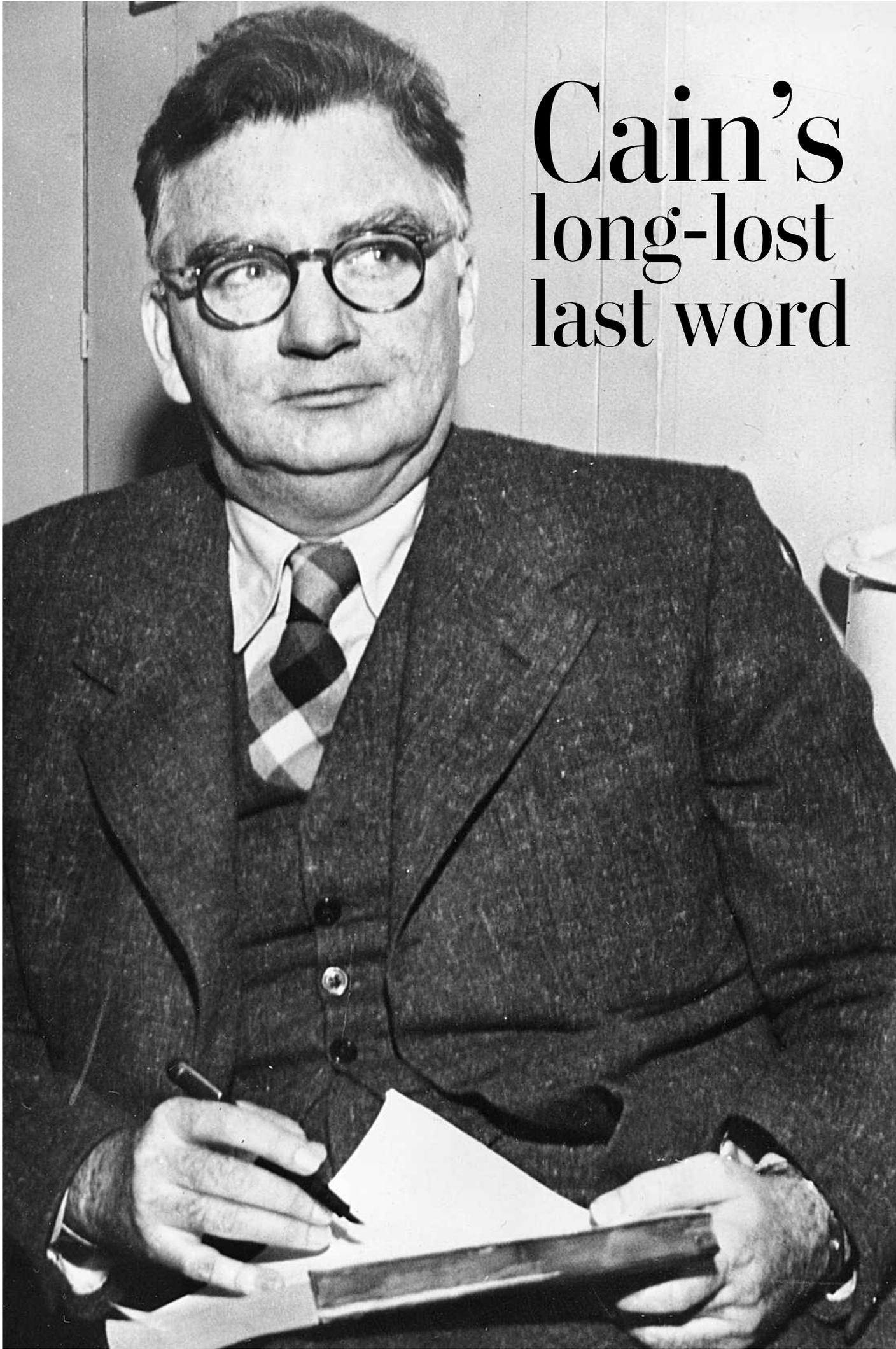


BY NEELY TUCKER



Cain's long-lost last word

James M. Cain was a tougher writer than anybody in this joint. Sex, murder, bad women, worse men. He slapped your face and told you to like it. “Double Indemnity.” “The Postman Always Rings Twice.” “Mildred Pierce.” They were outrageous sensations as books and films back in the Depression and just after. People still eat them up. Kate Winslet starred in “Pierce” on HBO last year; the Round House Theatre in Bethesda staged “Double” this summer.

Now his long-lost last novel, “The Cocktail Waitress,” is landing in bookstores, 35 years after the Annapolis-born Cain, an unintentional co-founder of the noir or hard-boiled school of crime fiction, died at 85.

At the end, he lived alone in a little house on 44th Avenue in University Park. Gruff, widowed, childless, beset by a bum ticker, he wrote the novel in these last few years of his life, says Charles Ardai, the editor at Hard Case Crime, an imprint lovingly devoted to old-school noir. Ardai discovered the manuscript of the book last year, after a search that lasted nearly a decade.

“It was like finding the Dead Sea Scrolls,” he says.

Cain mentioned the book in a 1975 interview with biographer Roy Hoopes published in the *Washingtonian*. “I started a book that was supposed to have a background in [Prince George’s] county politics . . . a book came out of it — ‘The Cocktail Waitress’ — which I am finishing now, but it is completely different from the book I started to write.”

When Cain died two years later, the book had not appeared, and no one was beating down the door for a new book from the old master. It had been years since he had a hit. He had fallen into obscurity and reduced financial circumstances, Ardai says.

The writer left his literary estate to a neighbor.

Cain had written a fine crime novel, “Rainbow’s End,” a few years earlier, but mainly he spent his last days writing grandpa-style stories about life in early 20th century for *The Washington Post* and local magazines. The last story he wrote appeared in *The Post* four days after he died.

Keith Alan Deutsch, publisher of the pulp magazine *Black Mask*, talked to Cain by phone several times during this period, but there was no real hint of a book in the offing. “He was a little senile, he was not a reliable person,” Deutsch says. “He once meant to mail me some material. He sent a series of blank papers.”

Years and then decades passed.

Ardai had heard the story of the lost book in 2002. He hunted through old letters, talked to people, searched Cain’s papers at the Library of Congress. He found bits and pieces of the manuscript — Cain started 100

pages of the book in third person, then switched to first person, his favored narrative style.

The end of the search came last year, in a plot twist Cain himself would have scoffed at: The agent who had the most complete manuscript was, in fact, Ar dai's own Tinseltown agent. It had been sitting in a box behind his desk the entire time.

"I didn't realize it had never been published," says Joel Gotler, a titan in the biz, laughing almost sheepishly. He inherited the literary stable of Hollywood legend H.N. Swanson, who had represented Cain. "I just had to turn around in my chair to the box it was in."

Ardai assembled the book, based on this manuscript, a task made more difficult because the drafts were not dated. "We had to pick and choose the best material," he says.

Here's the plot, set in about 1960: Joan Medford, a very recent widow with a bust-line, a baby and bad relatives, takes a scantily clad waitressing gig at the Garden of Roses, "on Upshur Street in Hyattsville, across from the County Building, which is on Highway

No. 1 at the south of town, 'The Boulevard,' as it's called."

A rich, older dude named Earl K. White III admires the gams and the cleavage. So does Tom Barclay, a younger stud. You know things aren't going to end well, and they don't.

This is vintage Cain.

"He liked scrappy women with a sultry edge," says James Grady, author of "Six Days of the Condor," who gave a presentation about Cain at the Politics & Prose bookstore and coffeehouse in the District this summer.

The novelist Michael Connelly, reviewing "Waitress" for the New York Times, said the book doesn't rate with Cain's best, but "the self-knowledge Joan possesses is perfect and some of the best stuff Cain ever put down on paper."

Cain didn't like writing stories about happy people doing happy things, and in his best books, if not his own life, he didn't care for the cheerful, either.

When Hoopes told him, in those final interviews, that he'd led a fascinating life, Cain harrumphed: "It may be to you, but it's never been interesting to me."

James Mallahan Cain was born to an English professor who became president of Washington College in Chestertown, Md. His mother was an opera singer. He graduated from Washington College himself at 18 and later got a master's degree in French.

He wanted to sing opera, too, but his mother told him he was lousy at it. He went into newspapers, working at the Baltimore Sun, where he became the the protege (and boozing partner) of the legendary H.L. Mencken.

He went to Gotham, where he wrote editorials for the great Walter Lippmann. He snagged the managing editor gig at the New



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ANDREW SCHWARTZ / ASSOCIATED PRESS

HIS CAREER: Fred MacMurray and Barbara Stanwyck in "Double Indemnity"; Lana Turner and John Garfield in "The Postman Always Rings Twice"; and Kate Winslet and Guy Pearce in "Mildred Pierce."

Yorker, under founder Harold Ross, whom he did not love.

Cain moved to California in 1931, at 39, determined to write screenplays. He didn't like the movies, just the money — \$2,500 a week at the end of his 17 years in the trade, more than the president of the United States made back then.

But he was lousy at screenwriting, too. Despite the big paydays, he never did anything you've heard of.

"Even in a whorehouse, the girl has to like the work a little bit," he told Hoopes, "and I could not like pictures."

He was about 6 feet tall and weighed between 220 and 245 pounds during his prime. "A hog-fat pink caricature of a man," he once described himself. He was married four times. He didn't just imbibe, he tried to "drink up Hollywood."

But when he sat down to write novels in La La Land, putting his first-person tales in the voice of Golden State roughnecks, he played the typewriter like a percussion instrument.

He wrote a brutal short story, "The Baby in the Icebox," which was made into a film.

Then, the breakthrough. Seizing on a sen-

sational 1927 case in Long Island — the Snyder-Gray affair, in which an adulterous couple killed her husband and were executed for it — he set it in rural California.

In Cain's version, a drifter named Frank hooks up with Cora, a hot babe married to the Greek owner of a two-bit diner. They kill the husband — Frank bashes him over the head with a wrench, almost exactly how the husband was killed in the Snyder-Gray case — and try to make it look like an accident.

The result was "Postman." It was revolutionary, both as a book and in the subsequent film.

Cain didn't have any interest in tough-guy detectives, like his iconic peers Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. Cain wrote about cheats and grifters and unhappily married women who had all the morality you could fit in a thimble and still have room for a garter belt.

It's hard to overstate how radical this was. The bad guys tell the story! They do bad things! We kind of like them anyway!

Cain's stuff was so good that Billy Wilder, the film director, cast goody two-shoes Fred MacMurray (later famous as television's squarest dad in "My Three Sons") as a

conniving, adulterous insurance agent in the film version of "Double Indemnity." He's an oily little slug, schmoozing up to Barbara Stanwyck, calling her "baby" this and "baby" that.

Their big idea is to kill her old man, pocket the insurance moolah and have mad, crazy sex with all the fury their rotten little hearts can pump out.

"Chandler and Hammett were investigating crime," says Ar dai. "Cain was instigating it."

His language in these wicked little tales (both were almost novellas) was punch-drunk perfect.

"Let's get stinko."

"They threw me off the haytruck about noon."

"I loved her like a rabbit loves a rattle-snake."

"I had killed a man, for money and a woman. I didn't have the money and I didn't have the woman."

And then, and then . . . Cain wanted to shake things up. He wrote some other novels that did well — "Serenade," "Love's Lovely Counterfeit" — but he couldn't stand being pegged as a genre writer. The son of society parents, people of learning and university degrees, he aspired to Big Lit.

So in 1948, he and his fourth wife, Florence MacBeth, a soprano in her opera days, moved to University Park so he could be close to the Library of Congress to research several books set in the Civil War era. He spent nearly a decade researching and writing "Mignon," only to see it flop. "All that reading and labor, and kind of a mouse is born," Cain told the New York Times.

His money began to run out. The move back to Maryland, he later told Hoopes, had been a terrible mistake. He said he didn't like it here but stayed because MacBeth didn't want to move back to Beverly Hills on a reduced income.

"We stayed. And it was not a good decision. I should have gone back."

MacBeth died in 1966. Cain suffered a heart attack two years later. He lost weight. His health was poor. He no longer had a car.

Neighbors "were very nice to him, would look in on him, he was quite the Southern gentleman," says Leila Steiner, who lives in Cain's old house. "He kept mint growing out front, to put in his juleps."

In his last years, Cain returned to what he did best. He wrote "Rainbow's End," a crime novel about an airplane hijacking, and, lastly, "The Cocktail Waitress."

Deutsch, the Black Mask publisher, said that Cain was adamant at the end that he had written not genre fiction but literature about the sexual relationships between violent men and dangerous women, a contorted sort of love.

"People were always lining him up with Hammett and Chandler, and he didn't want to be lined up with them," he said. "He felt he'd done something larger than that."

That sounds good. Maybe he was right. Waitresses and drifters, men with rough hands, women with short skirts.

Let's go get that book, baby. Let's read it. Let's get stinko.

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