



Woolrich, Cornell (1903-1968)

by Charles Krinsky

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In a writing career that lasted over forty years, Cornell Woolrich was a prolific and successful author of hard-boiled fiction. Many of his works were adapted for radio, television, and film. Among the best-known movies based on Woolrich's stories and novels are Robert Siodmak's *Phantom Lady* (1944), Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), and François Truffaut's *The Bride Wore Black* (1967).

Woolrich was born Cornell George Hopley-Woolrich on December 4, 1903, in New York City, to Genaro Hopley-Woolrich, a civil engineer, and Claire Attalie Tarler Hopley-Woolrich. His parents divorced when he was a young child, and Woolrich spent most of his early years with his father in Mexico and Central America. At the age of twelve, Woolrich returned to New York to live with his mother. He was periodically a student at Columbia University from 1921 to 1926, but left without graduating after he published his first novel, *Cover Charge* (1926).

Like most of Woolrich's early fiction, *Cover Charge* was a story of the Jazz Age, heavily influenced by the work of F. Scott Fitzgerald. Woolrich's second novel, *Children of the Ritz*, appeared in 1927. The next year, he moved to Los Angeles to work on the script for the book's movie adaptation. While living in California, in 1930 Woolrich married Gloria Blackton, the daughter of J. Stuart Blackton, a motion picture pioneer who founded the Vitagraph Company, an early film studio.

The newlyweds separated after three months and the marriage, which may not have been consummated, was later annulled. It is likely that the immediate cause of the separation was his wife's discovery of a diary in which Woolrich recorded his homosexual experiences. At the time, Woolrich was sexually promiscuous, frequently donning a sailor's uniform, which he kept hidden in a locked suitcase, to wander the waterfront at night in search of encounters.

In 1932, Woolrich moved with his mother to an apartment in New York's Hotel Marseilles. Although he could afford better housing, and despite ongoing friction in their relationship, Woolrich lived with his mother in this rundown residential hotel until her death in 1957. Then, for a brief time, Woolrich lived with his aunt, Estelle Tarler Garcia, in the decrepit Hotel Franconia. Eventually, he resided alone at the Sheraton-Russell, a luxury hotel.

Woolrich published his first crime story in 1934. Sometimes using the pseudonyms William Irish and George Hopley, he continued to write in this genre until the 1960s. Much of Woolrich's suspense fiction was produced quickly for pulp magazines and, as a result, was inconsistent in characterization and confusingly plotted. Nevertheless, his best tales, including "It Had to Be Murder" (1942) and *The Black Path of Fear* (1944), remain compelling because of their depictions of fearful, alienated, and uncertain lives.

Woolrich was secretive about his homosexuality, and his writings include no unambiguously gay characters. However, it is evident that his ambivalent and troubled emotions about sex and human relations inspired recurring themes and situations in his fiction. For example, in the novels *The Bride Wore Black* (1940) and *Phantom Lady* (1942) love is portrayed as a potential source of happiness that, ironically, brings death and

destruction to those who are too vulnerable to it. Similarly, the lonely protagonists of works such as "The Boy Cried Murder" (1947) and *I Married a Dead Man* (1948) search for safe haven in families that turn out to be filled with dangers.

During his last years, Woolrich was plagued by ill health, perhaps a consequence of the heavy drinking and chain smoking that began when he was a young man. In 1965, he underwent cataract surgery. In January 1968, a gangrenous leg, which had gone untreated, was amputated. On September 25, 1968, Woolrich died after suffering a stroke. In memory of his mother, he left his estate, worth \$850,000, to Columbia University to endow scholarships in journalism.

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