

NOIR CITY

Presents

GETTING SHUT-EYE

AN INTERVIEW WITH *NIGHTMARE ALLEY*'S
GUILLERMO DEL TORO & KIM MORGAN

To say the new film version of *Nightmare Alley* is highly anticipated would be an understatement. Whispers that multi-award-winning director-producer-screenwriter-author Guillermo del Toro had plans to adapt William Lindsay Gresham's 1946 novel—previously filmed in 1947—first surfaced in 2018, not long after del Toro took home Best Director and Best Picture Academy Awards for *The Shape of Water* (2017).

For many cineastes and noiristas, the already-formidable goodwill and enthusiasm about the project only increased when it was announced that del Toro would be cowriting the screenplay with Kim Morgan. Morgan, who has written for publications including *Playboy*, *Sight & Sound*, and her own popular film blog *Sunset Gun* (as well as serving as a juror, programmer, and guest director for several film festivals), is also known to NOIR CITY readers for her provocative piece “In Defense of the Femme Fatale” in our “Women in Film Noir” issue (Fall 2015). Then there's the excellent 2008 DVD commentary for 1948's *Road House*¹ in which she slings facts and insights with Eddie Muller.

Amid the excitement surrounding *Nightmare Alley*, Morgan and del Toro were also married in May of this year. I recently spoke with them by phone in the weeks leading up to *Nightmare Alley*'s December 17 US release date.

—Brent Calderwood

¹Noir trivia: The silent-film actor/director George Beranger, who had a bit part as Richard Widmark's bespectacled fishing buddy Lefty in *Road House*, played the geek in *Nightmare Alley*.





Tunnel vision: The symbolic imagery in *Nightmare Alley's* carnival funhouse is a wink to Hitchcock—but also foreshadows the affliction called “shut-eye” that besets phony mentalists like Stan Carlisle (Bradley Cooper), who start believing their own lies

NOIR CITY: Can you tell me how this project got started?

Guillermo del Toro: When Kim and I were talking about working together, she said, “What about *Nightmare Alley*?” And I said, that would be a great idea because it’s such a difficult book that it would be a great exercise in writing. We could just make the movie we wanted without thinking about anything else—production, difficulties, etcetera.

Kim Morgan: I really love the novel—I also love the 1947 movie. But I wanted to adapt the incredible novel, and that was a difficult process, because adapting a novel and trying to get everything in is impossible—the movie would be ten hours long. But the more I researched William Lindsay Gresham, the more I became very attached to him and his vision and what he was trying to achieve with the novel. I was reading all kinds of things about Gresham: reading his novel *Limbo Tower* (1949), reading his essays, reading his nonfiction book about carnival life, *Monster Midway* (1953).

Nick Tosches wrote that wonderful essay about the novel and Gresham [the introduction to the 2010 New York Review Books edition of *Nightmare Alley*]. I loved one part he touched on so powerfully, the alcoholism aspect of it—as Tosches wrote, “The delirium tremens writhe and strike in this book like the snakes within.” I kept thinking about how many of us are all kind of running from something inside of us that we’re trying not to face and that maybe we self-medicate with alcohol or drugs, maybe we look at the tarot, or maybe we go into psychoanalysis. But sometimes once you start facing your demons, your demons come to the surface and they frighten you. There’s a lot of fear and anxiety in the book that I wanted to really look at in the adaptation as we were working on it.

I thought so much about Gresham as we were writing it—so much so that it was really hard for me to take things out [*laughs*].

GDT: We could not include everything. The novel is amazing; however, for me the thing that I identify with is that William Lindsay Gresham was grappling with every aspect of modern urban America: the overwhelming dispiriting effect of capitalism, the search for something more in Buddhism and Catholicism and mysticism and tarot and even Scientology and yoga.

He was really a seeker—and so we thought it would be great if Stan was looking for something. This was a major difference from the original movie; in our adaptation when Stan finds what he believes he’s destined to be, he feels only momentary relief. But he was not really *destined* to be a great magician, he was not destined to be a man of society—this was what he made himself into. To me, it is the illusion of the American Dream. You pursue the American Dream of success and accumulation but wind up in a “nightmare alley.”

One of the things that’s key in noir is that there’s a peace that comes with losing everything and not having to keep up appearances. That is something you can see in *The Killing* (1956), you can see it in *Too Late for Tears* (1949), in a lot of noirs. In the end of *Double Indemnity* (1944), when [Walter Neff] is finally found out, there’s a relief.

NC: Guillermo, while on the subject of those classic film noirs, *Nightmare Alley* is being described as your first “official” venture into film noir, although your 1986 short film *Doña Lupe* has some noir elements. Do you agree that this new movie is film noir? And—this is for both of you—was that a consideration while you were working on the screenplay?



Smooth operators: Stan as “The Great Stanton” invites Dr. Lilith Ritter (Cate Blanchett)—the most “surgical” of noir’s femmes fatales—into the spotlight while his wife, Molly (Rooney Mara), looks on

GDT: To me, what was “official” was to honor the reality of that moment in American art and literature coming out of World War I and the Depression—those artists’ need to acknowledge crime and violence, and the violence done to the American spirit, and new environments that were not bucolic. So to me it was honoring [the novels] *They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?* (1935), *The Day of the Locust* (1939), *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), [and the artists] Thomas Hart Benton and George Bellows; it’s also the confluence of Tin Pan Alley music with the brutal reality of the carnival—it was about honoring all of that.

Although we do have nods to certain noirs, like the entrance to the carnival is a nod to *Strangers on a Train* (1951); and the bag and the money that Stan has at the end is a nod to *Too Late for Tears*. But we very consciously said we’re not making a noir that tries to reference the acknowledged clichés.

KM: We watched a lot of pre-Code films as well; we wanted that kind of grit.

GDT: Pre-Code, along with some other things, was a big North Star for us because it sort of chronicles all the reality without noir’s genre superimposition, you know? All the sex, violence, and corruption without being censored by the censorship boards.

KM: The 1933 pre-Code *Heroes for Sale* was a big movie for us. William Wellman shows a guy coming back from the war addicted to morphine. In *Nightmare Alley* the geeks that were pulled into the carnival were usually addicts, whether their poison be drugs or alco-

hol; and then there was the story Gresham tells in *Monster Midway* about first learning of the geek, how it “haunted” him—that was really important to us.

NC: Speaking of geeks and the carnival, since “carnival noir” is a topic in this issue of NOIR CITY, I’m wondering what you learned in your research and how you decided to depict the carnival in your film.

GDT: It is extremely hard to art direct a carnival that is not “cute.” We did an incredibly deep dive with the art department on what

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Book to film: Author William Lindsay Gresham’s sideshow-performer characters the Major (Mark Povinelli) and Bruno the strongman (Ron Perlman)

font, what art, who are signature artists of carny matters, how many styles there are. Otherwise, you end up making a cartoon out of the carnival instead of the gritty reality of where they lived, how they lived. What was the electric layout? Where were things legal? Certain acts were illegal in most states, like the geeks. We needed to know what drugs the geeks would have.

We learned that carnival life was very regimented, a very segregated community. They really had almost their own bylaws. When Stan first joins the carnival, the owner Clem senses that this guy is running from something, and he says, “Look, if you’re gonna stay, we don’t care who you are or what you’ve done.” And a majority of the hardcore carnies had a very difficult past. The semi-illegal or fully illegal activities that took place in the carnival occasionally back then . . . there were very few books really written from the inside about carnival life.

KM: They don’t give inside information to outsiders. They don’t reveal their secrets.

GDT: We read everything that we could find about mentalism and body language, etcetera. One of the things we wanted to show is that the movie is not about “back then” but about us now. It’s a very present movie about the moment we are living in and how

in a certain way we all are getting “shut-eye” [mentalist slang for the occupational hazard of beginning to believe your own lies]. This is a crucial moment to distinguish truth from lies in every aspect of our social, spiritual, and political life.



Del Toro on set with Cooper (right) and Richard Jenkins (left), who plays tortured tycoon Ezra Grindle

NC: Kim, in your essay for Criterion’s new Blu-ray of the 1947 *Nightmare Alley*, you discussed how Zeena, Molly, and Lilith are presented in the book and in the original film as more than rungs on a ladder or simple archetypes . . .

KM: Yes. And in our movie, I feel these women are not simple archetypes either. This is a rough world. These women, though all different, have seen a lot, they’ve felt a lot of things, they’ve been around. Molly, for instance, who is the youngest, is not just an innocent.

GDT: For me, the most interesting one is Lilith. Everything she learns from Stan, she uses against him and turns it on him. Every single thing. She makes him think he’s scared. She makes him think she loves him. She’s far more surgical than the brutality of the carnival in a way.

KM: And the trickery of Dr. Lilith Ritter is scary because she’s a psychologist—people are trusting her with secrets, their innermost thoughts, their pain and fear and regrets. With carnival life, yes there is trickery, but it’s also an entertainment for people. Still, in our movie Lilith has a mystery, a past of something that makes you wonder. She’s complicated.

GDT: Gresham basically says everything is a grift and everything is real to a point. The tarot is real in some ways, psychology is real in some ways, and carnival life is a real thing: “You give us your money, we give you an illusion for a few minutes, and that’s it. We don’t lie to you—you know how this is.” But everything is also a lie, including the racket of psychology. Stan couldn’t find the final solutions there for his problems. The ultimate struggles were still there.

NC: Thank you both for your time. Last question—in addition to the geek, Gresham’s novel includes several characters who work as so-called freaks. The 1947 movie was pretty cautious about what it showed, partly because of the Production Code. How did you choose which sideshow performers to show and how to portray them?

GDT: You have to have them have no more or no less importance than the rest of the carnies folk. Because this is not Tod Browning’s *Freaks* (1932). The rest of the carnival acts you can see, like the Snake Man, and the Dog Boy washing in the barrel and having breakfast, and at the end of the movie you see the Bird Girl and the Pinhead in the background—but we didn’t make them a big deal. The Strong Man and the Major, they just become two characters that act and behave like any of the other carnies.

I think that if you’re going to tackle the other side of the carnival, you need to devote another movie to them. You cannot use them as a curiosity because that, I think, is profoundly difficult if you don’t do it correctly.

But the real sadness and ugliness is Stan’s soul, which is an enormous lacking—the crack in his soul and his fear not being assuaged by anything. I love when Stan says, “I’m afraid every day of my life.” He says, “Please—everybody has left me, Molly.” That is very important for me. When the lies cannot make Molly stay anymore, he uses the truth. That’s the thing I was interested in. ■

Nightmare Alley, directed by Guillermo del Toro with screenplay by del Toro and Kim Morgan, hits US theaters December 17, 2021.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

