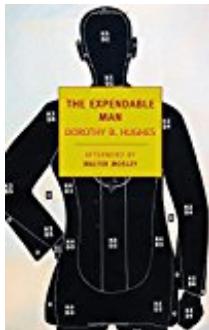


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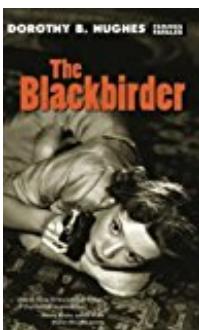
The Sultana of Subversion: Three Hard-Boiled Novels by Dorothy B. Hughes



The serial killer Dix Steele in Dorothy B. Hughes's 1947 noir classic *In a Lonely Place* professes to his friend Brub Nicolai, an LAPD detective assigned to the "strangler" case, to be writing a detective novel. Brub responds: "Who you stealing from, Chandler or Hammett or Gardner?"



Hughes herself stole brilliantly from her fellow pulp writers, added her inimitable twist, and became the "Queen of Noir," the "Mistress of Dark Suspense." She, in turn, was stolen from by the likes of Jim Thomson, Patricia Highsmith, Ruth Rendell, and Sara Paretsky. She wrote thirteen novels, of which three were adapted to film, most famously Nicholas Ray's *In a Lonely Place* starring Humphrey Bogart and Gloria Grahame. An award-winning poet and critic, Hughes worked for a time in Hollywood, including a stint on Hitchcock's *Spellbound*. Her influences ranged beyond the masters of the genre to Dostoevsky, T.S. Eliot, Faulkner, and Shakespeare, but also to more obscure authors such as Anne Petry and Nella Larsen. For Hughes, any encounter with another writer's work contributed to the shaping of her own, reading itself being the supreme influence.



The above exchange between her characters Dix and Brub is, of course, self-referential, but the inward nod is particularly Hughesian because she's identifying with her murderous protagonist and because Dix's novel doesn't exist. His imaginary opus is a ploy to pump Brub for information. Yet the novel we're reading is a detective novel narrated from Dix's point of view. Whose novel is it? In exquisitely noir fashion, Hughes's fiction and Dix's fiction become darkly entangled, and readers are compelled to question subjective reality. As a writer, Hughes is dead set -- stylistically, thematically, narratively -- on destabilizing our expectations and preconceptions as readers, as human beings. She is the Sultana of Subversion.

As will happen with women writers, Hughes's books fell out of print, nearly forgotten until 2004 when The Feminist Press launched the fabulous new series Femmes Fatales: Women Write Pulp, including informative essays by literary scholars. Two of Hughes's novels *The Blackbird* (1943) and *In a Lonely Place* were the lead titles. This month, New York Review

Books is publishing Hughes' last novel, *The Expendable Man* (1963), with an afterword by Walter Mosley. Whether Hughes's name will ever be said in the same breath as Chandler and Hammett remains to be seen, but her revival is significant, not least because her books, from within a masculine, often misogynist literary genre, offer an alternative vision that might be described as feminist. (Hughes, who rejected classification, hated the term.) Her books not only refuse to cater to the "male gaze" so prevalent in popular culture, they include a critique of that gaze using the tools and tropes of popular fiction to expand our ways of seeing.

In these novels, Hughes nimbly and assiduously undermines authority -- authorial, cultural, political -- through her manipulation of a close third person point of view. Each of her chief protagonists, a young woman fleeing Nazis and the FBI in *The Blackbirders*, a psychopathic WWII veteran whose obsessive love-hate relationship with women finds relief in strangling them to death in *In a Lonely Place*, and an upstanding young medical intern falsely accused of having given an abortion to a girl subsequently found dead in *The Expendable Man*, are characters in heightened states of paranoia. Paranoia -- terrifying, exhilarating, revelatory, unreliable -- is an emotional state we all relate to. Who's a friend, who's an enemy? Who's on the inside, who's on the outside? From within the paranoid's perspective, we are driven to reconsider what are "normal" and acceptable behaviors.

The Blackbirders, written during World War II, centers on twenty-two-year-old refugee from occupied France, Julie Guille, who has entered the U.S. illegally via Cuba. At Carnegie Hall, Julie runs into a friend from Paris who is then shot on Julie's doorstep. Convinced she will be next, that the murderers are possibly Nazis or FBI, Julie flees the same night for Santa Fe in search of the mysterious Blackbirder, a human smuggler, who will get her out of the country. The plot twists are as dizzying as Julie's suspicion of everyone and everything, but Julie is saved by her own ingenuity, bravery, mental acuity, and belief in herself. She fights for her freedom and against the world's evil.

If *The Blackbirders* celebrates female courage during wartime, *In A Lonely Place* is representative of postwar retribution against women for having abandoned accepted gender roles and for not reassuming them fast or firmly enough. Dix Steele hates women. After reading about the "stupid life" of one of his victims in the newspaper, he thinks "the only exciting thing that had ever happened to her was to be raped and murdered." Though Dix's thoughts are brutal, Hughes does not depict any of the actual murders, as if refusing that easy road of titillating her readers with sexual violence. Nor are the murdered girls blamed for their victimhood (they didn't "ask for it"). The absence of these cultural clichés in Hughes's story serves to highlight their prevalence in our society. Furthermore, by sticking to Dix's perspective, Hughes reveals a depraved killer who passes as a normal guy both to the outside world and to himself. She implies a subtle line between domestic violence and murder: during a violent scene with Dix, his new flame Laurel Grey realizes he might seriously harm her. Ultimately, it is two women, Laurel and Sylvia, Brub's wife, who set a trap for Dix so that the police can catch him. The war's disruption of gender roles may have released a morbid male anger toward women, Hughes's novel suggests, but women will not cower in fear, they will continue to struggle against evil whether the world is at war or at "peace."

Hughes's *The Expendable Man* is a groundbreaking tour de force. From the first line, "Across the tracks there was a different world," the narrative is tense and taut. A young doctor, Hugh Densmore, is driving his mother's Cadillac across the desert from LA to Phoenix when, against his better judgment, he picks up a hitchhiker, a scruffy, redneck girl, and soon regrets it. She's in trouble and he's a doctor; she dogs him for his help; he refuses. When she winds up dead, he fears his own life has all but ended. His overblown anxiety feels real until, about fifty pages into the story, Hughes nonchalantly throws in one of her signature twists with the ripple effect of a deep sea earthquake, forcing us to question everything we've read so far and to scrutinize every word that follows. Hughes's novels, while thrilling us, make us question the power structures upon which our society is so tenaciously, yet perilously, built.

After *The Expendable Man*, Hughes never wrote another novel, though she continued to write book reviews and published [a biography of Erle Stanley Gardner](#) (1978). Writing a novel required tremendous concentration, which she decided to devote to her ailing mother and her grandchildren -- surely a complicated, courageous choice worthy of her characters.

When Dix and Brub discuss Jack the Ripper, Dix suggests the renowned killer was never caught because he stopped killing when "he'd had enough." Brub says this is impossible, explaining: "A murderer is a murderer as... as an actor is an actor. He can stop acting professionally but he's still an actor. He acts. Or an artist. If he never picks up another brush, he will still see and think and react like an artist."