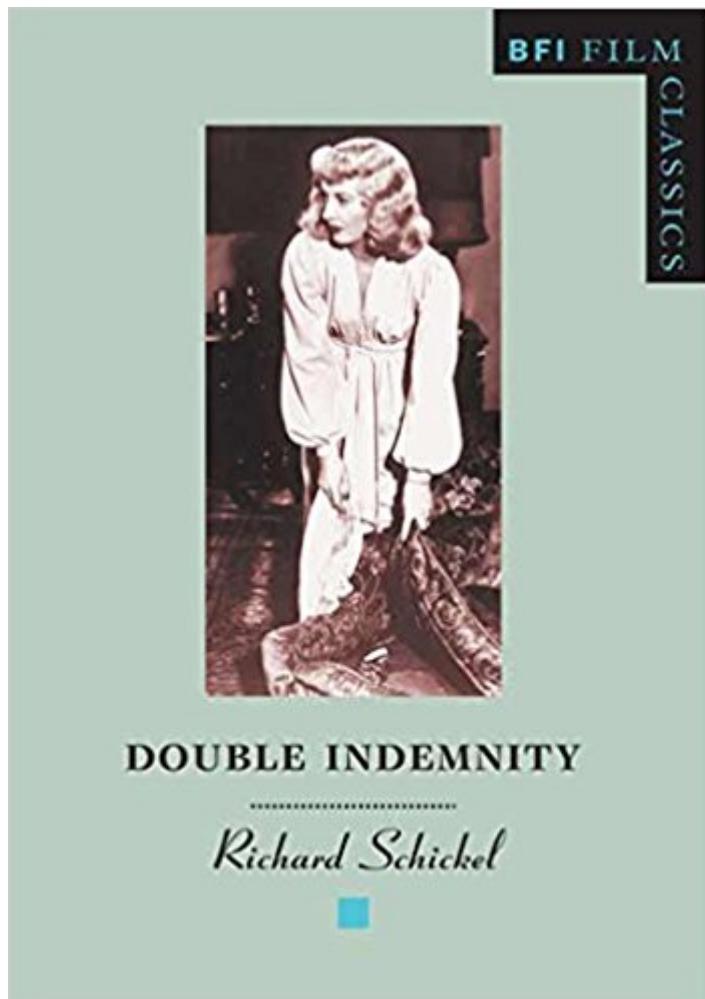


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Double Indemnity (BFI Film Classics)



Synopsis

A new kind of film emerged from Hollywood in the early 1940s, thrillers that derived their plots from the hard-boiled school of crime fiction but with a style all their own. Appearing in 1944, "Double Indemnity" was a key film in the definition of the genre that came to be known as film noir. Its script creates two unforgettable criminal characters: the cynically manipulative Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) and the likeable but amoral Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray). Billy Wilder's brilliant direction enmeshes them in chiaroscuro patterns, the bright California sun throwing shadows of venetian blinds across dusty rooms, shafts of harsh lamplight cutting through the night. Richard Schickel traces in fascinating detail the genesis of the film: its literary origins in the crime fiction of the 1930s, the difficult relations between Wilder and his scriptwriter Raymond Chandler, the casting of a reluctant Fred MacMurray, the late decision to cut from the film the expensively shot final sequence of Neff's execution. This elegantly written account, copiously illustrated, confirms a new the status of "Double Indemnity" as an undisputed classic.

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Customer Reviews

Richard Schickel is a great lover of Billy Wilder's Double Indemnity, one of the earliest and best examples of film noir. In this lively book, Schickel provides an engrossing account of how the movie's screenplay was written. He compares the film to James M. Cain's novel and talks about how screenwriters Wilder and Raymond Chandler tried to improve upon it. He quotes generously from the film's dialogue and waxes admiringly upon its sleekness and style. Schickel's deep affection is infectious. His book encourages you to hear the movie through his enthusiastic ears and

see it through his delighted eyes.

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Schickel is particular about what he thinks is best and like most great film critics he lists Double Indemnity as the very epitome of the forties film noir classics. Another gem in the expert BFI literary series that critiques the greatest movies of all time.

Pristine condition. Just as described.

Double Indemnity holds an absolutely unique place in my personal history. I have encountered movies that have bucked the trend and been better than their books: THE BOURNE IDENTITY, RABBIT PROOF FENCE, THE PLAYER, DRUGSTORE COWBOY. But those books were not very good to begin with. What is remarkable is that the novel DOUBLE INDEMNITY is really quite good, and the movie is still better. That, my friends, is an accomplishment. Author Richard Schickel helps us understand why in this excellent entry in the BFI series. A good deal of time (relatively speaking; this book is small even by BFI standards) is spent examining the writing of the movie against the backdrop of the book's author, James Cain, the screenwriter, Raymond Chandler (a huge figure in American crime noir himself), their relationships to Hollywood, and Chandler's icy relationship with co-screenwriter and director Billy Wilder. Great art sometimes comes from the creative destruction that occurs when such discordant personalities come together, to which the movie Double Indemnity. The movie is such a pleasure to watch now

that it is striking to realize what it meant at the time. It came out before the term crime noir was even coined, making it that much harder to sell, both to the audience and, before that, to the studios. Together with the more conservative social climate and the censorship board reluctant to show crime unpunished by the law (the criminals punishing each other did not count), and it is a wonder that it made it to the screen. On top of that, the casting. Fred MacMurray fits into the role of Walter Neff, the insurance man more dupe than he realizes, so seamlessly, it seems the role was written just for him. But he was a controversial choice, having built a reputation as a nice guy in comedy roles. Other actors had turned it down, one because he insisted, consistent with the tune of the times, that Walter Neff reveal himself as a cop at the end, never having been on the wrong side of the moral divide. That was George Raft. Remember him? No, me neither. Nice instinct you had there, George. And Edward G. Robinson? Reluctant to take the supporting role after being the star for years, he made the right choice to follow a career path of excellent co-starring roles rather than decline as the lead. His character was written in to the movie to provide a moral center lacking in the book, and Robinson hit it out of the park. All discussed, shortly but sweetly, in this nice little book. If you like the movie, by all means, read this, and enjoy it a wee bit more.

Overall, Schickel's short monograph on Wilder's *DOUBLE INDEMNITY* is a nice piece of work. The information on Wilder's collaboration with the somewhat difficult Raymond Chandler is particularly well researched and well presented. Wilder is, after all, a writer's director, the way that John Ford is a director's director or Sergei Eisenstein, an editor's director. When film critic Andrew Sarris downgraded Wilder in his book *THE AMERICAN CINEMA*, it is because he could not understand that a director can be an artist while lacking a distinctive visual style. If Wilder's art comes out primarily during the scripting phase of the process, the resulting film can be just as successful -- especially if you have a great veteran like John B. Seitz behind the camera. And there is no doubt that *DOUBLE INDEMNITY* is a masterpiece. It is a complex work bringing together Billy Wilder's bemused street smarts, James M. Cain's corrosive venom, and Raymond Chandler's poetic noir dialogue. My only complaint with this monograph is that Schickel spent very little time on Cain's original novel except to pan it in passing. Granted that Chandler and Wilder improved on the original, the original is still one of the classic noir novels and deserves more than a passing nod. Secondly, Schickel just mentions in passing an article on screenwriting written by Chandler and doesn't even bother footnoting it. I finally tracked down the article in the second volume of the outstanding Library of America set of Chandler's work (which, by the by, also includes the complete film script for *DOUBLE INDEMNITY*). Chandler was obviously very down on screenwriting. Like

many writers, he assumed that the script was THE key element of the film, and that writers should be treated with greater deference. After reading it, I still think the world of Chandler, but I feel all the more respect for Wilder for how he handled his somewhat cranky associate.

Double Indemnity is perhaps the best film noir of all; and this is perhaps the best volume in the entire BFI series of monographs on classic (and modern classic) films. Schickel's study includes the usual (for the series) personal appreciation of the film and the way it helped create the genre (Maltese Falcon and Citizen Kane set the tone and the look; Double Indemnity contributed the central iconic character of noir, the two-timing blonde, and it wasn't until she was added to the mix that the genre took off). But it's also a solid job of research, detailing the work process of Wilder and his often-frustrated collaborator Raymond Chandler, the way in which they turned Cain's prose into speakable dialogue (in the process improving almost every aspect of the original), and most intriguing of all, outlining the film's original ending, in which death in the electric chair paid off the theme of mechanized people in a mechanized society riding an assembly line to doom.

Schickel is not a great film writer, although he is very influential. He gives an excellent introduction to the Wilder classic Double Indemnity and gives a good background to the film. Schickel could have done more and looked at the various interpretations of the film, but he is content to keep it focussed on its history.

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