

Triple Nightmare

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As you've probably figured out, movies rank high among my longtime passions. In the 1970s, when I was in junior high and high school, there were just seven television channels to choose from: the Big Three networks, PBS, and three local networks, nearly all of which ran pretty much nothing but old movies in the after-school hours. My sister and I would come home from school--early latchkey kids, we--and curl up in front of [The 4 O'Clock Movie](#) or [The 4:30 Movie](#) or [Million Dollar Movie](#). We would watch raptly, clutching sofa pillows during the more intense moments of films like the 1931 *Dracula* or 1944's *The Uninvited*. One film that passed our pillow-clutch test with flying colors was one we didn't see again on air for a very long time: the 1947 film noir [Nightmare Alley](#).

As a kid, all I knew was that it was a creepy, eerie film starring handsome Tyrone Power. I didn't know that it had been a novel, nor that the novelist's eventful life made Power's character's adventures seem tame. And that novel had not yet been made into a moody, faithful comics adaptation by the great [Spain Rodriguez](#).

But now I know these things, and the existence of the same story in three media is as interesting to me as the story itself. The questions of adaptation, interpretation, and inter-medium translation that these three versions present are, I believe, worthy of study.

William Lindsay Gresham, who published his mystical carny novel [Nightmare Alley](#) in 1946, lived the kind of life destined to make great blurb copy. He was a folksinger in Greenwich Village in the 1920s, then joined FDR's [Civilian Conservation Corps](#) in 1933 and the Communist Party in 1936. He worked as a medic with the [Lincoln Brigade](#) during the [Spanish Civil War](#), attempted suicide, went through psychoanalysis, wrote stories for the pulps. He and his first wife, Joy, became fascinated with the philosophy and theology of C.S. Lewis--his wife would leave him after twenty years of alcoholism and abuse, in fact, and marry Lewis (yes, she's [THAT](#) Joy)--but he later wandered from Christianity towards Zen Buddhism, the occult, and...Dianetics. He married his ex-wife's cousin, and abused her as well. None of Gresham's subsequent books met with the success of his first novel and, after growing blind and cancerous, he killed himself in 1962, in a hotel in Coney Island. The subject matter of *Nightmare Alley* he'd first learned from a fellow medic in Spain, Joseph Daniel "Doc" Halliday, who'd been a carny worker himself and told Gresham tales of the tricks of the trade. He learned still more, living in the Dixie Hotel near Coney Island's amusement park--the same hotel where he would later commit suicide.

The plot of *Nightmare Alley*--far pulpier as a novel than the tamer version I'd first encountered on film and, as [J. Hoberman](#) has observed, probably the only novel ever inspired by T.S. Eliot's

poem "[The Wasteland](#)"--follows young Stanton "Stan" Carlisle, a carny worker with a talent for magic, whom we first meet gazing in horrified fascination at the carnival's geek, a gibbering half-human "bottle-a-day booze fool" who bites the heads off snakes and chickens. The carny barker explains that a geek isn't born, he's made: some sot is told that he'll get his daily drink and a warm place to sleep if he takes the geek act temporarily, then, one night, is told he'll be let go if he doesn't bite the head off for real. "You give him time to think it over, while you're talking. Then throw in the chicken. He'll geek."

In the Ten-in-One sideshow of the Ackerman-Zorbaugh Monster Show, Stan helps out Zeena, "The Woman Who Knows," a mind-reader who'd once had a profitable mentalist act with her husband Pete, before he "became scared of himself," and descended into an alcoholic stupor only a couple of steps above the geek's. The show also features a strong man, a midget, a legless contortionist, a tattooed man, and Molly, "Mamzelle Electra," a beautiful teenage girl with serious Daddy issues, who lets electricity flow through her body as she sits strapped in a rigged-up electric chair.

Stan likes the carny but is haunted by a recurring dream of running through a darkened alley towards a receding light, with something unknown on his heels--a dream that will turn out to be exceptionally fateful, as you'd expect. (Spain corporealizes Stan's fear with grasping hands, reaching out like those arms in the hallway of a delusional Catherine Deneuve in the film "[Repulsion](#).") Stan, who has Mommy issues that rival Molly's father-fixation, begins an affair with the older Zeena, but is confounded by her continued attention to Pete. One frustrated night, Stan--who never touches booze--kills Pete by replacing the gin in his bottle with the wood alcohol Zeena uses in her mentalist act, but not until after Pete spooks Stan thoroughly with a return to his former mastery, doing a stock cold reading on the kid that reels him in before dumping him on his butt.

With Zeena now single, Stan manipulates her into suggesting he join her act using the two-person word code Pete had once devised for a real "spook act." The phrasing, word-choice, and syllable-stresses used by her partner passing through the audience clue the blindfolded Zeena into what items he's holding. Stan develops his mentalist-show skills until, one night, he does a mesmerizing cold reading on a southern marshal who's come to shut down the show and arrest Molly for indecent exposure. Stan's eloquence wins Molly's heart, and off they run, with Zeena's code, to make it together in the big time.

Success follows on success and soon Stan is performing for society audiences as the Great Stanton, with Molly as his partner. Gresham details the equipment Stan uses to fake his [Spiritualism](#), which is admirably supplemented by exploiting Molly's rampant sexuality. The two convince a wealthy, grieving widow that she's communicating with her dead daughter, and Stan subtly persuades the old woman to donate her Riverside Drive mansion to his Church of the Heavenly Message, while she moves to California. Soon, Stan has a radio show as well--a regular masculine [Aimee Semple McPherson](#).

Moving now in even more exalted circles, often without Molly, Stan meets a psychologist named Dr Lilith Ritter, with whom he becomes involved in a warped submissive relationship. She uncovers his mother-fixation and learns about the death of Pete. She persuades Stan to begin

drinking brandy. And, finally, she introduces him to millionaire industrialist Ezra Grindle, a man with a secret.

When Grindle was a student at Columbia, he had a girlfriend called Dorrie. Stan's detective work reveals that she got pregnant, and Grindle sent her for an abortion, but it went badly and she died. The old man has been racked with guilt ever since, which is just the angle Stan has been waiting for. Passing a rigorous debunking test (Gresham is a little coy as to how) Stan convinces Grindle that he's the real deal. Now, Stan has to convince Molly to masquerade as Dorrie; no easy task as Molly has a moral streak utterly foreign to Stan. But masquerade she does, on the grounds of Grindle's New Jersey estate, and Grindle donates \$150,000 in cash to build Stan a "City of Shining Light," promising more cash after just one last session with Dorrie, in hopes that she'll materialize enough for him to touch her.

Stan gives the \$150,000 to Lilith for safe-keeping and persuades Molly to pose naked on a couch as Dorrie. He drugs Grindle to keep him docile during the session, but the corrupt old leech is overcome at the sight of this luscious girl and tries to have sex with Molly, who screams for help. "It was not a spiritual voice. It was the voice of a panicky showgirl who has more than she can handle." Stan knocks out Molly, punches out Grindle, and runs for it, leaving much of his Spiritualist apparatus behind. Stan runs to Lilith to get his money; he's preparing to leave town, until he discovers that she's pulled a "gypsy switch" on him--the original \$100 and \$500 bills are now all singles. Stan returns to Lilith's in a rage, and she calmly announces that he's insane, that his entire story of her involvement with him is a delusion, and then refers him to Bellevue--watching him run as the medics come for him.

Now, convinced that Grindle's security men are hounding him and aware that Lilith will sic the cops on him for Pete's murder, Stan is reduced to conning marks with readings in roadhouses, often for drinks. Soon, he's selling horoscopes on the street. Roused by a beat cop, running for real just like in his nightmare, he turns on the cop and kills him with a jujitsu chokehold he'd learned in his carny days. Now he has even more reason to run.

He finds his way to a farm owned by Zeena and Joe, the legless contortionist, and they try to help him out with a new routine and some contacts, but he steals from them and runs. He dyes his hair, pretending to be a swami. He's starting to do better--drinking only beer--but then he sees a random news story: Lilith has just married Grindle. Down he slides.

He finds his way to a carnival. Trembling, stinking, he begs for a palmist job. The boss looks him over, sees the alky shakes and the dyed hair that says he's on the lam, and replies that he has a job Stan might take a crack at. "Keep you in coffee and cakes and a shot now and then. What do you say? Of course, it's only temporary--just until we get a real geek."

The end.

Needless to say, this was too powerful for Hollywood, especially during the height of the [Production Code](#). But the novel was popular, getting a warm critical reception ("If you enjoy hundred-proof evil---and a cogent analysis of same with your nightcap---then, in the words of the Ten-in-One barker, hurry, hurry, hurry!" said The New York Times), and the actor Tyrone

Power really wanted to play Stan. Power was the youngest in a [long theatrical line](#) going back over a century, and he had serious stage training, but he had become typecast in romantic leads and he was bored. He'd just played the lead in [The Razor's Edge](#), as a young American who eschews western materialism and discovers eastern religious spirituality, and he wanted a similarly meaty role. At 33 Power was a little old for the lead--Stan is 21 at the beginning of the novel, although he does age to his mid-30s by the end--but he convinced 20th Century Fox studio head [Darryl Zanuck](#) to let him play the part.

The work of adapting the novel into a screenplay was given to [Jules Furthman](#), a screenwriter with impeccable noir credentials, having adapted [To Have and Have Not](#) and [The Big Sleep](#). The director, [Edmund Goulding](#), however, who had also directed Power in [The Razor's Edge](#), was known less for film noir than as a director of melodramas, such as the seminal ensemble film [Grand Hotel](#) or epic weepie [Dark Victory](#). Nor was the cinematographer, Lee Garmes, a stereotypical noir filmmaker, although he had been one of the co-developers of "Rembrandt lighting," a distinctive single, northern light source which generated the chiaroscuro effect that makes noir so evocative. Goulding had never worked with Furthman and had had Garmes on his crew just once, briefly, but this didn't seem to hamper their teamwork. Casting decisions, however, changed rapidly--the [black-Irish](#) Power was playing the blond, blue-eyed Stan, but all the other roles seemed up for grabs, with Celeste Holm under consideration for Zeena before it went, in a brilliant choice, to aging showgirl Joan Blondell. Narrowly averting a casting tragedy, the vulnerable and nearly unknown Coleen Gray got the part of Molly over perky June Allyson, Zanuck's choice. (For you true Hollywood geeks: it's interesting to consider what the film might have been had Lilith being played by early choices Marlene Dietrich or Constance Bennett rather than Helen Walker.)

Zanuck, who hated the story, called for numerous changes. Stan's affair with Zeena was toned down, and Pete's death was made an accident rather than a premeditated murder. The murder of the policeman was cut completely. Stan marries Molly instead of just living with her, and Grindle's girlfriend merely dies young, rather than from a botched abortion. Stan stays true to Molly despite his attraction to Lilith, whose dominatrix ways are watered down to wardrobe-related androgyny. Stan was raised in an orphanage; his Mommy issues and Molly's Daddy issues are both wiped away. The acquisition of the Riverside Drive mansion and all the tricks of Stan's swindle are likewise eliminated. When Stan proposes the Dorrie plot, Molly worries about his immortal soul, but Stan maintains that he never mentions God in his spiel, and that keeps his entire routine on the up-and-up: it's a standard fleece-the-rich con. This all conspired to make Stan a much more likable fellow, in response to Zanuck's complaint that the story was "lacking a sympathetic character to root for." In addition, out of deference to the Code, the sideshow freaks were limited to Bruno the Strong Man only; unlike in the pre-Code days of films like [Freaks](#), the sight of such unfortunate creatures now might "[offend good taste or injure the sensibilities](#)" of the audience.

The plot was so denatured that even Stan's nightmare was omitted: the title of the film is never actually explained. Nor do we see the all-important foreshadowing of Stan hearing about the making of a geek at the very beginning, which is mirrored in his own fate at the end. Grindle's over-reaction to Dorrie never reaches the final stage of the near-rape; instead, he runs toward her ethereal form on the grounds of his estate and Molly, her own moral code transgressed, cries out

and ruins the swindle. In the book, when Stan ditches Molly she sinks so low she's reduced almost to prostitution, but eventually marries a race-track habitué like her Daddy, with whom she has a son; in the film, she stays true to Stan and, in an amazing coincidence only Hollywood could love, is working at the very carnival that hires Stan as a geek. Instead of ending the film at that blistering and fateful moment of Stan's lowest low, the story continues to show Stan rampaging insanely across the grounds, most likely in horror at his first night of geeking, and ending in Molly's forgiving arms. A carny worker turns to the boss and asks "How can a guy get so low?" The boss replies, as the credits music begins to swell, "He reached too high," a fade-out approximately four levels more sententious than "[It was beauty killed the beast.](#)" As in the classic medieval trope of the Wheel of Fortune, Stan has risen to great heights, only to fall, to be crushed beneath the wheel and then, perhaps, to rise again.

Of course, my 13-year-old self was not only far less critical than I would later become but, more significantly, was completely unfamiliar with the novel, so I had no idea how much the plot had changed from the original. The film got to me plenty, though, from the Dr Frankenstein electricity of Molly's act to the fate of poor Pete; from Stan's hubristic rise to his horrific fall. A lawsuit between the studio and producer [George Jessel](#) tied up the video rights for years, so I had only my dim memories of this dark, twisted film for many years, until I came upon Spain's graphic novel adaptation shortly after its 2003 release.

Spain returns to the novel as his source, making the film more of a cousin than an ancestor, but it's difficult to believe that he wasn't at some level influenced by the Hollywood version. In fact, it's difficult to believe that Spain wasn't influenced by an array of films: in addition to that nod to *Repulsion*, for example, Molly's Mamzelle Electra costume is a cross between the [Metropolis android](#) and Madonna in the "[Open Your Heart](#)" video. Stan is back to blond--and intriguingly angular, in a [Rockwell Kent](#) sort of way--but again, he doesn't seem as young as the boy in the book. Oddly, Spain leaves out Stan's teetotalism, which sets the baseline against which to measure his later fall, and Spain's Stan seems not to learn prestidigitation until under Zeena's tutelage. But Spain keeps the language, the rich quirky Americanisms that distinguish Gresham's writing and that were entirely jettisoned for the film. A carny worker observes that a summer's day is so hot and dry that his "throat's as sore as a bull's ass in fly time." Sailor Martin, the tattooed man, is fired for starting a "hey-rube"--a brawl with the local yokels--and turns out to be the guy that sicced the marshall on the carny; a former colleague remarks that "somebody ought to stick a butcher knife up his rear end and kick the handle off."

Spain also takes advantage of the graphical format to include small details that expand on scenes in the novel. At one society event, for example, a naughty debutante pulls out a "gold mesh vanity case" from her date's pocket to show to Stan, daring him to ask Molly to identify its contents. Spain spells--er, draws it out: a package of Ramses condoms. He returns all the sexuality to the story that the film siphoned off, drawing voluptuous women in the WPA-style that seems to have inspired so many of the underground comics artists. And, in a lovely touch, a splash-page montage includes a glimpse of a movie marquis featuring Tyrone Power in *The Razor's Edge*.

So what's the upshot? Why this exercise of comparison? I suppose I think it's worth thinking about, the way a story gets transformed from prose to film to comics. What can each medium do

that's better or more effective than the others? What are the shortcomings? It's somewhat of a challenge to compare the film to the other versions, since so much of the story required changing to satisfy the needs of the Code. It's interesting to me, though, that both the film and the graphic novel were labors of love: for Power, clearly, and for Spain, who had started work on the project in the early 1990s for an Avon Books noir comics series, only to see the project scrapped in 1996. Fantagraphics picked up the rights in 2001, allowing Spain at last to finish the book.

The prose novel contains a richness, a sweep, and a darkness impossible to convey even in my overly-long synopsis. The movie captures a mood and tells the essential story, even in its emasculated state, with the moody lighting and dubiously sympathetic anti-hero of classic film noir. The graphic novel pares the story down to its dialogue, using Gresham's rich and earthy language, adding visuals with a sensuality that enhances the tale Gresham told. All three are the same story and a different story.

How does that work? I'm reminded of the philosophy problem known as the axe paradox (I've also heard it as the "hammer paradox") which Ben Harvey evoked quite beautifully in a [recent blog post](#) about *Asterios Polyp*. Say you have an axe, and the handle breaks, so you replace the handle. A little while later, the head shatters, so you replace the head. Is this axe the same axe you had originally or, now that its two essential elements have been replaced, is it a new axe? These three versions of Stan Carlisle's tale present a similar paradox. Are they the same story or a different story? Do they differ only in their medium, or does the change in medium make the story essentially different?

Please answer in 500 words or less. Use complete sentences. Spelling counts.

This month's column, incidentally, has been an homage to the splendid film blogger known as the [Self-Styled Siren](#), and to the cause for which she bears a standard: film preservation. The Siren was a co-sponsor of last month's [Film Noir Blogathon](#), which sought to raise money for film noir film preservation, a double helping (rather than [indemnity](#)) of worthiness. Timing prevented this column from appearing during the blogathon, but I feel certain it's not too late to be counted, and certainly not too late to solicit donations to such a worthy cause. So if you love pulp fiction, film noir, or comics inspired by either, think about clicking through [here](#).

Finally: Hillary Chute, author of *Graphic Women: life narrative and contemporary comics*, will be talking at my library on Wednesday, March 9, at 4 PM. "[Animating an Archive: Repetition and Regeneration in Alison Bechdel's Fun Home](#)" will be in room 523 of Butler Library. Come on up to Columbia (116th & Broadway) and say hello!

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