

THE BABY IN THE ICEBOX And Other Short Fiction
by James M. Cain

James M. Cain, dubbed the twenty-minute egg of hardboiled fiction by David Madden, spent less than a fourth of his life in California, but California is where he really cooked. Like another transplanted Marylander, Dashiell Hammett, Cain did his best work at land's end. It was in a Western setting that he found his subjects – egalitarian characters who chased misguided versions of the American Dream that ultimately turned into nightmare.

Cain's California time was the Thirties and Forties when he wrote the novels for which he is remembered. After returning East in the Fifties he labored for two more decades but failed to maintain the hardnosed standard he had established with "The Postman Always Rings Twice" and "Double Indemnity." The late historical novels he turned out were flabby compared to the above twin tales of illicit sexual passion cum murder. Trim storyline, relentless pace, and fatal consequence had given way to age.

But what was Cain's early life like? This collection proposes to answer that question. For one favorably disposed to his work, the answer is a regrettable not much. Here are ten journalistic sketches, nine short stories, and a novella that was originally serialized in Liberty magazine. Most of the sketches first appeared in H.L. Mencken's American Mercury and they have not aged well. Composed in cutesy vernacular as satires of government and bureaucracy, they ape Ring Lardner's caustic style but lack his bite. Cain as Will Rogers seems an irony of miscasting.

At this time Cain had begun to publish stories too. Those here included are notable for their inchoate announcement of themes that he later developed fully. The title story and "Pastorale" are studies in domestic murder, but the calculated device of speaking through a countrified voice interferes with the dialogue and sabotages the stories' effects.

The best of the stories is atypical. "The Taking of Montfaucon" is based on an incident experienced by Cain during World War I and follows a loyal soldier trying to deliver a message through a hazardous no man's land of detonating shells. Despite its understatement, "Montfaucon" epitomizes the confusion and terror of trench warfare, and here the ingenuous voice of the unsophisticated soldier seems just right.

The novella, "Money and the Woman" takes up a third of the book,

and while it does not qualify as early work, does add pages to a slim volume. "Money" appeared a year after Cain's four major novels had been published and is a shallower variation on "Double Indemnity." Again there is a felonious plan in which the narrator is seduced by the wife into what turns out to be a reverse embezzling scheme. As a bonus, the story constitutes a crash course in how to beat the bank without getting caught.

But something has gone awry. The essential Cain woman, ruthlessly determined and driving the sexually obsessed narrator to his moral and psychological limits is here a vague, mostly off-stage shadow of Cora, Phyllis, or the lawful but equally driven Mildred Pierce. And, inexplicably, a melodramatic happy ending is tacked on. Nowhere to be found is Cain's taut structure of simple declarative sentences that build suspense and foreshadow the inevitability of tragic consequences.

A good Cain sentence slugs the reader – as one of Joe Louis' opponents described the champ's jab – "like an electric light bulb exploding in your face." I found no such worthy examples in "Money and the Woman," whereas a quick flip through "Double Indemnity" produces two: "I loved her like a rabbit loved a rattlesnake" and "She looks like what came aboard the ship to shoot dice for souls in 'The Ancient Mariner.'"

That's Cain –vintage stuff – not to be found in this collection of historical interest only. These fruits were picked too early or hung on to too late.

Los Angeles Times, 1981

.