

PYRAMID[®]



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NOIR

THE ZEPHYR CLUB

by Matt Riggsby

THE GAMEABLE BOUNCER

by Jason Brick

HUMAN, FLAWED

by Michele Armellini

THE FEMME FATALE

by Cal Godot

THE HOUSE OF THE SUN

by J. Edward Tremlett

THE GATHERING WILL

by Steven Marsh

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Article Colors

Each article is color-coded to help you find your favorite sections.

- Pale Blue:* In This Issue
- Brown:* In Every Issue (letters, humor, editorial, etc.)
- Dark Blue:* **GURPS** Features
- Purple:* Systemless Features

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Matt Riggsby

Enter the gritty, gray world of noir . . .

IN THIS ISSUE

Are those prison bars across your eyes? No – it’s the light through the vertical blinds coming into the office of *Pyramid*. This time we’re turning our shadow-obscured gaze to the gritty, gray world of noir.

For good times, wholesome entertainment, and the occasional dark secret, visit *The Zephyr Club*. Complete with labeled and unlabeled maps, this location is presented by Matt Riggsby, co-author of **GURPS Low-Tech**. Learn about a hot spot to trot and its inhabitants (with notable **GURPS** details).

Every nightclub needs a tough guy at the door, but any old strong-arm won’t do. For quality security, look no further than *The Gameable Bouncer*. Along with a discussion of job expectations and challenges (including how the job has evolved from the early 20th century to the 21st), this article includes three **GURPS** templates and two new optional **GURPS Martial Arts** techniques.

The truly good noir movies and novels have interesting supporting casts. Your campaigns should be no different! Michele Armellini (author of **GURPS WWII: Grim Legions**) provides backgrounds and **GURPS** stats for eight iconic secondary characters.

The typical noir protagonist is a loner, with a plucky secretary or assistant at best. However, RPGs thrive on groups. *The Gathering Will* is here to help. This systemless campaign hook should be good for at least two years of adventures . . . if everyone can stand not to kill each other that long!

San Francisco in the early 1930s was famed as a city of vices. *The House of the Sun* presents a fully fleshed early-noir den of iniquity, intrigue, and terrible danger that might have been established in Fog City. Explore this locale and its secrets in the game system of your choice; it’ll be the experience of a lifetime!

Where would the hard-boiled detective be without *The Femme Fatale* and her schemes? Unearth the characteristics most common to the plot’s most dangerous lady and the **GURPS** traits associated with them, plus learn tips for using the archetype as a PC or misleading the protagonists about who the *real* femme fatale is.

This month’s *Random Thought Table* delves into adding discontent by way of *more* choices. *Odds and Ends* provides a secret stash or two, while *Murphy’s Rules* reveals how to be a good cop *and* bad cop.

Whether you’re donning a fedora in a full-fledged noir campaign or looking to add some gray to your other genre’s blue skies, this issue of *Pyramid* has got your back. Don’t say you weren’t warned . . .

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FROM THE EDITOR

NOIR! WHAT IS IT GOOD FOR?

In a lot of ways, I feel that “noir” is a flavor that can apply to many different campaigns. It’s versatile like “horror” in that regard. Thus, we have noir-flavored superheroes in the form of Peter David’s *X-Factor* and Brian Michael Bendis’ and Michael Avon Oeming’s *Powers*, and sci-fi noir such as *Blade Runner* and *Inception*.

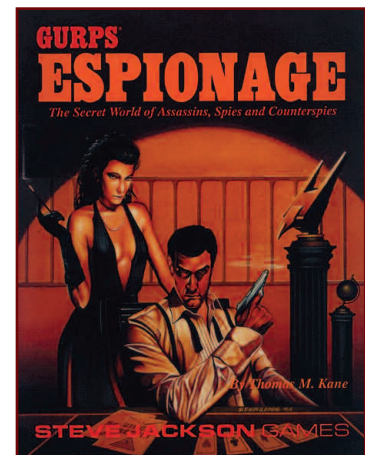
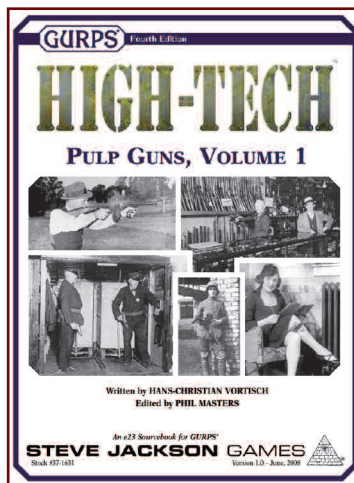
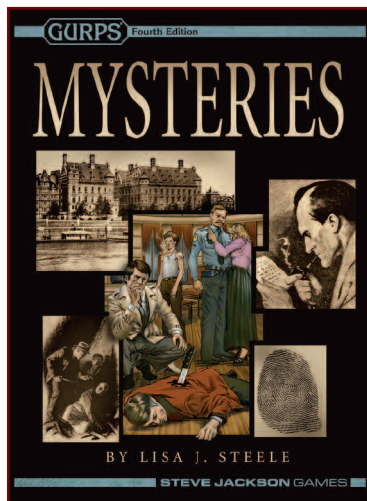
However, this issue looks at a relatively “pure” form of noir (with the exception of the transdimensional pub briefly detailed on p. 16 . . . it must’ve snuck past the security). We figure it’s easier to add noir to other campaigns that might benefit from it than it is to scrub strange elements. After all, any campaign from the past 100 years or so can use *GURPS* stats for bouncers (pp. 15-16); *GURPS* supporting-cast members that fit a noir sensibility (pp. 17-24) can turn up anywhere; gals who use their wiles (pp. 34-35) can cause mischief at any time; and odd situations that thrust random souls together (pp. 25-26) can be useful in most games.

In addition, similarly to horror, comedy, and action, “noir” as an idea is something that can be included in a campaign for a brief period, only to have it retreat to the shadows when the adventure is over. Even the most clear-cut black-and-white campaign might benefit from the shades of gray that a gritty adventure provides. (Frank Miller’s *Batman: Year One* started just a few months after one of the most over-the-top anniversary issues of *Batman* ever.)

So don your trench coat, question that “innocent” damsel once more, and venture into the night. If you play your cards right, you might just make it to see the morning.

WRITE HERE, WRITE NOW

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MAP OF THE ZEPHYR CLUB

For a larger, unlabeled version of this map, see pp. 10-11.

Key

1. Entrance
2. Vestibule
3. Maître d's Station
4. Bar
5. Main Floor
6. Stage
7. Backstage
8. Office
9. Men's Room
10. Powder Room
11. Kitchen
12. Pantry

Scale: 1 hex = 1 yard

#99: *Why would brilliant, intelligent men wanna go to a place like that?*

Maxwell Smart: *Well, there are several reasons, 99. Men like that need a place to unwind. A change of atmosphere, a change of scene.*

#99: *But Max, there's nothing to do there except look at a lot of girls walking around half undressed.*

Maxwell Smart: *Say, that's the best reason yet.*

– **Get Smart**
#2.27

She was on her way out the door before he hit the floor. She got a ticket on the next bus out of town and never looked back. Dolores mostly doesn't care, but sometimes she wakes up at night wondering what would happen if someone came after her.

Key Stats: Performance-13; Sex Appeal-13; Singing-14; Streetwise-14.

THALES JOHNSTONE, THE JANITOR

Thales is probably the oldest member of the staff, but still in good shape and as sharp as anyone. He doesn't talk much about his past – indeed, he doesn't say much about anything. (Given the social milieu of the times, few of the overwhelmingly white staff and entirely white customers would think to speak with him). He's believed to be only two or three generations removed from slavery.

Wearing a worn but well-maintained dinner jacket, he works as washroom attendant in the men's room during open hours, padding his meager pay with tips. He's also in charge of cleaning up after hours.

A few weeks ago, while taking a short cut home through a cluttered alley, he tripped over a man with an alligator briefcase and a bullet through his heart. On impulse, Thales took the briefcase, wrapped it in torn brown paper, and ran. Now, for the first time in decades, he's completely at a loss for what to do. The briefcase contains an ancient-looking painting in an elaborate gold frame. (It's a medieval icon stolen from a

European cathedral, but he doesn't know that.) It's clearly worth a lot, enough for its previous holder to die for it, but what can *he* do with it? Petty criminals and small-time fences are a dime a dozen, but who can be trusted with something like this? And who might be willing to kill a second time to get it back?

Key Stats: Brawling-12; Housekeeping-14.

MR. CAMINO, THE OWNER

He's not a bad guy by any stretch of the imagination, but he's not a particularly interesting one, either. Mr. Camino (Sam to his friends) leaves the charisma and showmanship to the orchestra and the rest of the staff; he excels as a businessman. He finds good people for the right positions and lets them do what they do best while he handles the money and the people problems. Camino's ancestors were Spanish, but he doesn't correct people who take him for Italian.

The Zephyr Club is, technically, a completely legitimate business (if you ignore the blind eye he turns to the patronage of racketeers). Keeping it that way isn't always easy. Johnny Buttons is friendly, but not necessarily *friends*. He'd love to buy a piece of the club. Mr. Camino can hold him off in good times, but a downturn in business might force him to consider it. Or maybe Johnny might get to the point where he just wants to sell some insurance, and there might not be any excuse not to buy it.

Key Stats: Administration-15; Streetwise-13.

One day I had a nice office and a secretary on Madison Avenue; the next, I was in and out of every gin joint from Eighth Street to Houston, in the regular company of what used to be called bums – that was before they became the homeless.

– Stuart Woods, *Imperfect Strangers*

IN THE CAMPAIGN

The location and period are intentionally left vague to allow the GM to place the Zephyr wherever it needs to go. As described, it can be set more or less without adjustment in any American city from the early 1930s into the 1960s. Within those bounds, concessions to the era can be minimal. For example, the music might be big-band jazz in the 1930s, moving heavily into swing by the late Depression, then to other forms like Brazilian jazz, bebop, and Sinatra-like crooners through the '50s. During wartime, there's a shelf of bottles reserved for military units whose members come through town; the soldiers drink free until the bottle's empty, then buy the next one.

With only a few more adjustments, the Zephyr Club can fit into a broader range of settings. For example, during Prohibition, the doors are heavy and opaque, and Dutch waits behind a tiny sliding window, only letting in those who know the password. In later decades, camera and cigarette girls fade away, but Candy and Loretta can become bartenders or waitresses. The house band can use a different style in later

decades, or retain a big-band influence to make the Zephyr deliberately retro. (Sicilian Joe might switch from clarinet to guitar, though by the '70s, the fact that he's bi-racial might become a curiosity rather than a deep secret.) With a few name and language changes, something like the Zephyr Club can be used in cities across the world, or the names can be retained to make it an oasis of American culture frequented by expatriates overseas.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matt Riggsby first saw *The Maltese Falcon* as a pre-teen in a 1920s movie palace. After knocking around the Barbary Coast and the brownstones of Boston, he hung up his trench coat as a numbers man in the medical systems racket. He's currently holed up with a dark-eyed dame, a kid who could be a spelling bee contender, and a pack of dogs who go down these mean streets and don't come back when they're called.

THE GAMEABLE BOUNCER

BY JASON BRICK

From the gorilla in the nightclub's alley to the tuxedo-wearing doorman, bouncers are a fixture of noir stories. In some

Candee was up on the stage, shaking her considerable assets, and all I could think about is how those yahoos at table six would settle down if she'd just put her clothes back on. That's the day I knew I had to quit working the clubs.

tales, they're just furniture in the local dive. In others, they play allies, adversaries, and informants. Some noir pieces focus on the exploits or misadventures of doormen and club security. They've appeared in movies so many times, people think they understand what their world is like.

Most of those people are wrong. Working security in a bar has elements of confrontation and risk, but a bouncer's job is more about talking than fighting. He cares more about bringing in customers than throwing them out, and worries about lawsuits more often than right hooks.

For a GM populating a noir world, and for players looking for a gritty new character concept, these staples of the genre deserve a detailed and accurate treatment suitable for any **GURPS** campaign.

THE JOB

Although the word "bouncer" first saw popular use in the late 19th century, bar security has been around for as long as there have been bars. Doormen even appear in ancient Mesopotamian mythology. For most of human history, security in a public house consisted of the owner – or his largest friend – and a big stick. Over the past 100 years or so, the role has evolved into its own specialized profession.

In the early noir years of the roaring '20s and Great Depression, club security was hired for their ability to enforce a club's policy – often by using an actual club. They kept out undesirables, including drunks, deadbeats, and local law enforcement. Size trumped skill, and getting tossed out of a bar often meant a serious beating. These were the bouncers of the detective novel, the jazz club, and the Depression-era honkytonk. They're what most people still think of when they imagine what this job is like.

After the war, club security grew more professional. Even smaller venues started using uniforms and writing down policies for ousting a troublesome customer. Negotiation, de-escalation, and other forms of social engineering became part of every bouncer's repertoire. As the United States grew increasingly more litigious, use of excessive force fell out of vogue.

Since the late 1990s, the job has become even more structured and regulated. Most states require licenses for on-site security. In states not requiring a license, insurance policies often mean bouncers get one anyway. Security chiefs hire for cool heads and people skills more than size or combat training.

Bouncers in all three eras *can* fight. Some even like fighting, but their first priority is to keep customers safe and the house

happy. Even winning a tussle can lose customers and break furniture, both of which can cost the owner a fortune. This leads to bouncing's first rule, which is arguably the only part of the job portrayed accurately in *Road House*.

BE NICE

The thing about bouncing drunks for a living is that you're dealing with drunks. The inebriated are irrational by definition. They respond poorly to aggression, even when it comes from a sober and much larger person. However, it's easy to sway them with humor, kindness, and understanding. A good bouncer knows how to redirect a belligerent customer's stream of consciousness. He's polite and professional, even while escorting someone out of the building. The best have people thanking them on their way out the door.

TEAM SPIRIT

No bouncer works alone. Even in small bars with just one doorman, he will work with the bartender when trouble starts. Teamwork is vital for safety, with all security staff watching one another's back throughout the night. It's a common tactic to surround a potentially troublesome drinker, intimidating him into submission through sheer numbers. Modern security teams use walkie-talkies or even tactical radios to keep the team coordinated and in touch.

THE PLUCKY YOUNG REPORTER

Meredith Sanders is young, inexperienced, and the first female reporter in town. Until now, she's worked for the women's page. But her father was the publisher's friend, and he backs her up. When the journalist who usually covers crime doesn't show up, she jumps at the chance. She's going to follow the news, wherever it'll take her, and she has her Intuition to guide her.

Meredith is still learning the ropes, however. She knows little about the bad neighborhoods, and nobody in the police. Maybe her Contacts in high society will turn out to be unexpectedly useful, if the plot steers that way. She might help the investigators, but it will be a two-way street; she needs information she can write down by the deadline. She loves taking pictures to go with her articles, and she might be present with her bulky equipment should photo evidence be critical.

It's worth noting that Meredith's male colleagues are likely to be chauvinist about her foray in "their" province, not just because she's a woman, but also because she's not jaded like them. Meredith earnestly believes in freedom of the press and in the right of the public to be informed. However, she burns with ambition and knows what will sell. Sooner or later, her Code of Honor might clash with her Obsession.

Her Vow has to do with what is published in the paper; she's perfectly able to tell a lie.

Variants

Meredith as a male character is less interesting but probably more likely. In the late 1930s, a series of films portrayed a woman reporter on the police beat, Torchy Blane. Those were considerably lighter than true noir movies.

Given that PCs in a noir adventure are unlikely to be white knights and that Meredith is no damsel in distress, she can be a suitable romantic interest.

She'll Say

"The public wants to know!"

MEREDITH SANDERS

40 points

She's a plain girl in her 20s, with short brown hair. When she's not handling her camera, she's writing on her notepad.

ST 9 [-10]; **DX** 10 [0]; **IQ** 12 [40]; **HT** 10 [0].
Damage 1d-2/1d-1; BL 16 lbs.; HP 9 [0]; Will 12 [0]; Per 13 [5];
FP 10 [0].
Basic Speed 5.00 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0]; Dodge 8.
5'7"; 130 lbs.

Social Background

TL: 6 [0].
CF: Western [0].
Languages: English (Native) [0].

Advantages

Contact Group (High Society; Skill-12; 9 or less; Somewhat Reliable) [5]; Intuition [15]; Less Sleep 1 [2]; Patron (Publisher; 6 or less) [5].

Perks: Convincing Nod. [1]

Disadvantages

Code of Honor (Professional) [-5]; Curious (12) [-5]; Obsession (Become a famous reporter) (12) [-5]; Pacifism (Self-Defense Only) [-15]; Vow (Writing the truth) [-5].

Quirks: Attentive; Loves taking photos. [-2]

Skills

Current Affairs/TL6 (City) (E) IQ [1]-12; Driving/TL6 (Automobile) (A) DX-1 [1]-9; Fast-Talk (A) IQ [2]-12; Literature (H) IQ-2 [1]-10; Photography/TL6 (A) IQ [2]-12; Professional Skill (Journalist) (A) IQ [2]-12; Psychology (H) IQ-2 [1]-10; Research/TL6 (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Savoir-Faire (E) IQ [1]-12; Writing (A) IQ [2]-12.

*Bad news sell best. 'Cause
good news is no news.*

*— Charles Tatum,
in Ace in the Hole*

THE NEUTRAL GANGSTER

This is not a typical character of classic noir movies. The protagonists don't come to terms with criminals (even though Eddie Mars repeatedly tries to reach an understanding with Marlowe in *The Big Sleep*). However, movies are more akin to one-shot adventures, and there's little time or scope for neutrals. On the contrary, a noir campaign can resemble a TV series; in a continuing storyline, there may be space for such a

character. He can cross the investigators' path more than once, and, as long as their interests are not directly conflicting, he might develop some grudging respect for them.

Danny Padalino is such a gangster. He began as a muscleman and driver for his late boss, then he stepped into his shoes. He is neither a gunslinger nor a mastermind, but he's dogged, born in the family, and able to use the right amount of violence.

ABOUT *GURPS*

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