



Tunnel Vision

The noir view of life is hip, addictive, all-pervasive—and untrue. BY BARBARA TANNENBAUM

Danger & Despair Knitting Circle's Film Noir Series, THURSDAY NIGHTS, (415) 552-1533, WWW.NOIRFILM.COM. **Sin City**, DVD ON SALE AUG. 16. **San Francisco Noir**, AKASHIC BOOKS, DUE OUT IN OCTOBER.

Another starless Thursday night at a deserted South of Market office building. Trash skitters across the windy street. The Bay Bridge looms ominously in the dark. An older man with gray hair emerges from the shadows of a derelict lobby, checking against a secret list the names of people entering through the creaky double doors. "Third floor," he whispers, pointing to the elevator. I try to give him some cash. "Forget it," he snarls. "It's free."

Not quite private, not quite public, the Danger & Despair Knitting Circle meets once a week to screen classic noir films, sitting in green plastic lawn chairs, nibbling on popcorn, with a drink from the no-host bar. The venue changes every few months: director Marc Dolezal is a facilities manager who finds unrented, even unfinished, office space in which to show the films, and you can learn the location only by email. The secrecy and feeling of transgressing, even paranoia, is classic noir in itself.

These days, though, noir is more than a hobby or taste encompassing retro movies and stories. It's jumped the rails of genre fiction to become an interpretation of fact, a jaded social view embraced by far greater numbers than those who show up for film festivals. You don't think so? When was the last time you talked to someone who believes that Bush and Cheney really thought there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, that everyone in public life tells the truth?

Secrecy, hidden influence, cynicism, paranoia, and despair drive just about every

noir tale, whether on paper or film. It doesn't matter if the action is instigated by a manipulative femme fatale, like Barbara Stanwyck getting Fred MacMurray to pull off a murder in *Double Indemnity*, or a corrupt official, like Orson Welles's postwar profiteer in *The Third Man*. Either way, the protagonist almost inevitably loses. The best he can do is take a brief shot at personal redemption. He'll probably go down trying. All this fictional behind-the-scenes influence, power, and corruption dramatizes our deepest fears about modern life.

The first noir stories and novels, like Dashiell Hammett's San Francisco-set *Maltese Falcon*, published in 1930, spoke to an audience made cynical by the brutality and opportunism they'd seen in

BEYOND FICTION: Today noir is more than a distinctive style in retro movies and books. It's a way of interpreting modern life.

World War I and in their own cities, as the country shed its rural character for a more rootless, urban one. Later, those hard-boiled crime and mystery novels influenced Hollywood's low-budget B movies, with their grainy black-and-white aesthetic and unhappy endings. Such films indirectly expressed the anxieties of grappling with the H-bomb and the latest Red scare. These stories, too, spoke to an audience hardened by loss and lies and the horrors of World War II. Anything made after this "classic" period—such as *Chinatown*, *Body Heat*, or *The Man Who Wasn't There*—is said to be an homage or *neonoir*.

Today we're awash in noir-influenced books, TV, and movies. What could be more noir than *Sin City*, with its beau-

tiful Expressionist black-and-white palette? Based on the graphic novels of Frank Miller, the movie is teeming with criminals, crooked cops, femmes fatales, and ordinary Joes seeking vengeance or redemption. On TV, consider *24*'s shadowy terrorist fears and paranoia (not to say the morally flawed hero isn't chasing real bad guys). Or UPN's *Veronica Mars*, which features a teenage detective unsure of whom she can trust in a deceptively placid town. Or *Desperate Housewives*, where a surprising suicide exposes secrets and more secrets beneath Wisteria Lane's Technicolor facade.

As for books, one publisher has created a whole series of new stories by local authors, with *San Francisco Noir* just behind *Brooklyn Noir* and *Chicago Noir*.

(For a look at some classic, locally set noir films, see Nathaniel Rich's recent book, also called *San Francisco Noir*.)

Now the noir sensibility is moving beyond the fictional into the real. Notice how Tina Brown derided as "unreal reality" Tom Cruise's profession of love for Katie Holmes. Nobody I know believes they're planning to marry any more than they believe that only a few renegade underlings were responsible for humiliating inmates at Abu Ghraib or that Kenny Boy Lay was unaware of what was going on at Enron. I know people who believe the last two presidential elections were rigged.

You'll even see words like *lies* and *betrayal* in headlines in the *New York Times*. It used to be you laughed at the conspiracy theorist. Today you're sitting next to him or her, sometimes even nodding your head.

With the permission it grants to believing worst-case scenarios, its lack of expectation for anything different or better, noir has become a psychic short-

Expecting nothing more than worst-case scenarios, the noir view has become a psychic shortcut.

cut. What better example than the title of the new Oasis album, *Don't Believe the Truth*? No one likes a Pollyanna, always looking on the bright side, naively believing only the best of everyone and everything. The noir view is hip, knowing, and addictive. That doesn't mean it's an entirely accurate way of seeing the world.

Noir stories are essentially passive; even when someone acts, change rarely occurs. No one seems capable of taking stock of his worst impulses. Therapy does not exist in the noir universe. No one buckles his seat belt or recycles her garbage. No one organizes a letter-writing campaign, neighborhood project, or stockholder revolt. Anyone possessing the facts lacks the power to persuade.

It works in movies, but the real world has a few more options than the black-and-white polarities of unfounded optimism and supercynicism. We've been living in a 24-7 noir marathon. How about leaving that to the Danger & Despair Knitting Circle? ●

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[open book]

A MONSTER TALKS

Crawl Space

by Edie Meidav

FARRAR, STRAUS & GIROUX

BY PAMELA FEINSILBER



the author, a 38-year-old American who heads the graduate writing program at San Francisco's New College of California, sounds here like an older European, possibly in translation.) A motherless, disfigured, inept boy, Emil Poulquet became the prefect of a rural town in southern France. As the story opens, he is on trial in Paris for deporting thousands of Jews to their deaths some 50 years earlier. When no one can identify him, he is able to escape the city and travel back to Finier to present his will—his version of history—to Arianne, the woman who has obsessed him since she tortured him in the Finier school yard.

Also part of his story is Izzy, the Jewish friend he betrayed, and Arianne's husband, Paul, who fought for the Resistance and later drowned himself.

What a reader wants to know, of course, is how Poulquet became what the world sees as a monster. This is more than mere history: all violent occupations and mass murders need bureaucrats as well as foot soldiers. That's what keeps one turning the pages of Meidav's second novel—the flashbacks and self-justifying explanations, as when Poulquet reminds us how someone who feels outside society could find "a link to the rest of the world by the discreet things one could let slip out about jews."

Meanwhile, you sense an unexpected reckoning at hand, because Poulquet has returned at the same time as a group of refugees, Izzy among them. Still in hiding, Poulquet falls in with some young squatters, as marginal and furtive as he is. A couple hundred pages pass, and we're still among these wastrels, as they call themselves. Not one is as fully realized as Arianne, whom we don't even see except in memory until the end, or Izzy, for whose confrontation with Poulquet we wait and wait. Even when we learn their purpose regarding Poulquet's fate, it feels more abrupt than earned.

Age, fatigue, and an unexpected relationship have kept Poulquet from escaping into Spain or changing his identity again. He stays far too long among the wastrels and, though he's unflinchingly interesting when he talks about his past, so does his story. ●