



**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

# The Man Who Wasn't There

In October 1942, Raymond Chandler wrote a letter to Blanche Knopf, wife and associate of his American publisher, in which he described his resentment at having 'to ride around on [Dashiell] Hammett and James Cain, like an organ grinder's monkey.' Hammett is 'all right', he allowed, 'but James Cain – faugh! Everything he touches smells like a billygoat. He is every kind of writer I detest, a *faux naïf*, a Proust in greasy overalls, a dirty little boy with a piece of chalk and a board fence and nobody looking. Such people are the offal of literature, not because they write about dirty things, but because they do it in a dirty way. Nothing hard and clean and cold and ventilated.'

The disingenuously fastidious Chandler wasn't beyond writing to 'Dear Jim' five months later to boast of his and Billy Wilder's adaptation of Cain's *Double Indemnity*, a task that had apparently been made harder by the need to sharpen Cain's 'remote' dialogue, or so Chandler graciously informed him. The famously agonising collaboration with Wilder paid off, of course, and *Double Indemnity* remains one of the few noirs that is an undisputed masterpiece, despite its sentimental subplot. The musky *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), also from Cain, runs it close, and if *Ossessione* (1943), *Mildred Pierce* (1945), *Slightly Scarlet* (1955) and the 1981 *Postman* remake are lesser Cain adaptations, there's no question that the prose so reviled by Chandler makes for a potent brand of dank, carnal thriller.

The Coen brothers, whose first film *Blood Simple* (1983) bore Cain's narrative imprint, have now made another movie on which Cain was apparently the prime influence. 'Cain's stories nearly always had as their heroes schlubs – losers, guys who were involved in rather dreary and banal existences,' Ethan Coen has said. Accordingly, he and brother Joel made the protagonist of *The Man Who Wasn't There*, set in the northern California town of Santa Rosa (like Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt*) in 1949, a barber who blackmails and stabs to death the department-store boss Big Dave (James Gandolfini) who has been cuckolding him. As if to underscore the Cain connection, the boss' wife is the archly named Ann Nirdlinger – thus a cousin of *Double Indemnity*'s Phyllis Nirdlinger, whom Barbara Stanwyck transformed into Glendale siren Phyllis Dietrichson – and a county medical examiner is called Diedrichson.

And yet *The Man Who Wasn't There* is unlike the various Cain adaptations. In making Billy Bob Thornton's passive, asexual Ed Crane the hero, the Coens have deliberately kept the chilli powder out of what in other hands might have been a sweat-inducing stew. Early in the film Crane acknowledges in voiceover that he's none too bothered by his wife's adultery – 'It's a free country' – and there's a startling scene towards the close when Scarlett Johansson's adolescent Birdy tries to thank Ed, who has attempted to sponsor her as a piano student, with a sexual favour he tenderly refuses. Imagine the worn-out Mr Dietrichson as the hero of *Double Indemnity* instead of Fred MacMurray's priapic Neff, or the buffoonish Nick the Greek as the hero of the original *Postman* instead of John Garfield's virile Frank, and you have a sense of the moralising effect.

Similarly Ed's wife Doris (Frances McDormand), though promisingly glimpsed from behind as a burnished blonde snapping on a girdle in the scene that introduces her, emerges as a peculiarly dreary adulteress, one who plays

bingo, says 'Love ya, honey' to Ed while she shaves her legs in the bath and demonstrates no particular desire for her lover. Femmes fatales are supposed to be phantasmic black widows who frequent roadhouses and bars; Doris is an enthusiastic book keeper and a sloppy drunk who eventually stings herself. Stylistically, meanwhile, the *mise en scène* of *The Man Who Wasn't There* has those exact aesthetic values Chandler missed in Cain's stories: visually it's as 'hard and clean and cold and ventilated' as the barber's shop where Ed works. The black-and-white film has been photographed, cut and sound-edited to Kubrickian pristineness: it offers us trails of cigarette smoke spiralling deliberately into a back yard hymned by cicadas; the dappled effect of light shining through trees; Tony Shalhoub's barnstorming lawyer transfixed in a vault of light as he offers some spurious wisdom; and a flying hubcap that metamorphoses fleetingly into a UFO from a Jack Arnold movie – a 3-D missile from the film's subtextual paranoia, which destroys Doris and Big Dave and renders Ann Nirdlinger a nut but doesn't threaten Ed's equanimity even when he's doomed.

If classic *films noirs* are febrile, there's a case to be made that *The Man Who Wasn't There*, which is languid to the point of sluggishness, is not only an anti-*noir* – as if the Coens were trying to catch out all the film reviewers who will inevitably mislabel it – but a puritanical revision of Cain too. Cain's paradigmatic noir stories were about the feverish desire to make a wish come true and the price that's paid when it does. In *Postman* and *Double Indemnity*, Michael Walker has written in *The Movie Book of Film Noir* (1992), 'the hero becomes so obsessed sexually by a woman that he is persuaded to murder her husband, and the *noir* world which he enters is psychological rather than physical, characterised above all by guilt and the fear of discovery.' Nothing like Ed, in other words.

The somnambulistic barber – 'it was like I was a ghost walking down the street,' he reports after Doris meets her fate – is a cypher in his own story, like the Western 'hero' nobody noticed in the Pete Atkin / Clive James song 'Stranger in Town'. As the title suggests, the film is built around a structuring absence. Usually that means the absence of a parent or a spouse, but here it means the absence of ego. So what does Ed want, if not money, success, a prime piece of jailbait or even to be a small-town barber? Or, to frame the question as Ed's brother-in-law Frank and Big Dave put it, 'What kind of man are you?' Although the Coens have Ed voice an existential question about the pointlessness of life when, giving a kid a crew cut, he muses on the inexorability and disposability of human hair, there's an overriding sense that he wants nothing and is no kind of man but a dead man walking.

**Graham Fuller, *Sight and Sound*, October 2001**

---

## THE MAN WHO WASN'T THERE

*Directed by:* Joel Coen  
*©:* Gramercy Pictures  
*Presented by:* USA Films  
*Production Company:* Working Title Films  
*Executive Producers:* Tim Bevan, Eric Fellner  
*Produced by:* Ethan Coen  
*Co-producer:* John Cameron  
*Associate Producer:* Robert Graf  
*Unit Production Manager:* John Cameron  
*Production Co-ordinator:* Karen Ruth Getchell  
*Production Accountant:* Cheryl Kurk  
*Location Manager:* Ned Shapiro  
*Post-production Supervisor:* David Diliberto  
*1st Assistant Director:* Betsy Magruder  
*Script Supervisor:* Donald Murphy  
*Casting by:* Ellen Chenoweth  
*Written by:* Joel Coen, Ethan Coen  
*Director of Photography:* Roger Deakins  
*Camera Operator:* Clint Dougherty  
*1st Assistant Camera:* Andy Harris  
*Key Grip:* Bob Gray  
*Visual Effects Supervisor:* Janek Sirrs  
*Special Visual Effects:* LLC Manex Visual Effects  
*Special Effects Supervisor:* Peter Chesney  
*Film Editors:* Roderick Jaynes, Tricia Cooke  
*Associate Film Editor:* David Diliberto  
*Production Designer:* Dennis Gassner  
*Art Director:* Chris Gorak  
*Set Designer:* Jeff Markwith  
*Set Decorator:* Chris Spellman  
*Property Master:* Ritchie Kremer  
*Costume Designers:* Mary Zophres, Maria Aguilar  
*Make-up Supervisors:* Jean Black, Amy Schmiederer  
*Special Effects Make-up:* Make-up & Monster Studios  
*Hair Designer:* Paul Leblanc  
*Key Hairstylist:* Joani Yarbrough, Carol Doran  
*Title Design:* Balsmeyer & Everett Inc, Randall Balsmeyer  
*Opticals:* Pacific Title  
*Original Score:* Carter Burwell, Dean Parker  
*Piano Performances:* Jonathan Feldman, Aquim Krajka  
*Orchestrated and Conducted by:* Carter Burwell  
*Choreographer:* Bill Landrum, Jacqui Landrum  
*Sound Design:* Eugene Gearty  
*Production Sound Mixer:* Peter Kurland  
*Boom Operator:* Randy Johnson  
*Re-recording Mixer:* Skip Lievsay  
*Supervising Sound Editor:* Skip Lievsay  
*Sound Editor:* Jerry Ross  
*Dialogue Editor:* Fred Rosenberg  
*ADR Editor:* Kenton Jakub  
*Foley Supervisor:* Jennifer Ralston

*Foley Artist:* Marko Costanzo  
*Foley Mixer:* George A. Lara  
*Foley Editor:* Ben Cheah  
*Stunt Co-ordinator:* Jery Hewitt

### Cast

Billy Bob Thornton (*Ed Crane*)  
Frances McDormand (*Doris Crane*)  
Adam Alexi-Malle (*Carcanogues*)  
Michael Badalucco (*Frank*)  
Katherine Borowitz (*Ann Nirdlinger*)  
Richard Jenkins (*Walter Abundas*)  
Scarlett Johansson (*Birdy Abundas*)  
Jon Polito (*Creighton Tolliver*)  
Tony Shalhoub (*Freddy Riedenschneider*)  
James Gandolfini (*Big Dave Nirdlinger*)  
Christopher Kriesa (*Persky*)  
Brian Haley (*Krebs*)  
Jack Mcgee (*Burns*)  
Gregg Binkley (*the new man*)  
Alan Fudge (*Diedrichson*)  
Lilyan Chauvin (*medium*)  
Ted Rooney (*bingo caller*)  
Abraham Benrubi (*young man*)  
Christian Ferratti (*child*)  
Rhoda Gemignani (*Costanza*)  
E.J. Callahan (*customer*)  
Brooke Smith (*sobbing prisoner*)  
Ron Ross (*banker*)  
Hallie Singleton (*waitress*)  
Jon Donnelly (*gatto eater*)  
Dan Martin (*bailiff*)  
Nicholas Lanier (*Tony*)  
Tom Dahlgren (*judge 1*)  
Booth Colman (*judge 2*)  
Stanley Desantis (*new man's customer*)  
Peter Siragusa (*bartender*)  
Christopher McDonald (*macadam salesman*)  
John Michael Higgins (*doctor*)  
Rick Scarry (*district attorney*)  
George Ives (*Lloyd Garroway*)  
Devin Cole Borisoff (*swimming boy*)  
Mary Bogue (*prisoner visitor*)  
Don Donati (*pie contest timer*)  
Arthur Reeves (*flophouse clerk*)  
Michelle Rae Weber, Randi Pareira, Robert Loftin, Kenneth Hughes, Gordon Hart, Brenda Mae Hamilton, Lloyd Gordon, Leonard Crofoot, Rita Bland, Audrey Baranishyn, Qyn Hughes, Rachel McDonald (*dancers*)

USA 2001  
116 mins

---

## BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

**The Killers** Tue 25 May 20:30; Tue 8 Jun 14:30; Wed 23 Jun 17:50  
(+ pre-recorded intro by Imogen Sara Smith, author of 'In Lonely Places: Film Noir beyond the City')  
**Alice in the Cities (Alice in den Städten)**  
Wed 26 May 17:50; Tue 1 Jun 14:30; Fri 25 Jun 20:45  
**Eraserhead** Thu 27 May 18:20; Mon 14 Jun 21:00; Thu 24 Jun 21:10  
**Man Hunt** Fri 28 May 18:10; Sat 12 Jun 16:00; Tue 29 Jun 14:15  
**Persona** Fri 28 May 21:00; Wed 2 Jun 18:10 (+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Mon 28 Jun 21:00  
**La Haine** Sat 29 May 21:00; Wed 16 Jun 21:00; Fri 18 Jun 20:40  
**Citizen Kane** Sun 30 May 12:40; Mon 21 Jun 20:45  
**Touch of Evil** Mon 31 May 12:45; Sat 5 Jun 17:50; Sun 20 Jun 18:15  
**The Last Picture Show (Director's Cut)**  
Mon 31 May 12:50; Mon 7 Jun 17:45  
**Steamboat Bill, Jr.** Thu 3 Jun 14:30; Tue 22 Jun 18:30  
**Sweet Smell of Success**  
Fri 4 Jun 15:00; Sun 13 Jun 15:45; Sat 26 Jun 11:40

## BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](http://bfi.org.uk/join)

**The Man Who Wasn't There** Fri 4 Jun 17:50; Sun 27 Jun 18:20  
**L'eclisse (The Eclipse)** Sat 5 Jun 12:10; Tue 15 Jun 17:50  
**The White Ribbon (Das weisse Band)**  
Sun 6 Jun 18:10; Sat 26 Jun 16:30  
**Le Doulos** + pre-recorded intro by Professor Ginette Vincendeau, King's College London  
Mon 7 Jun 14:15; Thu 17 Jun 20:45; Wed 30 Jun 17:45  
**The Night of the Hunter** Tue 8 Jun 20:50; Wed 16 Jun 18:15 (+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large)  
**The Tango Lesson** Wed 9 Jun 17:50 (+ pre-recorded intro by So Mayer, author of 'The Cinema of Sally Potter')  
**Cleo from 5 to 7 (Cléo de 5 à 7)** Thu 10 Jun 21:00; Mon 21 Jun 14:30  
**Bitter Victory** Sun 20 Jun 13:00; Mon 28 Jun 17:55  
**The Big City (Mahanagar)** Wed 23 Jun 17:40  
**The Gospel According to Matthew (Il vangelo secondo Matteo)**  
Thu 24 Jun 17:40

## BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on [player.bfi.org.uk](http://player.bfi.org.uk)