FRANK FENTON'S HOLLYWOOD NOCTURNE

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"Every so often in the annals of Hollywood critiques, there appears a fulsome treatise executed by some literary figure of the hour who has gone to Movieland to do a writing chore. Properly dined and cocktailed by the town's past-masters in the art of adulation, the great man savors a robust stimulation of the ego; and invariably he writes a memoir."

—"The Hollywood Literary Life" by Frank Fenton

Frank Fenton never got around to writing a memoir. With a resume of over 60 feature films and television shows (and a profusion of uncredited and unproduced work) over a 40-year career, he was too busy for self-reflection.

Fenton was establishing himself as a proficient scenarist of B-films when the above-quoted article appeared in the November 1938 issue of *The American Mercury*. He would pen several other fictional short stories about the Hollywood movie scene whose posturing he mocked. Another Fenton piece, "Boy Meets Gorilla," was published in *Collier's* the following month. His story of a Hamilton, Ohio, hick who is transformed into an acclaimed Hollywood writer-producer after saving a movie star from a gorilla on the set of a South Seas potboiler was a spot-on satire of Tinseltown pretentiousness.

Fenton's professional outlook (along with a fondness for booze) resembled that of Robert Mitchum, for whom he wrote some of the actor's most memorable dialogue. Like the laconic movie star, Fenton never hesitated to mock the suits that signed his checks—even as he cashed them.

Much of Fenton's work has become overlooked, forgotten, or unavailable. Some of his best writings were uncredited script rewrites, extensive polish jobs, or original stories that were adapted by others. Fenton established an emblematic standard for cynical dialogue and innovative plotting in some of the best film noirs and Westerns, despite few people remembering who actually crafted the words. He is frequently confused with another Frank Fenton, a character actor who enjoyed an overlapping career in film and television.

Frank Edgington Fenton was born in Liverpool, England, on February 3, 1903. He arrived in America with his family at the age of three and was raised in the Ohio heartland. Despite erroneous claims on the internet (and a similar Ohio immigrant lineage), Fenton was not the brother of Leslie Fenton, a British actor who incurred the wrath of Jack L. Warner after he eloped with Ann Dvorak in 1932.

Photo courtesy of Mark Fenton

Writer Frank Fenton, 1903 - 1971

Photo courtesy of Mark Fenton

John Fante (left) and Frank Fenton — a pair of lifelong pals who shared an affinity for writing about Los Angeles

Fenton was American-bred, but he never abandoned his British roots. His son Mark Fenton remembered, "Dad never became an American citizen—he always carried a green card." The younger Fenton said his father would "toast the Queen every evening with a glass of Cutty Sark."

His father, John Fenton, was listed in the 1920 census as a shoe manufacturer. In addition to Frank and his two sisters, the Fenton household included a 36-year-old female servant and Fenton's maternal grandmother, Mary Edgington. The elder Fenton was apparently well off enough for son Frank to attend college. After graduating from Ohio State University, Fenton journeyed to Los Angeles and remained there for the rest of his life. A film buff as well as a student of classical literature, he dreamed of writing for the movies and was drawn to Hollywood like the proverbial moth to the flame.

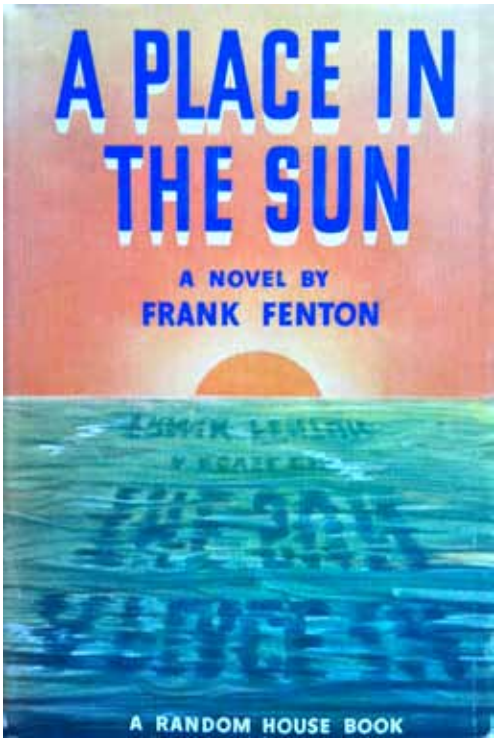
Fenton's earliest film credit was an original story for the 63-minute programmer *Behind Jury Doors* (1932). He co-wrote *Dinky* (1935) with his pal John Fante, which the pair sold to Warner Bros. Fante would become renowned for his 1939 semi-autobiographical novel *Ask the Dust*, about a struggling Depression-era writer–Arturo Bandini, and considered to be the definitive Los Angeles novel. His "Bandini quartet" of stories, along with screenplays for *Full of Life* (1956, based on his novel), *Jeanne Eagels* (1957), and *Walk on the Wild Side* (1962) earned Fante a great deal of late-career and posthumous acclaim. During the Depression, he and Fenton were just another pair of hungry writers attempting to scratch out a living in the City of Angels.

Fenton and Fante remained lifelong friends even after the former began working with Lynn Root. Root was a Broadway actor who ditched treading the boards to take up writing. He would eventually hit it big with his play *Cabin in the Sky*, adapted into a major 1943 MGM production with an all-star African-American cast. Fenton and Root began with a couple of flop plays. They sold one of them, *Stork Mad*, to 20th Century–Fox, which turned it into a Jane Withers comedy. The pair gained a professional toehold by cranking out three more Withers features for Fox.

From 1937 to 1946, Fenton and Root collaborated on over 20 original stories and screenplays. Many of their scripts became leanly produced RKO programmers, usually for *The Saint* or *The Falcon* series.

A prototypical entry was *The Falcon Takes Over* (1942). Shot in 20 days for $140,000, it was the first screen adaptation of Raymond Chandler's work. Based on *Farewell, My Lovely*, the not-yet-famous author received $2,012.70 from RKO for the rights.

Fenton and Root shifted the locale from Los Angeles to Manhattan and compressed Chandler's mystery into a 65-minute feature starring George Sanders as the Falcon and a padded Ward Bond as Moose Malloy. Although much of Chandler's story and characterizations had to be tossed in order to streamline the plot (while also getting the script by the censor's office), the film was permeated with the amusing dialogue that became a Fenton trademark. RKO appreciated the results and remade Chandler's yarn two years later to greater acclaim as *Murder, My Sweet* (1944) starring a repurposed Dick Powell.



Publishing a critically acclaimed novel was considerably less lucrative for Frank Fenton than cooking up an original story with Roland Brown for *Nocturne* (1946)

Even as Fenton ascended to scripting major productions like *The Sky's the Limit* (1943), he aspired to be more than a screenwriter. For most writers of his era, the path to Hollywood usually began after a stint with newspapers, writing for the "slicks," or authoring a successful novel. Fenton stood this formula on its head by authoring a pair of novels just as his screenwriting career gained significant traction.

The New York Times praised Fenton's debut novel *A Place in the Sun*, which was published by Random House in July 1942:

> "Fenton's [book] is notable for its sensitive portrayal of a young man who lived with the inferiority of a physical handicap. [He] does a masterly job of balancing the forces which molded the character of Rob Andrews…[and] he succeeds in giving the story the glow of human fulfillment."

The respected California writer-historian Carey McWilliams believed *A Place in the Sun* was one of only four novels (including Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* and John Fante's *Ask the Dust*) "that suggest what Southern California is really like." Fenton's depiction of pre-war Los Angeles in *A Place in the Sun* remains poetically descriptive:

> *Down the foothills into the city the air changed. The lingering mist of morning fog was rising and in the fog there was the salt flavor of the sea. Then the shreds of fog melted and the great yellow and white city lay at the mercy of the sun.*
>
> *He drove down one street after another. It was all beautiful. A million bungalows and mansions of all conceivable architectures; flowers he could not name, and trees he had never seen before. Strange races on the sidewalks: Mexicans, Filipinos, Japanese, Chinese.*
>
> *A strange and wonderful city.*
>
> *It was not like some Middle-Western city that sinks down roots into some strategic area of earth and goes to work there. This was a lovely makeshift city. Even the trees and plants, he knew, did not belong there. They came, like the people, from far places, some familiar, some exotic, all wanderers of one sort or another, seeking peace or fortune or the last frontier, or a thousand dreams of escape. And all these malcontents had joined in a dreamy effort to create a city of their dreams…*
>
> *This was a city of heretics. A themeless city with every theme. Chicago, St. Louis and Denver had each been different; each had its own sordidness and strength and fury. Each was lusty and titanic in its own way, joyful and somber in its own way, and each was indubitably American. But not this Los Angeles. It had the air of not belonging to America, though all its motley ways were American. It was a city of refugees from America; it was purely itself in a banishment partly dreamed and partly real. It rested on a crust of earth at the edge of a sea that ended a world.*

What Way My Journey Lies elicited similar admiration in April 1946. Fenton's saga of a returning veteran struggling to adapt to a changed Los Angeles was in timely vogue with several popular films about returning veterans including *The Best Years of Our Lives* and *Till the End of Time*, which were released later the same year.

A Place in the Sun would be eclipsed in the public's mind by the 1951 Academy Award-winning movie of the same title, adapted from Theodore Dreiser's 1925 novel *An American Tragedy*. Both of Fenton's novels are out-of-print and nearly impossible to find.

Despite the critical accolades, Fenton discovered he couldn't make a living writing novels, so he returned for good to the world of screenwriting. A 50-page mystery yarn written with Rowland Brown, titled "Sweeney Among the Nightingales," was probably thrashed out over cocktails at the writers' table in the Musso & Frank Grill where he was a habitué. Although the success of what eventually reached the screen as *Nocturne* (1946) was primarily due to producer Joan Harrison and screenwriter Jonathan Latimer, Fenton's yarn (with a credit for Brown as well) about the murder of

Hardboiled narrative: Fenton's dialogue was tailor-made for Robert Mitchum (center), shown here with Jane Greer and Steve Brodie in 1947's *Out of the Past*

a famous Hollywood composer reached the screen intact. According to future director Joseph Pevney, who made his movie-acting debut in the picture, a lot of dialogue was altered on-set as star George Raft didn't care to be burdened with line readings.

RKO became excited over the potential of Daniel Mainwaring's 1946 novel *Build My Gallows High*. Writing under the pseudonym of Geoffrey Homes, Mainwaring's story possessed "action, excitement, suspense, toughness, tenderness, and a group of excellent characters" according to one breathless studio reader, but his screenplay adaptation was lacking. The characters bore little resemblance to those who eventually appeared on screen. Kathie Moffett was "Mumsie McGonigle," Jeff Bailey/Markham was "Red Bailey" and the deaf-mute played by Dickie Moore had "the starved, wizened face of a jockey with peculiar, grooved scar across his narrow forehead." High stakes crook Whit Sterling was an overweight slob and there were several additional characters, including a retired crooked cop named Parker.

The studio brought in James M. Cain for a rewrite. A superb novelist, Cain spent years in Hollywood vainly attempting to master the art of screenwriting. His version opens with *eight pages* of Bailey and Ann fishing in the Sierras, until she finds a Jack Fisher/Jeff Markham business card in the glove box of their station wagon while searching for a cigarette. Cain's script was filed and forgotten.

RKO reader Lynn Shores noted that she didn't know "what the next writer would have in mind," but the present script had "so much plot and counterplots, love entanglements, etc. that it is apt to be somewhat confusing."

> [Fenton] eliminated ... extraneous plot points while honing the dialogue to a razor's edge. The shooting script was titled *Out of the Past*.

Frank Fenton was the next writer. He eliminated several characters and extraneous plot points while honing the dialogue to a razor's edge. The shooting script was titled *Out of the Past*. Kathie Moffett (Jane Greer) became "a leaf that blows from one gutter to another." Henchman Joe Stefanos (Paul Valentine) "couldn't find a prayer in the Bible," and Meta Carson (Rhonda Fleming) was "awfully cold around the heart." Mitchum clipped off some of the best lines, from telling Whit Sterling (Kirk Douglas), "You liked me because you could use me, and you could use me because I was smart. I'm not smart anymore," to letting Kathie know that he doesn't want to die, "but if I have to—I'm going to die last." Fenton's rhythmic prose flowed like hard bop at Birdland. Despite his essential contributions, Fenton's name was omitted from the credits in favor of Mainwaring, who added a final polish to Fenton's rewrite and got sole screen credit with his Geoffrey Homes pseudonym.

Raymond Burr (left) and Dick Powell traded in their fedoras for Stetsons in the Fenton-scripted Western noir *Station West* (1949)

Out of the Past was followed by an assignment to adapt Luke Short's serialized novel "Mission in Mufti" into an oater titled *Station West*. Fenton rewrote another script (this time by Winston Miller). If there is such a thing as "Western noir," *Station West* is it. Dick Powell's reinvention into a laconic noir protagonist was perfect for Fenton. He turned Powell's ripostes (he's an undercover Army officer investigating mining camp murders) into wisenheimer poetry:

"If I weren't in uniform, I might teach you some manners."
"If you could teach me anything, you wouldn't be in a uniform."

"You couldn't be looking for trouble, could you?"
"I could, but I'm not."

"I see you finally got here."
"I seem to finally get everywhere."

"What good is a lawyer if he never gets into court?"
"Like a doctor in a graveyard."

The advent of television and the anti-trust divestiture of their theater chains signaled the end for the Hollywood studios' assembly line. RKO's pain became more acute when the revolving door to the studio's executive suite ushered in the era of Howard Hughes. After buying the studio in May 1948, Hughes forced out Dore Schary as head of production, then inexplicably shelved or continually remade completed movies.

The house screenwriters (less those blacklisted by Hughes for alleged communist ties) were mostly amused as continual script rewrites and added scenes became *de rigueur* at RKO. Like Robert Mitchum, who nicknamed Hughes "the Phantom," Fenton was tickled by the mogul's eccentricities. "My father boasted he was one of the few people at the studio who actually met Hughes," said Mark Fenton.

The final RKO release to bear a Dore Schary credit was the Fenton-scripted *Walk Softly, Stranger*, which was filmed during April-June 1948. The picture was a co-production with David O. Selznick's Vanguard films, which lent out director Robert Stevenson and stars Joseph Cotten and Alida Valli. It was eventually released on October 14, 1950, in an attempt to cash in on the success of *The Third Man*. One of

Fenton's more melodramatic offerings concerned a criminal (Cotten) returning to his hometown to seek redemption from a crippled woman played by Valli. *Walk Softly, Stranger* was a box office bomb, losing $775,000 on the balance sheet.

When Dore Schary left RKO, he brought with him a non-fiction property called *Operation Malaya* to be produced at MGM. Fenton's screenplay has an adventurous newspaperman springing his crooked friend from Alcatraz in order to smuggle critically needed rubber out of Malaysia and into the U.S. during the war.

Malaya (1949) boasted an all-star cast of Spencer Tracy, James Stewart, Lionel Barrymore, John Hodiak, and Sydney Greenstreet, along with a gilded Metro budget of nearly $2.5 million. The film was not as successful as the smash-hit *Battleground* (another Schary-owned property that Hughes rejected), but it recouped $691,000 over its cost. Fenton's *Malaya* script was tinged with the period's jingoistic flavor:

> *"And then we'll be home again—the thin Chinese music, the dirty smell of opium and of spices and the unbathed people. The good honest face of evil in the streets."*

> Fenton was tickled by [... Howard Hughes'] eccentricities. "My father boasted he was one of the few people at the studio who actually met Hughes," said Mark Fenton.

In August 1949, Fenton submitted a 51-page original story to RKO producer Robert Sparks called "The Big Bullet." It was a vehicle designed for the studio's two biggest stars, Robert Mitchum and Jane Russell. Fenton cast Mitchum as a gambler who becomes involved with Russell while exposing a communist smuggling ring at a luxurious Baja California seaside resort. By December, Fenton and Jack Leonard expanded the yarn into a screenplay titled "Smiler with a Gun." The plot was shifted away from Hughes' obsession of foiling domestic communism to Mitchum being inveigled to arrive at the resort so a deported mob boss modeled on Lucky Luciano (played by a sinister Raymond Burr) could assume his identity and re-enter the country.

A rewrite by Roy Huggins made few discernable changes to the original script. Fenton and Jack Leonard received sole screen credit. Nearly everything they wrote remained in the final cut including an over-the-top movie star memorably portrayed by Vincent Price. But Howard Hughes wanted much more of a slam-bang ending.

After John Farrow finished directing the picture, Hughes assigned

Tough guys Charles McGraw (center left) and Robert Mitchum square off in RKO's *His Kind of Woman* (1951)

director Richard Fleischer and his writing partner Earl Felton to add more pizzazz with a wild fight scene on a yacht (that Hughes had purchased) and a prolonged gunfight between Price and Charles McGraw, along with a large number of retakes. Twenty-five additions or changes to the shooting script (from April 10, 1950 to April 26, 1951) took place after the picture first wrapped. The retitled picture, *His Kind of Woman,* lost $850,000—almost exactly the amount of money Hughes put into a year's worth of retakes. The film remains eminently watchable due to the excellent cast, a delightfully ridiculous plot, and Fenton's crisp dialogue[1].

Fenton moved on from RKO to write for studios that treated moviemaking as a business more than a form of personal amusement. The 1950s became a decade of Westerns, and Fenton cashed in big-time with *The Wild North* (1952), *Ride, Vaquero!*, *Escape from Fort Bravo* (both 1953) and *Garden of Evil* (1954).

He was reunited with Robert Mitchum when he wrote the screenplay for *River of No Return* (1954). It was a troubled production whose problems began when Fox mogul Darryl F. Zanuck forced director Otto Preminger on producer Stanley Rubin. "Preminger was totally wrong for this kind of picture," said Rubin. "I wanted Raoul Walsh or Henry King, but Zanuck wasn't having it because Otto had a "pay-or-play" contract." Rubin spent the balance of the production attempting to maintain a semblance of comity between the mercurial Preminger, a terribly insecure Marilyn Monroe, and an imbibing Mitchum. Fenton became irritated when Preminger preemptively decided to

Fenton's original story "The Big Bullet," which became *His Kind of Woman*, was specifically designed for Robert Mitchum and Jane Russell

1 For a more detailed description of the *His Kind of Woman* debacle, please refer to Richard Fleischer's memoir *Just Tell Me When to Cry* and the author's *Charles McGraw: Film Noir Tough Guy* biography.

An insecure Marilyn Monroe opposite an imbibing Robert Mitchum, with direction from the vitriolic Otto Preminger, made *River of No Return* (1954) a tempestuous production

drop a scene that had Mitchum attempting to maul Monroe. When the screenwriter objected, Preminger banished him from the set.

Fenton's life underwent a major change by the middle of the decade. After a brief marriage to diminutive actress June Martel had flamed out in 1942, he wed actress-stuntwoman Mary Jane Hodge in 1945. Hodge could be as spirited as her husband. Mark Fenton recalled a family story about his mother being terminated by RKO during the filming of *Folies Bergère de Paris* (1935) for playing a practical joke on star Maurice Chevalier that backfired. The Fentons would have two children, Mark and Joyce, and they resided comfortably in the Cheviot Hills area of Los Angeles near Fenton's other home, the California Country Club. According to Mark Fenton: "My father loved golfing and the cocktail hour."

The marriage eventually fell apart. Both Fenton and his wife drank. At the time, he could handle it. She couldn't. After the 1957 divorce, Fenton ended up with custody of seven-year-old son Mark, with his ex-wife raising their daughter. Fenton moved to a small house off Olympic Boulevard. "I had kind of a weird childhood with my father," said Mark Fenton. "We had a housekeeper and I was a latchkey kid." The ups and downs included being taught how to swim by Tarzan—Johnny Weissmuller was a chum of his Dad's—and having his father fend him off when he was busy with a screenplay. "He was a very intense, driven man when it came to his writing," recalled Mark. "I think it was very difficult for him to stop and become immersed all over again in what he had been doing."

According to Mark Fenton, his father's movie work dried up after Barbara Stanwyck accused Fenton of being a communist during the filming of *These Wilder Years* (1956). The younger Fenton vividly remembers a high school teacher humiliating him publicly in class over his father being listed as a communist or suspected subversive in a press report. Whether Fenton was actually blacklisted or graylisted remains unknown. I could not locate his name on any source or archival material denoting the era's blacklisted artists. Nevertheless, he managed only two more screenplay credits. His final feature film, *The Jayhawkers*!, was released in 1959.

After a lean period of spec work, Fenton caught on again with television. He did a lot of work for famed television writer-producer and HUAC-friendly witness Roy Huggins, but it was a far cry from writing for Mitchum and Monroe. Mark Fenton surmised: "I think my father had trouble adjusting to the changing tastes of the public. He loved writing stories about tough guys and men of action. I think he found it difficult to write love scenes."

The drinking continued. His son remembered occasions when his father "came home from the Cock 'n Bull pub late or the next morning, with a black eye or a missing tooth." He continued his irreverence toward a new generation of TV suits. Mark chuckled at the memory: "He always dressed nicely, but would wear dirty white tennis shoes whenever he had a meeting at the studio."

The younger Fenton concluded: "I liked my father. I always felt protected by him."

Frank Fenton's last hurrah was *Something for a Lonely Man*, a 1968 Western TV movie he co-wrote with his friend John Fante. He suffered a stroke and died on August 23, 1971. He left behind an unpublished poem that was an ode to his career and the lost Hollywood night.

I did not love you greatly, I only lied.
I loved all things and none. I merely tried.
Never forgive me love, I was not true.
To anything I loved but love, not even you. ■

Thanks to Mark Fenton for his candor and family photos, Craig Hodgkins' blog, the late Joseph Pevney, the late Stanley Rubin, and the Charles E. Young Research Library Special Collections.

Photo courtesy of Mark Fenton

Frank Fenton at work... Grinding out TV scripts was never as much fun as writing for the movies