

Night Darkens the Street: Two Post-War Naturalist Works of Arthur La Bern

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RÉSUMÉ

Bien qu'on se souvienne aujourd'hui de lui comme de l'auteur du roman dont a été tiré Frenzy d'Alfred Hitchcock, l'écrivain journaliste Arthur La Bern fut un chroniqueur assidu de la vie britannique d'après-guerre. Cet article se propose de commenter les aspects naturalistes de ses romans It always rains on Sunday (1946) et Night Darkens the Street (1947) – romans qui donnèrent lieu à un film noir immédiatement après leur publication – en fonction du rapport qu'ils entretiennent avec les œuvres de fiction d'Émile Zola.

En tant qu'œuvres populaires destinées au grand public, les deux romans insistent sur les aspects déterministes de l'environnement et les changements historiques imminents qui affectent leurs protagonistes. Si les deux œuvres prennent pour cadre la fin des années 1930, époque à laquelle s'intensifie la menace de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale, le second roman comprend également la période de guerre, qui voit l'abandon d'une moralité traditionnelle et une augmentation de la criminalité, éléments indicatifs d'une nation plongée dans le chaos et qui rappellent la France de Zola à la veille de la guerre franco-prussienne.

Although once well-known crime writers such as Peter Cheyney and James Hadley Chase may still evoke faint recognition on the part of readers of British crime fiction, despite the fact that most of their work remains out of print, the name of Arthur La Bern today remains associated with the original novel behind Alfred Hitchcock's *Frenzy* (1972). La Bern also wrote the source novels of two post-war British *films noirs*: *It Always Rains on Sunday* (1947), directed by Robert Hamer, and David MacDonald's *Good Time Girl* (1948), starring secondary Gainsborough Studios actress Jean Kent in the role of the tragic Gwen Rawlings. While Cheyney may be remembered as the author of those Lemmy Caution novels that boosted the star career of Eddie Constantine in France, reaching its highest peak in Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville* (1965), and his eventual "swan song" in the same director's *Germany Year Zero* (1991),¹ James Hadley Chase's name remains associated with the then scandalous *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* (1939), filmed as a 1948 British *film noir* starring Jack LaRue as Slim Grissom and remade by Robert Aldrich

¹ Although *Germany Year Zero* was officially the last time Constantine played Caution, the actor did appear again in Lars von Trier's unfinished *Dimension* (1991/2005) in a gangster role. Cheyney's American-influenced private eye Slim Callahan only appeared in two post-war film adaptations: *Uneasy Terms* (1948), starring Michael Rennie, and *Meet Mr. Callahan* (1954), in which the title character, portrayed by Derrick De Marney, acted in a manner reminiscent of inebriated boredom thus ensuring a "brief encounter" for an audience unwilling to participate in a return meeting!

in his neo-noir version *The Grissom Gang* (1970).² However, Arthur La Bern deserves greater recognition.

Although it is impossible to determine whether La Bern was familiar with Zola's writings, his two 1947 novels exhibit clear traces of what Robert Singer has described as that naturalist *moment*, a particular dynamic existing in either literature or film illustrating a certain "social circulus, the dynamic movement and interaction among people, society, and the respective era, which affects the individual under the scrutiny of the clinical naturalist lens, viewed by the observer, in the presumed position of knowing."³ As journalist-turned-author La Bern examines his characters within a respective era using his own type of "naturalistic lens" in these works, one which reveals that forgotten works are often equally as important as those canonical texts favored by certain disciplinary institutional boundaries. It is always important to discover the wider picture whenever possible.

La Bern's two 1947 novels are not only key works of post-war British *noir* fiction that inspired two contemporary *films noirs* but also illustrate areas of British naturalist popular fiction revealing deterministic snares trapping its victims within the dark culture of contemporary life. When post-war British *films noirs* first appeared they were criticized by the British establishment, most notably President of the Board of Trade Harold Wilson and journalist Arthur Vesselo who coined the term "morbid burrowings." The Labour Government then struggled in vain to establish Jerusalem in "England's green and pleasant land" during that "age of austerity" that lasted well into the 1950s.⁴ Written in 1947 but featuring a gallery of characters affected by the squalid working-class world of the 1930s in the same way that many of Zola's characters are traumatized by environmental forces of the Second Empire of Louis Napoleon, *It Always Rains on Sunday* and *Night Darkens the Street* paint a grim picture of human existence realistic and faithful to an ideological prison-house affecting its characters. If *La Bête humaine* and *Nana* end with the beginnings of the Franco-Prussian War that will terminate the society responsible for the personal and economic entrapment of its victims, these two La Bern novels note the imminent cataclysm of World War II that will end forever the miserable existence of its London inhabitants. Like any intuitive naturalist novelist, La Bern offers no guarantee that things will be different for his characters. He writes at the very beginning of Britain's Age of Austerity noting the virus of a post-war crime wave ready to infect the utopian aspirations of the Clement Atlee government,

² George Orwell's well-known essay "Raffles and Miss Blandish" in *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, vol. 3 (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1971) 256-59, especially demonstrates the culturally shocked nature of British sensibilities to American crime fiction, particularly a novel set in an America the British author writing under a pseudonym had never visited at the time. See also Orwell's "Decline of the English Murder," that appears in the same volume (124-28).

³ Robert Singer, "'At the Still Point': Framing the Naturalist *Moment*," in *Zola and Film*, eds. Anna Gural-Migdal and Robert Singer (Jefferson, USA: McFarland & Co, 2005) 198. The socialist science fantasy novels of American writer George Allan England such as *The Air Trust* (1915), *The Golden Blight* (1916) and the *Darkness and Dawn* trilogy are notable examples of other neglected works in another field.

⁴ See Robert Murphy, *Realism and Tinsel: Cinema and Society in Britain, 1939-49* (London: Routledge, 1989) 168; see also *The Age of Austerity*, eds. Philip French and Michael Sissons (London: Oxford University Press, 1986), for a good overview of this period. Although Murphy regards the British equivalent of *film noir* as "much more diffuse and [...] virtually impossible to contain them [all the deterministic snares of contemporary life] within a single genre" (169), this may actually be an astute recognition that Britain's own type of post-war malaise had far more extensive connections in popular work of this period.

and the unforgiving nature of a middle class and judicial system that will see drastic punishment as the only remedy for situations that had other causes than pure malevolence.⁵

It Always Rains on Sunday opens with a description of the working class East End street of Coronet Grove before it reveals the bedroom shared by Doris and Vi Sandigate detailing its mundane contents in a manner worthy of Zola's many descriptions of objects belonging to a particular environment and symbolizing a particular nature of existence. The monotonous faded "pink and green wallpaper" (10) contains "pictures of film stars torn from illustrated weeklies," some Christmas cards," (10) as well as "a framed print of disconsolate sheep perpetually lost on disconsolate moors" (10).⁶ These objects define eighteen-year-old Vi, one year older than her sister Doris. She lives in a fantasy world of movies and dreams of becoming a big-band singer. By contrast, Doris is a dutiful daughter, willing to run errands on behalf of her father George and step-mother Rose, a fat woman "in the middle forties, a good deal younger than her husband" (13) who had once been very attractive at twenty. All are disconsolate lost sheep in different ways living various forms of bleak existence in London's East End of the late thirties. Rose has

⁵ In addition to his fictional work La Bern also wrote studies of notorious British criminals such as "Brides in the Bath" murderer George Joseph Smith mentioned by the gossip in the sound version of Hitchcock's *Blackmail* (1929) and acid bath murderer John George Haigh. See Arthur La Bern, *The Life and Death of a Ladykiller* (London: Leslie Frewin, 1967) and *Haigh: The Mind of a Murderer* (London: W.H. Allen, 1973). The second is dedicated to Robert Fabian, otherwise known as "Fabian of the Yard," the title of a 1950s British TV series starring Bruce Seton that also received American distribution. The book contains a foreword by University of London Emeritus Professor of Forensic Medicine Keith Simpson as well as a psychiatric analysis by Dr. Noel C. Brown. Except for their brief citations of British history, descriptive prose and period detail (see *The Life and Death of a Ladykiller* 9-12, 154), most of La Bern's other novels are forgettable, aside from for evocations of a past era:

A solitary omnibus crawled up the stem of Ludgate Hill like a little red ladybird making for the grey flower that was St. Paul's Cathedral. The little cafes displayed last night's menu in whitewashed letters on the misty windows behind which chairs were perched lopsidedly on tables like an old skinny danseuse immobilized in the middle of some grotesque carousel. Fouling the morning air came the stench of stale beer from closed public houses, like body odour from slumbering harpies.

See Arthur La Bern, *Paper Orchid* (London: Richard Marlowe Ltd, 1948) 80. The murdered gay artist, his spurned campy boyfriend, and the anti-semitic Nazi-sympathizing elderly English Colonel interned during the war fondly remembering gas chambers and singing the Horst Wessel song, do not appear in the 1949 film version. See *Paper Orchid* 97, 135, 160-61, 165, 166, 191. For other examples see La Bern, *Pennygreen Street* (London: Moreley Baker, 1970) reprint of the Jarrolds Publishers Limited, 1950 (5, 8, 91, 109, 123, 135-36, 143, 206, 249, 250). He also mentions the lingering presence of "home-bred little Nazis" (202) in the post-war era and the illegal practice of abortion in working-class areas. The following description from *Pennygreen Street* is too remarkable not to be quoted:

Outside in the yard of Pennygreen Street the water was beginning to subside, gurgling and bubbling in the drains like disgusting old men. Somewhere beyond Wandsworth the sun was setting, like a huge blood orange dripping juice. Pennygreen Dwellings was three black smudges on the saffron sky. The cripple girl who had stopped playing to look down from her window at the aquatic fun and games in the yard returned to her accordion, beginning with an erratic version of 'La Paloma'." (236)

See also Arthur La Bern, *The Big Money Box* (London: William Kimber & Com, 1960) 5-6, 84, 149, for the author's detailed descriptions of contemporary London and *Brighton Belle* (London: W.H. Allen & Co, 1963) 5, 24, 29, 131, for similar descriptions of Brighton.

⁶ Henceforth, citations are from the London Moreley-Baker 1969 reprint of the 1947 edition originally published by Ivor Nicholson and Watson. See also Arthur La Bern, *It Was Christmas Every Day* (London: Jarrolds Publishers, 1950) 57, 92, for similar naturalist descriptions as well as the description of the main character's room in *Brighton Belle* (152).

married George, on the rebound from her former romance with Tommy Swann who has recently escaped from Dartmoor. Mundane and unimaginative George is a brewery worker and father of five children, one by his marriage to Rose. Vi's fantasies make her easy prey for music shop owner Morrie Hyams, the younger brother of Whitechapel Lane amusement arcade owner Lou, who fuels her impossible dreams and sees her as *shiksa* bait despite already being married and a father. By contrast, sentimental Doris engages in romantic fantasies that will also never be realized. Her regular boyfriend Johnny Price is a Spitalfields Fruit Market junior clerk whose only interest lies in sports. Although more literate than her sister, Doris's reading is little more than basic and superficial:

She was no brilliant child of mean streets. But occasionally she read a good book and liked reading it. Her favorite book was Thomas Hardy's *Under the Greenwood Tree*. She liked it for the story and not for the rugged grandeur of Hardy's prose. She herself rarely used a sentence with more than six words in it. (58)

All major characters are trapped in an East End deterministic limited environment. Female fantasies lead nowhere. Rose yearns for those long ago days when handsome wide-boy Tommy would woo her, despite already having a wife "living in Leeds or somewhere" (19) like Morrie Hymans. Others exist in this world like the young criminal gang led by Whitey Williams, object of Detective-Sergeant Forthergill's watchful eye. They also include the following: "honorary organist [...] and zealous church worker" (108), painter, decorator and sanitary engineer, Caleb Beasley (who uses his respectable façade to operate as a fence); reporter Slopey Collins (who also appears in *Night Darkens the Street* as a fictional surrogate for La Bern); Lou's ageing mother who does not read, let alone understand, the literary works (such as Haeckel, Herbert Spencer, Shakespeare, Omar Khayyam, Tolstoy, and Dickens) that her deceased, self-educated cabinet-maker husband Reuben once read. Tommy's return stimulates a crisis situation that will not only change everyone's existence drastically but also anticipate in that dark sexual and violent world of British *film noir* initiated by the Blitz, as *Night Darkens the Street* reveals:

The newsvendors bawled "*Sunday Speshull! London*" "*Unt for Escaped Convict. Sunday Speshull!*" And an old man rattled his white stick on the kerb and whined "*Box o'matches! Box o'matches!*" Crowds of youths and young girls pushed into the amusement arcades in the Whitechapel Road [...]. A hundred tattered Communists in khaki shirts and long hair distributed pamphlets as they marched through the rain with their tattered crimson banner towards Hyde Park and some kind of demonstration, shouting out "Arms for Spain!" as they splashed through the puddles and held up the traffic [...]. A young woman in a red-and-black straw bonnet stood on a corner amid a circle of young women in red-and-black straw bonnets and cried out, "*I am Saved – Saved through the Blood of Our Lord!*" Street organs jangled "*September in the Rain.*" Loudspeakers blared. It was Sunday. To-morrow was Monday. There was a vast peace and a vast relaxation and a vast noise [...]. Doris Sandigate cried over the sink, and Vi Sandigate sang happily as she put the finishing touch to her lips. She had just remembered. Morry Higham had promised to give her some gramophone records. (34)

Through this complex literary mosaic, La Bern intuitively captures a naturalist fresco combining competing forces of history, politics, ephemeral amusements, religious escapism, Doris's realization

of the bleak domestic existence that awaits her, and Vi's continuing fantasies. He sets into motion contrasting facets of human existence that will eventually lead to emotional and historical collision.

Tommy Swann seeks refuge at Rose's house. But he is now a nightmare figure, no longer the Tommy "of the flash suits, the coloured shirts and the patent shoes, the smart boy who took her to West End clubs" (67) but having the appearance of an escaped convict. Seated by the fire, Tommy "looked like his own corpse warming itself into life again, the flames of the kitchen fire causing queer, distorted shadows to flicker over the white face" (67). Rose hides him in her bedroom until circumstances force him to flee dressed in George's clothes, his incongruous appearance contrasting with the once flashy dresser he once was (154). Vi runs away from home and is installed in a rooming house, a move representing her first step into the world of prostitution. Doris walks into a Whitechapel "on that wet Sunday night during the spring before the Second German War came upon the world, with its black-outs and its sirens" (133). She thinks of Johnny's possible mobilization if another war should occur but La Bern's following description shows that her feelings on this subject are just as illusionary and fantastic as those of her movie-fan sister:

It all sounded very thrilling, but thrilling in a *cinematic* way [*italics mine*]. Doris was no student of politics or international affairs, but she didn't believe war would ever come to England again. Not for another five years at any rate. That was what she had heard her father say, and he should know. He read the articles in the papers. She herself had several times read an astrologer's prediction that there would be no war, either this year, next year, or the year after. And hadn't Mr. Chamberlain come back from Munich last September waiving a piece of paper and declaring that it was "Peace in our time"? She had seen that with her own eyes on the newsreel, and she had noticed how happy Mr. Chamberlain had looked, almost hugging himself with joy and pride at his achievement. And Mr. Chamberlain should know what he was talking about, because he had been face to face with Hitler. He even had tea with him. She couldn't quite visualize Hitler doing a nice, peaceful thing like having tea, but she had seen that on the newsreels, too. (134)

When Slopey enters the Sandigate house, Tommy assaults him and escapes leaving Rose alone with her son Alfie. Normally sober George Sandigate drowns his sorrows over his family's abrupt domestic friction at the local pub. As the rainy Sunday night continues with cymbal-twanging Salvationists, crowded public houses, lovers in dark doorways (anticipating those wartime "brief encounters" described in *Night Darkens the Street*), the odor of food from kosher restaurants, tattered Communists marching in support of the doomed Spanish cause (166), ensuing events move towards their tragic conclusion. Whitey batters Beasley to death and sets up Tommy knowing full well that the serial numbers on the notes he gave him from Beasley's wallet (as well as his victim's gold watch and chain) will result in capital punishment. Rose attempts suicide in her kitchen oven and later dies in hospital. The novel ends with Doris alone in the house as her father returns: "Then, at the end of the passage, he stopped to turn out the light, and the house was in darkness" (222).

Darkness returns in *Night Darkens the Street*, an unofficial sequel to *It Only Rains on Sunday*. Set in the same pre-war era and extending into wartime Britain, it focuses on Gwen Rawlings who resembles Vi Sandigate. Fascinated by movies, living in a tawdry dream world, and eventually becoming engulfed by the sexual and violent underworld of her time, Gwen is

another La Bern character doomed by the environmental conditions determining her existence. Vi's last appearance in *It Only Rains on Sunday* saw her alone, penniless, and obviously headed towards the same type of existence personified by Lulu Blair, whom she met in the rundown hotel where Morry Hyams left her.

Like *It Always Rains on Sunday*, *Night Darkens the Street* opens with a description of a particular East End street. Its rigid working-class morality will provide a catalyst against which seventeen-year-old Gwen Rawlings will rebel. Described as abrasive from birth, subjected to brutal parental beating and having a desire for constant gratification initially directed toward sweets, she is about to take, according to La Bern, "the first Decision of her life. A decision that was in the nature of a revolt, a physical and spiritual burning of the boats of her Pimlico existence" (9).⁷ Like Vi, she has left home and her head is full of *Peg's Paper* fantasies of working as a parlor-maid "with a rich family and marrying the son and heir" (16). Rescuing a Jewish boy from racial assault, she gets into the good graces of landlady Mrs. Chalk and rents a room. La Bern describes Gwen's character in a much more penetrating psychological manner than he did with Vi: "Gwen had an awareness of people and their temperament that was older than her years. She knew the folly of appearing too eager, and at times she could control the natural impulsiveness of youth" (19).

Night Darkens the Street begins its East End naturalist *Bildungsroman* chronicle of the psychological and environmental changes that will affect his heroine. Unlike Zola's *Nana*, she will not achieve upward mobility into pre-war and wartime high society but exist on the margins of a criminal underworld that is a modern Anglo-Saxon version of that portrayed in Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris*. Unlike Hugo's Esmeralda she is no tragic innocent but a vulnerable waif already traumatized by her early family life. She will descend into the depths of crime due to the interactions of a manipulative and uncaring adult world. Although Gwen is not an attractive figure, La Bern suggests that the fault is not entirely her own in a manner anticipating his later biographical studies of notorious criminals such as "Brides in the Bath" murderer George Joseph Smith and John George Haigh. They were not only dangerous psychopaths but ones whose activities appealed to a certain section of the British public. Throughout La Bern's work there exists a suggestion that society gets the dangerous killers it secretly desires, while perversely refusing to recognize contemporary ideological forces responsible for generating monsters.⁸

⁷ Henceforth, citations are from the 1947 edition of *Night Darkens the Street* (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson Ltd).

⁸ See *The Life and Death of a Ladykiller* 154-55, where La Bern mentions the conspicuous presence of women jostling each other to get a seat in the Old Bailey for the last stages of Smith's trial and contemporary newspaper comment. See also *Haigh: The Mind of a Murderer* 21-23 where an American art student from Savannah, Georgia, with her girlfriends queued overnight, stating "We've come to see what goes on in this country and this is the best way to do it" (21). Writing to his parents, Haigh also noted the phenomenon of "Hundreds of crazy women paying for mobbing the place" and La Bern compares him to a pop singer: "Like a pop star who pretends to shun publicity and the adulation of fans, this star criminal was really relishing what he feigned to condemn" (23). Hitchcock also notices this fascination with deadly crimes in the opening sequence of *The Lodger* where the media promote news about the Avenger's latest victim "wet from the press" to voyeuristic male and female spectators. For La Bern's limited, but revealing understanding of the social forces motivating Smith, see *The Life and Death of a Ladykiller* 165. In *The Big Money Box*, he describes the Lord Chief Justice as "the real terror of the underworld" (169) responsible for the executions of Derek Bentley and Timothy Evans hanged for crimes they never actually committed:

Would the story of George Joseph Smith have been any different if he had not received that savage sentence of seven years in a reform school when he was but nine years of age? We do not know. We can only speculate, but my feeling is that the Victorian type of brute – the prototype exists today – who staffed that reformatory must share some of the responsibility for turning out such an unmitigated fiend. (169)

Settling into her “dim small room” listening to plaintive dance music, and feeling dispirited, she becomes easy prey for her fellow lodger flashily dressed Jimmy the Waiter who fixes her up with a job at Maxie’s night club as cloak room attendant. Finding the club dazzling due to the fact that her notions “of luxury were entirely drawn from the cinema and cheap periodicals” (30) she immediately becomes part of a sordid and vulgar world temporarily alleviated by the fatherly figure of Red Farrell who does not wish to take advantage of her. She slowly changes beginning to “look mature” and “even assuming a veneer of sophistication” (49) but has not yet slept with anyone despite Jimmy’s attempt at a clumsy seduction. Caught between the crossfire of a razor attack by Jimmy on his former boss and Max’s revenge on his former employee, she is taken home by the cultured and intelligent Red separated from his Spanish wife due to her support of Franco in the Spanish Civil War (88). Externally tough, but internally softhearted, he yields to her desire for sexual initiation. Through no fault of her own, she becomes implicated in Max’s revenge and is sent to reform school by judgmental and uncaring authorities who have no understanding of her psychological vulnerability and inexperience of the world of everyday reality. Cinematic fantasy is her twentieth century equivalent of the alcoholism that dominates various members of Zola’s Rougon-Macquart family tree:

The only cultural factor in her life up till now had been the cinema, if that can be termed cultural. Gwen Rawlings had reversed the values of fact and fancy. In her jejune mind screen plays were not something to be measured against the warp and woof of reality. To Gwen Rawlings life itself was measured against the technicolour pattern of romance as viewed from the cinema stalls, and in this comparison it was not surprising that life itself was found wanting. Her god was in Hollywood and her scriptures were, indeed, Hollywood’s script writers. If she had ten commandments the first was: Thou shalt be beautiful. (86-87)⁹

We can also ask whether Gwen Rawlings’s life would have taken a different path had she not been unjustly sent to a reformatory. La Bern also suggests that Haigh was actually insane and that his murders “were committed by a man who was the end-product of two influences – genetic pre-disposition, and his environment, for neither of which he could be held responsible, and yet we hanged him” (*Haigh: The Mind of a Murderer* 170).

⁹ La Bern was an insightful commentator on how American popular culture affected certain youngsters in the post-war era as seen in his description of “faux American” village trollop Betty in his 1950 novel *It was Christmas Every Day*. Producing an illegitimate child during wartime, she eventually moves to London to become a prostitute and drug-addict; and then she comes to the attention of an American military officer who initially thinks she is a Soviet agent at the time when Klaus Fuchs made headlines as an atomic spy:

No broad from Brooklyn could ever have been tougher than this village girl from old-world England. She was an all too common phenomenon of wartime and post-war Britain. She would have baffled the students of social welfare and environment. In all history there had never been a more fantastic tribe of vivandières than Betty and her kind, coming as they did from so many different backgrounds but having one thing in common, an unholy passion for the travesty of American life as portrayed by gangster films and pulp magazines. She would have shocked even the girl friends of the late Mr. Dillinger. (*It was Christmas Every Day* 195-96)

He also describes her educational background in further detail:

She had derived all the benefits of an all-American education, starting with a syllabus of Hollywood films glorifying gangsters and gun molls, continuing with an intensive course in pulp magazines, taking honours in both *True Crime* and *True Romance*, and concluding with personal coaching from military tutors in all aspects of the curriculum, including such extraneous subjects as gum rolling and others which need not be

Despite her love for Red Farrell that “might have been her salvation” (96) she is sent to Brownwood House approved school that far from reforming her triggers off the negative aspects of her personality that her previous life with Red had kept in abeyance, temporary though such a relationship would be. Exposed to the humiliating conditions of imprisonment and the predatory lesbian tendencies of fellow inmate Roberta, Gwen escapes and begins a new chapter in her life as a road girl “no longer a vacuous child” and educated by Brownwood House’s “cunning and deceit and lies to such an extent that she was herself now adept at them” (122). Although she finds solace in the companionship of gentle lorry-driver Andy, she becomes a member of that pre-war sordid society of girls “living on the roads” thriving in their “happy-go-lucky sinfulness” who would soon find a new role in society’s dark wartime underworld:

A year or two later these same girls or their younger sisters were to satisfy their craving for excitement in another way. When war came and the big towns were filled with lonely Allied soldiers the lorry girls deserted the dusty white roads and sought the softer blandishments of the cities. (127)

When Andy becomes involved in a road café fight attempting to defend Gwen, she walks out into the rain: “One more phase in her life was over” (134). She moves back to a London on the brink of war indulging in a corrupt and garish night life affecting all classes of society such as British aristocrats socializing with German diplomats and suburbanites, except “the great honest mass of people” (134). La Bern pictures this world in *Zola noir* and surrealistic overtones, a world in which Gwen grows into a calculating woman learning to conceal her emotions:

In these catacombs of cacophony and chicanery, spurious glamour and flat champagne was seen a fusing of elements of society such as had never been seen before. Heaping the profits from it all, making money easier than they had made it before, were men and women who knew what prison diet was like, scallywags and blackguards, perverts and poseurs, jostling one another like hungry rats racing through a sewer to gorge themselves fat. (134)

As newspapers announce conscription, Gwen discovers that Red has found other female companionship. She gets involved in a shakedown racket organized by a homosexual dandy specializing in blackmailing respectable figures, such as affluent evangelist Lloyd Bright, before moving to Brighton and becoming the mistress of racecourse gangster Johnny Rosso who “reminded her of George Raft, although he was fuller in the face” (167). Maturing mentally and physically

mentioned (Gwen Rawlings obviously followed the same type of curriculum [*It was Christmas Every Day* 154]).

La Bern was not exclusively anti-American culture as his other remarks on British popular entertainment reveal:

If Kathryn had other parents she might have been sent to an Academy of Dramatic Art and emerged as a typical English actress, with cold, flawless enunciation and lack of passion or ability to interpret human emotion, the type of actress so beloved by the B.B.C. Alternatively, if she had been lower in the social scale, the kind of girl who wins Beauty Queen titles at holiday camps, she might have become one of those charm school graduettes who never achieve stardom. (*It Was Christmas Every Day* 44)

in the worst possible sense, she snatches psychological defeat from the jaws of her affluent victory:

Her childish aspirations of two years ago, her uneducated but nevertheless very real and almost passionate desires to rise from her childhood squalor, to embrace a life that had colour, music and dignity, had been for ever defeated by her own triumph. And in the moment of her triumph she became less worthy of sympathy than at any time in her life, and more ridiculous. (172)

Once “a child with stars in her eyes and an ache in her heart” (172) she “had passed from childhood into womanhood without knowing the cleansing pangs of adolescence” (172) and becomes hardened to the degradation surrounding her “spiritual merry-ground” (172). Formerly sensitive and sympathetic, Gwen Rawlings “had died a leprous death and been triumphantly transmigrated as a hard-eyed, brazen consort of a flash bookmaker” (173). Now spiritually a damned soul, she continues her descent into hell by killing a policeman in a drunken hit-and-run incident and fleeing to London at the very beginning of World War Two. Experiencing the early days of the black-out in a restaurant where “servicemen and some loud-voiced girls” (195) mingle with regulars making more money from the war than ever before, Gwen discovers that Red has died in a bombing raid and falls into the clutches to two American deserters – Al and Mickey. Moving deeper into London’s own *inferno*-esque inner circle of hell, she participates with them in criminal enterprises one of which will lead to the murder of Andy and her own eventual doom. In the meantime, La Bern’s fictional surrogate Slopey Collins sets out in her pursuit, looking for a good story, and just missing her while entering a world alluding to those images of the damned evoked by Hieronymous Bosch:

There was no air-raid on that night, and as he stood indecisively on the kerbside of Piccadilly Circus, hundreds of soldiers of many nations and girls of one type surged past him, arms round waists and arms round necks, some singing, others shrieking, “Taxi! Taxi!” in a vain, ceaseless cacophony. The starless sky was like black marble, the darkened buildings like the frowning walls of some glacial cavern, flickeringly silvered from time to time as careless pedestrians allowed light from their torches to stream upwards. The people who surged noisily past were like silhouettes of some strange race of troglodytes marching happily to an orgy of physical and spiritual self-destruction. (207-08)

Witnessing Al and Micky battering two American MP’s Gwen now joins them in a “great feeling of *camaraderie*, no longer sickened and angry at the very thought of physical violence.” (211). La Bern describes them as “three musketeers of the darkened London streets” (213), fully united in their own criminally perverse version of an Anglo-American “special relationship.” On a lonely road outside London, the inevitable happens as Gwen “stood waiting under a tree, holding her torch so that it shone down on her legs” (219), masquerading as a prostitute during the wartime black-out conditions. Realizing that Andy recognizes Gwen following a mugging, Al shoots him with a “black Luger-type pistol” (221).

Gwen’s fate is finally sealed. Achieving stardom in the Old Bailey during her five-day trial, she receives the death sentence with her accomplices. The curtain finally descends on her life as the rope that will be placed around her neck later ensures her final descent into that night

that had once fascinated her. However, it really foreshadowed her eventual doom as La Bern earlier describes her time as a road girl:

She liked the life, particularly on dark nights when the great headlights seemed to powder the roads and the hedgerows with cubistic patterns of silver snow as they flashed past. Night-time had always fascinated Gwen Rawlings. It was only at nighttime that the vista from her Pimlico bedroom had been attractive to her wondering child eyes, when the railway signals flashed green and red and the smoke from the engines seemed to be stained with those colours as it billowed skywards. (128)

Gwen Rawlings will never achieve whatever potential existed within her. Her character has much in common with Zola's other doomed heroines such as Gervaise and Nana who are both victims of society in different ways as well as his other gallery of lost souls adversely affected by the Second Empire of Louis Napoleon and its post-war aftermath. Living in the mid-twentieth century of a Britain traumatized by the Great Depression and facing the imminent threat of war, Gwen becomes a damned soul due to her psychological condition and the environmental forces acting on her. Her eventual fate occurs during the deadly conditions of wartime London, conditions that will have a lasting impact upon the survivors of the Blitz contributing to a perverse post-war social *circulus* dismissed as "morbid burrowings" but deeply embedded within a certain contemporary social psyche. Several literary and cinematic chroniclers expressed these influences within post-war popular British naturalism and the allied world of cinematic *noir*.¹⁰ Arthur La Bern is one of these chroniclers whose novels deserve further attention.

¹⁰ Due to his imprisonment in a Japanese P.O.W camp, the young hero of *Pennygreen Street* cannot resume his pre-war career as a boxer and turns to a life of crime. He eventually ends up blinded for life. In *Brighton Belle* (22, 201) La Bern suggests that Charley's decapitation of Ossie Newman with a Samurai sword resulted from executions he witnessed in a Japanese P.O.W camp. La Bern's source novel for Alfred Hitchcock's *Frenzy* (1972), *Goodbye Piccadilly, Hello Leicester Square* contains many references to the hero's traumatic wartime memories suggesting the author's awareness of what will later be defined as P.T.S.D. See *Goodbye Piccadilly, Hello Leicester Square* (New York: Stein & Day, 1967) 7-8, 12-13, 27-28, 35-36, 67-68, 74, 106-07, 160-61. Noting changes in the West End since his honeymoon year of 1943, Richard Blamey regards the Leicester Square to Piccadilly as "not the heart of London but 'the anus'" (27). Unlike the film, the novel makes frequent parallels between Blamey and the vicious killer Neville Heath who was executed in 1946 (See 73, 112, 146). Inspector Oxford also notes "similarities in the behavior of the two men" (146). La Bern also wrote a pre-quel to *Goodbye Piccadilly* that contains characters who appear in the next novel such as Johnny, Hetty, and Jenny as well as references to the unfortunate Richard Blamey. The main character of that novel, Larry Wellington, suffers vicious persecution from the "uncivil service" due to Britain's heavily punitive bankruptcy laws. See *It Will Be Warmer When it Snows* (London: W.H. Allen, 1966). The Richard Blamey trilogy concludes with *A Nice Class of People* (London: W.H. Allen, 1969). There the unfortunate hero discovers a very ironic reversal to what he attempted at the end of *Goodbye Piccadilly*. La Bern himself had no illusions about those inside and outside the law often casting a skeptical look on both categories very much in the manner of Zola himself. Even if post-war gangsters did not serve in the Forces during World War Two, they also, had their own form of wartime experience:

Bluey was sensitive to remarks about war service. He, like most of his mob had been a deserter. The fearless gangsters who would eat coppers for breakfast and chiv a man to ribbons at the drop of a bicycle chain had sought out the deepest Underground shelters in which to sleep during air-raids and were not above stealing the handbags of old ladies sleeping on the same platform. Incidents like these are conveniently forgotten when Sunday newspapers pay the "Big Time" criminals generous sums to glamorize themselves. (*The Big Money Box* 101)