



# Despair and the Noir Character

*Michael Caleb Tasker*

**Abstract.** Noir’s atmosphere of anxiety and/or despair stems not from environment and setting but rather from character and from an outsider defined by and riddled with a very Kierkegaardian sense of existentialist despair. As works by John D. MacDonald and David Goodis demonstrate, the despairing protagonist is the foremost defining characteristic of noir fiction.

The link between noir and existentialism is widely recognized, but when discussed in noir scholarship, the existentialist dimension is too often summed up as nothing more than a mood or sense of atmosphere (Horsley, *Noir* 48; Porfiro 77; Brevda 321). However, noir’s existentialism is much deeper and, in fact, is vital to the very foundations of noir fiction. Existentialist principles are found in noir’s themes, characters, and story (or narrative conflict). As Stephen Faison writes of noir: “The isolation of the individual and the lack of transcendent values are personified by the noir protagonist, who is typically a cynical, morally ambiguous loner without conventional standards of ethics” (12). In noir fiction we find the existentialist estrangement; the lack of concrete, predetermined meaning and purpose; the absurdity in life, and the fractured or perhaps even lost sense of identity that so often combine to provide the despair of the noir protagonist. The aim here is to explore Kierkegaardian despair, and how it is used in shaping and defining the noir character, primarily in John D. MacDonald’s *A Flash of Green* (1962) and David Goodis’s *Of Tender Sin* (1952), to demonstrate the place and narrative magnitude of despair as foundational to noir fiction.

Both authors are titans of noir fiction. MacDonald, perhaps best known for his influential Travis McGee series, wrote more than 60 novels, starting with Gold Medal paperbacks in the early 1950s, and went on to win the National Book Award in 1980. Goodis—also a Gold Medal alumnus, perhaps best known for *Down There* (1956) that was filmed by François

*Michael Caleb Tasker is an independent academic and award-winning short story writer. He holds a PhD from the University of Newcastle, Australia, and is currently researching the picaresque in crime fiction. He lives and works in Adelaide, Australia.*