

Private Eye

"New and Selected Poems," by **Kenneth Fearing** (Indiana University Press. 143 pp. \$3.95), dedicated to the fascinating but irritating city of New York, is the latest work of a poet who matured in the Depression.

By Stanley Kunitz

THE voice of Kenneth Fearing is an unmistakable one. No contemporary poet has more effectively dedicated his career to the representation of what T. S. Eliot, in his essay on Baudelaire, described as "the sordid life of a great metropolis." It cannot be said flatly that Fearing either loves or hates New York, but he is not seduced by it, he does not habitually celebrate it, and he never forgets, in his role of the quizzical pedestrian, those bleak images of the city's meanness and indifference and violence that so crowded his eyes in the Depression years when his art matured.

In "New and Selected Poems," his seventh book of verse, which affords a welcome opportunity to review the work of some thirty years, we cannot fail to note the constancy of his vision. The same cards, however reshuffled, keep turning up: we are in a world threatened by newspaper headlines and sudden death; a world of cops and gangsters, the hunters and the hunted; of stuffed shirts and frightened little men; of cigar stores and drug stores and seedy barrooms and pinball arcades; of doubts and guilts and inquisitions. Such materials would seem to posit a poet of rage and revolution, but Fearing

does not characteristically climb to that level of intensity. His tone, for the most part, remains ironic. If he is a revolutionary poet, out of the proletarian tradition of the Thirties, and the best survivor of that tradition, he is one without a revolution to propose. One of his favorite disguises is that of the investigator, the private eye, whose professional pride constrains him, almost against his will, to crack the case.

Fearing's poems are always asking questions: "What will you do when the phone rings and they say to you: What will you do?" . . . "But what if the police find out? What if the wires are down? What if credit is refused? What if the banks fail?" . . . "What is one more night in a lifetime of nights?" The structures are incremental, largely based on repetitions, with little impulse towards the grandeur of resolution.

Question mark, question mark,
question mark, question mark,
And you, fantasy Frank, and
dreamworld Dora and hallucination
Harold, and delusion Dick,
and nightmare Ned,
What is it, how do you say it,
what does it mean, what's the
word. . . .

Though a handful of Fearing's poems evince a degree of optimism about man's destiny, he is usually too aware of the malady of our time to deceive himself with easy formulas for salvation. At times indeed he seems to settle a bit too comfortably, with a shrug of his shoulders, into the resignation of spiritual fatigue. "I am tired of following invisible lives down intangible avenues to fathomless ends."

Somewhat paradoxically, this social

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realist speaks to us of the unreality of modern existence. His poems are populated by cliff-dwellers who own neither gods nor heroes, and who have lost finally their faith in themselves. It is by no means an accident that Fearing so frequently introduces sorcerers, wizards, astrologers, and other apostles of the degraded miracle into the world of his invention.

Fearing's ear for speech rhythms is remarkably keen, and he handles the vernacular without any trace of self-consciousness. His long cadenced line derives from Whitman, but he has made it very much his own, tinted with an acidulous wit and sensitive to varying pressures. He aims at a poetry that is at once exciting and understandable: "Everything in this volume has been written with the intention that its meaning should disclose itself at ordinary reading tempo." I am not inclined to quarrel with the virtues of excitement and readability, but I wonder, as I look back at Fearing's career, with a good deal of admiration for his gifts and accomplishment, whether his development has not been restricted by the stubborn limitations of his esthetics.

His art of brilliant surfaces and quick contemporaneity seemed more daring once, as a poetic configuration, than it does today, though the best poems keep their early lustre. In response to the new textures of an age, perhaps his greatest daring would be to change.

FRASER YOUNG'S

LITERARY CRYPT NO. 731

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 731 will be found in the next issue.

FOXPFCAPFCC UC

FPATGCUOCL AFLVFXFM NB

XFOCYP.

SOCEOH

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 730

The solar system has no anxiety about its reputation.

—EMERSON.

Fiction

Continued from page 12

Carpentier's third novel, "The Lost Steps," was a critical success last year in this country, but was inferior to the present book, which has a nervous and exciting excellence, as of a Haitian drum, high pitched because of the heat, communicating something of the frenzy as well as the words of the message. —JOHN COOK WYLLIE.

FINLAND'S WAR: Most of us have forgotten that during World War II Finland allied herself with Germany and fought a long, losing battle in the borderland of Karelia. Vaino Linna calls all this back to mind in "The Unknown Soldier" (Putnam, \$4), a novel that has been quite a success in his native Finland but will probably strike most American readers as too special, too narrowly aimed at those who lived it. While Mr. Linna paints an authoritative, grim picture of the warfare raging around snowy pine forests and icy lakes, he has neglected his protagonists. None of them ever comes to life, and soon a gray monotony begins to numb our minds whether we follow episodes of action or listen to the long dialogues of the soldiers. Once in a while, the author manages to break through the monotony, particularly when he presents the ever-rebellious Finnish non-coms, who display a singular lack of respect for their superiors. The translation (by an unidentified translator) is wooden.

—RICHARD PLANT.

YORKSHIRE DOOM: The first of Hubert Nicholson's books to be published in America, "Sunk Island" (Coward-McCann, \$3.50), is a tale of love and fate under the gray, unbreaking skies of the Yorkshire coast, written with the brooding simplicity and intensity of Thomas Hardy. Young Roger Wellincroft, plodding and inarticulate, courts Louise Kilner, a composed and comfortable woman, but it is her younger sister who stirs the suitor's unguessed feelings. Ida is an arresting figure—sudden dark, elusive, electrical. Her power over Roger is made entirely real, and the happiness she brings him plays like fox-fire in the darkening tale. But Ida is secretly coughing her life away, and it is the rejected sister who comes to care for Ida and comfort Roger.

Mr. Nicholson's people are wholly realized in their groping and finding, their pain and patience, their admissions and silences. —W. H.

CLOAK-AND-DAGGER: Bernard Wolfe's uneven but absorbing novel "In Deep"