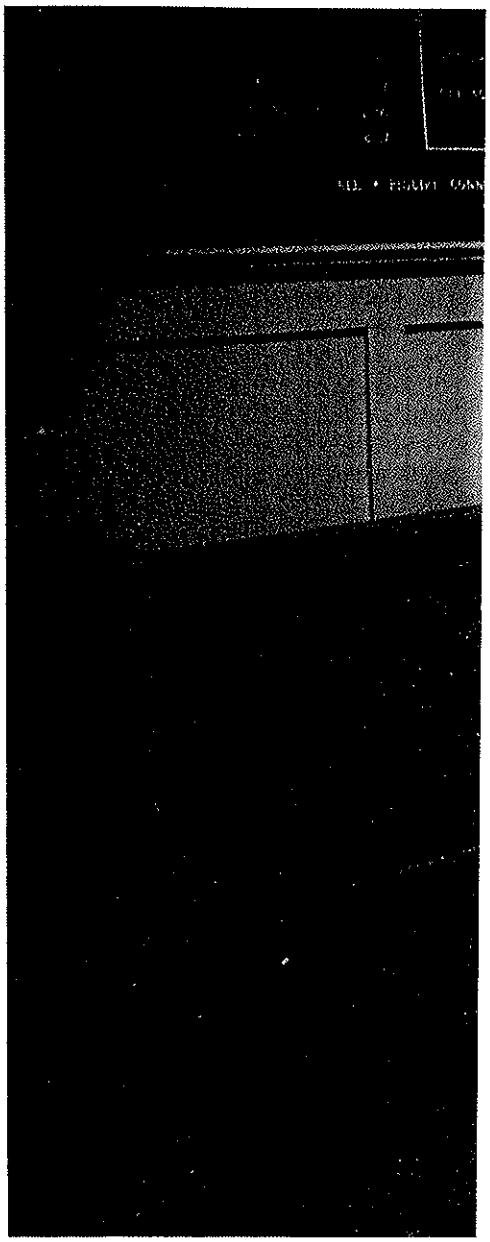
THE POSTMAN RINGS AGAIN

Patrick McGilligan

A new film version of James M. Cain's classic novel reunites two iconoclastic friends—Bob Rafelson and Jack Nicholson.



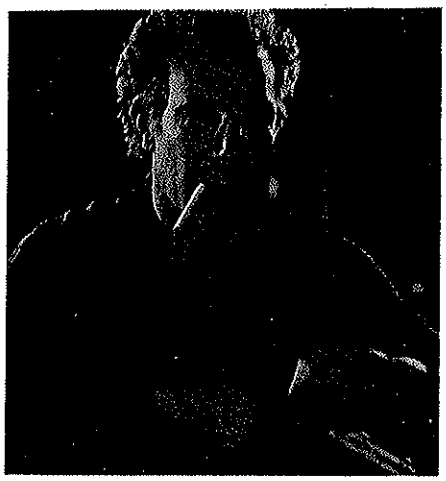
The story circulating in Hollywood after Bob Rafelson was fired from *Brubaker* in April 1979 was a good one, and it had a plausible ring to it. It was said that before being fired—or to cinch being fired—the director threw a chair at a Twentieth Century-Fox executive who had come to the *Brubaker* set in Ohio to plead with him for commercial concessions and an accelerated pace of shooting.

At forty-seven, Rafelson has a steel-rubber body and looks as if he could heft cargo on the docks, let alone throw a chair on a movie set. According to press clippings, Rafelson has been a bronco-buster, a tramp seaman, a jazz drummer, and—somewhat like the character Jack Nicholson plays in Rafelson's *King of Marvin Gardens*—an army disc jockey rapping all night while stationed in Japan. The clippings indicate that he has been in scrapes before, and that when he is working, he is intense, driven, not nice, and left-handed.

At any rate, there was a bitter parting of ways between Rafelson and Fox, and the rights and wrongs of the affair are still being sorted out in a mess of lawsuits. Stuart Rosenberg stepped in as his replacement and completed the picture, reshooting about one week's worth of footage. Rafelson's associates maintain that the key elements and overall look of *Brubaker* are recognizably his—except for the Jane Alexander role, a commercial element which Fox had insisted on and which Rafelson had resisted from the beginning.

Rafelson still hasn't seen the picture and won't see it. The firing was a blow to his pride and career. It came three years after his last credit, *Stay Hungry*, and during that time, he also had put in long hours of research and preparation on another unrealized project—an adaptation of Peter Matthiessen's *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*.

For director Bob Rafelson, the offer to direct The Postman Always Rings Twice *came at a most opportune time.*



It was a stroke of luck that within a month of the firing, Rafelson got an offer to direct the remake of James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. It was just luck, too, that he and Jack Nicholson, who had done mutually challenging work together in the past, would find themselves willing and available at the same time. All of it, including the *Brubaker* firing, might be deemed luck, but James M. Cain would have appreciated how it also had the design of fate.

"The poet of the tabloid murder," as Edmund Wilson once called him, Cain was a prolific writer whose popularity peaked in the forties with screen versions of three of his novels: *Double Indemnity*, *Mildred Pierce*, and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. Now interest in Cain has flared anew, with paperback reissues of his fiction and revived activity in Hollywood. In addition to *Postman*, a version of Cain's never-before-filmed *Butterfly*, with Stacy Keach, cabaret entertainer Pia Zadora, and Orson Welles, is completed and due for release this year, and a television miniseries based on Cain's *Past All Dishonor* is in preparation.

Jessica Lange, as a wayward wife, languishes in a bus station.

Postman has already been filmed three times: an unauthorized French version in 1939; the 1942 *Ossessione*, directed by Luchino Visconti and also unauthorized; and the familiar 1946 MGM version, in which the chemistry of John Garfield and Lana Turner compensated for the watered-down sex and violence. Although the novel was first published in 1934, it sat on the shelf at MGM for more than a decade because nobody could figure out how to make it censorproof.

Nicholson and Rafelson first discussed *Postman* ten years ago, when Rafelson recommended the book as well as the MGM movie to Nicholson. But he gave no thought then to directing a remake, although he saw interesting parallels between Nicholson's career and Garfield's, because both of them so frequently played roles of, as Rafelson puts it, "the alienated man." After reading the novel, Nicholson became fascinated by the character of Frank, the drifter who falls in love with a sexy roadhouse waitress named Cora and who is drawn into a nightmare of adultery and murder. For Nicholson, the idea of remaking *Postman* with, what he calls, its "extreme sexual elements and sexual realities," persisted throughout the next decade.

"It's an area of acting that I really haven't gotten to explore that much," Nicholson explained one day on the *Postman* set, "and that's the attraction of the role for me. Not everything about it is sexual or erotic, but it tends to underlie everything that is in the story. I wanted to go a little more deeply into this area within a vehicle that is appropriate for it."

Previous attempts to film *Postman* with Nicholson failed to get off the ground. At one point, MGM, which retained the rights to the novel, planned a version with Hal Ashby directing, but Nicholson demurred when then MGM head James Aubrey demanded that Raquel Welch be cast as Cora for marquee value.

In the spring of 1979, when Bob Rafelson was suddenly at liberty, MGM was talking with producer Andrew Braunsberg, an Englishman long associated with Roman Polanski, about a *Postman* remake by Lorimar Productions. Braunsberg made an offer to Rafelson, and this time MGM was more generous—once Nicholson and Rafelson were committed, the project was given a blanket OK. There were no other contingencies, no casting approval. The concept was to use the Depression setting of the novel, but there was no script.

At first glance, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* seems to have little in common with Rafelson's other films—*Head*, a free-wheeling vehicle for the rock group the Monkees; *Five Easy Pieces* and *The King of Marvin Gardens*, his collaborations with Jack Nicholson on contemporary alienation; and *Stay Hungry*, an offbeat look at body builders and real estate agents set in the New South of Birmingham. But Rafelson's work has never been easy to categorize by plot or genre. Describing himself as "more abstract and less linear" than most American directors, Rafelson admits, "I've always been interested in character evolution, not emphasizing the story."

Rereading *Postman*, Rafelson was struck by the sheer narrative momentum of Cain's writing. He decided to take the assignment "as a test of craft, because I so admire Cain's ability to tell a story." He also became intrigued by "the concealed and understated sentiment" of the love story, by the religious and mystical undercurrents of the plot, and by the fatal conjunction of two ordinary people who would never have committed a murder if their lives had not intersected.

"It was my conception for this film," says Rafelson, "that Frank and Cora were equal partners throughout, that neither of these two characters was capable of completing a sentence alone. I have a general philosophical attitude about people—and certainly about characters—that they contain all emotional reference points and all standards of morality. Fear, perhaps, contracts a person from imagining murder. People don't allow it into the lexicon of their emotions. But probably in their sleep or at moments of intense anger, they wish it upon someone. So I had to conceive of these people as being just very, very ordinary—which is to say, with complete emotional latitude."

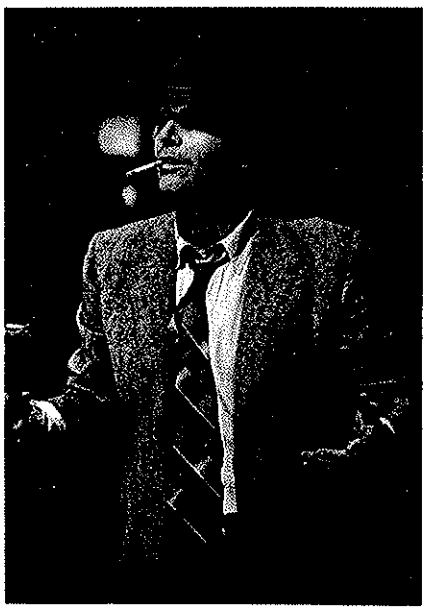
It is this "philosophical attitude" that provides an affinity between Rafelson and Cain. Cain's perception of the world is "really up Rafelson's street," in the words of Andrew Braunsberg. "It's the kind of man Rafelson is." As a philosophy undergraduate at Dartmouth, Rafelson studied and admired existentialism; it is said that Sartre and Camus found pleasure and consequence in Cain. And, according to Rafelson, when Sartre reviewed *The King of Marvin Gardens*, he called it "this decade's *Nausea*." In turn, when Rafelson met Sartre, he told the aging philosopher,

Rafelson had Jessica Lange in mind for Cora even before casting began.

"You have been my guiding light for twenty years."

Casting on the film began without a script. More than 130 actresses tested for Cora by reading from Cain's novel, with Rafelson often acting out the other characters. One actress who auditioned, unsuccessfully, was Lindsay Crouse, who complained to Rafelson that her husband should have been asked to write the *Postman* screenplay. When Rafelson found out that Crouse was married to playwright David Mamet, he knew instantly that she was right. He had once read part of Mamet's play *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* in a Chicago airport and had called Mamet up in the middle of the night to tell him how much he liked it. Although they had never met, Rafelson decided Mamet was perfect for adapting Cain because "he has the most direct use of language of any writer in America today."

To play the role of Frank the drifter, Jack Nicholson read up on Gary Gilmore.



Mamet had tried screenwriting before, but his experiences with Hollywood had been, in his words, "very hateful." Nevertheless, he was intrigued with the opportunity of paying homage to Cain by faithfully rendering his book. "A wonderful writer, very direct about human emotions," Mamet says about Cain. "He makes Raymond Chandler look like a pansy."

Mamet, who lives in New York, flew to Hollywood and took a crash course in writing for the screen from Rafelson. Rafelson's story editor Michael Barlow gave Mamet a copy of Truffaut's conversations with Hitchcock. Rafelson and Mamet went to movies together and read scripts together and talked long hours into the night about techniques.

"No one had ever really told me how to write a movie before," says Mamet. "This was a great revelation to me. His overall advice to me, in what he told me and in what he showed me, was be simple, be direct. Which is the way he shoots. The camera always follows the protagonist or goes to a p.o.v. [point of view]."

In his initial draft Mamet strove to be true to Cain, and although there were many revisions, in dialogue and in structure, Mamet says, "the refining of the script went back, philosophically and actually, to the first draft." Mamet made only occasional appearances on the set. When he did, he could be found making last-minute changes on a borrowed typewriter in the director's trailer; otherwise, he was available by phone, and spoke with Rafelson constantly.

With the drafting of a screenplay, the other pieces of the project began to fall into place. The search for Cora ended with Jessica Lange. Nicholson had tested Lange for *Goin' South*, and he remembered her. Rafelson now says his original "strong intuition" was to cast the ex–fashion model, whose previous credits included *King Kong* and *All That Jazz*. He claims he wrote Lange's name on a piece of paper and sealed it in an envelope

before open casting began. Months later, during filming, he presented her with the envelope as a gesture of confidence.

The role of Cora's husband, Nick Papadakis, was also cast in a curious fashion. Rafelson tested some eighty men for the part, including Elia Kazan; he even went to Greece and prevailed upon director Michael Cacoyannis for wisdom. Finally, Rafelson recalled a character actor named John Colicos whom he had seen as Cyrano de Bergerac on the New York stage some twenty years before. He tracked Colicos down in Canada, where he was filming John Huston's *Phobia*, and asked him to do a few pages of Cain on videotape. Although Rafelson didn't like what he saw, he wasn't prepared to give up on Colicos. He convinced him to fly to California and dig deeper into the characterization. After a grueling series of video tests, the Canadian-born actor was cast as Nick.

As for the principals behind the camera, Rafelson chose as his director of photography Sven Nykvist, Ingmar Bergman's cameraman, who is working with increasing frequency in the United States. A decision was reached to shoot in color "as the eye sees it," according to Nykvist, and to emphasize earth tones. Nykvist says he went for a "complete, deep-focus, high-contrast look which still contains the possibility of romance, something like Gregg Toland in color."

The production design was turned over to George Jenkins, whose career has embraced Broadway, television, and the movies, and who won an Oscar for his contribution to *All the President's Men*. For the *Postman* remake, the designer's role was crucial: Jenkins had to locate an isolated outdoor setting that would also satisfy the period requirements of the novel. Cain had set his novel in "Sunland," near Glendale, but that area had become too obviously urban. So Jenkins took to a helicopter and crisscrossed the counties of Southern California until he spotted a patch of land in some foothills north of Santa Barbara, near Lake Cachuma.

On a ridge near an old stagecoach road, Jenkins conjured up the striking setting for *Postman*. The distant barns were painted green; the surrounding farmland was purchased and allowed to grow wild. The road was carpeted with shale. A mission-style Shell gas station of the era and a California bungalow in the hodgepodge Greene and Greene style were built on the site. There was already one twisted and gnarled oak tree in the yard; another had to be "planted" to justify the name of Cain's roadside café, Twin Oaks.

It was more than twelve years ago that Nicholson and Rafelson first met. In a theater with an otherwise well-behaved movie audience, they were both standing and applauding ecstatically and screaming their approval at the screen. Afterward, they got together, introduced themselves, and went out for a cup of coffee. Rafelson doesn't remember what movie they saw.

It was the beginning of a deep, lasting friendship and a rich, symbiotic partnership. The two wrote a movie for the Monkees, and Rafelson directed it; *Head* was a picture that Timothy Leary pronounced as good as an acid trip. When Rip Torn backed out of *Easy Rider*, Rafelson recommended Nicholson to Dennis Hopper for the part of the flaky southern lawyer. The two movies they made together in the early seventies, *Five Easy Pieces* and *The King of Marvin Gardens*, are among the finest of the decade and are staples of the revival circuit.

Curly, as Nicholson calls Rafelson (he has rust-colored, curly hair), knows Nicholson like a brother, and that intimacy informs their collaboration. The *Five Easy Pieces* script called for Nicholson to weep in one scene. But Nicholson had a conceit about never having cried on the screen, and he refused. When Rafelson insisted, reminding him of the depth of their relationship, Nicholson told him, "You have no right to call upon our personal experiences, because now we are working professionals." To which Rafelson replied, "It would be a disaster to eliminate personal affections, personal revelations from our work together." After two days of intense argument and conversation, Nicholson came through with tears. (Rafelson got tears from Nicholson in *Postman*, too.)

"Jack is always prepared, in some curious fashion that has to do with the history of our relationship," says Rafelson, "to yield to me as a director as much as I am prepared to accept him as an actor. You do enough of these things together and you develop a very extraordinary and potent relationship as friends, and if you're friends, you can draw upon each other's reserves in a professional way as well. I might call upon Jack to release certain emotions that he won't normally show on the screen, because he knows that I know they exist. He knows that I know they're normal. Whereas he might be more guarded, perhaps, with other directors, there can be no pretense between us."

On the set, the two men seem unalike in many ways. Rafelson is grim, tense, revved up, a chain smoker. Nicholson is apparently at ease, joking with cast and crew, taking snapshots with a small camera. The words come out of Rafelson's mouth with terseness and deliberation. What pours from Nicholson is a Joycean stream of consciousness. Rafelson: ice. Nicholson: fire.

Their differences serve as a stimulus and challenge, and as a counterbalance to each other's excesses. They can argue for hours or days or years and still disagree, and thrive on it. They can make a movie like *Postman* with views that seem incompatible at points, and somehow reconcile them within the work, adding to its tension and richness.

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For *Postman*, Nicholson read Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*, and he was compelled by what he perceived to be similarities between the character of Frank and Gary Gilmore. According to Nicholson, Rafelson saw the story as a "folies à deux," of polar opposites attracting, but it was another side of Cain that Nicholson was accenting in his performance. "I'm more interested in the sexual extremes—and the Gary Gilmore side," explained Nicholson during a break in shooting. "He's more interested in the religious and mystical aspects."

Reading certain books or seeing par-

Museum of Modern Art/ Film Stills

The Postman *has rung before: in 1946, with John Garfield, Lana Turner, and Cecil Kellaway, and in 1942, in* Ossessione, *with Massimo Girotti and Clara Calamai.*

Museum of Modern Art/ Film Stills

ticular movies for references has always been part of their pattern of working together. In making *The King of Marvin Gardens*, for example, Rafelson and Nicholson viewed *The Conformist*, for color and design, and Rafelson provided Nicholson with Kafka, Kierkegaard, and Jerzy Kosinski's *Steps*. But in the case of *Postman*, Rafelson was not reading Mailer, nor was he seeing any movies.

"In this instance," Rafelson notes, "there was already an extraordinary reference point, which was the novel itself. I didn't want to have another degree of abstraction in my conversations with Nicholson. It was enough to talk about what Mamet had conceived. It was surely enough to refer to Cain. Why have another literary reference point?"

Aside from their differences, Rafelson and Nicholson work closely together once shooting begins. Nicholson involves himself in everything from rewriting the dialogue to finding accommodations for the auxiliary camera crew or approving the stills. He is at Rafelson's side for the video playbacks of an especially difficult scene, discussing camera angles and options. A lot of the talking may already have been done the night before, or is done in a shorthand developed from knowing each other so well. "With Curly," says Nicholson, "you talk in slightly more 'result' terms."

To Rafelson, rehearsal and blocking of the other actors are essential to that "result." There are individual touches: Before shooting began, Rafelson escorted John Colicos inside the *Postman* house and advised him to walk around and get comfortable with the furniture and the stairs and "to make the house your own." Then, before each of the actor's major scenes, there are twenty minutes of privacy with the director. But Nicholson "doesn't like to rehearse," Rafelson says, "so we really don't. He feels, Let's go for it. But that 'let's go for it' has been prepared for a long, long time in terms of the attitudes of a character and the prevailing sensibility of a character. It doesn't have to do with how you say a line or where you are going to stand."

The erotic scenes in *Postman* depended on this trust between Rafelson and Nicholson. Rafelson dismissed the crew and the rest of the cast from the set on the days that these scenes were being shot, and he and Nykvist operated the two cameras. Although the nudity is handled discreetly, the sex scenes are prolonged and explicit, and are sure to stir up a little

press. "Quite frankly, I wanted to see sex in a very specific way," Rafelson comments, "and the camera becomes a sensual instrument."

The filming of *Postman* spanned three months during the spring of 1980. For the most part, the set was closed to visitors. Outsiders would have been an intrusion, because with Rafelson directing, the mood on the set could be emotionally charged and almost violent, especially considering the nature of the subject matter. "Bob recapitulates the emotion of the scene," according to associate producer Michael Barlow. "The mood on the set is the same as the scene. He sucks everybody into the moment you're doing right now. He goes for the highs. Later, Bob will address himself to balance."

Rafelson has said that he works out of the "enormous ambivalence" of "not knowing, now knowing." Barlow declares, "The hardest thing about working with Bob is also the most interesting. What I learned from him is the value of indecision." For Rafelson, there is a rigorous, almost Jesuitical questioning of himself and his ideas. The door is always left open for tinkering or circumstance. It is more of a refining process than improvisation. In a way, it is the opposite of improvisation.

For example, one night the cast and crew were up in the mountains for an all-night session. The air was cold, and there was a piercing wind. The scene was a particularly important one—the murder scene, in which Frank kills Nick. It takes place in a car driven by Cora, with a drunken Nick in the passenger seat and a supposedly drunk Frank in the backseat. Rafelson decided to make a slew of last-minute changes, both in dialogue and action. For one thing, Nick's final speech was dropped, and as a result, Colicos was sulking a bit in his trailer.

"It changed at the last minute because I wasn't there," explains Rafelson, "I wasn't *in* the murder. I had dreamed of it for months. I had written it with David [Mamet] for months. It was conceived a hundred different ways. But until I was actually on the spot, I couldn't feel it the way it was going to be done in the most compressed terms."

After Colicos calmed down, the scene was shot again and again, with both Nicholson and Rafelson consulting the video playback, and checking each other's reactions. Neither was satisfied with the dramatic impact. Rafelson was looking for something, but he wasn't sure what—a detail that would make the scene, an unrehearsed bit, a spontaneous gesture that could become the central metaphor for the scene.

Finally, it happened. Nicholson's jacket was folded around his neck. His head was down, his hat slanting over his brow. He was bathed in shadows, pretending to be drunk or asleep before making his murderous lunge. When he moved slightly, his collar unfolded by chance, accenting his face. Rafelson was pleased: "It makes the entire scene for me, *visually*."

There was also much concern about the freak accident at the end of the movie in which Cora is thrown out of a careening automobile. Rafelson was worried about whether he could sell the idea of her death to movie audiences. For *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, Rafelson spent nearly two years scouting dangerous locations in Panama, an adventure that resulted in the deaths of two guides assisting him. For *Brubaker*, Rafelson lived for several days in a Mississippi state prison. Now for *Postman*, he actually threw himself out of a moving car onto a highway and onto a beach, again and again and again, trying to figure out how the climactic scene should be shot.

"I had to make that logical for myself," he explains. "I had to find a way to make that utterly electrifying on the screen. I had one image in mind that I had learned from the whole experience, which was: how you try to grab things to stop yourself. And I learned how it would be seen internally, as opposed to this image from the outside. How would *Jack* see it? I always try to shoot action sequences from within as opposed to without. It's something I learned from Kurosawa, I suppose, more than anybody else. Somehow he manages to find the only place the camera should be, not 'let's shoot it from every possible angle and figure it out in the editing room.' The answer? I put the camera exactly where Jack's face was and shot it exactly from that point of view."

Finally, it is this exhaustive and exhausting approach, this emotional commitment, that accounts for the overdue arrival of only the fifth Rafelson film to date. Also, Rafelson's early money-making success with the Monkees (he co-produced their television series and directed many of the episodes) and his association with producer Bert Schneider in the short-lived but profitable BBS experiment (among its films were *Easy Rider* and *Five Easy Pieces*) have allowed him to work when he wanted. In addition, private unhappiness and studio cop-outs have affected his output.

Yet he says that all of his research for all of the movies he never made will show up somehow in future movies he directs, and he also says that he is ready now to step up his snail's pace of filming. "*Postman* was such an enjoyable process," he says, "and my life has changed considerably. I was married before [to production designer Toby Rafelson]. I'm not now. My son has grown up. I can feel, perhaps, a little freer to indulge professionally. I'm more confident, and I learn more with every movie. And I had such an enjoyable experience, so why not try to recapitulate it? Arduous, yes, but always enjoyable."

About the word "remake." Cain himself was relatively pleased with the MGM *Postman*. Although he rated the motion picture adaptation of *Double Indemnity* "closest to my story," he ranked *Postman* "next closest," with *Mildred Pierce* getting the vote for "least close." In MGM's *Postman*, the violence may have been played down, but Cain thought the treatment of sex was, all things considered, fair.

"In each [of the films], naturally, details about sex were omitted," Cain once wrote, "but they are pretty much omitted in my novels, it may surprise you to learn. People think I put stark things in my stories, or indulge in lush descriptions of the heroine's charms, but I don't. The situations, I daresay, are often sultry, and the reader has the illusion he is reading about sex. Actually, it gets very little footage."

Still, the feeling among the people involved in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* is that it is not precisely a remake. "Of course, it *is* a remake," says producer Braunsberg, somewhat defensively, "but when a book has not been done very well, I don't see any shame in trying to do it well." That was the effort by Rafelson—to simply do Cain well, with the sex and violence, the tough and elemental human behavior, the fatalism intact. But if the new *Postman* is at all successful, the result will be not only vintage Cain, it will be pure Rafelson as well. ■

Patrick McGilligan writes on film from Los Angeles.