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WILD THINGS

Original Release Date: 20 March 1998

CAST

Kevin Bacon Sergeant Ray Duquette

Matt Dillon Sam Lombardo

Neve Campbell Suzie Toller

Denise Richards Kelly Van Ryan

Bill Murray Kenneth Bowden

Sandra Van Ryan Theresa Russell

Daphne Rubin-Vega Detective Gloria Perez

Carrie Snodgrass Ruby

Robert Wagner Tom Baxter

Jeff Perry Bryce Hunter





CREW

Directed by **John McNaughton**
Written by **Stephen Peters**
Produced by **Rodney M. Liber** and **Steven A. Jones**
Edited by **Elena Maganini**
Director of Photography **Jeffrey L. Kimball (ASC)**
Music by **George S. Clinton**
Executive Music Producer **Budd Carr**



LET'S TWIST AGAIN: SEX, MURDER AND THE LATE 20TH CENTURY HOLLYWOOD THRILLER

by Anne Billson

“People aren’t always what they appear to be,” says one of the detectives in *Wild Things*. And later on, another detective says: “There’s more to this story than you know.” You can say that again. In the world of preposterous plot twists, *Wild Things* stakes a claim to being queen. Which is why, if you haven’t yet seen John McNaughton’s film, you would be best advised to stop reading now and come back later. Because there *will* be spoilers.

Stephen Peters’ screenplay was originally known as *Sex Crimes*, a title retained in French-speaking territories, and almost too on the nose: the film is chock-a-block with people looking sexy or having sex in between conspiring to murder one another. It was released in 1998 to a wave of bemusement from mainstream critics, who described it as tawdry, vulgar and trashy while shamefacedly confessing they had also found it indecently entertaining, as though something so tawdry, vulgar and trashy had no right to be this much fun.

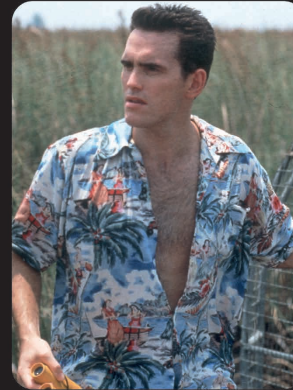


The fun stems from the way *Wild Things* subverts expectations. It presents itself as one genre before slipping into another and then, finally, whipping off the mask to reveal itself as something else again – much like several of the characters. In 1998, it sat at the point at which three tendencies of the 1980s and 1990s intersected – erotic thriller, neo-noir, and preposterous plot twists – and turned the dial up to eleven on all of them. In a sense it was the last hurrah of the erotic thriller as mainstream money-spinner; the subgenre would hence become a playground for auteurs (Stanley Kubrick’s *Eyes Wide Shut* [1999], David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive* [2001], Brian De Palma’s *Femme Fatale* [2002], Jane Campion’s *In the Cut* [2003]) before box-offices succumbed to a rising tide of superhero movies in which sex is conspicuous by its absence.

Ground zero of the erotic-noir-preposterous triple-threat is surely *Body Heat* (1981), directing debut of Lawrence Kasdan, hot off his screenplays for *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981). *Body Heat*, like *Wild Things*, is set in Florida and squeezes sensuous capital out of the state’s steamy climate, ambience of overripe corruption and nouveau riche decadence. Kasdan deliberately modelled it on classic films noirs, in particular *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944). Matty Walker (Kathleen Turner) is a married woman who introduces herself to feckless lawyer Ned Racine (William Hurt) with the prescient words, “You’re not too bright, are you. I like that in a man.” It’s the opening shot in her scheme to persuade him to murder her rich husband. While the classic noirs were shaped if not hobbled by the MPA Production Code, by the time Kasdan made *Body Heat* he could show Ned in explicit sexual thrall to Matty, as well as let her get away with murder, leaving Ned to take the rap and belatedly discover he was never anything other than the fall guy in her long-gestating masterplan.

The anti-heroine of *Wild Things*, like Matty, is playing a long game – though we only discover this in a series of flashbacks during the end credits, which fill in some of the literal black holes in the plot. The film, too, is playing a long game. For the first act, it sets itself up as a slick and sleazy melodrama, with the camera ogling twentysomething actresses playing high-school girls in crop-tops and cut-offs. All this is thrown for a loop when spoiled rich girl Kelly Van Ryan (Denise Richards), soon after flirting outrageously with her school counsellor Sam Lombardo (Matt Dillon), accuses him of rape.

This is where the first of the black holes comes in; the film cuts away from the incident itself, so we don’t know who to believe. The case against Sam solidifies when he is accused of rape by a second girl, Suzie Toller







(Neve Campbell) – dope-addled trailer trash with dyed hair and chipped nail varnish. The introduction of Bill Murray as Ken Bowden, Sam’s street-smart but not entirely trustworthy lawyer (he’s wearing a neck brace as part of an insurance fiddle) adds comic relief, but also muddies the waters.

The rape case collapses in court, and Kelly’s mother (Theresa Russell) is forced to pay Sam eight and a half million dollars for damages and defamation. But then the first of the really big twists is sprung around the one-hour mark, when Sam is joined in his motel room by both Kelly *and* Suzie. The three of them were in cahoots to plunder Kelly’s hitherto inaccessible trust fund! They celebrate their success with a three-way sex romp.

The same year as *Body Heat*, Bob Rafelson’s 1981 version of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, adapted by David Mamet from James M. Cain’s novel, also revisited the classic noir set-up of sexy lovers conspiring to murder the woman’s husband. In tune with the times, Rafelson’s film replaces the smoldering glances of Tay Garnett’s 1946 adaptation with kitchen table copulation.

Postman and *Body Heat* were in the vanguard of a vogue for erotic thrillers trading on the dubious frisson of copulation with someone who might be plotting to murder you. For the next two decades, a series of hapless male stooges were lured into sticky webs of blackmail, murder, and bunny-boiling by sexually available women in films like *Body Double* (Brian De Palma, 1984), *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987), *Sea of Love* (Harold Becker, 1989), *Final Analysis* (Phil Joanou, 1992), *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992), *Color of Night* (Richard Rush, 1994), *Jade* (William Friedkin, 1995) and so forth, not counting low budget straight-to-video

variations. More rarely it would be a woman lured into a relationship with an “homme fatale”: *Jagged Edge* (Richard Marquand, 1985), *Masquerade* (Bob Swaim, 1988), *Whispers in the Dark* (Christopher Crowe, 1992) and *Guilty as Sin* (Sidney Lumet, 1993).

But with the sexy threeway in Sam’s motel room, *Wild Things* has only just got started. In the 1990s, the preposterous plot twist became a *sine qua non* of thrillers, science fiction and horror. Some twists are rooted in classic literature. Ambrose Bierce’s short story “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” (from 1890, filmed in 1962 by Robert Enrico) was the mother of all the “they were dead all along” reveals featured in *Carnival of Souls* (Herk Harvey, 1962), *Jacob’s Ladder* (Adrian Lyne, 1990) and *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999). James Hogg’s *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “William Wilson” (1839) are all antecedents of doppelgangers or alter egos (extra points if the alter ego dresses in drag) in *Psycho* (1960), *Dressed to Kill* (1980), or *Fight Club* (1999).

Other twists take their cue from detective stories with “unguessable” endings. Agatha Christie novels, in particular, provide blueprints for many of the switchbacks that would later become popular in filmed thrillers: the narrator or protagonist turning out to be the murderer, the murderer faking their own death, or *all* the suspects being guilty en masse. Another regular feature of the filmed thriller is an evil masterplan (often explained in the final reel) so ridiculously elaborate it would require a lifetime of planning and so much effort, which makes you wonder why the perps don’t just apply their talents to less risky money-making pursuits, such as banking or politics. Maybe it’s the risk that they crave.

Equally prevalent was the “reality is a construct” twist, pioneered not just by Philip K. Dick novels such as *Ubik* (1969) or *Time Out of Joint* (1959) and echoed in *Dark City* (Alex Proyas, 1998), *The Game* (David Fincher, 1997), *The Matrix* (the Wachowskis, 1999), *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998) and *Shutter Island* (Martin Scorsese, 2010), but by works of



non-fiction such as David Maurer’s 1940 study of confidence tricksters, *The Big Con*, inspiration for *The Sting* (George Roy Hill, 1973) and David Mamet’s confidence trickster yarns. The convoluted schemes of criminal masterminds are, in effect, carefully constructed alternate realities in which the other characters unwittingly play the roles assigned to them.





And just as *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, 1995) doubles back on itself to deconstruct the art of storytelling, thrillers like *Wild Things* unmask the thriller plot as an arrangement of smoke and mirrors, a magician's sleight of hand to misdirect and sometimes even cheat the audience.

While the conspirators in *Wild Things* are trying to stab each other in the back, corrupt cop Ray Duquette (Kevin Bacon) is sowing distrust, leading

to another flurry of plot reversals, including the murders of Suzie and Kelly, and the revelation that Ray has been in league with Sam all along. The finale plays out on a yacht in the Caribbean. Ray is killed by Suzie, who, it turns out, faked her own death and has been conspiring with Sam. But Sam is just the fall guy; Suzie easily gets the better of him and sails off into the sunset alone, though not before collecting her loot from crooked lawyer Ken.

“Who wins?” said director John McNaughton. “The girl from the trailer park! She’s all alone on the ninety foot sailboat, out on the Caribbean. Pretty much everyone else is dead.”¹ With her grungy goth looks and humble origins a contrast to the moneyed Florida lifestyle we see elsewhere, Suzie encourages everyone to underestimate her, though sharp-eyed viewers who spot her reading Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s *Death on the Installment Plan* (“He had a pretty good line on what cheap fucks people are”) may guess there is more to her than meets the eye.

Much of the pleasure in rewatching a film like *Wild Things* comes from realizing that some of the bad acting was deliberate, and trying to work out which characters are privy to what information at any given time. Of course, further viewings also reveal plot holes and implausibility. There’s an out of focus shot from Suzie’s point of view, just prior to her supposed murder, indicating she is drunk and vulnerable. In the reveal during the end credits, though, we’re led to believe she was sober enough to almost immediately join with Sam in faking her own death. There’s no one else in the frame, so who is the out of focus shot supposed to fool? With a sinking feeling, we realize it’s us. Suzie has been conspiring with the film itself to

¹ Interview with John McNaughton, first published in an edited version in the Dutch magazine *Schokkend Nieuws* and later published online in *The Flashback Files* [accessed 16 Sept 2021]. <https://www.flashbackfiles.com/john-mcnaughton-interview>.



pull the wool over our eyes. In the preposterous thriller, the ultimate fall guy is not one of the characters, but the audience.

Women can and do take pleasure in watching the femme fatale at work, but she is still an archetype invented by men, embodying the idea of the sexually active female as temptation incarnate, the opposite of the wholesome wife and mother. And only male filmmakers, one suspects, could have cooked up a scenario pivoting on two false rape accusations, vanishingly rare in real life, but perennially cited by men's rights groups as justification for disbelieving allegations of sexual assault. If the comeback of the erotic thriller subgenre is long overdue, what form might it take in a post #MeToo era?

Perhaps a revival could build on the lateral thinking of promising one-offs that skew the neo-noir formula towards the female point of view: *Black Widow* (Bob Rafelson, 1987), in which a female investigator tracks down a glamorous female serial killer, *The Last Seduction* (John Dahl, 1994), in which the viewer is privy to the femme fatale's sociopathic schemes, or *Bound* (the Wachowskis, 1996), in which two lesbians conspire to steal from a crooked boyfriend. And if it's time for the femme fatale to make a comeback, it might be refreshing and enlightening to look at her through the eyes of female filmmakers.

Wild Things begat a mini-franchise, in which the sequels only highlighted what McNaughton and his crew got right, starting with famous actors playing around with their screen personas, as opposed to interchangeable TV actors going through the motions of a daytime soap, and clearly having a ball with the preposterous twists and turns of the plot as opposed to cynically recycling them to diminishing returns. False rape allegations, faked deaths and conspiracy sex abound, with ever more exposition shoehorned into the

final credits. The series petered out with the straight-to-DVD *Wild Things: Foursome* (2010). Perhaps symptomatically, it's the first entry in which the criminal mastermind turns out to be a man. An erotic thriller without a femme fatale at the helm is like a car without an engine.

Anne Billson is a novelist, film critic, screenwriter and photographer. Her horror novels include Suckers, The Ex and The Coming Thing; non-fiction books include monographs on John Carpenter's The Thing and Tomas Alfredson's Let the Right One In, Billson Film Database and Cats on Film. She lives in Belgium.







SHADOWS IN THE SUNSHINE: WILD THINGS AND FLORIDA NOIR

by Sean Hogan

Florida. Third-most populous state in America, and its fourth-largest economy. And where there are people and money, there is always crime. Noir writers such as John D. MacDonald and Charles Willeford were the first to see what was coming, charting Florida's transformation from – as *The Atlantic* magazine put it, in a profile on Willeford – ‘vacationer and retiree haven to the nation's capital of glamour, drugs and weird crime.’²

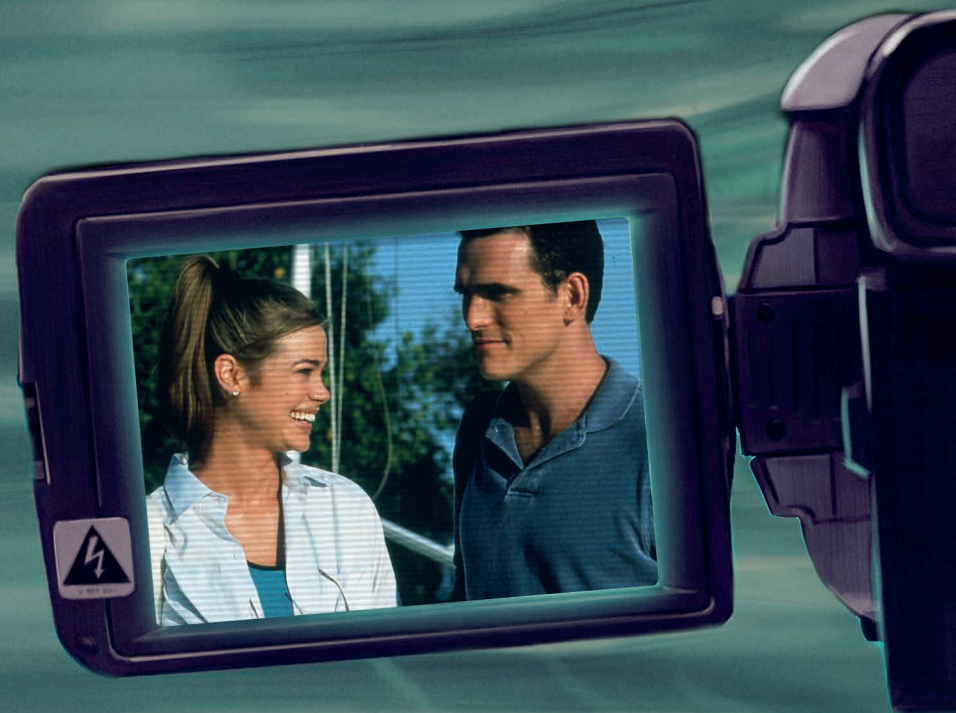
For Hollywood, the drugs and the weird crime would come later. What the Sunshine State initially promised was glamour, and they don't come much more glamorous than the pairing of Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. John Huston's *Key Largo* (1948) signaled the beginning of Florida noir, while also gesturing towards the moral enervation that would come to pervade the sub-genre. Protagonist Frank McCloud is another Bogartian world-weary tough guy who won't stick their neck out for nobody, but

² Fisher, Marshall John, 'The Unlikely Father of Miami Crime Fiction', *The Atlantic*, May 2000.

is eventually forced out of his isolationism by a suppressed sense of duty and the love of a good woman. In *Key Largo*, McCloud's nemesis is the sadistic gangster Johnny Rocco (Edward G. Robinson), previously exiled from the country but now plotting his return. (This establishes one of the main preoccupations of Florida noir: the notion of the state being a gateway for corruption, allowing all manner of illicit substances and personae to enter the country and infect the body politic.) While McCloud has the foresight to recognize that Rocco is merely a symptom of a more widespread disease, the gangster is eventually banished back out to sea and killed. America is safe for now and Bogart heads back into port with a wry smile; a triumphant closing shot that would habitually be inverted by many of the more downbeat films that followed.

If *Key Largo* already anticipated the end of the heroic phase of Florida noir, then *Tony Rome* (1967) and its 1968 sequel *Lady in Cement* are less an ending than a prolonged death rattle. Frank Sinatra plays *Rome's* titular private eye, whose main preoccupations (booze, broads, gambling) closely mirror the actor's own, and who seems as little invested with his caseload as Sinatra does in his performance. The two films are basically Bondian larks, their interest in their Florida setting barely extending beyond ogling bikini babes. (*Tony Rome's* artistic ambitions can perhaps best be summed up by the recurring gag that bookends the film: a woman bends over and Sinatra's POV zooms in on her ass, accompanied by a bass drum kick.)

A far more interesting portrayal of the Floridian private eye can be found in *Darker Than Amber* (1970), Robert Clouse's adaptation of the seventh book in John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee series. On the face of it, Tony Rome and Travis McGee seem to have much in common, both being idle but good-natured sea dogs who seem only to stumble into the business of crime-solving when the plot demands it. But while Marvin Albert's





Tony Rome novels actually predate MacDonald's, it is McGee that has proven to be the more enduring creation, and *Darker Than Amber* does much to suggest why.

As portrayed by Rod Taylor, McGee is tanned and ruggedly handsome, the tarnished-but-not-dirty white knight recognizable from a thousand noirs. One might expect the character to be as smugly insouciant as Tony Rome; certainly the beefy Taylor looks far more convincing throwing a punch than the diminutive, middle-aged Sinatra. But there is a lurking disquiet to McGee, as if he can perceive the darkness gathering in Florida's future. The film begins conventionally enough with McGee trying to help a girl in trouble, only for the investigator to promptly discover he is quite powerless to save her. Indeed, by *Darker Than Amber's* climax, McGee is barely able to save himself from the film's psychotic antagonist (a genuinely terrifying

William Smith), their bloody *mano-a-mano* confrontation making the brawls in *Tony Rome* look like the feeble playfights they are. (One likes to imagine that Rome might already have crossed paths with Smith, with undoubtedly fatal results for the playboy P.I.) At the film's close, in what will become a common inversion of *Key Largo's* final shot, McGee is left staring disconsolately out to sea, wondering what might have been.

If *Darker Than Amber* suggested that the noir hero's days were already drawing to a close, Arthur Penn's *Night Moves* (1975) takes him all the way to the end of the line. The masterpiece of Florida noir, Penn's film was birthed out of the creeping paranoia of the early 1970s, and concerns Harry Moseby, an ineffectual private eye whose attempts to trace a missing girl lead him to stumble blindly into a labyrinthine plot of sex, lies, betrayal and murder. Moseby seeks to emulate the classic noir hero, only to find himself



overwhelmed by the sheer corruption of modern society; indeed, he is barely cognizant of how deep the rot goes. (As Moseby comments during the film, 'He never saw it coming.')

At Night Moves' climax, the private eye is left, not merely staring out to sea, but stranded upon it; bereft, wounded, and hardly able to comprehend how he got there.

Harry Moseby might not have been much of a hero, but at least he was striving to be one. By the time Lawrence Kasdan's *Body Heat* opened in 1981, Florida noir no longer had any use for white knights. In *Body Heat*, everyone is dirty; even Floridian law enforcement barely seem to care that their shyster lawyer pal William Hurt killed his lover Kathleen Turner's husband. After all, he did it for the love of a beautiful woman, and the husband was a bad guy anyway, so the prospect of arresting Hurt for the murder seems more like an annoying technicality than a moral imperative. Often derided as an empty pastiche of noir classic *Double Indemnity*, with the benefit of 40 years of hindsight, *Body Heat* now looks increasingly impressive; its combination of perfectly cast movie star glamour and snappy dialogue symptomatic of a type of movie that latterly seems to have vanished forever. (To get a sense of just how well Kasdan's film works, contrast it with a later Florida noir: *China Moon*, a 1994 *Body Heat* retread that, despite a similarly good cast, never rises beyond rote imitation.) And once again, we conclude with one of the main characters gazing wistfully out to sea; mourning the choices they've made, mourning a time and a place that will soon be lost forever.

Just how lost would become apparent in Brian De Palma's satirical 1983 ode to Reaganite excess, *Scarface*. In its account of the rise and fall of a sociopathic Cuban hood, De Palma's movie shows us a Florida that has finally abandoned all sense of moral or ethical reason; under the influence of the cocaine trade, the petty corruption of *Body Heat* has now ballooned

into a sort of spiritual gangrene. There is no place for the likes of a Travis McGee or even a Harry Moseby in the world of *Scarface*, a realm inhabited only by monsters preying on other monsters. De Palma's film may lack the sort of deft character shading found in *Night Moves*, but cocaine isn't a subtle drug, and neither are the people who take it. What *Scarface* demonstrates is just how little value the individual actually possesses in an age of vicious individualism run amuck.





Miami Blues, the 1990 adaptation of Charles Willeford's novel, shows us exactly what happens when the old-time noir hero encounters this new breed of Reaganite sociopath. Amiable doofus cop Hoke Moseley loses his badge, gun, and false teeth to Alec Baldwin's grinning psychopath Frenger Junior, and spends the rest of the film trying to get them back. Moseley isn't fighting for a better world, or even to save a girl in trouble; he just resents being made to look like a schmuck. His eventual triumph has less to do with diligent police work or his own heroism than the self-destructive mania that ultimately consumes Frenger, just as it did Tony Montana. In a society as debased as modern-day Florida, we can no longer rely on heroes to save us; we can only hope that these utterly corrupt men and women doom themselves. The scumbag protagonist of Abel Ferrara's

The Blackout (1997) at least has the decency to take his own life when forced to confront his own sins; the sub-genre's typical closing image being further inverted as the stricken man not just stares out to sea, but throws himself into the ocean to drown. *The Blackout* is a druggy ramble, and scarcely any more coherent than Ferrara's disowned 1989 Florida noir *Cat Chaser*, but it is yet another signifier of the moral bankruptcy to come.

Blood and Wine (1996) is another post-Reagan essay in greed. ('This is a thousand points of light', one character says of the priceless diamond necklace that serves as the film's MacGuffin, in a pointed reference to George H.W. Bush's oft-quoted 1988 speech.) But while old hands Jack Nicholson and Michael Caine are superbly reptilian as the two central

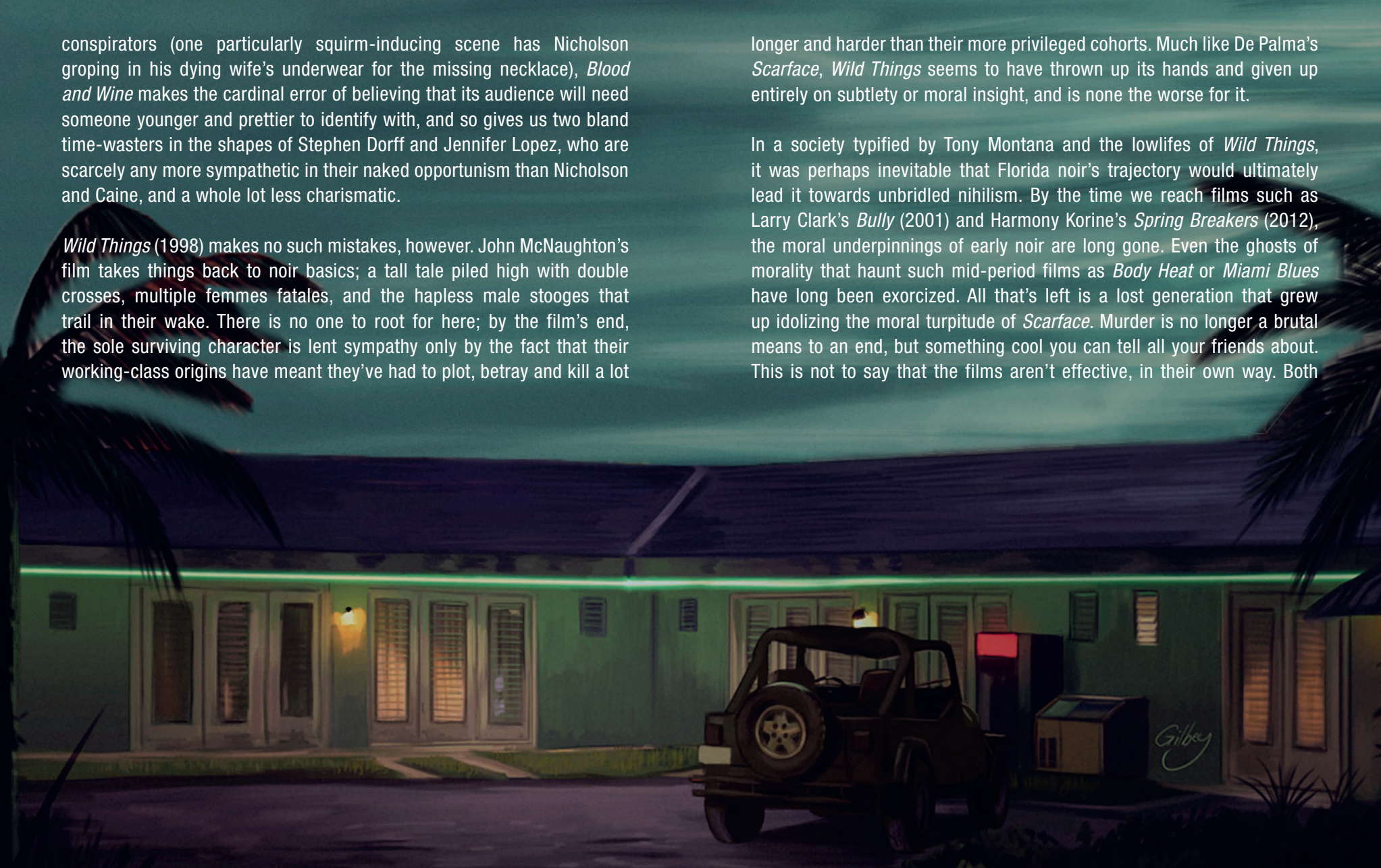


conspirators (one particularly squirm-inducing scene has Nicholson groping in his dying wife's underwear for the missing necklace), *Blood and Wine* makes the cardinal error of believing that its audience will need someone younger and prettier to identify with, and so gives us two bland time-wasters in the shapes of Stephen Dorff and Jennifer Lopez, who are scarcely any more sympathetic in their naked opportunism than Nicholson and Caine, and a whole lot less charismatic.

Wild Things (1998) makes no such mistakes, however. John McNaughton's film takes things back to noir basics; a tall tale piled high with double crosses, multiple femmes fatales, and the hapless male stooges that trail in their wake. There is no one to root for here; by the film's end, the sole surviving character is lent sympathy only by the fact that their working-class origins have meant they've had to plot, betray and kill a lot

longer and harder than their more privileged cohorts. Much like De Palma's *Scarface*, *Wild Things* seems to have thrown up its hands and given up entirely on subtlety or moral insight, and is none the worse for it.

In a society typified by Tony Montana and the lowlifes of *Wild Things*, it was perhaps inevitable that Florida noir's trajectory would ultimately lead it towards unbridled nihilism. By the time we reach films such as Larry Clark's *Bully* (2001) and Harmony Korine's *Spring Breakers* (2012), the moral underpinnings of early noir are long gone. Even the ghosts of morality that haunt such mid-period films as *Body Heat* or *Miami Blues* have long been exorcized. All that's left is a lost generation that grew up idolizing the moral turpitude of *Scarface*. Murder is no longer a brutal means to an end, but something cool you can tell all your friends about. This is not to say that the films aren't effective, in their own way. Both





suffer from an overly lascivious directorial eye, but their vacant, unblinking horror does pack a queasily effective gut-punch.

And if the darkness of Florida noir is to be taken as an accurate reflection of the shadowy underbelly of the locale that spawned it, then the no-values ideology of *Bully* and *Spring Breakers* seems entirely apposite. The old-world glamour of *Key Largo* has long since been lost at sea; all that remains is the same disease Bogart saw coming back in 1948.

Sean Hogan is a UK writer and filmmaker. His feature credits include the films Future Shock! The Story of 2000AD, The Borderlands, and The Devil's Business. He has written two award-nominated books of cinema metafiction, England's Screaming and Three Mothers, One Father. A third volume in the sequence, Twilight's Last Screaming, will be published in 2022.









ABOUT THE TRANSFER

Wild Things was restored in 4K by Sony Pictures Entertainment. 4K scanning by Colorworks, Culver City from 35mm Original Picture Negative. Digital Image Restoration by Prasad Corporation, India and Roundabout Entertainment, Santa Monica. HDR color grading and conform by colorist David Bernstein at Roundabout Entertainment in Santa Monica. Audio restoration and conform at Sony Pictures Entertainment, sourced from the original 35mm 5.1 stereo magnetic tracks. Restoration supervised by Rita Belda for SPE, with color approval by director John McNaughton.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Jasper Sharp**
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**
Technical Producer **James White**
Technical Assistant **James Pearcey**
Disc Production Manager **Sigrid Larsen**
QC **Aidan Doyle** and **Alan Simmons**
Production Assistant **Samuel Thiery**
Mastering and Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**
Artist **Sam Hadley**
Design **Obviously Creative**

SPECIAL THANKS

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