

IT'S TOLD THE UNTAMED *Hemingway* WAY!

MARK HELLINGER presents

The *Ernest Hemingway's*
KILLERS

Directed by
ROBERT SIODMAK
of "The Spiral Staircase" fame

with BURT LANCASTER
AVA GARDNER EDMOND O'BRIEN
ALBERT DEKKER SAM LEVENE

Screenplay by John Huston and Richard Brooks from a story by Ernest Hemingway Produced by Mark Hellinger A UNIVERSAL Release

CREDIT WHERE DUE

The name in the credits isn't necessarily that of the person who wrote the script or directed the film. Film historian **ALAN K. RODE** considers some notable noir films where the most valuable contributions were made, for various reasons, anonymously.

The credit "Directed by" doesn't always tell the whole story. Despite the sole billing of Alfred Werker as director of *He Walked by Night*, for example, rumors have persisted over the years that Anthony Mann actually directed the majority of this seminal 1948 *policier*. Where credit lies for the film as a whole, or its individual sequences, has long been the subject of supposition, largely due to the lack of

any production files for this Eagle-Lion film.

Max Alvarez's recent book, *The Crime Films of Anthony Mann* includes a summary of the available evidence, along with astute theorizing about specific portions of the film ostensibly directed by Mann. He concludes that the flawless continuity of *He Walked by Night* is due to the work of legendary cinematographer John Alton, who filmed the picture in its entirety.



Director Alfred Werker's contribution to *He Walked by Night* has long been debated

The late director Arnold Laven served as script supervisor on *He Walked by Night* as well as other Eagle-Lion films. During our conversations (“Arnold Laven: Tales of the Dark Side,” *NOIR CITY Sentinel*, July–Aug. 2009), Laven avoided any direct answers about whether it was Werker or Mann who was mostly at the helm (although he inadvertently mentioned Mann’s involvement in shooting the Los Angeles sewer sequences). Although he spoke highly of both directors, Laven was obviously friendlier with Werker and, being a gentleman, he abhorred saying anything about a colleague that might be construed as negative. This left me to surmise that Werker had been removed from *He Walked by Night* at a certain point and replaced by Mann, or that Werker completed the picture but Mann directed extensive retakes. Until production records for the film are located, the extent and circumstances of both directors’ participation will remain a mystery.

Contract directors bound to a studio were routinely required to direct retakes or additional scenes for a finished film if the front office (and negative preview cards) dictated revisions. But Howard Hughes’ bizarre stewardship of RKO Studios merits special recognition for the use (or abuse) of multiple uncredited directors—often on the same film. Hughes went through four directors on *The Racket* (1951): the credited John Cromwell had his work finished off, anonymously, by Nicholas Ray, Robert Stevenson and Edmund Grainger. *Macao* (1952) might well have set a record for the most directors and writers to work on a single picture: Josef von Sternberg holds the sole directing credit, but Nicholas Ray, Robert Stevenson, Mel Ferrer, William Dorfman and James Casey all hefted the megaphone at one point or another. At least eight different writers toiled on this one, with five (including Edward Chodorov and Walter Newman) going uncredited.

Hughes hired Richard Fleischer to redirect the ending of *His Kind*



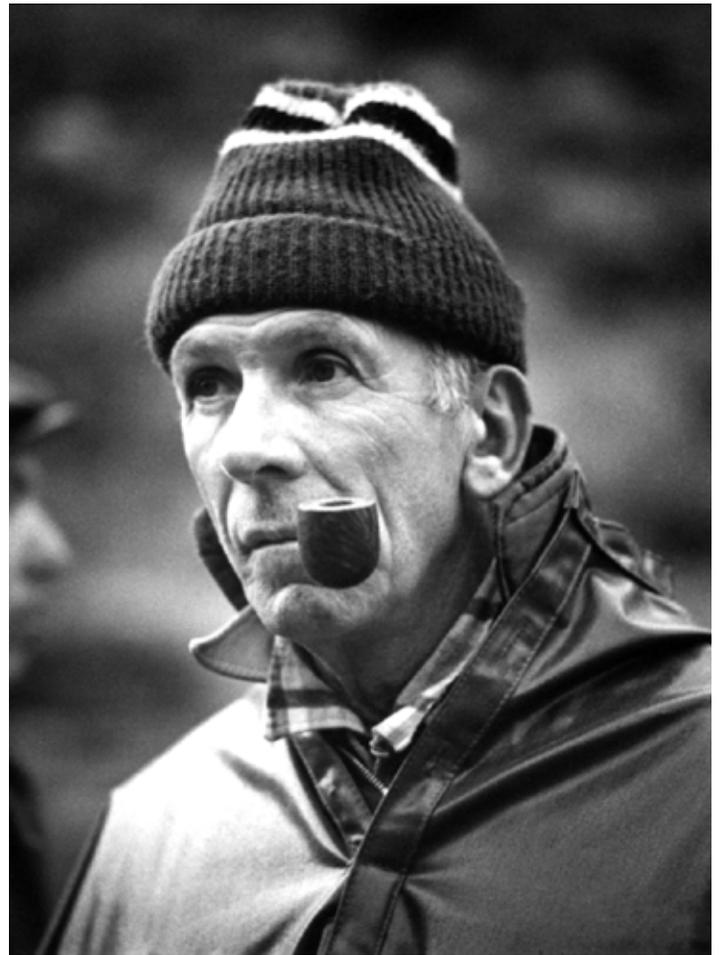
Excessive reshoots on *His Kind of Woman* really drove Mitchum into a furious tantrum

of *Woman* (1951) after John Farrow had completed the picture. Hughes wound up keeping Fleischer on the film for another year, reshooting a climatic fight scene on a yacht and even changing the casting of the principal heavy, a role eventually consigned to Raymond Burr. Even after a frustrated and inebriated Robert Mitchum ran amuck and destroyed a set, Fleischer gamely hung on until the bitter end. He had to, having extracted a promise from Hughes that the studio would release his picture *The Narrow Margin* without further tampering. (After having William Cameron Menzies direct several retakes on *The Narrow Margin*, Hughes held the picture hostage to force Fleischer into accepting the *His Kind of Woman* chores.) Hughes had also promised to terminate Fleischer’s contract with RKO once he’d finished *Woman*. Howard Hughes might have been a nut job, but he kept his word.

FIRINGS COULD ALSO LEAD to a switch in the director’s chair. Actor Richard Boone finished up for Hubert Cornfield on *The Night of the Following Day* (1968) after the director’s relationship with Marlon Brando became untenable. Irving Allen was let go after three days on *The Man on the Eiffel Tower* (1949), with Burgess Meredith and Charles Laughton jointly taking over co-direction of the picture. Columbia Pictures mogul Harry Cohn fired Robert Aldrich off *The Garment Jungle* (1957) shortly after production began, when Aldrich insisted on location shooting in New York’s garment district, an expense that the penurious Cohn vetoed. Vincent Sherman directed the bulk of the picture on the Columbia lot. Perhaps most famously, Rouben Mamoulian’s firing by Darryl Zanuck from 1944’s *Laura* led to the first directing assignment in the distinguished career of Otto Preminger.

Because screen credit translated into more money and increased power, Hollywood eventually regulated how credits could be allocated. The unionization of the industry included the formation of directors’ and screenwriters’ guilds, which coincidentally evolved during the classic noir era. Although rules for screen credit, including arbitration, were tied to basic agreements with the studios and limited the excesses of mogul control, the names of valued contributors, particularly writers, often went missing for a variety of reasons.

Case in point: Universal’s 1946 hit *The Killers*. Although Anthony Veiller is the sole credited scenarist, the principal screenwriter was John Huston. Huston was still on active duty in the U.S. Army and had recently completed post-production on his documentary



John Huston and Richard Brooks, the actual screenwriters of the popular and influential 1946 film noir *The Killers*

The Battle of San Pietro.¹ Army regulations prohibited Huston from drawing a civilian salary while in the service, and his Warner Bros. contract was exclusive. Huston circumvented both obstacles by using Veillier as his personal stalking horse. He repeated this sleight-of-pen when he worked on the script for RKO's *The Stranger* (1946) on which Veiller was again given sole screenwriter credit.

Huston's script for *The Killers* was based on an original treatment by Richard Brooks, whose name doesn't appear anywhere on the film. The former newspaperman had made his bones with a couple of Maria Montez pictures at Universal prior to a stint in the Marine Corps. He became drinking buddies with one-time Broadway columnist Mark Hellinger and returned to Hollywood after the war to write for the now-established producer. Hellinger, whose persona was characterized by Jules Dassin as one of "gangster honor," had become fed up working for Hal Wallis at Warner Bros. and after producing several hits for the studio, including *The Roaring Twenties* (1939) and *High Sierra* (1941), Hellinger penned a memorable resignation letter

to Wallis in 1941 that included this fiery burning bridge:

"Keep on using your other producers as messenger boys and involuntary ass-kissers who in reality hate your very guts—but credit me with just a little more manhood and honesty."

—Mark Hellinger

"Keep on using your other producers as messenger boys and involuntary ass-kissers who in reality hate your very guts—but credit me with just a little more manhood and honesty."

Ernest Hemingway was Hellinger's favorite author, but the producer couldn't afford to purchase any of the master's novels, only a short story. He paid \$36,700 for *The Killers*. Once freshly independent, the producer split the cost of the \$875,000 production with Universal, borrowing nearly \$320,000 to cover his share.

As Richard Brooks recalled in a 1988 interview with author Patrick McGilligan, Hellinger tapped him to come up with the film's storyline, first asking, "You ever read *The Killers*?"

"I said: 'Yeah.' He said, 'Good story?' I said, 'Yeah, terrific.' He said, 'Well, it's five, seven pages long, something like that. Two guys come into town, they go to a diner, they make some jokes and then they go look for the Swede to kill him. So what's the story?' I said, 'I don't know.' He said, 'Well, write a story. If you'll write the story, John Huston, who is in the Aleutians just finishing up—he's gonna be discharged any day now—will write the screenplay.'"

¹ In his book *Five Came Back*, author Mark Harris unearthed evidence revealing that Huston, bringing Hollywood acumen to the actual war, staged numerous combat scenes for his landmark war documentary—something that has gone unreported since the film's original release.



Ben Hecht: more uncredited rewrites than anyone in Hollywood

Brooks based his scenario on the infamous Rubel Ice Company robbery of 1934, which he wove around the saga of the love-struck Swede and a double-crossing femme fatale. He also came up with the insurance investigator character played by Edmond O'Brien. Mark Hellinger gave Brooks a small percentage of the picture—an unheard of gesture by a producer to a neophyte screenwriter in 1946—but the former Marine was not about to share story credit with Ernest Hemingway.

"[Hellinger] said, 'I want you to know why,'" Brooks later recalled. "'How's it gonna look, 'Story by Hemingway and Brooks'? Who the hell is Brooks? Nobody knows Brooks!' I said, 'Hey Mark, it's all right!'"

UNEARTHING SCREENWRITING CREDITS for old movies can be a daunting task. In addition to missing or incomplete records, it's complicated by the fact that scripts were frequently worked on by a plethora of writers who often never met; in some cases, writers never knew who worked on a script after they were done with it. Norma Barzman once told me about writing the original story for *The Locket* and selling it over dinner at Musso and Frank. She was surprised to learn, all those years later, that Sheridan Gibney had written the final screenplay.

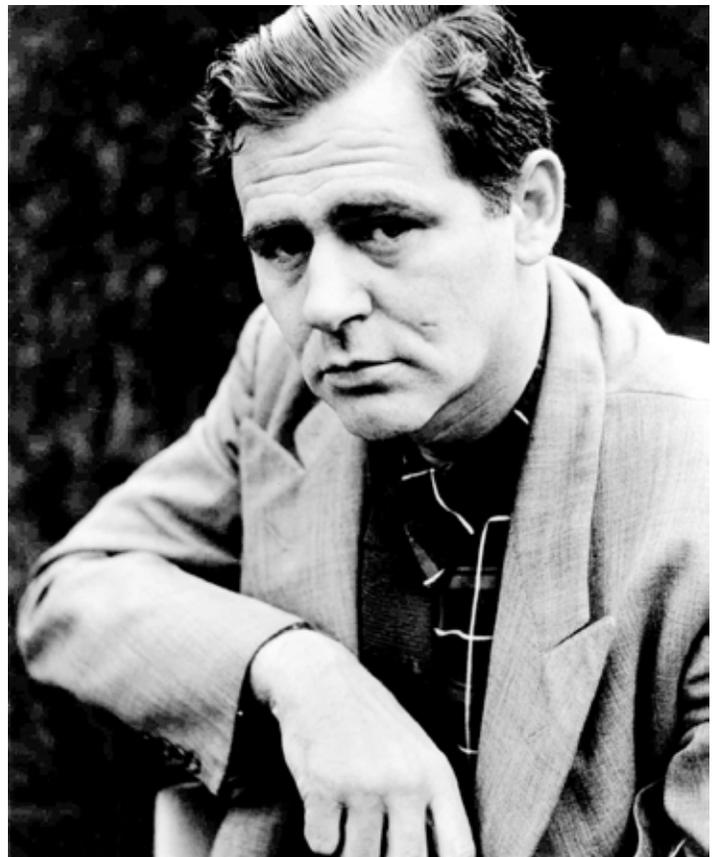
Then there were all those scripts by blacklisted writers, using fronts or pseudonyms. Many of the credits rightfully belonging to Dalton Trumbo, Carl Foreman, Ben Barzman, Cyril Endfield, Paul Jarrico, and Bernard Gordon, and other blacklisted writers have been restored

by the Writers Guild of America. Phil Yordan ("First is First and Second is Nobody: The Philip Yordan Story," *NOIR CITY Sentinel*, Nov.-Dec. 2009) was Hollywood's most notorious practitioner of hiring blacklisted screenwriters and assuming credit for their work. Yordan employed so many different surrogates that no one is sure who actually wrote several of the films credited to him. Bertrand Tavernier termed the script for *The Big Combo* "... one of the enigmas in Yordan's career. We were never able to find the writer behind this credit."

Writers hired solely to improve dialogue are too numerous to mention. Ben Hecht's resume of uncredited polish jobs is a mammoth body of work in itself. Hecht was not only prolific, but generous. When a financially strapped Rowland Brown discovered that Warner Bros. was interested in his original story *Angels with Dirty Faces*, he asked pals Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur to secretly punch up his yarn, which Hal Wallis subsequently purchased as a vehicle for Jimmy Cagney.

One of the most accomplished purveyors of "additional dialogue" was William Bowers. Renowned for his mordant wit—as exemplified in his scripts for *Cry Danger* (1951), *The Mob* (1951), *Split Second* (1953), and *Tight Spot* (1955)—an uncredited Bowers wrote the lion's share of *Pitfall* (1948) and was discovered by this writer to have revamped Daniel Fuchs' screenplay of *Criss Cross* (1949). After a *NOIR CITY* screening of *Abandoned* (1949) years ago, director Joseph M. Newman told the audience that "Any good stuff in this picture is because of Bill Bowers"—explaining perhaps why the often uncredited Bowers was given an "Additional Dialogue" credit on the film. Interviewed in *The Screenwriter Looks at The Screenwriter*, Bowers pointed out that writers under contract to the studio were paid for 40 weeks a year; many writers took work anonymously to make extra money.

Bowers was also a prodigious drinker during his most prolific



James Agee: how much of *The Night of the Hunter* did he actually write?

screenwriting period. “You gotta work all the time because it’s a messy life, drinking,” he recalled. During one lean period, Bowers and his writing colleague D. D. “Bud” Beauchamp sold the original story for *The Wistful Widow of Wagon Gap* to Universal for \$2,500.00 after working on it for “. . . an hour and a half, tops.”

IF SCREEN CREDITS

are duly noted and screenplay drafts available, what various collaborators actually wrote can be determined. In “‘The Past’ Rewritten,” (*Film Comment*, Jan.–Feb. 1991) author Jeff Schwager revealed that the oft-quoted dialogue from one of film noir’s greatest hits was the work of Frank Fenton, not the better known writers Daniel Mainwaring and James M. Cain. Schwager read all the revisions of *Out of the Past* and discovered that Fenton’s final draft had contributed all the movie’s best lines. With a résumé containing *Station West* (1948), *His Kind of Woman* (1951), *Walk Softly, Stranger* (1950), *Nocturne* (1946) and *The Falcon Takes Over* (1942), it’s obvious that Frank Fenton could compose wiseacre noir dialogue like a slumming lyricist.

The well-documented history of a screenplay can also be altered by the discovery of new archival information. For example, it was generally accepted by film scholars that James Agee, the credited screenwriter for *The Night of the Hunter*, wrote a massive original draft adapted from Davis Grubb’s novel—one that was deemed completely unacceptable. Assistant director Terry Sanders claimed the Agee screenplay was “over 400 pages long,” and Robert Mitchum recalled that Agee’s script looked like “a WPA project—the god-damned thing must have weighed eighteen pounds.” Paul Gregory, producer of *The Night of the Hunter* said that, “I read about a fourth of it and threw it out the window.”

As the conventional wisdom goes, Agee’s screenplay had to be completely rewritten—*sans* credit—by the film’s director, Charles Laughton. Some accounts allege that Agee’s poor health and drinking marred his collaboration with Laughton, and that the writer’s contribution never progressed beyond that elephantine first draft.

In 2003, Paul Sprecher, Agee’s son-in-law and current executor of the Agee estate, was rummaging through boxes in his basement for a computer keyboard to give his son when he opened a box and discovered his father-in-law’s long-sought original manuscript. In 2009, film scholar Jeffrey Couchman scrupulously reviewed it and other Agee documentation for his book, *The Night of the Hunter: A Biography of a Film*.



Director Charles Laughton conferring with star Robert Mitchum on the set of *The Night of the Hunter*

It turned out that the first draft was 293 pages (the final shooting script was 147 pages) with considerable fidelity to Davis Grubb’s book. Digressions by Agee into politics and irrelevant topics, which had been long alleged, were not present. It was a credible first draft: overly long, impractical to shoot, but faithful to the book. There was additional documentation uncovered that indicated a harmonious working relationship between Agee and Laughton during subsequent script revisions. The writer was not completely shunted aside after the first draft, as previously reported by Davis Grubb and others. Also uncovered was a letter from Agee to Paul Gregory that addressed Laughton’s contributions:

“My feeling was and is that Charles has such an immense amount to do with the script that it seems absurd to me to take solo credit. Charles’ own feeling . . . he doesn’t like to be talked of as a genius or a credit hog.”

Both Gregory and Laughton insisted there was no reason to add Laughton to Agee’s sole writing credit. Although the details of Agee’s collaboration with Laughton remain murky, it is obvious there was more to their working relationship than an unwieldy first draft and accusatory recriminations. *The Night of the Hunter* was more of a genuine collaboration between writer and director than many had previously chosen to believe.

In the end, uncredited screenwriters often sought payment more than recognition. But again, there was always the exception.

The Killers ended up being nominated for four Academy Awards—including Best Screenplay. The night of the Oscar ceremony found Richard Brooks and John Huston at Mark Hellinger’s house, drinking and listening to the awards ceremony on the radio. Brooks recalled the moment:

“I said to John, ‘Suppose the damned thing wins? Who picks up the award? . . . How is that going to make you feel?’ John thought about it for a moment or two and said, ‘Well kid, let’s pray it loses.’” It did. ■