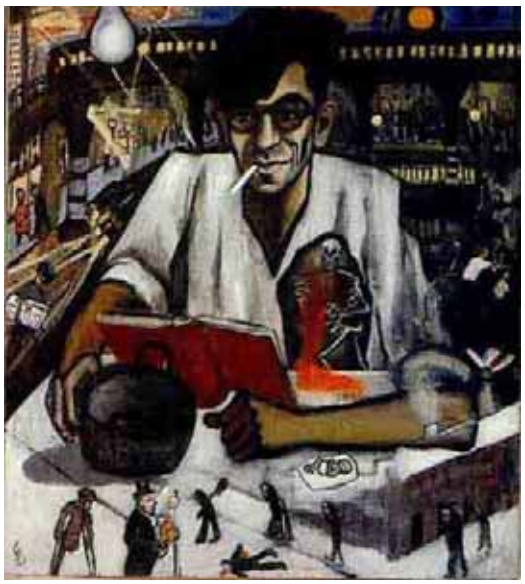
A SENTINEL PROFILE

KENNETH FEARING

The Poet of Noir



Artist Alice Neel's portrait of Kenneth Fearing

By Ben Terrall
Special to the *Sentinel*

The writer Kenneth Fearing is best known to fans of film noir and crime fiction for his novel *The Big Clock*. The 1948 film version, scripted by Jonathan Latimer and directed by John Farrow, is a classic of paranoid, walls-closing-in storytelling. Paul Schrader included it in a list of pictures exemplifying what he called the second phase of the classic film noir cycle, "the postwar realistic period from 1945–'49."

Fearing was a police reporter for the Chicago *City Press* and in the 1920s wrote pseudonymous titillation for "spicy" pulps *Tattle Tales*, *Paris Nights*, *French Night Life Stories*, and *Snappy*. More to the point for the highbrow readers of this publication, he penned barbed movie reviews for *The New Masses* magazine in the 1930s, where he identified with his readers, whom he described as "genuine, dyed-in-the-wool movie hopheads." He wrote that though Hollywood "dream powder" was the "the lowest form of opiate on earth," he still "[couldn't] get enough of it."

Fearing worked for a brief stint in the Time/Life empire. *The Big Clock* is set in a similar publishing monolith run by a murderous megalomaniac, a character who, probably not coincidentally, shares many traits with Henry Luce, co-founder of *Time* Magazine.

The book's protagonist George Stroud says of his workplace: "The whole organization was full and overrunning with frustrated ex-artists, scientists, farmers, writers, explorers, poets, lawyers, doctors, musicians, all of whom spent their lives conforming, instead. And conforming to what? To a sort of overgrown, aimless, haphazard stenciling apparatus that kept them running to psychoanalysts, sent them to insane asylums, gave them high blood pressure, stomach ulcers, killed them off with cerebral hemorrhages and heart failure, sometimes suicide." Clearly, not a setting for a Doris Day/Rock Hudson picture.

Luce was a rabid anti-Communist and a devout Christian who believed the U.S. was blessed by God and had a divine mission to spread democracy and open markets throughout the world. He originally planned to call *Fortune*, his business magazine, "*Power*." Though his tune changed when the U.S. entered WWII, in the 30s Luce wrote of his admiration for Mussolini and downplayed the threat posed by Hitler. In a 1934 speech, Luce said, "The moral force of Fascism, appearing in totally different forms in different nations, may be the inspiration for the next general march of mankind."

Fearing, on the other hand, was a radical leftist who had little sympathy for the rich and powerful Luce routinely courted. In his masterful survey *American Poetry in the 20th Century*, Kenneth Rexroth wrote that Fearing's left-wing dada poetics recalled "a taxi driver reading a billboard while fighting traffic." Rexroth opined, "No other American poet of his time so closely identified himself with the working class, with the lumpen proletariat, with the impoverished stratum of the underworld, with hustlers, grifters, 'nifties, yeggs, and thirsties,' and no one else so completely immersed himself in the lingo of the mass culture."

When asked by Congressional witch hunters in 1950 if he'd ever been a member of the Communist Party, Fearing loudly testified, "not yet." Through the 1950s, his vision became darker as crackdowns on unions and other progressive sectors pushed stateside politics ever further rightward. In his 1956 essay "Reading, Writing, and the Rackets," Fearing savaged the House Un-American Activities Committee and kindred red hunters: "The revolution that calls itself the Investigation had its rise in the theatres of communication, and now regularly parades its images across them, reiterates its gospel from them, daily and hourly marches through the corridors of every office, files into the living room of every house."

The essay includes a hilarious comparison of public disavowals of youthful communist indiscretions to the time-tested "True Confession Story":

> The Temptation. ("Little did I dream when the suavely handsome stranger first visited our simple home, and his glib talk about the glittering life of the underworld set my pulses racing, that soon this would lead…") ("Little did I dream that my new-found friend, all too aware of my innocence, set my youthful idealism on fire with his roseate picture of a better life for the underprivileged, that soon this would lead…")

In her useful 1995 book *The Great Depression and the Culture of Abundance: Kenneth Fearing, Nathaniel West, and Mass Culture in the 1930s*, (which manages to compare the work of Fearing and West to the writings of Marxist philosopher Walter Benjamin without becoming mired in postmodernist pretension) the critic Rita Barnard notes, "Fearing's novels all have something of a 'film noir' quality."

The noir shadings that run through all Fearing's books include a bitter world-weariness compounded by paranoia and distrust of authority figures, whether bosses or government figures. Life plays cruel tricks, and bad decisions are made, frequently under the influence of too many cocktails. The excessive libartions lead to blackouts worthy of Cornell Woolrich. Romances generally don't work out, conspiracies and betrayals abound. Many of his characters are broken-down wrecks, not dissimilar to Nathaniel West's often less than charismatic creations. Sometimes it seems the only thing keeping them going are their caustic asides and cynical one-liners.

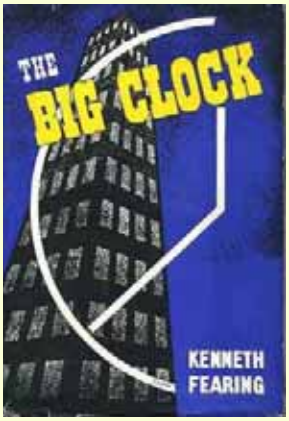
All of Fearing's novels are told from multiple points of view. *Clark Gifford's Body*, brought back into print along with *The Big Clock* by the prestigious "New York Review of Books Classics" imprint, is Fearing's most experimental book. Published in 1942, it describes the planning and aftermath of the armed takeover of a small town-radio station from the perspective of more than twenty different narrators.

The Crozart Story, published in 1960, is packed with characters so devious that a search for redeeming character traits is fairly pointless. These operators toil in public relations for powerful commercial and political interests at a company specializing in spreading misinformation and smears. A product of countless mergers, the firm is called United Great Famous Artists of the World, Inc. "Plant them and slant them" is how one of its operatives describes a job of dubious "news" leaks and spin control. Sort of as if *Mad Men* was scripted by Phillip K. Dick in his pre-sci-fi, but still plenty paranoid, social realist years, with more attention to polished prose.

By all accounts awful at handling money, in a few years Fearing burned through the significant chunk of cash he received from the movie sale of *The Big Clock*, and never hit again with a sale to Hollywood. Too bad for us. After too many years of chain-smoking and heavy drinking, Fearing died one month shy of his 59th birthday in 1961.■

A BOOK VERSUS FILM COMPARISON

THE BIG CLOCK



Kenneth Fearing's novel *The Big Clock* is a plastique valentine to Henry Luce and his publishing empire. Luce's stand-in, Earl Janoth, is an odious megalomaniac who attempts to control every aspect of his employees' lives. Manipulative, shrewd, Janus-faced, and absolutely ruthless, his drug of choice is power. He is a sort of one-man Chamber of Commerce on steroids. His magazines exist to sing songs of praise to the healing powers of open markets and big capital: one of his headlines reads, "Crimeless Tomorrow, Science Shows Why, Finance Shows How."

Janoth is pompous and fully capable of lauching spontaneously into the kind of treacly, sanctimonious cant that characterizes his enterprise's favored scribes. When he is contemplating being caught for the book's central murder, he waxes lugubriously, "Death by poverty, famine, plague, war, I suppose that is on such a big scale the responsibility rests nowhere, although I personally have always fought against all of these things, in a number of magazines dedicated to wiping out each one of them, separately, and in some cases, in vehicles combating all of them together. But a personal death, the death of a definite individual. That is quite different."

His right-hand man Steve Hagen, there to help Janoth cover his tracks, observes, "He had reduced himself to the intellectual status of our own writers, a curious thing I had seen happen before."

The book strongly implies that Hagen and Janoth have a more than platonic bond, a suggestion echoed when Janoth's mistress Pauline York baits him with homophobic slurs. Before he lashes out physically, Janoth responds by hurling bitter accusations of lavendar leanings at Pauline.

In the novel, George Stroud is more than faintly sleazy. Fearing has married man Stroud assuring Pauline that he is not at all dangerous with this memorable line: "Kittens a month old get belligerent when they see me coming. Open their eyes for the first time and sharpen their claws, meowing in anticipation." But then Stroud takes her away for a romantic weekend of drink and carnal adventure.

Director John Farrow, a devout Catholic by the time the film adaptation of Fearing's book went into production, cut Stroud's cut Stroud's lustful impulses. Ray Milland portrays Stroud stumbling through a green mint stinger-splattered night out with Pauline, but stops before getting too physically amorous. The picture's preview implies most of the blame lies with Pauline's sinful influence: "A wonderful afternoon with Georgette, who wanted me for all the right reasons … A crazy evening with Pauline who wanted me for all the wrong ones!"

Ace screenwriter and novelist Jonathan Latimer streamlines some plot strands and makes the strictly metaphorical clock of the book into an actual giant timepiece that Milland hides in as Janoth's frame closes in on him. Latimer's screenplay preserves Janoth's supremely slimey nature, which Charles Laughton seems to have had a blast bringing to life. Latimer also thankfully preserves the character of the eccentric bohemian painter Louise Patterson, giving Elsa Lanchester plenty of room to steal the film with her sublime portrayal (Fearing based Patterson on the artist Alice Neel, whose incredible portrait of Fearing is in the permanent collection of New York's Museum of Modern Art).

As with all of Fearing's books, alcohol-drenched debauchery plays a key role in the narrative. The sequence showing George's fateful bender echoes similar dissolute moments Milland brings to life in *The Lost Weekend*, which *Big Clock* DP John Seitz also shot.

Raymond Chandler called Fearing's classic crime novel a "tour-de-force." Critics have been similarly kind to the first and best filmed version of Fearing's story. In the *New York Times*, Bosley Crowther wrote, "This is a dandy clue-chaser of the modern chromium-plated type, but is also an entertainment which requires close attention from the start […] Ray Milland does a beautiful job of being a well-tailored smoothie and a desperate hunted man at the same time." Those readers eager to torture themselves with cravings for a time machine should take note that when *The Big Clock* premiered at New York's Paramount Theatre, the onstage musical accompaniment for the picture was Duke Ellington and his Orchestra, along with Ella Fitzgerald.

—Ben Terrall