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Reading Group Guide

# THIS WICKED WORLD

A Novel

*by*

**Richard Lange**

## RICHARD LANGE'S LIST OF TEN GREAT CRIME FILMS

### *Point Blank*

John Boorman directs Lee Marvin in a stylish adaptation of the first of Richard Stark's Parker novels, *The Hunter*. The simple plot—a man tracks down the bastards who double-crossed him—acquires added profundity through fantastic editing, cinematography, and sound design. The scene of Marvin walking down a long corridor at LAX on his way to confront his wife gives me chills every time.

### *Sonatine*

A yakuza clique led by the great Takeshi Kitano (who also directs) is ordered from Tokyo to Okinawa to mediate a gang war. Things get ugly, and the boys hole up in a secluded beach house. Things get ugly again. A strange, beautiful film with a rhythm all its own. Quiet, then loud. Lyrical, then violent. Funny, then unbearably sad.

### *Homicide*

David Mamet's third film as writer-director is a detective tale focusing on a cop, played by Joe Mantegna, investigating the murder of a store owner. Mamet geeks the story by forcing the cop to examine his cultural-religious identity (both he and

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the store owner are Jewish) in the course of his investigation. What really makes the film, though, is that brilliant Mamet dialogue. Profane, poetic, and funny as hell.

### *Touchez pas au Grisbi*

Jacques Becker's story of criminals doing each other dirty in 1950s Paris stars the great Jean Gabin as Max, an aging gangster who has managed to pull off the proverbial last big job and is looking forward to a quieter life. Of course, things don't work out that way. The French coined the term *film noir* to describe a certain kind of American thriller, then brought the genre home and put their own fascinating stamp on it. This is one of the classics.

### *Badlands*

In 1959, lonely South Dakota teen Holly (Sissy Spacek) falls in love with charismatic sociopath Kit (Martin Sheen). Daddy disapproves and comes to a bad end, and the young lovers go on the lam. Director Terrence Malick's dreamy reimagining of the real-life Starkweather-Fugate murder spree is beautifully shot, and Kit's girlishly naive narration gives the film a sweet, poignant tone.

### *Gomorra*

The Camorra is a criminal organization whose activities touch every level of Italian society. This film weaves together five stories of people whose lives are affected by the gang. Think a grittier, more realistic *Traffic*. The characters vary from a tailor who secretly trains Chinese workers to sew high-fashion clothing and finds himself on the wrong side of the mob to a

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low-level bagman forced to betray his bosses to two teenage gangster wannabes who tear around shooting stolen guns and quoting *Scarface*. The film has a documentary feel at times and effectively illuminates a little slice of hell.

### *Miller's Crossing*

Up is down and black is white in this Coen Brothers masterpiece. Two gangs vie for dominance in an unnamed city in the 1930s, and Tom Reagan (Gabriel Byrne), right-hand man to one of the bosses, gets caught in the middle. This gangster myth has a chilly veneer, but a sea of emotion roils just beneath the surface. The plot twists and turns and the camera does loop de loops, but it's the anguish at the core of this film that makes it a favorite of mine. John Turturro's pleas for mercy as he is walked out into the woods to be executed will haunt you forever.

### *Battles Without Honor and Humanity*

The first film of Kinji Fukasaku's five-part Yakuza Papers series follows a Japanese ex-soldier as he struggles to survive in the chaos of post-bomb Hiroshima and eventually becomes a member of a yakuza gang. These films brought a new realism to the yakuza genre and set a new standard for onscreen violence. You may find yourself a little confused about who is killing who and why, but you'll never be bored. Just sit back and enjoy the blood-soaked ride.

### *Bande à part*

This adaptation of Dolores Hitchens's *Fools' Gold* is Jean-Luc Godard's most accessible film and a great introduction to

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his work. It's the story of three young people who meet in an English class and eventually plan to rob one of their relatives. The plot is secondary, though, to Godard's playful experimentation with the medium. A narrator voices the characters' thoughts, the kids dance the Madison, and then there's that famous moment of silence and the dash through the Louvre. Everything about this film is the epitome of cool.

### *The Long Goodbye*

Robert Altman's rambling, shambling update of the Chandler novel perfectly captures a certain hazy moment in L.A. history. Elliott Gould as Marlowe smokes and mumbles and slouches his way through a missing-person investigation that gets all out of hand. The plot is secondary to the tone, however, which always makes me feel like I've been puffing on a fatty. Sterling Hayden is wild as a Hemingway-esque drunken writer.

## RICHARD LANGE'S LIST OF TEN GREAT CRIME BOOKS

### *A Good Day to Die* by Jim Harrison

In the early 1970s a fisherman drowning in his own navel, a crazy Nam vet, and a sexy but stupid Southern belle take a boozy, druggy road trip from Florida to Idaho to blow up a dam. This book is a strange artifact of a strange time.

“My system began to speed up in a rush, no doubt the leftovers of what I had been dropping and smoking, and I felt preternaturally tough and gutsy, a little fated and doomed like a samurai or some tropical exile holding dark secrets.”

### *Billy Phelan's Greatest Game* by William Kennedy

Billy Phelan is a gambler, bookie, and man about town. Martin Daugherty is a journalist with a taste for lowlife. The two of them get mixed up in the kidnapping of a political boss's son in this sweetly sad ode to the characters who live by night in the dives, diners, and pool halls of Depression-era Albany, New York.

“No man who wore socks in Albany felt better in the nighttime than Billy Phelan, walking with a couple of pals along his own Broadway from Nick's card game to Union Station to get the papers, including the paper that was going to make him famous tonight. Maybe he feels so good that he's getting a

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little crazy about not being afraid. Martin was right. A .22 in the eye gives you a hell of a headache.”

### *The Day of the Owl* by Leonardo Sciascia

The noble Captain Bellodi attempts to solve a murder in the small Sicilian town to which he’s been newly assigned. His investigation is stymied by wary witnesses, the mafia, and mysterious government figures. A fascinating, frustrating, and ultimately moving glimpse of Sicilian life in the early sixties.

“I,’ went on Don Mariano, ‘have a certain experience of the world; and what we call humanity—all hot air, that word—I divide into five categories: men, half-men, pigmies, arse-crawlers—if you’ll excuse the expression—and quackers. Men are very few indeed; half-men few, and I’d be content if humanity finished with them . . . But no, it sinks even lower, to the pigmies who’re like children trying to be grown-ups, monkeys going through the motions of their elders . . . Then down even lower we go, to the arse-crawlers who’re legion . . . And, finally, to the quackers; they ought to just exist, like ducks in a pond: their lives have no more point or meaning . . . But you, even if you nail me to these documents like Christ to His Cross, you’re a man.’”

### *True Crime: An American Anthology* edited by Harold Schechter

A collection of true crime writing that includes pieces by Benjamin Franklin, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Abraham Lincoln, Jim Thompson, and James Ellroy. The Black Dahlia is here, Richard Speck, Manson, the Son of Sam, but what will linger longest are the lesser-known crimes, like those detailed in an anonymous article from a 1796 issue of *New York Weekly*

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magazine about James Yates's murder of his wife and four children while in a religious mania and Celia Thaxter's terrifying 1875 account of a New Hampshire axe murder.

From "Pillars of Salt" by Cotton Mather: "One *Hugh Stone*, upon a Quarrel, between himself & his Wife, about Selling a piece of Land, having some words, as they were walking together, on a certain Evening, very barbarously reached a stroke at her Throat, with a Sharp knife; and by that *One Stroke* fetch'd away the Soul, of her, who had made him a Father of several Children, and would have brought yet another to him, if she had lived a few weeks longer in the world."

### *Controlled Burn* by Scott Wolven

This haunting collection of thirteen stories puts the spotlight on men who are slouched on the crumbling edge. Wolven's is a beautiful voice singing sad songs about prisoners, drunks, dopers, drifters, loggers, and truckers.

"'Well, I make the best crank north and west of Philadelphia,' he said. 'That's not some bullshit you hear in a bar, like the rest of life's crap, like "Oh, I love you," or "You're handsome," or "I like small tits," or some horseshit. My fans are legion. I know for a fact that right this minute up in Belt Montana, there are bikers using my stuff and they are very happy sturdy stouthearted men engaged in the work of whatever god they happen to believe in.'"

### *The Secret Agent* by Joseph Conrad

Verloc, a Russian spy in London, makes his living reporting on the activities of the motley crew of anarchists he hangs out with. Things go all to hell when he's assigned to blow up the Greenwich Royal Observatory. Written in 1907, the book is



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part spy thriller, part detective novel, part domestic tragedy. Verloc's would-be terrorist associates are scary and funny at the same time, especially The Professor, who wanders the streets of London carrying explosives wired to a detonator in his pocket, always ready to blow himself and anyone around him to smithereens at a moment's notice.

“I have always dreamed,’ he mouthed fiercely, ‘of a band of men absolute in their resolve to discard all scruples in the choice of means, strong enough to give themselves frankly the name of destroyers, and free from the taint of that resigned pessimism which rots the world. No pity for anything on earth, including themselves, and death enlisted for good and all in the service of humanity—that’s what I would have liked to see.’”

### *You Can't Win* by Jack Black

This memoir of a hobo and thief who roamed the country in the late 1800s–early 1900s is the best account I've ever read of criminal life in that time. It's a down-and-dirty look at a wilder, woollier America with one foot in the Old West and the other in the “modern” era. The slang alone is worth the price of admission.

“This book is dedicated to Fremont Older, to Judge Frank H. Dunne, to the unnamed friend who sawed me out of the San Francisco jail and to that dirty, drunken, disreputable, crippled beggar, ‘Sticks’ Sullivan, who picked the buckshot out of my back—under the bridge—at Baraboo, Wisconsin.”

### *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* by George V. Higgins

The cops and robbers, killers and cheats we meet in this fast-paced whirl through Boston's underworld talk and talk and talk. Probably 90 percent of this book consists of some of the best dialogue you'll ever read. The magic here is that what appears to

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be a transcription of real gangsters wheeling and dealing, grousing and bluffing, is in fact a highly stylized reworking of lowlife cant. What also amazes me is how skillfully Higgins gradually weaves a story out of what is essentially a series of gabfests. You read along, just enjoying hearing these guys go at each other, and all of a sudden you're in the middle of something that you didn't see coming. A masterpiece of crime fiction.

“Now look,’ the stocky man said. ‘I’m getting old. I spent my whole life sitting around in one crummy joint after another with a bunch of punks like you, drinking coffee, eating hash, and watching other people take off for Florida while I got to sweat how the hell I’m going to pay the plumber next week. I’ve done time, and I stood up, but I can’t take no more chances. You can give me a whole ration of shit and this and that, and blah, blah, blah. But you, you’re still a kid, and you’re going out and coming around and saying, “Well, I’m a man, you can take what I say and it’ll happen. I go through.” Well, you’re learning something too, kid, and I advise you, you better learn it now, because when you say that, when you get me out there all alone on what you say, well, you better be there in back of me. Because once you say it’s going to happen, it’s going to fucking happen, and if it doesn’t you got your cock caught in the zipper but good.”

### *Straight Life* by Art and Laurie Pepper

This memoir of jazz saxophonist Art Pepper is a no-holds-barred descent into junky hell. For while Pepper was a great musician, he was also an unapologetic dope fiend until the day he died and spent years in prison behind that. What makes his story compelling and even strangely inspiring is his lack of self-pity and unique voice. Most of the book consists of transcripts of tapes he recorded, which makes you feel like you're sitting

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in a bar with your most fucked-up friend, laughing at his latest incredibly self-destructive exploits, and thinking, “There but for the grace of God . . .”

“I was afraid of everything. Clouds scared me: it was as if they were living things that were going to harm me. Lightning and thunder frightened me beyond words. But when it was beautiful and sunny out my feelings were even more horrible because there was nothing in it for me. At least when it was thundering or when there were black clouds I had something I could put my fears and loneliness to and think that I was afraid because of the clouds.”

### *Savage Night* by Jim Thompson

Nobody twists pulp into art like Jim Thompson, and this is one of his best. His psychological insight and bleak worldview transform this simple tale of a hitman sent to ice someone who has crossed The Man into a gothic romp through the mind of a sociopath. Truly chilling, with an ending that will stick with you always.

“There was a crowd of people waiting to get on the train at Times Square. I went through them. I walked right through them. Giving it to them in the ribs and insteps. And no one said anything, so maybe they sensed what was in me and knew they were lucky. Because they were lucky.

“There was a woman getting on, and I gave it to her in the breasts with my elbow, so hard she almost dropped the baby she was carrying. And she was lucky, too, but maybe the baby wasn’t. Maybe it would have been better off under the wheels. Everything ended.”

## QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Near the beginning of *This Wicked World*, Boone adopts the motto “Fail better” (page 25). How does this motto presage the events in the novel, and how does it help make sense of what happens to Boone? Do you think the motto still applies to him at the novel’s end?
2. What is it about Oscar’s case that is so compelling to Boone? Does something specific about Oscar’s story strike a chord with him? What is Boone hoping to gain in discovering the truth about Oscar?
3. Speaking about the crime Boone committed, his lawyer says, “You had honorable intentions, Jimmy, and that makes all the difference” (page 63). Does it? Is there a disconnect between the intentions and actions of the characters in *This Wicked World*? How much should intention matter in judging people’s actions?
4. When Boone meets Loretta, the dog rescuer, he thinks, “She’s one of the lucky ones, someone with a worldview. Boone keeps waiting for the pieces to come together for him like that but doubts they ever will” (page 157). What does Boone mean by *worldview* in this context? Is it true that he doesn’t have one? Do you agree with his assessment that people like Loretta are “the lucky ones”?

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5. Amy is one of the two principal female characters in the book, but unlike with Olivia, we rarely get a glimpse of her interior point of view. What do you think is going through her mind at some of the pivotal moments in the book, such as when Boone tells her his story (page 111), when she meets his visitors (page 285), or later, in the aftermath of the climactic events of the book (pages 384, 390, and 400)?
6. One reviewer wrote about *This Wicked World*, “Even the most ruthless villains are drawn with an unexpected sensitivity to their essential humanity.” Do you agree? Does the portrayal of any of the villains in the book give you sympathy for them, despite their violent actions? If so, who are your favorites among the “bad guys”?
7. Olivia starts out as a character on the fringes of a criminal gang dominated by men, but by the end of the book she is a full-fledged villain in her own right. Did you sympathize with Olivia’s desire to be more involved in Taggart’s work? If he had agreed, how do you think her story (or his) would have unfolded differently?
8. T.K. describes Taggart as “fearless” and explains to Virgil, “He doesn’t give a shit about dying because he should be dead already” (pages 124–25). Do you think this accounts for Taggart’s toughness? Is this the reason he takes a big chance on the deal with Mando, or is something else at play there? If you thought you were living on borrowed time, would you do anything differently?
9. The action of *This Wicked World* takes place both in Los Angeles and in outlying areas of Southern California.

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Discuss the significance of the sense of place to the development of the plot. Why do you think the author chose to set parts of the novel outside the city? Are there any parallels between the different settings and the writing style? Does the portrayal of Los Angeles itself surprise you?

10. What did you think of the end of the novel? To what extent has Boone found what he was looking for when he began investigating Oscar's death? Do you think he will at last settle into the quiet life he had been trying to establish?

ALSO BY RICHARD LANGE

## DEAD BOYS

“*Dead Boys* marks the emergence of a compelling new talent....Of the many things Richard Lange does well, it is perhaps Los Angeles itself that he conveys most compellingly....The stories are all possessed of a sure tone, a wealth of telling detail, and a headlong narrative energy.”

—Joshua Henkin, *Los Angeles Times*

“Short stories can be little goodies you nibble on while trying to decide which novel to read next. Or as in the case of *Dead Boys* they can be as filling as a banquet....The writing is so fine throughout that it’s almost a crime to single out ‘Everything Beautiful Is Far Away’ as a perfect specimen....It’s violent, it’s truthful, and it’s devastating.”

—Marilyn Stasio, *New York Times Book Review*

“Lange’s stories are incredibly enjoyable, and the early comparisons to Raymond Carver and Denis Johnson are dead on....These stories lock you in and beg to be read quickly.”

—Jason Kuiper, *Omaha World-Herald*

“Stylistically brilliant, painfully and truly observed and rendered, *Dead Boys* is not just one of the best collections thus far this decade: it is one of the best short story collections of the past fifty years.”

—Eric Williamson, *San Francisco Chronicle*



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