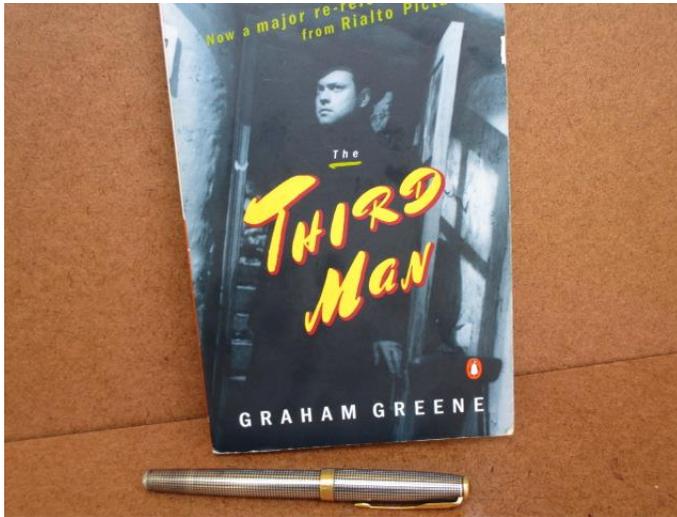


The Third Man

By Rod Fraser



This short novel of 157 pages was originally written as a storyline and list of characters for a film about postwar Vienna. No thought was given to publishing it as a novel at the time. Released in 1949, *The Third Man* was a box-office success in the years that followed. Some claim it was among the best films ever made. I tend to agree.

It starred Joseph Cotton, Orson Welles, Alida Valli and Trevor Howard, all important actors in the postwar era. The book was published under the same name the following year.

Before I get to my review of the book, it is worth mentioning the film has a lovely musical soundtrack to accompany it. It adds considerably to its charm. Click [here](#) if you'd like to hear it.

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The narrator of the book, a British Army officer by the name of Major Calloway, is part of the allied occupation of Vienna after World War II. In those years, the city was under the joint military control of Russia, France, Britain and the United States.

Each allied power had its own zone in the city over which it had authority, and all four powers shared the administration of the city centre, called the 'Stradt'. Calloway was a key player in the police investigations of black-market activity.

Due to major shortages of food, medical supplies and other goods in postwar Europe, there was a thriving black market. Unscrupulous individuals bought or stole scarce goods and sold them to the highest bidder.

Penicillin was one of these coveted goods, and a group of racketeers, led by Harry Lime, illegally obtained a substantial quantity of the available supplies, diluted the penicillin with coloured water, then sold it to those in need, causing death and mayhem.

As the story begins, Rollo Martins arrived in Vienna to take up a job offered to him by his friend, Harry Lime. He and Harry were students at school together many years earlier. Rollo has no idea of the illegal profiteering in which his friend was involved.

Rollo earned his living as a writer of third-rate Western novels. It wasn't very lucrative, so when Harry offered him a job in Vienna, he was happy to take it. The job offered adventure, good pay and a means of reconnecting with his old friend from long ago.

On the day of his arrival, Rollo learned from a neighbour in Harry's building that his friend was hit by a car and killed in a tragic accident a few days earlier. Harry's burial was planned for that very afternoon.

Rollo takes a taxi to the cemetery and witnesses the burial, at which a lovely young woman, a priest and two friends were gathered. He meets Major Calloway who is standing apart from the others, watching the proceedings. Calloway confirmed to Rollo, it was Harry Lime being buried. When the service is over, Calloway asks Rollo to share his taxi.

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As Calloway chats with Rollo over drinks back in the city, he learns of the early friendship of Harry and

Rollo, and the nature of the job Harry had offered to his old friend.

In turn Calloway tells Rollo about the real Harry Lime, "one of the worst racketeers who ever earned a dirty living in this city". Calloway tries to find out Rollo's involvement, if any, in Harry's corrupt world. In Calloway's view, it was likely Harry meant to cut Rollo in on his plans to expand his black-market business.

Initially, Rollo is taken aback at these allegations. He intends to do what he can to clear Harry's name. But as he finds out more, he learns Harry was indeed the monster that Calloway described. Stealing and selling watered-down penicillin was his signature crime. Just before his death, he was about to be arrested.

The woman I mentioned earlier, who attended the burial was Harry's girlfriend, Anna Schmidt. Rollo meets with her to ask her help with his investigation. She agrees to do this, but insists she must remain in the background, so her immigration status isn't threatened. It isn't long before Rollo falls in love with Anna.

As his investigation continues, Rollo learns that the circumstances surrounding Harry's death are suspicious. There was an unaccounted third man at the scene of the accident that no one acknowledges

and there is some confusion whether Harry died instantly or not. Rollo finally concludes Harry was that third man. He had not died at the accident. Rather he had faked his own death to avoid arrest and imprisonment.

Everything had now changed. Rollo saw Harry in a different light. His friend was apparently still alive, and involved in a sick, twisted criminal racket that had resulted in the death of hundreds of children. He needed to be arrested and imprisoned. Rollo was prepared to assist the police to do just that.

Shortly after, Rollo visited Calloway to tell him the results of his investigation. Plans were quickly put in place to have Rollo contact Harry and ask for a meeting. When they met, Harry would be arrested.

The plan was a good one, but it went awry when Harry realized it was a trap. At the last minute, Harry escaped through the sewers of underground Vienna with Rollo and a policeman in pursuit. There was an exchange of gun fire and Harry was finally dead at last.

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I mentioned earlier in this review that Anna Schmidt was Harry's girl friend. After Harry faked his death, and Rollo met Anna, he falls in love with her. It seems this is reciprocated for a time, but it is a love

seemingly without passion.

In the final page of the book, when Harry Lime is buried for a second time, Anna Schmidt, Rollo Martins and Major Calloway are all present at his burial. As the service concludes, Anna walks away without a word down the long avenue of trees leading to the cemetery entrance.

When Major Calloway offered Rollo a lift back to the city, Rollo declined. The Major noted the following,

"I watched him striding off on his overgrown legs after the girl. He caught her up and they walked side by side. I don't think he said a word to her; it was like the end of a story."

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