

**MORE
JAMES
AGEE**

Noir City Sentinel

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ALL NOIR**

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AGEE ON NOIR

James Agee's film criticism, which appeared concurrently in *The Nation* and *Time* during the 1940s, is classic prose about films that few expected to be classics. His tongue is a bit more tart than usual for the films we know now as "noir," but that's a good thing. In this installment, Agee breaks off some classic one-liners, surprises us by revealing himself as a fan of Victor Mature, and consistently demonstrates that he prefers hard-boiled elements to melodrama. Too bad he never reviewed *Try and Get Me!*

—Don Malcolm

Double Indemnity

But in Wilder's apparent desire to make it clear that nympholepts are cold he has neglected to bring to life the sort of freezing rage of excitations which such a woman presumably inspires in such a fixer as Walter Neff; this sort of genre love-scene ought to smell like the inside of an overwrought Electrolux. Wilder has not made much, either, of the tensions of the separations of the lovers after the murder, or of the coldly nauseated despair and nostalgia that the murderer would feel.

[from *The Nation*, 10/14/44]

The House on 92nd Street

Convincing inadvertent suggestion that the FBI functions efficiently less through intelligence than through doggedness plus scientific equipment. Effective pseudo-naturalistic performances by Lydia St. Clair, Gene Lockhart, William Eythe, and others, none of

(continued on pg. 3, col. 1)

Bay Teens Caught In "Black Tide," Survive

By Simone Polgar
Special to the Sentinel

A GROUP OF YOUNG film enthusiasts was recently immersed in the world of classic noir at this year's Young Critics Jury, held at the Christopher B. Smith Rafael Film Center in San Rafael, California. The annual program, sponsored by the California Film Institute, is an intensive three-day course for teens taught by selected film professionals from a variety of fields.

Film Noir Foundation president Eddie Muller, this year's representative "film historian," held court with a group of students ranging in age from 12 to 17 years old. Most were aware of, if not fully acquainted, with the defining facets of noir. When initially asked whether they understood "what film noir is," most of the equally-mixed group of boys and girls expressed a surprisingly good grasp of the genre.

Refreshingly knowledgeable about film, the students were quickly engrossed in the noir discourse, eager to inquire and debate, listen attentively, or — in true noir fashion — backchat incessantly.

The class peppered the instructor with queries about which contemporary films could be considered "noir," sparking a lively discussion about such recent works as *Sin City*, *Memento*, and *Match Point*. Muller traced the roots of these films back to books and movies of the mid-twentieth century, explaining how certain themes retain their inherent power, despite changes in filmmak-

ing style and cultural taste.

The lecture, flowing through spontaneous question and answer sessions, included a screening of the 28-minute DVD, *Amour C'est Noir*, a collection of clips from disparate noir films, assembled by Muller to emulate, in his words, the "definitive noir storyline."

The youngsters heard snappy dialogue (many were getting their first taste of *Double Indemnity*), relished some beat-outs, and were exposed to a handful of shootouts and stylized criminal behavior — everything about noir that is emulated in television today, but never matched in style. The students loved it. The end of the presentation was met with a chorus of "So cool!" and "Awesome!"

The Film Noir Foundation had initiated almost two-dozen teens in less than two hours, leaving behind a truly exhilarated group of freshly-minted noir neophytes.

"Turning young people on to noir is the most satisfying and gratifying part of the Czar of Noir's job," Muller said, when asked why he became involved with the program.

In fact, he said that the Film Noir Foundation will offer "community outreach" seminars such as the one with the Young Critics Jury as an integral part of the FNF's mission. If you know of a group that would be interested in such an event, contact fnfadmin@filmnoirfoundation.org. Information on the Young Critics Jury program can be found on the California Film Institute's website at <http://cafilm.org>.

UNSUNG HEROES OF FILM NOIR

DANIEL FUCHS

By Marc Svetov
Special to the Sentinel

Daniel Fuchs (1909-1993) was, and still is, an underrated writer, and his work in film was a labor of love for a medium he admitted he could never quite fathom.

He came from Brooklyn — Williamsburg, to be exact — and went out west in 1937 on a short-term contract to write screenplays. He'd already published three novels, each in its own way extraordinary: *Summer in Williamsburg* (1934), *Homage to Blenheim* (1936) and *Low Company* (1937).



Daniel Fuchs

He wrote screenplays for some remarkable films, most notably *Cross Cross* (1949), starring Burt Lancaster, Yvonne DeCarlo and Dan Duryea, a noir classic — with a powerful, unforgettable ending. Less well-known is *Between Two Worlds* (1944), an amazing film — not strictly noir — with John Garfield, Paul Henreid, Eleanor Parker and Edmund Gwenn, with an over-the-top, lush score by Erich Wolfgang Korngold. It involves a dangerous trip across the Atlantic to America from allied England during the war, and is notable for its melancholy and sustained poetic mood due to the make-believe world being shown: the audience knows all the people are dead, while they (seemingly, at least) do not. The film partakes of the same "make-believedness" coupled with earnestness — parallel-world vs. life-as-it-is-lived — that one sees in some of Capra's work. Or Cocteau's.

Fuchs wrote a very unsparing yet compassionate screenplay for *The Hard Way* (1942), with Ida Lupino in her vintage tough cookie mode. And what an ending! (I won't give it away. It's long overdue for a DVD release — listen up, Warner Bros.!) It's here that Fuchs begins to master the art of noir characterization, and *The Hard Way* is a key transition toward a full-blown noir universe.

Then there is the film based on his own novel *Low Company*, which was produced in 1947 as *The Gangster*, with Barry Sullivan, Akim Tamiroff, and John Ireland. Barry Sullivan's Shebunka is a stellar role: a tortured, self-hating gangster. Fuchs always had a simultaneous empathy/contempt for these low-life hoodlums, men he'd seen or had heard about at close range during his Brooklyn days. (Brooklyn was

(continued on pg. 3, col. 3)



From "Twin Bill," *Vault of Horror* #36

BLOOD, SWEAT, AND FEAR:

THE INK-STAINED GENIUS OF JOHNNY CRAIG

By Eddie Muller

One of America's finest tellers of noir tales wasn't a novelist or a film director — he was a comic book artist. During an inspired five-year burst in the early 1950s, using only India ink and Bristol board, Johnny Craig evoked a noir universe every bit as compelling as what Jim Thompson and Fritz Lang were simultaneously creating with prose and film.

Craig, a WWII veteran barely out of his teens, was one of a stable of young artists hired at Entertaining Comics, a small New York-based publishing house that W.M. Gaines inherited in the late 1940s following his father's untimely death. (M.C. Gaines had been a pioneer of the comic book industry). Before the brash Bill Gaines took over, the company was called Educational Comics, and it promoted a stagnant, almost medicinal, roster of titles. Gaines was brimming with piss and vinegar, and had a desire to run the company like a mogul ran a studio:

an assembly line, for sure, but one that respected the work of its artists, and played up their distinctive styles.

Young Gaines ended up creating a taboo-busting cultural phenomena. EC's popularity surged mainly due to its gory Grand Guignol-inspired horror comics, which featured grisly finales that gleefully shattered the boundaries of good taste. The mayhem eventually earned EC government censure for "corrupting America's youth," and brought about the Comics Code Authority, which policed comics the way the Production Code Administration regulated movies. Despite the federal witchhunt — or because of it — the impact of Tales From the Crypt, Crime Suspense Stories, Weird Science Fantasy and other EC titles is still felt today.

What set Johnny Craig apart from his ink-stained EC comrades was his ability as a writer. Editor Al Feldstein handled almost all the plotting chores at EC, but once Craig proved himself a yarn-spinner, he established

(continued on pg. 4, col. 1)

AGEE (continued from pg. 1)

whom, however, manage to suggest how spies, counterspies and traitors who look and act like that are not identifiable to those interested at five hundred paces.

[from *The Nation*, 10/13/45]

I Walk Alone

Good performances by Wendell Corey and Kirk Douglas; a sharp scene about an old-fashioned gangster's helplessness against modern business methods. Some better than ordinary night-club atmosphere. Otherwise this picture deserves, like four out of five other movies, to walk alone, tinkle a little bell, and cry "Unclean, unclean."

[from *The Nation*, 2/14/48]

Key Largo

[John] Huston manages kinds of vitality, insight, and continuance within each shot and from one shot to the next which are the most inventive and original, the most exciting and the hardest to analyze, in contemporary movies; everything that he achieves visually is so revealing of character, atmosphere, emotion, idea, that its visual and rhythmic rightness and beauty, and the freshness and originality themselves, generally overtake one as afterthoughts.

[from *The Nation*, 2/14/48]

Kiss of Death

The script, though expert, is certainly not inspired, and I can't believe that the director and cameraman are better than thoroughly competent, either. All of which makes it the more striking, for apparently if good technicians pay careful attention to the actual world, they can hardly help turning out a movie that is worth seeing... Victor Mature is good as the burglar. I have always wished I might cast him right; he is well cast this time. In any adequate production of the picture he would be still better in a still better role: as Diomed in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*.

[from *The Nation*, 9/13/47]

The Long Night

It would be interesting to see it on a double bill with its original version, the French *Daybreak*. Both films obviously rate themselves as tragedies; both are merely intelligent trash. But the old one is much more discreet with its self-pity and much more sharply edged. The new one depends too heavily on crowd-commotion; noise (there are gruesome distortions of the slow movement of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony); huge, lugubrious close-ups of Fonda looking adenoidal; and class-angling. It is, however, much better than the run of contemporary movies.

[from *The Nation*, 8/30/47]

Mildred Pierce

Nasty, gratifying version of the James Cain novel about suburban grass-widowhood and the power of the native passion for money and all that money can buy. Attempt made to sell Mildred as noble when she is merely idiotic or at best pathetic; but constant, virulent, lambent attention to money and its effects, and more authentic suggestions of sex than one hopes to see in American film. Excellent work by Joan Crawford, Jack Carson, Zachary Scott, and a little girl whose name I can't find [Ann Blyth] who is as good an embodiment of all that is most terrifying

about native contemporary adolescence as I ever hope to see.

[from *The Nation*, 10/13/45]

Murder, My Sweet

...as Raymond Chandler wrote it, combined about equal parts of poetic talent, arrested-adolescent prurience, and the sort of self-pity which, rejoicing in all that is hardest-boiled, turns the two former faculties toward melodramatic, pretentiously unpretentious examination of big cities and their inhabitants. The picture preserves most of the faults and virtues of the book. I suppose a lot that I like about it is not really food except by comparison with the deadly norm, from the astuteness with costuming and sets — over-attentiveness to secondary levels of realism buying off sharp enough attention to primary — to the rather adventurous but rather arty pho-



Murder, My Sweet

tography. Nevertheless, I enjoyed the romanticism of the picture, and much of its acting — that of Miles Mander, Claire Trevor, Ralfe Harold, and Dick Powell especially. Even its messiness and semi-accomplishment made me feel better about it than the much better-finished, more nearly unimpeachable, but more academic and complacent *Double Indemnity*.

[from *The Nation*, 12/16/44]

My Name Is Julia Ross

...a mouse-among-cats thriller, shows bewildered Nina Foch, who thought she was merely a new secretary, trying to escape from Dame May Whitty and George Macready, who insist that she is respectively their daughter-in-law and wife, and who do their best to drive to madness and mayhem. The film is well planned, mostly well played, well directed, and in a somewhat boom-happy way well photographed — all around, a likeable, unpretentious, generally successful attempt to turn good trash into decently artful entertainment.

[from *The Nation*, 11/24/45]

Will HBO Ride the Wave?

Milch, Nunn Create "Surf Noir"

David Milch, creator of the popular television series' *Hill Street Blues*, *NYPD Blue* and *Deadwood*, is poised to ink a deal with HBO to produce a new series for the cable network that he describes as "surf noir." Serving as inspiration are the books of Kem Nunn, a pioneer of the form, whose novel *Tapping the Source*, was nominated for the American Book Award in 1984.

Tapping was considered by many to be the uncredited genesis of the 1991 crime film, *Point Break*. Nunn has written two other noir-tinged novels, *The Dogs of Winter* and *Tijuana Straits*, as well as writing the

Daniel Fuchs (continued from pg. 1)

where Murder, Inc. was headquartered during the thirties; really lousy rats like Albert Anastasia, Abe Reles, Harry Strauss, Lepke Buchalter, Gurrah Shapiro.)

Fuchs wrote the adaptation from an unpublished story for Elia Kazan's *Panic in the Streets* (1950), with Richard Widmark, Paul Douglas, Jack Palance, Zero Mostel and a host of character actors; once again the portrayal of lowlifes, three of whom — although they think themselves exceedingly clever — are about to become a great danger to the community. As in his novels, Fuchs is sad and elegiac about their petty greed, ignorance and doom.

Storm Warning (1951) (co-written with Richard Brooks) was a classic, with Doris Day, Ginger Rogers, Ronald Reagan, Steve Cochran and a host of others. It is a very dark film about the Ku Klux Klan in a small Florida town, where the KKK is portrayed as a conspiracy of criminals in the city, not as the racists they really were. Steve Cochran is brilliant and pathetic as a small-time bumbler, but a deadly one caught in the clutches of the Klan (with his own connivance, however), with Reagan as a crusader against the Klansmen. (It is finally being released on DVD by Warner Bros. in the *Reagan Signature* boxset.)

Fuchs won an Oscar in 1955 for his screenplay of *Love Me or Leave Me*, starring James Cagney and Doris Day, a wacky love story, a tale of a mismatch — or is it? — between a gangster who wants to promote a showgirl to a star à la *Pygmalion*, who at the same time, however, wants to be loved for it — as a lover. The theme and the Cagney character are reminiscent of *Low Company*, with the gangster — as was Shebunka — enmeshed in self-contempt.

While he tended to downplay his achievements, it's clear that Fuchs was an original and an innovator. He almost single-handedly originated urban Jewish-American literature, written with his unmistakable tough-cookie attitude; he then took that tone and made it into a key feature of film noir. Fuchs said he and others were simply portraying guys and dames who had hit some hard luck, but these were people filled with a grasping, anarchic passion. No one else made desperation into something so nearly transcendent, thus ensuring an intense audience identification with the characters.

Possibly the most sublime example of this is Fuchs's screenplay for *Hollow Triumph* (aka *The Scar*, 1948). Noir has never been so ironic and biting, and yet the relationship between Paul Henreid and Joan Bennett is touching — strangely tender and vulnerable underneath the cynicism.

Toughness and tenderness in Fuchs,



Criss Cross

as with his soul-brother John Garfield, went hand-in-hand: both men hailed from poor, tough Jewish New York slums and knew the cost of life as it was lived there — of trying somehow to "stay straight among the crooked." That's why Fuchs can find common ground between his heroes and villains: his compassion for all of them resists caricature and, as a result, all of his characters are three-dimensional.

A last note: in the recently published *The Golden West: Hollywood Stories* (2005), Fuchs often portrays actors as very unbalanced people when they're not doing their job — as people whom one could term psychopathic but not necessarily dangerous. Fuchs had a view of the film industry that was simultaneously wide-eyed and jaundiced: his expression of wonder for whatever it was that made a film work was one of the truest representations of that ineffable aesthetic — something you cannot quite put your finger on, but you know when a film just works. The awe of that process allowed him to cut some slack to the people who recited his words.

His vision — empathic, humane, humorous but essentially dark, believing in no political panacea for the human condition — made him a natural for noir. Without him, the canon would be far less rich and not nearly so encompassing.

NOIR FILMS OF DANIEL FUCHS

Proto-noir: *The Big Shot* (1942), *The Hard Way* (1943), *Between Two Worlds* (1944).
Noir: *The Gangster* (1947), *Hollow Triumph* (1948), *Criss Cross* (1949), *Panic in the Streets* (1950), *Storm Warning* (1951), *The Human Jungle* (1954).

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