

William Lindsay Gresham (1909–1962) was born in Baltimore and went to high school in Brooklyn. Gresham's was a tortured mind and a tormented life, and he sought to banish his demons through a maze of dead-end ways, from Marxism to psychoanalysis to Christianity to Alcoholics Anonymous to Rinzai Zen Buddhism. In addition to *Nightmare Alley* (1946), he wrote one other novel, *Limbo Tower* (1949), which went largely unnoticed. Three nonfiction books followed: *Monster Midway* (1953), *Houdini* (1959), and *The Book of Strength* (1961). *Nightmare Alley* brought Gresham fame and fortune, but he lost it all. The second of his three wives, the poet Joy Davidman, left him in 1953 for the British author C. S. Lewis. He killed himself in New York City on September 14, 1962.

Nick Tosches is the author of fifteen books of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. His most recent novel, *In the Hand of Dante*, was translated into seventeen languages and selected as a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. He has long been working on a book about William Lindsay Gresham.

NIGHTMARE ALLEY

by William Lindsay Gresham

Introduction by Nick Tosches

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“For fans of vaudeville and magic, the book is a treasure trove of trade secrets.”

—Walter Kirn, *The New York Times*

“*Nightmare Alley* combines the creepy world of Tod Browning's movie, 'Freaks' with the relentless cynicism of a Jim Thompson novel.” —*Time*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

The opening pages of William Lindsay Gresham's *Nightmare Alley*—an extraordinary description of a carnival “geek,” forced by circumstance to debase himself each night for a captivated audience—set the tone for what is to come: a gripping and disconcerting exploration of ambition, greed, malice, and inevitable fate.

Stan Carlisle is twenty-one and works in the company of Clem Hoately's Ten-in-One show, a traveling carnival of freaks and performers. He is capable and determined, and before long he assumes the part of the mentalist in the show, reading the audience's minds with astonishing accuracy. (People aren't that different from each other, anyway.) The Ten-in-One provides Stan with valuable experience, but he wants more—so he and his sweetheart, Molly, set out on their own. Before long, they're giving private readings in beautiful homes, stunning their wealthy clients with their precision and being paid handsomely for it.

But that still isn't enough for Stan: he and Molly get in deeper. Soon, they aren't just reading minds; they're raising the dead. As the stakes get higher, their deceptions become more complicated—and Molly grows more uncomfortable—until Stan meets The One: a skeptic with a secret, their greatest challenge. If they can pull this off, they stand to gain a vast fortune—but at what cost?

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Zeena justifies her profession by saying, “Folks are always crazy to have their fortunes told, and what the hell— You cheer 'em up, give 'em something to wish and hope for. That's all the preacher does every Sunday....Everybody hopes for the best and fears the worst and the worst is generally what happens but that don't stop us from hoping” [p. 35]. Do you agree with Zeena's philosophy? Do you think the “marks” view her fortunetelling as escapist entertainment, or as something more? Does it matter?
2. How does what happened to Pete propel the narrative? Is Stan to blame? Should he have told someone? In his position, would you?
3. What is the significance of the tarot cards at the beginning of each chapter? Why are they arranged in the order they are? Why does the image of “The Hanged Man” reappear throughout the novel, and what does it add?
4. Gresham alludes to an early sexual experience in which Molly “tried to turn her head away” from a man who “was taller than she and his voice was low and intense and his hands were brown and powerful” [p. 72]. How did you read this scene—who was the “man”? Between Molly's affection for her father and Stan's feelings about his mother, what role does incestuous desire play in the novel? Why do you think Gresham chooses to focus on this kind of desire?

OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

The Big Clock

Kenneth Fearing (Introduction by Nicholas Christopher)

Dirty Snow

Georges Simenon (Translated from the French by Marc Romano and Louise Varese, Afterword by William T. Vollmann)

Hard Rain Falling

Don Carpenter (Introduction by George Pelecanos)

A Handbook on Hanging

Charles Duff (Introduction by Christopher Hitchens)

Corrigan

Caroline Blackwood (Afterword by Andrew Solomon)

Don't Look Now: Stories

Daphne du Maurier (Selected and with an introduction by Patrick McGrath)

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Lawrence Sanders, *Grifter's Game*

Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood*

James Randi, *Conjuring*

Ray Bradbury, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*

Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer*

OTHER IDEAS FOR YOUR READING GROUP

Nightmare Alley, starring Tyrone Power and directed by Edmund Goulding (film, United States, 1947)

Nightmare Alley, Geffen Playhouse, April 13-May 23, 2010 (A musical by Jonathan Brielle)

Freaks, starring Wallace Ford and directed by Tod Browning (film, United States, 1932)

Carnivale, starring Nick Stahl and created by Daniel Knauf (television series, HBO, United States, 2003-2005)

5. After Stan announces his plans to go into spiritualism, Molly is hesitant [p. 115]. Molly seems to believe that mind-reading is just harmless fun, but conjuring spirits is going too far. What do you think? At what point do Stan's actions cross the line into immorality? When he becomes a reverend without any real religious conviction? When he dupes Mrs. Peabody and Mr. Grindle? Or was it wrong to have been a mentalist in the first place, at the Ten-in-One?
6. Do you think Stan is right about what happened to Gyp [pp. 148-151]? How does he know? Why does he feel the need to expose his father's act?
7. Were you surprised when, just minutes into their first meeting, Dr. Lilith Ritter revealed that she already knew all about Stan's livelihood [p. 164]? Did you suspect that Lilith might not be trustworthy? When? What tipped you off?
8. Beginning with "At her door," page 173 consists almost entirely of one long sentence, which describes Stan's thoughts about Lilith in a stream-of-consciousness style. How do you account for this change in register? What does this kind of formal experimentation add to the scene? What about other sudden shifts in tone or voice—when the reader is allowed a glimpse into the thoughts of the carnies on pages 8-11, for instance, or when the prose devolves into sentence fragments throughout the last chapter?
9. Ezra Grindle's biography [p. 182] is very detailed. Do you think he is meant to represent a version of some real-life figure? Whom?
10. Why, at the climactic point in the story, does Molly stop following the script and call out for Stan [p. 224]? After playing along for such a long time, why does she break character at that moment?
11. Were you surprised by the ending? Does Stan get what he deserves? Does Molly?
12. When you were reading *Nightmare Alley*, did it feel like a period novel to you? Do the details of the novel—technological, sociopolitical, linguistic—tie it to its specific time in history? Could a story like Stan's happen today? How might it be different?

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