

OUT OF THE PAST

Post war (ww2), intricately plotted film noir __ 8/10

Novel by Daniel Mainwaring

Screenplay by Daniel Mainwaring

Directed by Jacques Tourneur

Robert Mitchum ... Jeff Bailey

Jane Greer ... Kathie Moffat

Kirk Douglas ... Whit Sterling

Rhonda Fleming ... Meta Carson

Richard Webb ... Jim

Steve Brodie ... Jack Fisher

Virginia Huston ... Ann Miller

Jeff Bailey: I sell gasoline, I make a small profit. With that I buy groceries. The grocer makes a profit. We call it earning a living. You may have heard of it somewhere.

Through the 1940s, before the Hollywood studio system folded itself into the social conformity of the 1950s, several well-written and superbly plotted stories made it to the silver screen. In the category of film noir, *Out of the Past*, starring Robert Mitchum—one of the more individualistic, risk-taking actors (even into the 1950s)—is one such gem.

The above statement from Jeff Bailey (Robert Mitchum) occurs early in the movie as we find him in a small California town trying to lead a normal life. We even see him out fishing (!), with his local honey Ann (Virginia Huston), and looking every bit like the guy who wants to settle down, buy a house, raise a passel of kids in the country. Not! Bailey's contemplation of the idyllic life is interrupted when another big man—menacing, obviously from a past Bailey wants to leave that way—finds Bailey, and gives him an appointment he cannot refuse.

Bailey knows he has to attend, that he has to deal with the situation. He makes a point of driving to his girlfriend's home—her parents have always regarded the new boyfriend as a little shaky—and then laying it out for her. We get the background as a flashback from his talk with Ann. And it's a complicated, though, oddly enough, a crystal clear tale where you need to pay attention (can't wander off to the kitchen for more than a few seconds).

The bad guy is one Mr. Whit Sterling (Kirk Douglas), a really smooth and nasty little kingpin in the illegal-business regime. Not too long ago Bailey was a semi-dirty detective, LA I think, who did some occasional side work for Sterling. But the big job Bailey did for Sterling, the one that moves the story along, was that Bailey was commissioned to find the moll who shot and wounded Sterling, supposedly stole \$40 grand from him, then fled to places unknown. I have to talk a little more about this woman Kathie Moffat (Jane Greer) and her role in the plot because when we first see her, in Acapulco, alone, she's absolutely a vision.

The movie is in black and white, and Bailey is at the bar in this open-air restaurant. Picture Rick's Café Americain in Casablanca, during the day. It's sunny outside, but the buildings around the square create shadows. She's dressed in a lightweight suit, white, you can see the suggestion of her perfect thighs through the fabric of the skirt. She walks into the cafe with calm assertion, as if carried by the faint breeze in a gossamer carriage. With royal

posture, she takes a seat at the table and looks around. Her eyes smile tauntingly, but not her lips, which are sensuous and not to be denied.

She has Bailey at hello. [And me and most guys at first sight... through foggy glasses.]

Well, that's it. Jane Greer is the "complete package," the five-skill ballplayer, the Madonna and the Whore, the everything in "You are my everything." Male-gendered movie fans can recall other spellbinding introductory moments in cinematic history—Rita Hayworth in *Gilda*, Jennifer O'Neill in *Summer of '42*, Kathleen Turner in *Body Heat*, even Ingrid Bergman in *Casablanca*, many others—where, in the lyrics of Robert Palmer's song, *Simply Irresistible*, "... she's so fine, there's no tellin' where the money went." And, basically, anything the leading man does after meeting such a woman doesn't astonish you.

So, okay, Bailey and Kathie become close, and the nuts are off the buggy. It all ends a few years back, not in the manner Bailey had hoped. Now, today, Whit Sterling wants him for something else, which does bear on the past; will Bailey be sucked in, even with all his street smarts? Stay tuned. I will say the complications of the plot ratchet up a notch in the current world, and perhaps some of the motivations challenge belief.

But it's a good yarn, and not your run-of-the-mill romantic fiction.

From the gitgo, we see a character in Bailey that's somewhat damaged. Which fits with reality in the main. When you have laws against victimless crimes—chiefly gambling and drugs—most cops with any degree of normality in them yield to the market (i.e. humane behavior) in some way. They know that what they're supposed to be apprehending people for isn't a real crime, and probably 50% of the popos have no burning desire to bash ordinary people for succumbing to "vices." So to be a moral person in those circumstances demands that a cop look the other way.

When they decide to do that, it's only a small step to "look the other way for a price." Then, because the type of person that will supply illegal markets tends to have real criminal tendencies—meaning he doesn't see a big difference in stealing from someone and providing a service to someone at an astronomically inflated price. The Whit Sterlings of the world are a dime a dozen... well, a whole buncha dimes per dozen. And as glamorous, or even heroic, as these characters may occasionally be (via defying the evil coercive state), most of 'em are low-life sleazeballs.

Out of the Past gives a fairly authentic portrayal of a good cop in a bad system. This is in the 40s, too, where victimless crime laws—particularly drug laws—are still relatively immature. So in the context, Bailey is a good man. He's even better for quitting the force and trying to make a go of it by the mundane process of "earning a living." Mitchum does a fabulous job playing the less-than-perfect romantic lead; Kirk Douglas is pure silky meanness as Sterling; and I've already spoken of Jane Greer.

She does have more to do in the movie than to enter the cafe like the second coming. She's all right in the give and take, as an actress creating a believable character, but it's hard to top the introduction. It simply stays with you if you're a man. Definitely worth the price of admission. You really have to hand it to the director, the camera guys, and the music guys—I'm sure there was music but nothing to remember as such; it fit.

It's still a man's world in the 1940s, after all. The contrast between what Bailey once enjoyed with Kathie—and, I might add, what he may be inclined to enjoy in real time

with a kept woman Meta Carson (Rhonda Fleming)—and the down-home, stand-by-your-man, love-him-even-if-he-don't-go-to-church woman, Ann Miller, is striking. [Though personally I'm thinking Ms. Miller is way fine despite her doltish townie ex-boyfriend and busybody parents. These are 1947 Hollywood girls, you know; even the glamour-challenged ones stack up favorably to the girl-next-door in suburban Cleveland.]

Is *Out of the Past* a great movie, say, like *The Maltese Falcon*? Well, yes, to me it's at least as good as that one. People make a big deal out of MF (1941), but I look back and see plenty of goofy behavior that doesn't add up. In *Out of the Past*, I must say, such purely unbelievable behavior—most of the unbelievable stuff is from the women characters—is at a minimum. And then you have this "vision of the perfect woman" thing, the Jane Greer original, going for it, too.

Surely, this exalted image of woman warrants some final scribbles.

Candidly, I would guess many if not most men lack the "romantic" sensibility where watching Kathie Moffat enter a cafe-tavern in Acapulco floats their boat. [Now I'm coming up with images of Ayn Rand's Dagny Taggart (or Dominique Francon). And, you know what, Jane Greer's Kathie Moffat adds some needed color and visceral lust to these Randian conceptions.] I admit to feeling a twinge in the ol' grungels for Kathie, that there's a kind of animal thing going on, or certainly could be if one played one's cards right... underneath the fine linen. And most likely you would like it and feel extremely good about yourself in the morning.

Okay, getting over my head now. Good movie, pay attention.

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Robert Mitchum | Out of the Past | Film Noir | Jane Greer | Kirk Douglas