

FREDRIC BROWN



THE FABULOUS CLIPJOINT

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1948 Edgar Award Winner

Ed Hunter is eighteen, and he isn't happy. He doesn't want to end up like his father, a linotype operator and a drunk, married to a harridan, with a harridan-in-training stepdaughter. Ed wants out, he wants to live, he wants to see the world before it's too late. Then his father doesn't come home one night, and Ed finds out how good he had it. The bulk of the book has Ed teaming up with Uncle Ambrose, a former carny worker, and trying to find out who killed Ed's dad. But the title is as much a coming-of-age tale as it is a pulp. Author Brown won the Edgar award in 1947 for this spectacular first-effort.

The Fabulous Clipjoint Details

Date : Published August 1st 2004 by Blackmask.com (first published 1947)

ISBN : 9781596541191

Author : Fredric Brown

Format : Paperback 132 pages

Genre : Mystery, Crime, Fiction, Noir, Thriller, Mystery Thriller

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From Reader Review The Fabulous Clipjoint for online ebook

Carla Remy says

Very, very good. At first this reminded me of the Moon in the Gutter by David Goodis (in that one it is the beloved sister who is dead in the alley, here it's the father), but it became more plotty and interesting (I loved Uncle Ambrose talking about how everything is just atoms spinning around so, you know, reality isn't as real as you think). A satisfying book.

(Just to clarify, this came out in 1947, the Goodis is from five years later).

Steve Dennie says

“The Fabulous Clipjoint” (1947), by Frederic Brown, is a coming-of-age story about Ed Hunter, whose father is murdered in a Chicago alley. Ed, age 18, is living with his stepmom and stepsister. He heads to Wisconsin to see his Uncle Ambrose, who works in a carnival. Ambrose immediately leaves with Ed, determined to find who killed Ed’s father and Ambrose’s brother.

The novel moves along at a nice pace. The interaction between Ed and Ambrose is interesting, as are the tactics Ambrose uses to track down the killer in Chicago’s underworld. You see wise old Ambrose, a very street-savvy sort, mentoring Ed and steering him toward manhood. Along the way, Ed learns much about the father he never truly knew—that he was not the weak, pathetic man he thought he was.

I found this book as a freebie epub somewhere on the internet and read it on my ColorNook. Frederic Brown won the 1947 Edgar Award for “Best First Mystery Novel” with this book, having already published hundreds of stories in pulp magazines.

This was a very good book, and since it was free, I consider it a great find. I understand that there are six more books featuring Ed and Ambrose.

Angie Boyter says

Very enjoyable! They don't write them that way any more.

Despite the fact that there were some real "bad guys" in the book, what I think I liked best was the warmth and naturalness of the characters, characteristics that are all too rare in today's thrillers.

It was also fun to step back into 1950!

Joe Rodeck says

"A thing can look beautiful or romantic or inspiring only if the beauty or the romance or the inspiration is inside you."

Much of the charm of this classic noir murder is that the hero is just 18. Just when I said this book just needs a femme fatale, Michelle Pfeiffer walks in! And it's about as torrid, I suppose, as 1948 would allow.

Dave says

A nice noirish detective novel--not as good as some other things I've read by him, but OK. Best when Ed acts like a real confused eighteen year-old and not when he turns into Mr. Smooth With the Dames. Am is a great character, and there's some wonderfully-detailed glances at seedy Chicago. The mystery is not much, but it's full of odd, interesting bits (Ed and Am sit around the bar and talk about women's handbags???).

Peter says

The Fabulous Clipjoint is the *Catcher In The Rye* of mystery novels - or at least, it is for **me**.

While I read it, I'm living the life of Ed Hunter, a bright but bitter 18-year-old living in the Chicago slums of the 1940s. And the funny thing is that just like *Catcher In The Rye*, it doesn't feel a bit dated; Ed loves jazz and wants to play the trombone, but that feels exactly the same as a kid wanting to play the electric guitar would today. Ed's thoughts, as Brown writes them, feel just as fresh and "now" as anything written last week - and are a lot more engaging and real-feeling than 99% of the fiction being written these days.

That's probably why the novel won Fredric Brown the Edgar for the best first mystery novel of the year*.

You'll like Ed, I think. You'll like his uncle Ambrose, "Am" for short, too. Am has been a lot of things, including a "carny", which is slang for a carnival worker. Brown spent some time as a carnny himself, and knew the business well. Although only a little of the novel takes place at a carnival (the main action takes place in the seedier parts of 1940s Chicago) Brown's details ring true. If you're interested, Brown set a number of short mystery stories in carnivals too.

When Ed and Am Hunter team up to find out who murdered Ed's father, it doesn't feel anything like the traditional mystery novel. There are *noir* elements of course, but there's an immediacy and realism to the book that - well, I keep trying to explain what makes the book different, and I keep coming back to the same comparison. Just as some readers almost feel as if Holden Caulfield was a friend, someone they knew, so you may well feel about Ed Hunter - and through him, Fredric Brown. Or at least, **I** do.

It's really an exceptional and unique book, and I can't recommend it highly enough.

Ed and Am Hunter are one of mystery's outstanding teams, and Brown wrote six more novels about them. *The Fabulous Clipjoint* remains the best in the series, but the rest are also outstanding novels. Not all are currently being published, unfortunately. Small mystery publishing houses keep bringing Brown's mysteries back into print, and then inevitably go out of business. In any case, all of Brown's mystery novels are beautifully written and well worth the effort of finding them. Although he never achieved the general recognition that he deserved, Fredric Brown is highly respected by authors and those who've read his work.

Brown also wrote many short *noir* detective stories for the pulps - but unlike many such stories, his have

heart and a *gentleness*, a sort of intellectual and thoughtful quality, that make them special. They, too, have been collected and published by several small companies.

Lastly, I have to note that Brown was also highly regarded for his science fiction stories and novels, of which there are many. If you like his work in either genre, you'll almost certainly like his work in the *other* genre - even if you don't normally like that sort of book.

If you like Brown, Anthony Boucher's writing style is in many ways similar. It may not be a coincidence that Boucher, too, worked both in mystery and SF.

* - Unlike other genres, mystery writers only give awards to *first* novels.

Julie Davis says

It is no wonder this book won the Edgar for best first mystery novel. When Ed Hunter is 18 his father is murdered so he goes to his Uncle Am, a carny, for help. As Am tells Ed, "We're Hunters," playing on the double entendre with full meaning, and they set off to track down the killer.

This is a rich story about coming of age, looking below the surface for people you thought you knew well, and learning to walk those mean streets while maintaining integrity. In short it is about where a hard boiled detective gets his formational training.

There were seven Ed and Am mysteries and I look forward to tracking the remaining six down for future enjoyment.

Ralph says

I had always thought of Frederic Brown as a science fiction writer, for that was how he was presented to me when I first discovered him in the Sixties. I was surprised later when I encountered others who had always thought of him as a mystery writer with a sideline in science fiction, which had gotten out of hand. It was not until the early Eighties that I came across re-issues of his collected short mystery fiction. Some of those stories from the Thirties and Forties seemed as dated as much fiction from that period, with outmoded social concepts, citations of forgotten radio shows or films, and references to people once household names but totally unknown now. But even the out-of-date stories scintillated with crisp dialogue, compelling narrative, and engrossing puzzles. In those stories, I discovered Frederic Brown a second time, this time a far edgier writer, one who walked on the noir side of the street, created grifters and gun molls, and employed a vocabulary steeped in violence and slang.

In a way, it's harder these days to track down out-of-print books by a writer like Brown because of the decline of brick-and-mortar bookstores. On the other hand, the rise of small, specialized e-book publishers has brought many forgotten crime classics out of oblivion. Such is the case with "The Fabulous Clipjoint," a book for which I searched a long time, without success, but finally found in a Kindle format. It's importance is that it was the first appearance of the nephew/uncle detective team of Ed and Ambrose (Am) Hunter, a key volume in providing a context for all the books that came after.

Ed Hunter tells the story of "The Fabulous Clipjoint," how his father, Wally, was murdered in a dark Chicago alley, an event devastating to Ed for many reasons, but which to his step-mother and step-sister was merely the end of a meal ticket. Shattered as only an eighteen year old can be, Ed travels to a far town to inform his father's brother, Ambrose, whom he has not seen for a decade, mostly because he is disliked by his step-mother, disliked not just because he works at a traveling carnival but because he sees through her. To Ed's surprise, Uncle Am leaves the carnival, accompanies him back to Chicago, and tells Ed they are going to solve Wally's murder. And when Am tells him, "We are Hunters," he understands the intended double meaning.

The goal of the characters, to find out who killed Wally, happens very late in the book and passes quickly, with startling abruptness. But the goal of the characters is not the purpose of the book, for Ed's story is more about coming of age and finding out what he wants to do with his life, than it is about who killed his dad. In this, he is guided not only by an uncle well acquainted with the highs and lows of the world, but by friends and family whose masks are ripped away by death, by gangsters and gun molls looking for vengeance and riches, and by the ordinary riff-raff of society whose only goal is to survive from one moment to the next, at a profit, whether by helping people or betraying them.

Reading "The Fabulous Clipjoint," you wonder why Frederic Brown ever bothered with science fiction. As with most things, it was probably an economic situation, for his crime writing is superb and extremely easy to read. True, some of the trappings of society have changed since the book was written, but if you've seen even one old gangster or detective film you know the clothes and the venue well enough. The slang may slow you down, but as with most languages context is usually sufficient for understanding, and, besides, carny slang is almost an academic study these days. All of the drawbacks of the book, however, are unimportant compared to the engaging narrative voice of young Ed Hunter and the masterful storytelling skill of Frederic Brown.

Wanda says

A good story with a somewhat unsatisfactory ending.

The main interest for me was a look at Chicago as it was in the late 1940s. Doors aren't locked unless the residents have gone out. A woman can go to the local tavern for a drink and to socialize and walk home at 1 am and it's safe and normal. The only "vibrancy" is provided by Italians and Irish. But you love listening to Jimmy Noone on the clarinet. There's no air conditioning and it's *hot* in summer, and you go to a rooftop cocktail lounge where the open windows let in a cool breeze for relief. You make calls from pay phones or go see people in person. A cop is just another working stiff who will take a bribe and still play you for a sucker, if you let him.

The protagonists walk everywhere or use public transportation. No car necessary. A trip to Gary from the Loop takes less than an hour on the Gary Express, then walk a block to get a street car that let's you off a block-and-a-half from your destination. If you want to go to St. Louis or Miami and it's 10 am, you take a street car or a taxi to the train station right down town and get on board the 11:20.

You introduce your uncle, who's moving into the neighborhood to the local grocer so he can start a tab. An 18-year-old has no need to think of college and takes a job as an apprentice printer at the shop where his father works. He'll become a journeyman printer, a good job that will allow him to find work anywhere and someday open his own shop if he puts a little aside from his paycheck each week for a few years. Or if that's not appealing he could take off and work with a traveling carnival for a year or two. It's a big country, with a lot of possibilities....

A vanished world.

Joel Mitchell says

I needed a break from philosophical C. S. Lewis reading so I grabbed something from my go-to escapist genre: mystery/crime from the 1920's-50's.

There was nothing fancy about this book; no snappy dialogue like Hammett or Chandler and no steadily building dread like Goodis or Woolrich. However, it had a decent plot with some good twists and turns. The story follows 18-year-old Ed Hunter as he and his Uncle Ambrose (a carnie) try to track down his father's killer in Chicago. The tale features the usual noir fiction assortment of drunks, gangsters, crooked cops, and a femme fatale or two. I guessed whodunnit pretty early on, but there were enough red herrings and obscure motives that I didn't get bored with it. There is also the added interest of this being something of a "coming of age tale" for Ed. I was a little disappointed that the carnie angle didn't play into the story as much as I'd hoped, but I guess you can only fit so much into 168 pages. Overall: exactly the kind of escapist read I was hoping for.

Michael says

By the time Fredric Brown wrote this, his first full novel, he had already been a prolific contributor to the pulp mags of the 1930s & 40s, turning in works across multiple genres from Sci-fi to Noir. The Fabulous Clipjoint duly won the Edgar Award for Best First Novel and introduced a popular pair of would be detectives, Ed & Ambrose Hunter, that would feature in a further six novels. Ed is an 18 year old living in Chicago with his father, step mother and teenage step sister. His hum drum existence as a printer working at the same firm as his father by day and dreaming of becoming a jazz musician by night is shattered when his father is found dead, murdered in a dark alley in a seedy part of town. Teaming up with his Uncle, a carnival worker and ex private dick, who he hasn't seen for a decade, Ed vows to track down the killer. Brown has a unique approach to writing noir that surely shouldn't work. He manages to evoke a gritty, shadowy world filled with suspense, while also maintaining a streak of humour that runs throughout. It's both a crime story and a coming of age story as Ed follows what leads they have, while discovering how little he really knew about his own father from the stories Am tells. Brown's playfulness with the narrative comes to the fore in the scenes where Ed does a spot of roleplay, playing a sharp-suited gun killer with an imaginary gun as they try to bluff info out of suspects. And it's smooth. Brown's first person narrative and snappy dialogue just roll through the mind. It's not short of detail either with Ambrose's sometimes off the wall observations fuelled by the author's own wide experience ranging from the nature of handbags to the basic physical structure of the universe, carney lingo, pop culture references, Jazz, movies, books etc. There are clever little touches like Ed ordering "Rye," from the bartender because he'd seen George Raft order it in the 1935 version of The Glass Key but getting Dutch courage not from a stiff drink but rather from the Juke box and the high wail of Benny Goodman's clarinet. After reading several ultra cynical modern day noir novels recently it was refreshing to see that even during the golden age of the genre Noir wasn't always entirely bleak, cold and black.

Xenophon Hendrix says

I recently read the classic mystery, winner of the Edgar award for best first novel, *The Fabulous Clipjoint* by Fredric Brown. The writing is superb. The characterization is strong. The dialog is good. The plotting is beautiful. (Brown was an experienced short story writer when he wrote his first novel. It's not the work of a beginner.) Readers who like language will learn both old carny jargon and mid-twentieth-century slang.

The plot is full of twists. Readers will guess some of them. I'm reasonably sure they won't guess all of them.

The Fabulous Clipjoint is among the top ten percent of novels I have read. (I believe the book has one small flaw, but I can't go into it, for it is a spoiler.) I especially recommend it for fans of Raymond Chandler.

Ben Loory says

I really enjoy Fredric Brown. I don't think he's a very good writer, tbh, but he has a great imagination and all kinds of energy and a singular voice-- he's never pretending-- which is always emotionally invested. I just read his books and smile. Good stuff.

Ron Zack says

Very nice first novel

In *The Fabulous Clipjoint*, Fredric Brown spins a great story with most of the elements of noir fiction as written in the 1940's. This is the first in what became a series featuring Ed and Ambrose Hunter, a nephew-uncle team who solve a mystery in more ways than one. It is a bit short on violence for me, but the matter-of-fact way narrator Ed describes a killing he accomplished is classic.

There is drinking, murder, inadequate police investigation, relationship issues, and a suggestion of sex. Barely an adult, Ed is schooled by his carney uncle, in human nature and life in general. There are some great hard-boiled type lines like, "They were nice arms for a sleeveless dress, and she was wearing a sleeveless dress," or "She came back looking like a million bucks in crisp new currency." Lines that make me think of Humphrey Bogart.

The book is also a father-son story and a rite of passage story. Ed transitions from boyhood to manhood and discovers things about his father's life he never knew while his father was alive. Although filled with regrets, they are never dwelled on, as Ed plows forward in life and learning.

The story is well-developed, consistent, and clever. I did not expect the ending. The author hit the mark on several levels. I am looking forward to reading the other books in this series.

Skip says

An under-read pulp writer from the 1940s, this is a classic noir mystery set in Chicago, the first of a series featuring young Ed Hunter and his uncle Ambrose, a carnie. Ed's father is killed in an alley on the way home from a regular night out bar hopping. The detective seems unmotivated so these two set out to solve the mystery of his death. Brown does a good job, keeping the reader guessing who killed Ed's father and why. Recommended for readers who enjoyed Ed McBain's 87th Street Precinct series.

Sadly, I am not sure where I am going to find the rest of this series...

D-day says

Young Ed Hunter's dad is murdered in a back alley in the mean streets of 1940's Chicago. The police aren't willing to spend much resources investigating the murder, so Ed teams up with his carney uncle Ambrose to find the killer. Along the way Ed learns that there was more to his father than Ed knew about.

The Fabulous Clipjoint is part noir detective story and part coming of age story. Pretty good mystery although I thought the ultimate solution to the mystery was fairly improbable, but then again one could say that about a lot of mystery novels. A good story with an interesting look at 40's Chicago, although I wished there was more to Uncle Ambrose's carney angle.

Boris Cesnik says

Good debut novel. It contains all the topical Fredric Brown's recurrent themes that we can encounter in most of his subsequent mystery/pulp novels - but in a much more embryonic life.

They are there but not fully developed as we would expect from a first novel.

Alcohol, drinks, pulp-ish atmosphere, drinks and drinking, high actions, swift developments, femme fatale, amateur detectives, sudden twists and shouts, sharp surprises and more.

Despite all this there's a unique element in this book towards the ending - specifically to deal with the 'why' - that I did not find in all his other novels. Maybe it was dropped for a reason, maybe who knows.

Not one of his great-est books but highly enjoyable.

David says

a little thin on plot. but this is a perfect boy book and its sense of place and authorial stance is pitch perfect.

Ed says

I've heard lots of terrific things about Fredric Brown, and I've read a couple of his short stories in anthologies. *The Fabulous Clipjoint* is my first novel, and I gave it five stars because I'm a sucker for old-school private eye yarns like this one is. Plus anything with jazz in it gets bonus points. Mr. Brown won the

1948 Edgar for Best First Novel in what went on to become a series, I'm told by other reader (I know the late Ed Hoch told me he was a big Fredric Brown fan).

Ed Hunter, still a teenager, works as a printer apprentice in Chicago and finds his father has been murdered. Before long, Ed hooks up with his Uncle Am, a carney who also happens to have some private investigator professional experience. Together, they set out to expose the killer with a little help given by the cops. Sounds like pretty standard PI fare except we're also treated to young Ed learning about life and coming of age. He encounters bank robbers, gun molls, torpedos, and con artists. All of it is related in his even-tempered, engaging voice. That for me is the strength of the novel.

I wouldn't call *The Fabulous Clipjoint* hardboiled, more like medium-boiled. Besides the snappy title, the story is first-rate. If I ever find more time to read, I'd move on in the series and find out just what the heck happens to Ed and Uncle Am.

tENTATIVELY, cONVENIENCE says

review of

Fredric Brown's [The Fabulous Clipjoint](#)

by tENTATIVELY, a cONVENIENCE - July 25, 2018

Blame it on Fredric Brown. He's sucking me into the underworld of plot-driven writing. I was engrossed in this. I loved it. I hardly took any reviewer notes on it at all for the usual reason that I don't want to spoil the plot & I don't have much to say about it that isn't plot-based. The father/husband/stepfather gets murdered & the family members have their various reactions wch seem real enuf. The son, Ed, realizes that he didn't really even know him & feels bad about it. This is emphasized when Ed meets the murdered father's brother after a hiatus of a decade & hears stories about the 2 of them that're surprising:

""Let's stick to Pop," I suggested. "He was in Spain."

""Yeah. Well, he came back. We finally got in touch with one another through a friend in St. Paul we both happened to write to. I was with a detective agency then—Wheeler's, out in L.A.—and Wally was in vaudeville. He used to be pretty good at juggling—oh, not a top act, even as jugglers go, but he was good with the Indian clubs. Good enough for a spot with a fair troupe. He ever juggle any lately?"" - p 77

"I was tired, but I had trouble getting to sleep. I kept thinking about what I'd learned about Pop.

"When he was my age, I thought, he'd owned and run a newspaper. He'd had a duel and shot a man. He'd had an affair with a married woman. He'd traveled across most of Mexico afoot and spoke Spanish like a native. He'd crossed the Atlantic and lived in Spain. He'd dealt blackjack in a border town." - p 81

This bk was copyrighted in 1947. I was born in 1953. I often find myself attracted to cultural products from the 1950s. I love Morton Feldman's "Intersection" piano pieces, e.g.. [The Fabulous Clipjoint](#) doesn't quite fit the era but it's close enuf. Ed calls his father "Pop". My mom called her stepfather "Pop" &, as a family tradition, I called mine "Pop". Is that common anymore?

""You mean you're going to—to—"

""Hell, yes. That's why I had to fix things with Hoagy and Maury—he bought the carney this season but kept Hobart's name on it—so I could stay away as long as I had to. Hell, yes, kid. You don't think we're going to let some son of a bitch get away with killing your dad, do you?"" - p 18

Uncle Am & Ed are going to investigate. The cover of the bk identifies this as "AN ED AND AM MYSTERY NOVEL" wch makes me wonder if there are others. I look online & learn that there are 7. This is the 1st one. I'm hooked, I want to read them all. (Then again, I really *do* have better things to do.) It helps that there's lingo I'm not familiar w/:

"Bassett's eyes unveiled a little, just a little. He asked, "You think you might want to run one?"

""I think maybe," my uncle said.

"They seemed to understand each other. They knew what they were talking about. I didn't.

"Like when Hoagy, the big man, had been talking to my uncle about the blow being sloughed. Only that was carney talk; at least I knew why I didn't understand it. This was different; they were talking words I knew, but it still didn't make sense." - pp 29-30

A subplot of sorts is that Ed's 15 yr old stepsister is horny & keeps trying to seduce him:

"She said, "Some day I'm going on the stage, Eddie. What do you? How'm I doin'?"

""You dance swell," I told her.

""Bet I could strip-tease. Like Gypsy Rose. Watch." She reached behind her, as she danced, for the fastenings of her dress.

"I said, "Don't be a dope, Gardie. I'm your brother, remember?"

""You're not my brother. Anyway, what's that got to do with how I dance? How—"

"She was having trouble with the catch. She danced near me. I reached out and grabbed her hand. I said, "Goddam it, Gartie, cut that out."

"She laughed and leaned back against me. The pull on her wrist had brought her into my lap.

"She said, "Kiss me, Eddie." Her lips were bright red, her body hot against mine. And then her lips were pressing against mine, without my doing anything about it." - p 63

Uncle Am is experienced & wily, Ed is young but has an imagination for taking risks that pay off. Here, after not being sure what he do, he spontaneously approaches a gangster's girlfriend in a direct way:

"I asked, "Does the name Hunter mean anything to you?"

""Hunter? It doesn't."

"I asked, "How about the name Reynolds?"

""Who *is* this?"

""I'd like to explain," I said. "May I come upstairs? Or would you meet me down in the bar for a drink?" - p 139

The direct approach pays off in a way that Uncle Am's previous con attempt hadn't.

Brown also wrote science fiction & I like the way his respect for the genre keeps popping up in his crime fiction:

"The top floor was a very swanky cocktail bar. The windows were open and it was cool there. Up as high as that, the breeze was a cool breeze and not something out of a blast furnace.

"We took a table by a window on the south side, looking out toward the Loop. It was beautiful in the bright sunshine. The tall, narrow buildings were like fingers reaching toward the sky. It was like something out of a science-fiction story. You couldn't quite believe it, even looking at it." - p 178

I really enjoyed reading this. I seem to like his crime fiction more than his SF even tho I generally like SF more than crime fiction. I've hardly told you anything about the bk to spoil it for you. READ IT! It's a quickie. Brown isn't afraid to depict 'beautiful' women as manipulative. I'm reminded of Raymond Chandler's The Little Sister b/c of that. I appreciate stories in wch women are shown equally as victimizers rather than only as victims — the latter seems unrealistic to me but there's plenty of it around these days.

Brown was supposedly popular in his day but in this reader's experience he seems close to forgotten now. That's a shame. Besides, he was born in Baltimore, my home town.
