Dark City: The Lost World of Film Noir

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Welcome to *Dark City*, urban landscape of the imagination. A place where the men and women who created film noir often find themselves dangling from the same sinister heights as the silver-screen avatars to whom they gave life. Eddie Muller, who led readers on a guided tour of the seamier side of motion pictures in *Grindhouse: The Forbidden World of 'Adults Only' Cinema*, now takes us on a spellbinding trip through treacherous terrain: Hollywood in the post-World War II years, when art, politics, scandal, style--and brilliant craftsmanship--produced a new approach to moviemaking, and a new type of cultural mythology. *Dark City* is a 1999 Edgar Award Nominee for Best Critical / Biographical Work.

Dark City: The Lost World of Film Noir Details

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From Reader Review Dark City: The Lost World of Film Noir for online ebook

Sam says

When I was about a quarter the way into this book & I was thinking that it was a pretty good book about film noir films, & then it went on & on, covering the personal & professional lives of the actors, filmmakers, writers, etc., the politics of the time, the influencing films & the influenced, etc., and then a poster gallery.

If you've seen a lot of these movies you should read this book, it's excellent.

Jeff says

Dark City: The Lost World of Film Noir (1998)

This may be one of the best books I've read on film. The writing is thoughtful and fun to read. He doesn't treat the films like gospel but he recognizes the art and occasionally debunks a lot of critical reverence pointing out that these may have points, but are also designed to be very entertaining. It's brought a bunch of new noir films to my attention. And he knows the novels so many of these books were based on. His biographical tidbits about all of the artists involved in these films add to the fun.

Ed says

Eddie Muller has written a nitty-gritty guide to the classic of the film noirs that Hollywood made. He uses Hitch's PSYCHO as the cut-off point. I liked reading the background to each film, including the biographies of the performers and directors. Many noirs are out on DVD release. Netflix offers some. Muller tells you which ones are worth a look. So, if you're searching for something different to watch in films, DARK CITY might give you some ideas.

Steve Vincent Furness says

Every now and then, a person returns to their favorite movie, or song, or book -- retreading ground they know very well, only because it's a comfort to them. Eddie Muller's "Dark City: The Lost World of Film Noir" is, in fact, my favorite book on the subject of film noir. Prior to reading this some fifteen years ago for the first time, my understanding of film noir was limited only to a few lines from Humphrey Bogart movies. They were black and white, they had tough guys and dangerous femmes. Muller's book was a revelation to me; it opened up a new cinematic universe that I'm still quite addicted to. Muller was the pusher, and damn him, I've been hooked ever since. When it was originally published, he added to the book's moniker: "The Lost World of Film Noir." Since, film noir has exploded back into popular culture, and thank God, more and more noir movies are making their way to screens again via DVD and Blu-ray. But I'd be remiss if I didn't mention Muller's Film Noir Foundation, a company that has discovered some of the "lost" noir classics and paid to have them restored in 35mm. Their Noir City film festivals tour the country each year, and for the

film fanatic, they should not be missed. Anyway...there are so many different books out there dedicated to exploring themes, hidden agendas, and Hollywood history, all in the film noir context. Lord knows, I've read my share of them. But for me, it all comes back to Eddie Muller's "Dark City..." He dishes all the stories and (somewhat) sordid details about these films, and the various characters who play in them and make them. Read this book right now.

Victoria says

Content-wise I think this book is excellent. I enjoyed every morsel of background about how the movies were made and all the people involved. I've always favored this genre. Now I can appreciate each movie more. I have revisited ones I didn't like looking at them in a new light based on Muller's insights. I recommend 'Noir Alley' on Turner Classic Movies hosted by Eddie Muller.

Format-wise, I have a few suggestions. I would appreciate a list of each film mentioned at the beginning or end of each chapter. I'm not a fan of white print on black paper. It's OK for limited text in advertising but, it's hard to read. I thought it was used too much. Also the shape of this book drove me crazy. It's landscape rather than portrait shaped. It's hard to hold. None of the book racks I use to read while eating worked. It was a pain to read but, I persevered because of the content.

Jill Hutchinson says

Film noir fans rejoice!!! Here is a book, written by noir film *maven* Muller, which will expand on your knowledge about the special genre of film that has become rather a cult phenomenon. These dark, raw, and gritty movies, shot in black and white, were made mostly by second level studios or as "B" features by the majors, They became popular during the post WWII era through the early 1950s and were rediscovered in the 1990s, receiving the long overdue kudos from critics and fans alike.

The author's approach to telling the story of the noir film is unusual......he creates Dark City and develops each neighborhood (Sinister Heights, the Precinct, Hate Street, Shamus Flats, Vixenville, Blind Alley, Psych Ward, Knockover Square, Loser's Lane, and Thieves' Highway) into which he fits the films that reflect that neighborhood. In this manner, the list of films has some categorical coherency as opposed to putting them in chronological or alphabetical order.

If you are a noir fan, you know the actors.......Marie Windsor, Ida Lupino, Charles McGraw, Sterling Hayden, Ted de Corsia, Lizabeth Scott, *et al*. Meaner than snakes, totally amoral, not to be trusted, and dangerous, these actors played characters that were not your next door neighbors and they played them to the hilt.

There are some true overlooked gems contained in this excellent history of noir film. There is the extra added attraction of short biographies of some of the directors/actors responsible for the loyalty of fans who were not even born when these films were made. Highly recommended.

Peter William Warn says

Without warning, Eddie Muller spilled the beans about everything that happens in *While the City Sleeps* (1956). I wanted to splash scalding coffee in his face, plug his liver full of lead with my .45 and then tie him to a wheelchair and giggle as I push it down a long flight of stairs.

Maybe I've been watching too many films noir. That might have been an overreaction. But I knew I had to spread the word that this Muller character doesn't know when to keep his trap shut. His *Dark City: The Lost World of Film Noir* is a terrific contemplation of the best of that kind of movie. It also offers information about the real lives of some of the actors for whom life unfortunately imitated their art. But Muller doesn't know when to quit.

By the time he squealed about *Force of Evil* (1948), I had no one to blame but myself. I'd read too much and learned more than I wanted to. I haven't seen *Scandal Sheet* (1952) yet, but I know the identity of that movie's "Lonelyhearts Murderer." I know what happens when Joan Crawford feels *Sudden Fear* (1952) and what leads to *Union Station* (1950). I know more than is good for me.

And I know that if I ever re-read *Dark City* (it's good enough that I might), I should skip at least the next three or four paragraphs every time Muller starts to describe a movie's plot.

Muller is not impressed with much of the analysis that's been published about film noir:

Conventional wisdom has branded these films bleak, depressing and nihilistic -- in fact, they're just the opposite. To me, film noirs were the only movies that offered bracing respite from sugarcoated dogma, Hollywood-style. They weren't trying to lull you or sell you or reassure you -- they insisted that you wake up to the reality of a corrupt world. Quit kidding yourself. Stand up, open your eyes, and be ready for anything. Prayers go unheard in these parts.

To correct the record, he takes us through Dark City, after warning us to "stay calm, act natural, and keep the windows rolled up. Dark City was built on fateful coincidence, double-dealing, and last chances. Anything can happen, and it will."

Muller discusses the major films noir and many of the minor ones as well, including *Private Hell 36* (1954), which he calls one of the best "dirty cop noirs." He takes detours to give short biographies of some of film noir's major players, such people as Ida Lupino, who started her career as a "sweet-faced ingenue who dispensed straight talk with a tart tongue." Lupino went on to produce and direct several acclaimed movies and was the only woman to direct a film noir (*The Hitch-Hiker* in 1953).

Gloria Grahame inspired the advertising tagline "You're destined to make wise men foolish." She won an Academy Award but could not make the transition from B-pictures to the A-list. She ended up having a scandalous sexual relationship with her 13-year-old stepson, whom she married, briefly, when he was in his 20s.

Muller points out other tragic intersections of real life and film noir make-believe, as when 20th Century Fox pulled *Fourteen Hours* (1951) from theatres and changed the ending when a studio executive's daughter killed herself in a way that was too close to the movie's original finale.

Muller guides his tour with polished patter. He calls Jimmy Stewart's glimpse into a world without him in *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) an "angel-dust inspired nightmare." Of Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* (1958), he writes that watching it "is like drinking vintage wine not long before it turns to vinegar. The headiness, the pungency and the uniqueness are there, but so is a queasy aftertaste. The filmmaking is intoxicating, at times magnificent, but as the coda of Orson Welles's Hollywood career, it leaves a painful hangover."

Yep, Muller talks a good game. But one of these days, that mouth of his is gonna get him into trouble.

Antonius Block says

Dark City is noir czar Eddie Muller's entertaining and informative exploration of film noir. Since film noir is essentially an urban phenomenon, Muller looks at film noir as if it were a city, and focuses chapters on different noir themes or aspects, relating them to the different sections of Dark City. In Knockover Square you'll find a lively discussion of heist films; Sinister Heights is where the corrupt and wealthy reside; and if you're lucky enough to escape Vixenville alive, you'll probably find yourself on Losers' Lane or Thieves' Highway.

Muller writes in a very entertaining, flowery style channeled through the lingo and tone of the films themselves. His discussions of the movies branch out into discussions of authors, directors, and especially actors associated with film noir, finding a remarkable number of lives that mirror the sordid tales these films tell. Dark City is, of course, Hollywood itself, as these many sidebars amazingly illustrate.

I agree with most of his thoughts, disagree with a few, and was inspired by several ideas he has. For instance, he makes a strong case for why the melodramatic, unnatural acting and visual style is preferable in these films to their "realistic" neo-noir counterparts. "Vivid, dynamic imagery – and vivid, dynamic acting – stick in the mind long after the extraneous details of 'naturalism' have evaporated," Muller writes. "Modern film noir plays like real life. Classic film noir plays like fevered memory." And on the topic of P.I.'s like Spade and Marlowe, Muller makes a most intriguing suggestion as for their inclusion as noir heroes. Writing on **Out of the Past**, he notes, "Daniel Mainwaring (writing as Geoffrey Homes) constructed an involuted tale that owned up to what most films in the genre only hinted at: these stories are about the protagonist's quest for solutions to his own problems, not the client's."

Some select comments that provide a nice sample of Muller's writing style:

"For years, critics have troweled endless symbolism onto Kiss Me Deadly, finding hidden meaning in character names, checkerboard floor tiles, veiled allusions to Greek myths, even in Nick the mechanic's Va-Va-Voom tagline. That's a lot of extra baggage for Hammer to stuff into the boot of his tiny roadster. No such acclaim attached itself to Aldrich's Attack!, a better film made the following year, and a darker vision of the human battlefield. But through the magic of critical hindsight, this swaggering, brass-knuckled lark has been hoisted into the pantheon of "meaningful" movies. What it really deserves is a place on any double bill with Dr. Strangelove: a pair of mordant black comedies about dangerous demagogues in places high and low."

"Although the times dictated fables in which the renegade double-X chromosome must be vanquished before the fade-out, film noir allowed women to savor for themselves the pungent, acrid nectar of unleashed power and violence. "A dame with a rod is like a guy with a knitting needle," cracks Jack Fisher (Steve Brodie) in

Out of the Past. Of course, that's before Fisher gets an extra orifice blown open compliments Kathie Moffet (Jane Greer), one of Vixenville's empresses. There's no greater kick in this town than when a woman finally wraps her delicate fingers around the trigger of a .38 Linga and blasts away every bit of genetic encoding and cultural repression in a roaring fusillade of little lead forget-me-nots."

Muller's opinion on when classic film noir ended? At the Bates Motel, in the shower, Hitchcock slashed it to pieces.

Andy says

A Desert Island Book. Even if you don't care about film noir you need this book, it's filled with amazing stills from crime films.
In between the noir film summaries are amazing "Mysteries and Scandals"-type stories of Gloria Grahame's affair with her stepson, Charles McGraw's violent accidental death, Steve Cochran's bizarre death (aboard a boat with an all teenage girl crew in Mexico), Linda Darnell's fear of fire ultimately meeting up in her death, etc.
There's no shortage of great photos and amazing Hollywood gossip. Highly recommended.

Stephanie Griffin says

An outstanding history of Film Noir, DARK CITY is a book I would recommend to all film fans. The whole book is written in a noirish style that compliments the subject. Chapter headings include Sinister Heights, The Precinct, Vixenville, Blind Alley, The Psych Ward and more. The book is printed on sturdy paper and there are photos on every single page. Stills, movie posters, promo shots – tons of photos!
Picking my favorite film descriptions for movies such as DEAD RECKONING and THE ASPHALT JUNGLE, I was able to add at least 20 titles to my Netflix queue. Some movies are not available through that means so I will be hunting them down at other venues.
It was interesting to read the background of the movies, the directors, the studios, and the actors themselves. Not only are the films engrossing, some of the actors' ironic lives could be made into movies. Take Bobby Driscoll. The 12-yr-old starred in THE WINDOW in 1949 as a boy with a penchant for lying. When he sees a murder no-one believes him. During the movie his character survives a fall in a vacant tenement in Greenwich Village. In real life, Driscoll had a washed out career when, in 1968, he died of a drug overdose – in a vacant tenement in Greenwich Village.
You couldn't ask for a better, more comprehensive book on Film Noir than this.

David says

Lots of fun and good info. I've seen many of the films discussed and enjoyed seeing his thoughts on them.

Somewhat idiosyncratic way of dividing various sections of the book as if they were various parts of the town of Dark City, but it works. Muller gives good attention to the base sources of film noir stories and scripts -- the hard-boiled novels and stories of the 1920s through 1950s -- and this will give many persons suggestions for valuable reading. He also goes into interesting detail on actors and directors. In short, the book is about the background and ingresidents that go into the films, not just the films themselves.

A word of warning . . . beware of spoilers -- if you haven't seen some of the films being discussed, tread lightly. On the films I hadn't seen, I tried to work around some of the detail.

Some detail errors -- is there ANY editing and proof-reading these days?

Tristram says

"Got More Than You Bargained for, Huh?" – "Yes … and No: I Should Have Considered the Follow-up Costs."

Follow-up costs? What follow-up costs can there possibly be hidden in a harmless book? In the case of Eddie Muller's crazy roller-coaster of a homage to *film noir* the answer is quite simple: You will end up buying loads of films to complete your noir collection while following the author on his *tour de force* through the Mean Streets of Dark City. For example such forgotten gems as Edward Dmytryk's "The Sniper" (1952), Robert Wise's "Born to Kill" (1947), Joseph Losey's "The Prowler" (1951) or Otto Preminger's "Fallen Angel" (1945), films which Muller discusses in comparative detail and which as yet I had not had in my noir collection. Let alone several other films which I could not order since they have not yet found their way on DVD – and I would so much like to see Robert Ryan bully Ido Lupino in "Beware, My Lovely" (1952)!

A look at the book itself will already tell you that this may be unusual fare because with its 21.5 cm height and 25 cm breadth it will not easily fit among the other titles in my bookshelf but instead it will stick out. So does Muller's way of dealing with the topic: Whereas Foster Hirsch in his knowledgeable study *Film Noir: The Dark Side of the Screen* applies a rather systematic approach by looking at literary backgrounds, at the development of the cinema that is mirrored in noir, at noir stylistics, at noir directors, at actors and at typical narrative patterns, or whereas the various Noir Readers edited by Alain Silver and James Ursini give you scholarly in-depth studies of single films or particular aspects of film noir, Eddie Muller makes the world of noir come to life again by linking the films with the stories behind them. This can at times take on a rather muck-raking attitude – Gene Tierney's private ordeal is described in what I would deem a very sensationalist style, and Gloria Grahame's sex life is exposed in a lot of detail, for instance – but often it proves very elucidating, e.g. when Muller writes about the infamous HUAC or studio politics.

Muller structures his book by taking us to various places of Dark City, which all stand for certain narrative patterns or sub-genres: In his chapter "Sinister Heights", for instance, he deals with films centring on gangsters and their influence on society, in "Hate Street" we are invited to take a look behind the bourgeois façade of families like the Dietrichsons ("Double Indemnity") or at deadly *ménages à trios*, like in "The Postman Always Rings Twice", in "Shamus Flats" we get to know the typical noir detective, in "Blind Alley" Muller deals with the fatalism that is so typical of noir, and "Vixenville" might speak for itself. Ah, "Deadly Is the Female"! [1] In a way, this is a very systematic approach but it allows Muller to proceed in a less scholarly way that is rather based on association. Still, while he often gives quite detailed summaries of films that are important to his cause – his language makes sure that this is entertaining reading, though –, he manages to offer a lot of interesting insight – as, for example, when he detects an acid attack on middle-class hypocrisy in a seemingly harmless noir like "The Prowler". Or, even more surprising to me, when he makes a sound case for considering Raoul Walsh's "White Heat" a conservative film in that it does not see crime as partly caused by social iniquities but rather as the result of a "mother complex".

I already mentioned Muller's language. He adopts a very casual style, trying to imitate the tough talk that features in so many noir films, which might seem off-putting and contrived at the start but soon adds to the

flair of the whole book. [2] I also liked the way in which Muller does not shy away from taking up a stance: He leaves no doubt that he does not particularly like Orson Welles as a person, and his commentary that Ida Lupino was an artist who, to the chagrin of modern critics, "never stooped to define herself in terms of gender" (p.177) may not be politically correct but is at least honest and refreshing, and true. A similar refreshing jab at "the cultural elite who had adopted its post-everything attitude" (p.191) made me nearly drown in my coffee for laughter.

Last not least, the book is full of appetizing stills from lots and lots of noir movies.

If you want to dive into the intricacies of noir cinema and learn something about critics' theories and if you are not afraid of scholarly mumbo-jumbo, the Noir Readers mentioned above would be more to your taste, but for those who love film noir and want to read a very, very long essay written by someone who shares this love, Eddie Muller's book is a very good choice.

[1] This impressive film is actually dealt with in the chapter "Loser's Lane" under its better-known title "Gun Crazy".

[2] A non-native speaker like me will also cherish the opportunity of enlarging their vocabulary for words and expressions they will probably never use.

Robert Blenheim says

Eddie Muller knows what he's writing about. He's one of the finest experts on film noir alive. And, yes, this book is superb in its writing with many wonderful pictures that make it a joy for a quick scan or to slowly peruse.

Nevertheless, it seems disappointing on several levels: 1) There are too many plot synopses to the point I actually had to skip a few paragraphs if it was about a noir I hadn't seen; 2) the book seems poorly structured -- actually at times more like a novel; and 3) there isn't one single photo of Jane Greer, one of the finest femme fatales, in the entire book!

Admittedly, it's a good book and worth your money. But a definitive reference book it is not.

Leonard Pierce says

Eddie Mueller is probably the premier popular writer on film noir. This is a really engaging and well written book, and its conceit -- that noir films all take place in a single universe -- works better than you might expect.

Kgwhitehurst says

Eddie Muller writes in the tone and language of noir, which can be a trifle off-putting until you get used to it. At that point, it takes off. He surveys the major players--directors, writers, stars--of noir and discusses the

best and most influential noir movies. You'll ten to twenty new movies to watch out of this this book. And one of the great Hollywood villains menaces these pages--the House Unamerican Activities Committe--because so mucj noir exposed the corrupt nature of post-war America. Many of the writers, directors, and actors were members of the Communist Party, joining, usually, during the Depression. The Production Code was also a problem, but at least it didn't send people to jail and ruin careers and creative partnerships. It did force writers and directors to be more suggestive, badinage and subtle photography replacing explicitly shown. There are plenty of great stills in this book that highlight the light and dark effects used by cinematographers to such tremendous effect in noir. Muller believes noir is a genre, but it is also a style--a smart, highly sophisticated style used to examine the worst and the weakest of human nature.