an Eye* (also 1957), an attorney is compelled into the role of investigator when his wife is kidnapped by a psychopath.

These later crime novels have fallen into obscurity, unlike *No Good from a Corpse* and several of Brackett’s other hard-boiled stories, which periodically find their way back into print. The greater interest in the earlier stories probably has partly to do with the enduring popularity of the hard-boiled style, although it is also the case that Brackett’s later novels are weighted by a kind of psychoanalytic exposition that has fallen out of popular favor.

But these later novels nevertheless problematize a common understanding of Brackett as having dabbled in crime fiction without mastering the conventions that produce fully satisfying instances of the genre. The choices she made in her detective fiction, rather than revealing an incomplete control of the genre, appear within the context of her other work to have been quite deliberate. Her stories—western, crime, or sci-fi—do not allow the kind of comfortable hero-identification that has helped sustain the popularity of the hard-boiled writers that initially inspired her. In place of vicarious power and certainty, Brackett offers readers protagonists that, in spite of strength, cynicism, and cunning, are not immune to the conditions of helplessness, terror, and wonder.

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