

NAXOS
AudioBooks

COMPLETE
CLASSICS
UNABRIDGED

William Lindsay Gresham

Nightmare Alley

Read by **Adam Sims**



1	Madame Sosostriis, famous clairvoyante...	5:15
2	The geek had picked up a black snake...	3:38
3	Against the summer night the ferris wheel lights winked...	4:11
4	Card 2 The Magician	5:09
5	'Now then, for my next number...'	4:55
6	Dad taught Molly all kinds of wonderful things...	6:34
7	Dad was wonderful. He looked over his shoulder...	5:56
8	Molly's grandfather, 'Judge' Kincaid...	5:42
9	Stanton Carlisle: The great Stanton stood up...	5:27
10	The woman was tall, dressed in flowing white...	6:13
11	Zeena looked up, folding her arms with decision.	6:00
12	Card 3 The High Priestess	5:26
13	'Nope,' Zeena went on, 'Pete was a real brunette...'	5:30
14	Zeena returned. In the watery gold light of morning...	6:15
15	'It's getting late'. 'Sure is.'	6:26
16	Across the tent the talker, Clem Hoately...	5:45
17	Her face softened and she laid her palm...	5:43
18	'You know, kid – ' Pete drew himself up...	5:07
19	They had left the tent and the darkened midway stretched out...	4:37
20	Card 4 The World	6:06

21	The sight of the sailor rushed Stan back to normal.	6:17
22	It was uncanny how Zeena could fish out things...	6:15
23	'Before you take that step,' she went on...	5:33
24	'You're the card worker,' Martin said aggressively.	5:55
25	Balancing against the rock of the train, he pushed...	6:03
26	It was Zeena's turn to keep quiet.	5:21
27	The figures, then, were a record...	4:16
28	The speech fascinated him.	4:44
29	Now the very country shimmered with violence...	6:06
30	Joe Plasky said evenly, 'Sailor, you been leaving a trail...'	5:59
31	Stan came up behind the steps behind Joe Plasky's platform...	6:32
32	Stan noticed that the stubble on the deputy marshal's chin was white.	5:19
33	'As I said, it's absolutely none of my business.'	4:33
34	I'm very glad to have met you, Marshall...	4:58
35	Card 5 The Empress	7:05
36	They took their seats and a gangling youth with spiky hair brought in two...	6:43
37	Card 6 Resurrection Of The Dead	5:27
38	Outside the snow was falling lightly...	4:59
39	It was like other days of early summer...	6:04

40	The boy lay face down. The sounds of the house filtered up...	4:15
41	Sudden anger rose up in him...	4:56
42	Mother's tone was brittle.	5:07
43	Someone switched on the living room lamp.	3:44
44	Card 7 The Emperor	5:37
45	Molly closed her eyes.	5:44
46	He turned back to the reclining girl. 'Miss Cahill...'	5:12
47	She sat up, passing the back of her hand...	4:25
48	Stan took both her hands in his and shook them.	5:09
49	Card 8 The Sun	5:52
50	In the old grey stone house near Riverside Drive...	5:43
51	She played the 'Amen' chords softly...	5:38
52	Miss Cahill stirred in her chair and her head drew back.	5:19
53	She hurried over, feeling the warmth in her face...	4:36
54	Upstairs he entered Mrs Peabody's room and shut the door.	4:36
55	Card 9 The Hierophant	5"53
56	Now the house wasn't like home any longer...	5:26
57	Addie Peabody got up late and called the Rev. Carlisle...	5:51
58	Addie had risen from her chair.	5:05
59	Sun beat on the striped awnings...	5:20

60	Card 10 The Moon	5:38
61	It was a cool June evening and Stan wore a blue coat...	5:11
62	The words had a hard time coming out...	6:13
63	If only they could all have stayed together...	6:05
64	The old man said 'Amen' and then grinned weakly at his wife.	6:10
65	Card 11 The Lovers	5:19
66	Loneliness came over him, like an avalanche of snow.	6:05
67	Monday afternoon, lecture on the Esoteric Significance of the Tarot...	4:12
68	With the wheels clicking past under him, Stan felt a little better.	3:29
69	Stan was looking at her spindly legs.	4:37
70	The nameplate said, 'Dr. Lilith Ritter...'	4:40
71	Card 12 The Star	4:36
72	'Let's get back to Humphries. Before he ran away...'	4:49
73	In the spring darkness the Obelisk stood...	5:54
74	The rush, the rocketing plunge of the years to death...	6:12
75	Three doors down was a little cocktail bar with a glass sign...	5:26
76	He finished the brandy and signalled the waiter...	5:38
77	Bracing his hand against the curved instep...	5:31
78	Card 13 The Chariot	5:54
79	The morgue office of Morningside Hospital...	5:48

80	Good Christ, was this guy never going to shut up...	5:53
81	Conversation flattened out to an eager rustle...	6:04
82	The tears had mounted to the clergyman's eyes...	5:03
83	'But God damn it – pardon me Reverend – but I know all this.'	5:05
84	Inside the concrete shack a man in a gray military shirt...	6:16
85	The Rev. Carlisle smiled spiritually.	5:25
86	Then Stan felt something touch his lips.	5:20
87	The others had left the directors' room...	6:19
88	The ghostly billiard game went on...	6:40
89	Card 14 The Tower	5:32
90	The Rev. Carlisle's hand tightened on the older man's arm.	5:29
91	Suddenly she stood up, throwing her hair back.	6:50
92	When Grindle got to the church he found the Rev. Carlisle...	5:03
93	It was late when Stan pressed the buzzer...	5:35
94	In a tiny bedroom, lit only by a skylight...	6:52
95	Inside the cabinet the Rev. Carlisle was busy packing...	5:22
96	He limped back into the hall.	6:13
97	Card 15 Justice	3:30
98	Mustn't use the car. Cab drivers remember people.	3:49
99	He stood, swaying...	3:10

100	She was standing up now and leaning over the desk...	3:02
101	Card 16 The Devil	5:14
102	Card 17 The Hermit	4:52
103	The fat hobo stood up, swishing the coffee in his can.	4:42
104	The world began to spin and he opened his eyes...	4:20
105	Card 18 Time	2:58
106	Card 19 The Wheel Of Fortune	5:19
107	'My dear friend, how often in your life, when things looked bad...'	5:40
108	Stan was trying to listen.	4:46
109	Justice. Something in it could mean folding money.	3:48
110	Card 20 Death	5:14
111	They had left the crowd and cut down a side street.	5:17
112	Card 21 Strength	5:32
113	The half – man acrobat pushed aside the piles of letters...	5:22
114	'What's calluses on the ends of the fingers...'	5:47
115	Card 22 The Hanged Man	4:33
116	You could hardly see the platform for the smoke and the waiter.	7:24

Total time: 10:24:00

William Lindsay Gresham
(1909–1962)
Nightmare Alley

Nightmare Alley is written with such conviction, feels so completely experienced, that it is almost a disappointment to discover that its author wasn't a sideshow huckster. But then *Nightmare Alley* has more to it than merely desperate showmen on the underside of the American dream; and it can be easy to overlook, especially in a work regarded as pulp even when it was a success, that the author plotted, planned and prepared it, crafted its set pieces and laced its themes throughout the story, using a series of narrative tricks (some quite daring in a populist work) to involve and engage the reader. He was, after all, a writer. And there is still plenty in Gresham's life – especially after the book was published – which allows *Nightmare Alley* to serve as a resonant metaphor if not autobiography.

Early in his life, when the family moved to New York, Gresham encountered the sideshows and cheap thrills of the carnivals

at Coney Island. He became fascinated by the culture, mesmerised by the oddities of humanity that could make a living out of being abnormal. One well-dressed man had a small, headless vestigial body, also well-dressed, hanging from his stomach. This seemed to Gresham like a much better way to make money than his father's factory job, although – lacking a freakish body to display for cash – he found that his calling was to take some years yet.

The fascination remained, though, and he became familiar with the tricks and customs, argot and way of life that typified the carry world. He took on a series of jobs (including some associated with the carry) – a stint working for a newspaper, even singing in folk groups round the bohemian edge of New York. He was married briefly; and then married again to a wealthy socialite in a match that lasted nine years, despite the apparent disparity. But he was still searching for

something – or running from it, perhaps. His parents had divorced and he lacked self-confidence. He must have begun to sense those personal uncertainties that would spark his years of analysis, chasing the alchemical formula that led him to Marxism, alcoholism, Christianity, the Tarot, Buddhism, Ouspensky, Dianetics – anything that might soothe or explain his unnamed terrors.

He joined the Communist party in 1936 and went to help fight in the Spanish Civil War. While waiting to return, he fell into conversation with a man called Halliday (or a doctor called Faraday – accounts differ) who told him one of the darkest secrets of the carnary: the geek, a man so ruined by alcohol addiction that he will put up with being displayed as an almost inhuman wild man, eating live chickens and snakes, just to be sure of his next bottle of hooch. The story stayed with him, stirring an imaginative revisioning of a deeper story – of man's constant terror, of his endless flight towards sanctuary. This was at the heart of *Nightmare Alley*; indeed, it *is* the alley – the chasing steps of the nightmare as you run towards a patch of light that will forever recede.

Gresham had TB when he returned from the war, and his second marriage failed as his neuroses took over. He attempted suicide, but the hooks on the closet holding his noose gave way. And then he met and married Joy Davidman, a poet and Communist, with whom he had two children. Gresham was beginning to establish himself as a writer of sorts, editing a true-crime magazine, but his childhood fascinations and that story from his comrade in the war gave him the material he wanted for a much broader piece of fiction. Davidman's guidance and assistance must also have been instrumental in helping him create the final work. She said of her later marriage to C.S. Lewis that she was no writer compared to him, but was able to make him write more like himself; something similar seems to have worked with Gresham, and he dedicated the book to her.

Nightmare Alley was a hit, and was sold to Hollywood with Tyrone Power fighting for the chance to play the lead. But the producer thought, even in its slightly Bowdlerised form, it would tarnish Power's image (which it probably would have) and released it as a B-movie, limiting its impact

considerably. Within a short while, both film and book were largely forgotten. The money did not last either: tax problems and overspending meant the family was largely without funds. Gresham wrote one other novel, based around his time in a TB ward, but it failed. Two of his other works are rather better thought of, but no more popular – *Monster Midway*, a non-fiction account of the world of the carny, and *Houdini – the Man Who Walked Through Walls*, a revisionist biography of the great magician and illusionist. And before these came out, his personal life was in painful turmoil.

Unwell, drinking heavily, unfaithful, losing belief in Marxism and no doubt himself, he found his marriage to Davidman collapsing. Its demise was not helped by his affair with Davidman's cousin, whom Davidsman had asked to help Gresham while she herself went to England; she was suffering her own crisis of faith, and converted to Christianity (her later marriage to C.S. Lewis was the subject of the play and film, *Shadowlands*). Gresham married the cousin, Renée, and this final marriage seems to have been a success. Although he never wrote anything to match *Nightmare*

Alley, he managed to keep afloat as a freelance, sometimes editing, sometimes contributing, writing short stories and radio pieces; he maintained contact with Davidman until her death, and with their sons until his own death. There is a suggestion that whatever woke his demons was for a while silenced. But it wasn't for long. In 1962 he was diagnosed with cancer: he went to the Dixie, a rundown old showfolks' hotel in New York, where, having checked in under an assumed name (that of an uncle), he took an overdose of sleeping pills and died.

Nightmare Alley is not an autobiography, and it is not a moral health-warning. It is a work of fiction that uses all a writer's craft to tell its story and draws its core from a broad experience of life. That is why it feels so personal but has a universal appeal. For Gresham, we are all running down the same alley, with the same fears and much the same chance of finding Nirvana at the end of it.

Notes by Roy McMillan



Adam Sims trained at LAMDA. His recordings for radio include *The World According to Humphrey* and *The Salamander Letter* for the BBC. His film and theatre credits include *Band of Brothers* (HBO), *Lost in Space*, *The Madness of George III* (West Yorkshire Playhouse), *Alice in Wonderland* (Royal Shakespeare Company), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Regent's Park) and *Snake in Fridge* (Manchester Royal Exchange), for which he won the award for Best Actor at the Manchester Evening News Theatre Awards. For Naxos AudioBooks, he has read Murakami's *after the quake* and *Hard-boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*; and Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*.

Credits

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Produced by Roy McMillan

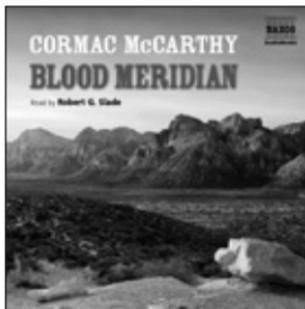
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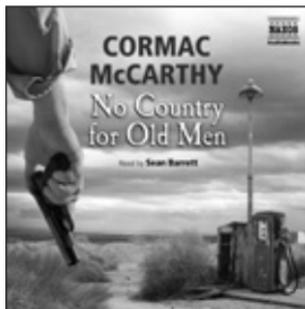
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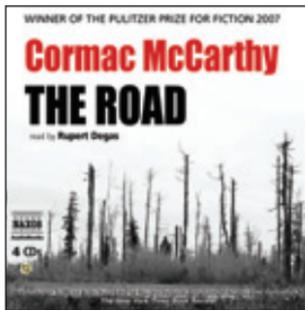
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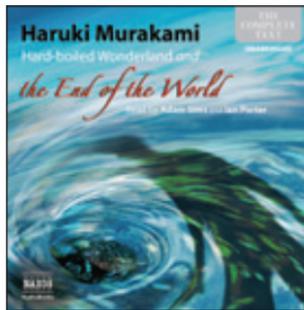
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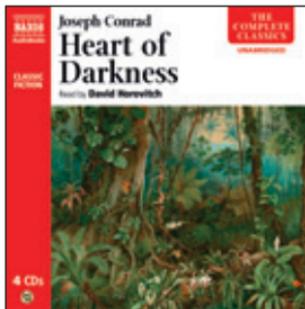
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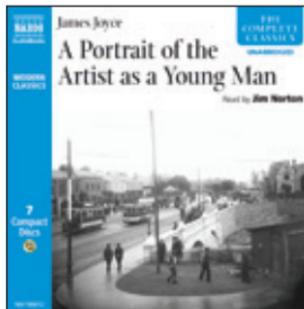
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William Lindsay Gresham

Nightmare Alley

Read by **Adam Sims**

Stanton Carlisle is smart, good-looking and ambitious. Among the outcasts, freaks and geeks of the Ten-in-One sideshow, he learns that the public is there to be gulled, and he learns how to do it. Amoral and brilliant, he aims for the brighter lights of vaudeville before a much bigger coup faking spiritualism for the rich. But his own dark fears haunt him, and he is not the only one taking advantage of terror and desire.

Published in 1946, *Nightmare Alley* is a noir classic – at once a vivid insight into the sub-culture of the carny, and a bleak and gripping fable.



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Total time
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NA00043D

CD ISBN:
978-184-379-482-0

