



Clark Gifford's Body

Kenneth Fearing , Robert Polito (Introduction)

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Back in Print After Fifty Years

Clark Gifford? A cipher. A disaffected, vaguely idealistic politician in a nameless media-driven modern state where representative politics has dwindled to the corrupt transaction of business as usual and a new foreign war is always breaking out. One night Gifford and his followers seize some radio stations and broadcast a call for freedom—a rebellion that is immediately put down by the government and whose motive will remain forever obscure. Even so, it leads to twenty years of war.

A paranoid tour de force of political noir, *Clark Gifford's Body* skips back and forth in time, interspersing newspaper clippings and court transcripts with the reactions and reminiscences of the politicians, generals, businessmen, journalists, waiters, and soldiers who double as the actors and the chorus in a drama over which, finally, they have no control. Who here is leading? Who is being led? Fearing's novel is a pseudo-documentary of a world given over to pseudo-politics and pseudo-events, a prophetic glimpse of the future as a poisonous fog.

"I have not developed the habit of reading thrillers, but I have read enough of them to know that from now on Mr. Fearing is my man."—*The New Yorker*

Clark Gifford's Body Details

Date : Published October 17th 2006 by NYRB Classics (first published 1937)

ISBN : 9781590171820

Author : Kenneth Fearing , Robert Polito (Introduction)

Format : Paperback 288 pages

Genre : Fiction, Literature, American, Novels, War

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From Reader Review Clark Gifford's Body for online ebook

Jukka says

Clark Gifford's Body - Kenneth Fearing

This has some major flaws, but still does some pretty amazing things. Fearing is not one to follow the crowd. Suppose you switch radio with the internet?

Chris says

A book seemingly ahead of its time for its fake-news-account and jumbled chronological telling and for its political thematics about a mass mediated politics, it's a book I liked a little more in theory than in practice. But there are some evocative moments, particularly in its reflection on tourism and historical memory.

Jacob says

The prosody is pulp, the structure and concerns (the construction of history, for one) are Modernist, and the act of reading it is, in retrospect, Borgesian. Borgesian in the sense expressed in the foreword to *The Garden of Forking Paths*: beside its own synopses and commentaries, the book itself is unnecessary. I loved the back cover.

Matt Morris says

See reviews of this & other books at <http://miscmss.blogspot.com/2016/01/f...>

Tony says

Fearing, Kenneth. CLARK GIFFORD'S BODY. (1942). ****. Fearing (1902-1961) is primarily known for his crime novel, "The Big Clock," but also published an impressive amount of fiction for pulp magazines – and, supposedly, a great deal of soft porn to make his living early on. In the 1920s and 1930s he was a regular contributor to "The New Yorker," and helped found "The Partisan Review." He was also a respected poet, with much of that work still in print. This novel might best be described as political noir. Clark Gifford, a colonel in a reactionary party to the established government, heads up a group of guerillas, and attacks and captures a radio station, WLEX. There is no specific country in which this occurs, but it could very well be any country. The plan, of which Gifford plays a small part, is to capture a grid of radio stations and begin broadcasting the new party's messages to fire up the people and have them come over to the reactionaries side. Although well armed and well trained, Gifford wants this to be a bloodless revolution to oust the party in power and allow an honest and intelligent party to take over. Although the raid is initially successful, Gifford's men are soon faced with an overwhelming display of force by the troops of the party in power. Although several other radio stations are captured according to plan, they are all re-captured in short order. The tale is not told in any kind of straight-forward manner. Although you have reports from soldiers and technicians at the radio station at the time of the attack and immediately afterwards, you also have comments

of participants of both parties months and years after the event. They all see it in somewhat different lights. The events of this uprising are reported on by current newspaper reports and retrospective accounts. Transcripts of radio messages from the rebels and the in-government are also included. Acquaintances of Gifford provide their testimony as to his character as far back as thirty years before the event, to about twenty years after the event. Of course, early character sketches of Gifford before the event are not colored by the event itself, whereas later comments by friends and comrades are dully colored by the events. The tale is told as if it were a collection of notes by a historian who hasn't yet had time to go through them and make sense out of them for the ultimate reader. What comes across is a sense of reading a pseudo documentary of a nation given over to pseudo politics and pseudo events. Fearing employed some totally new techniques in presenting this work that the reader soon picks up on, and begins to participate in this non-event of a nation continuously at war. Recommended.

Chris says

A good, sad look at what war does to those it puts through hell & those it serves.

g026r says

The final ending chapter is perhaps a bit too traditional in nature given the structure of the rest of the work, and there's no doubt, despite my enjoyment, that Fearing's reach once more exceeded his grasp with this one.

At the same time, however, this ambition (it's narrative structure is not just non-linear, but decidedly fractured, with over 2 dozen narrators) that elevates it above *The Big Clock* in my eyes. Whereas the latter was a 3/5, this one is more of a 3.5/5: still not without flaws, particularly in the plotting department, but interesting enough that I can see myself re-reading this work before *Clock*.

Richard says

The premise and the structure were interesting and the satire of political and revolutionary movements is still relevant. Clark Gifford's *Body* is the story of how a failed revolutionary act is co-opted and manipulated by various political groups whose agendas (Clark Gifford's included) seem to be based on platitudes so amorphous and ambiguous as to make their differences almost meaningless and interchangeable - making it easy enough for the characters themselves to change sides as they detect which way the wind may be blowing. What the country is left with is 20 years of war and hardship based on manipulation and the self-interest of a few. The story is told out of order through newspaper clippings and first person accounts, presented in a way that allows you to piece together the plot and motives of the characters gradually in a way that a hypothetical person living through these events might not. The technique is interesting but it didn't always grab me - the first person narratives were probably the most effective - but they were usually from the point of view of someone who wasn't one of the main actors. I was wishing the characters and some of the episodes were more compelling but the form limits this (and the unknowability of some of the characters through what they say and do is partly the point). I liked how language was used to manipulate. The use of broad, almost meaningless phrases by the military/political leaders (lots of talk about "freedom" and taking things back) to motivate people to violence without any concrete ideas or goals certainly rings a bell.

Stephanie says

Strangely compelling and still 69 years after its initial publication, timely. A country (or is it the entire world?) is at war and the novel jumps back and forth in time before and after "the attack" that sets off the latest round of fighting. Different characters from each side are describe their involvement with restrained detachment. There are no good guys, no bad guys. Just people in a war.

Glenn Russell says

American novelist and poet Kenneth Fearing (1902-1961)

Clark Gifford's Body is a forgotten classic of postmodernism, a novel not well received at the time of its first publication in 1942 and virtually unknown ever since. Thank you *New York Review Books (NYRB)* for this 2006 edition which includes an informative introduction by critic Robert Polito. And let me tell you folks, if you are interested in reading political noir in an experimental fictional style, this is your one-of-a-kind book.

As a way of underscoring "postmodern" and "experimental" below are several postmodern, experimental features of this story revolving around and hovering over one central event - the attack and takeover of a series of radio stations by Clark Gifford and his anti-government followers, a takeover leading to twenty years of war:

Reaction Against Established Forms

Rather than telling the story in conventional start-at-the-beginning-and-move-forward linear progression, the novel hops and shifts back and forth in time, covering reflections, reports and events before, after, and during the attack, ranging from thirty years prior to thirty years after as well as including more than two dozen first-person narrators from military officers and executives to town residents and those actual participants in the attack.

Incorporates Many Varieties of Texts Directly

Among the novel's thirty chapters, we have a written proclamation, a letter, a monthly magazine article, a series of press service flashes and three different newspaper articles. Chapters focus anywhere from years before the attack to years following the attack. To take but one example, here is a quote from a monthly magazine: "What sort of man was he, this Clark Gifford who plunged a continent for twelve long hours into the abyss of terror and despair? What lay behind the philosophy that waked children screaming in their beds, set housewives to shuddering, and caused even strong men to falter -and as casually as you or I would push the button of a light switch secure in the safety and sanctity of our own home?"

Erosion of Boundaries Between Subjects Usually Studied Separately

One would find it nearly impossible to approach *Clark Gifford's Body* from distinct, self-contained perspectives, since, when it comes to history, social theory, philosophy or political science, the novel is an undifferentiated postmodern jumble. Here is a bit of philosophy from one General F. Johan Esteven: "I have no sympathy whatsoever with the terrorist methods employed by "Colonel" Gifford. In my opinion, Gifford should be tried by court martial and shot." Ha! Now that's very generous of you, General Esteven! Why not save the state some money and simply shoot Clark Gifford?

Postmodern Experience of Space and Time and the Leveling of Differences

With all the shifting back and forth through time and place, a reader has the sense people and events of this novel are coated with a layer of hazy gray fog; there is the buzz of sameness about it all. Where are we?

What was the year of the attack? Sure, there are a couple of sports references, a general is off playing golf, a standard fare kind of guy muses on how fall is the season for football, but there is nothing more specific. Welcome to postmodern country, a bland-land and flatland, to be sure; we could be anywhere at any time, since, after all, no one location is any different from all the others.

Pastiche Rather Than Parody

Here is literary critic Fredric Jameson on the use of pastiche in postmodernism: "Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language, but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic." This description fits Fearing's novel like a custom made suit, a novel for the most part both humorless and free of satire, a novel that does anything but suggest there is an alternative, more "normal" culture and society anywhere else in the world.

All in all, there was something strangely compelling about *Clark Gifford's Body* that made me want to keep turning the pages. Perhaps it was the constant freshness of perspectives, each chapter offering a new voice, a different mode of communication, a new narrator with new expectations and challenges interlaced with all the other characters. But, whatever the reasons, this was an intriguing read, one with its own unique flare and a book I would wholeheartedly recommend.

Kenneth Fearing was a novelist ahead of his time. He was also a sensitive artist who suffered difficulty both as a child and then as an adult who eventually turned to alcohol. Other than his crime noir novel, *The Big Clock*, also republished by *New York Review Books*, Fearing's fiction and poetry are all but forgotten.

Chris says

An interesting mosaic novel of political turmoil. This could easily be confusing and fractured but it hangs together well with both separate and combined voice.
