

The Eight-Day Clock

Dale Swanson

CreateSpace (Mar 26, 2016)

Softcover \$16.00 (310pp)

978-1-5239-5316-5

The Eight-Day Clock has a sharp critical edge that sets it apart from any genre exercise and puts it into the realm of literary fiction and vital political satire.

Dale Swanson's new novel is a subversive noir tale set in the sweltering heat of Tampa. Mordant in tone, ingenious in wordplay, *The Eight-Day Clock* offers a fresh twist on a classic whodunit story and a biting critique of political hypocrisy.

The neo-noir plot begins with a ribald introduction to the book's first-person narrator. Jimmy Campaglia is an unabashedly gay and slyly contrarian private investigator hired to figure out who is blackmailing one of the Sunshine State's most powerful political families. His search for answers leads him and his goofy, pot-smoking partner Bailey to the scene of a murder and into the middle of an elaborate extortion scheme. That his clients are rich conservative Mormons desperate to cover up salacious family affairs makes these events ripe for irony and political satire.

The writing is stellar throughout, reminiscent of Don DeLillo and other dark, trenchant postmodern writers. Descriptions of Congressman Dick Whitlock and his wife, June, for instance, capture the arrogance of the ruling class but also a palpable desperation behind the facade. Though some of the descriptiveness veers toward political caricature more than natural characterization, the satire is sharp enough to sting. And the book's atmospherics are consistently rich and intriguing. Chinese elms "hiss in the hot breeze." In the Florida rain, a faded Art Deco building becomes "a haunted and tear-streaked face."

Also important to the novel is the predominance of a male gay perspective amid traditional political structures. Jimmy is unabashed in his sexuality and is both amused and disturbed by the hypocrisy of the congressman, who wants to cover up the sexual exploits of his two queer adopted sons, as well as his own misdeeds. But this subversive perspective also operates in the narrative form itself; the book successfully replaces classic noir conventions—like the femme fatale—with male gay characters.

The book's third act, however, is convoluted. Though the writing is brilliant, twisting plot lines become cartoonish in their complexity. At some point, the incestuous relationships and double-crossings evoke contrivance more than cleverness, and are a parody of noir more than noir itself. Denouement fatigue sets in as characters, in the final scenes, rehash each crime and announce their findings.

Despite these hang-ups, *The Eight-Day Clock* manages to give one hell of a ride. There's enough freshness and wit and excitement throughout the novel to enthrall fans of pulp fiction. More than thrills, *The Eight-Day Clock* has a sharp critical edge that sets it apart from genre exercise and into the realm of literary fiction and vital political satire.

SCOTT NEUFFER (June 16, 2016)

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