



## Little Caesar (RosettaBooks Into Film)

*W. R. Burnett*

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W.R. Burnett had first-hand experience of the world he describes in his vivid and terse novel *Little Caesar* (1929).

The novel's hero, Cesare Bandello (Rico), is a "gutter Macbeth", a bad guy who claws his way through the ranks of a Chicago gang, circa 1928. Though the image of Rico is almost inseparable from Edward G. Robinson's star-making performance in the 1930 film version of the book, the novel, inspired in part by Machiavelli's *The Prince*, remains a fuller experience. It is believed to have had a profound effect on William Faulkner, Horace McCoy, and Graham Greene.

There is nothing heroic about Rico. He is not a dashing or even especially talented man; the one gift he possesses is a laser-like focus. It is this intensity that sets him apart from the slovenly hoods that surround him.

Rico is a cold, clear-eyed student of human nature. This knowledge initially provides Rico's success, but when it crystallizes into hubris, it results in his ultimate undoing. Rico becomes too satisfied with his success, forgetting that he has prevailed in what is essentially a jungle and that in this place, the laws of survival are immutable and unsparing.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William Riley Burnett (1899-1981) was a master of fiction, a skillful writer, contemporary to James M. Cain, Raymond Chandler, and Dashiell Hammett. Burnett authored some 36 novels and either wrote alone or in collaboration 60 screenplays. His novels *Little Caesar*, *High Sierra*, *The Asphalt Jungle* represent a rich vein of thought in contemporary American literature and culture.

After he began his career as a writer, Burnett moved to Chicago in the late 1920s at the height of Al Capone's power and sway over the city. It was this atmosphere, Chicago in the '20s and notably the St. Valentine's Day Massacre (Burnett was one of the first people on the scene) that inspired Burnett's first great success *Little Caesar*, which was made into a film by the same name starring Edward G. Robinson.

After this initial success, Burnett had a strong, close working relationship with Hollywood as both a novelist and screenwriter, and eventually found a champion in writer/director John Huston. Burnett collaborated with Huston on the adaptation of *High Sierra* in 1941 in which Humphrey Bogart redefined himself in the role of Roy Earle. The two men's paths crossed again when Huston filmed *The Asphalt Jungle* in 1950. The Mystery Writers of America awarded Burnett their highest honor--the prestigious title of Grand Master--at the 1980 Edgar Awards.

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