Walter Mosley

*Devil in a Blue Dress*

by John Lennard
Walter Mosley: 
*Devil in a Blue Dress*

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A Note on the Author

John Lennard took his B.A. and D.Phil. at Oxford University, and his M.A. at Washington University in St Louis. He has taught in the Universities of London, Cambridge, and Notre Dame, for the Open University and on-line for Fairleigh Dickinson University; he is now Professor of British & American Literature at the University of the West Indies—Mona. His publications include *But I Digress: The Exploitation of Parentheses in English Printed Verse* (Clarendon Press, 1991), *The Poetry Handbook* (1996; 2/e, OUP, 2005), with Mary Luckhurst *The Drama Handbook* (OUP, 2002), and the Literature Insights *Hamlet* (2007). He is the general editor of the Genre Fiction Sightlines and Monographs series, and has written *Sightlines* on works by Reginald Hill, Octavia E. Butler, Ian McDonald, and Tamora Pierce. His collection *Of Modern Dragons and other essays on Genre Fiction* (2007), published simultaneously with this e-book, launches the Monographs Series.
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1. Notes

1.1 Walter Mosley

Walter Mosley was born in Los Angeles in 1952, to an African-American father, Leroy, born in Louisiana, and a Jewish-American mother, Ella, born in New York. Both his parents had come to Los Angeles as post-war migrants, Leroy after serving in World War 2, and through the ‘GI Bill’ (see Note 1.7.4) and hard work were able to buy a house. Mosley grew up in Watts, attending the private Victory Baptist Day School, and reading voraciously—everything from Marvel comics (of which he now owns more than 30,000) to *Winnie the Pooh*. When he was 12 the family moved to Pico-Fairfax, and Mosley then attended Alexander Hamilton High School, from which he graduated in 1970.

Though a good student Mosley did not really know what he wanted to do, and after enrolling at Goddard College in Vermont for a few semesters dropped out, preferring to travel and drift. He later enrolled at Johnson State College, also in Vermont, graduating in 1977 with a BA in Political Science. He also tried graduate work, but found it without appeal, and from 1977–82 lived in Boston with his partner, choreographer and dancer Joy Kellman, working as a computer programmer and at various odd jobs. In 1982 the couple moved to New York, and in 1987 married. Mosley continued to work in programming and consultancy but was increasingly bored and frustrated.

By most accounts his turning-point came in reading Alice Walker’s *The Colour Purple* (1982), which in using language familiar to him as an African American persuaded him he could write. He started taking writing classes at the City University of New York, and after disappointments with his first completed novel, *Gone Fishin’*, had *Devil in a Blue Dress* accepted. Since 1990 he has published 21 novels (including nine about Easy Rawlins), two collections of stories, and four works of activist non-fiction. He is now a significant presence in African-American publishing and politics, helping to found a publishing institute at CUNY, promoting the Black Classics Press in Baltimore, and writing on various social topics.¹

1.2 The Easy Rawlins Novels and Stories

1.2.1 The Series

The Easy Rawlins books, their dates of publication, and the year in which each is set, are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Devil in a Blue Dress</em> (1990)</td>
<td>Summer 1948</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>White Butterfly</em> (1992)</td>
<td>Summer–Fall 1956</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Black Betty</em> (1994)</td>
<td>September 1961</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A Little Yellow Dog</em> (1996)</td>
<td>November 1963</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Gone Fishin'</em> (1997)</td>
<td>Fall 1939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Six Easy Pieces</em> (2003)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Cinnamon Kiss</em> (2005)</td>
<td>Fall 1966</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Their order of publication is also the chronological order of plot, save that *Gone Fishin'*—the first novel Mosley wrote and earliest plot, dealing with Easy’s late adolescence in South-West Texas—was published only after the success of subsequent work. The other anomaly so far is *Six Easy Pieces*, seven short stories that fit in among the first seven novels to amplify and throw sidelights on Easy’s complicated life.

Mosley apparently intends to continue the series until Easy is 70, bringing him up to 1990, when *Devil in a Blue Dress* was published. An obvious literary model is African-American playwright August Wilson (Frederick August Kittel, 1945–2005), who from 1984–2005 wrote ten plays, each dealing with a decade of black US twentieth-century history—but the Rawlins novels are also indebted to Raymond Chandler (1888–1959) and later crime writers including Chester B. Himes (1909–84), Sue Grafton (b. 1940) and James Ellroy (Lee Earle Ellroy, b. 1948) (Notes 1.4–6 below).

The Rawlins novels have grown progressively more complex and skilled in execution, and (probably for commercial reasons) their sex scenes more explicit, but Mosley’s mode, cast, and high ambitions were there from the first. His narration is almost always laconic, details sparing and explanations minimal, but a wide world is

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1 Full details in the Bibliography.
implicit in the Los Angeles cityscape with its sprawling neighbourhoods and famous landmarks, and in the vastness of the US that spawned Easy, bringing him to south LA via the notorious 5th Ward in Houston and army service during WW2. It is in this strongly representative sense that Mosley’s project most obviously summons Wilson’s, while his attention to south LA from the inside complements Ellroy’s more brutal and slangy portrayal from the outside.

The unifying feature of the titles is colours. Many series authors do something similar: among the best known are the ‘Nursery Tale’ series (*Goldilocks*, 1977; *Rumpelstiltskin*, 1981 etc.) by Ed McBain¹ (1926–2005); the Californian ‘Alphabet’ series (*A is for Alibi*, 1983; *B is for Burglar*, 1985 etc.) by Sue Grafton; and the ‘Death’ series (*Naked in Death*, 1995; *Glory in Death*, 1995 etc.) by J. D. Robb (Nora Roberts, b. 1950). Grafton is a probable influence, but colours specifically summon John D. MacDonald (1916–86), who from 1964–85 published 21 novels featuring ‘salvage consultant’ and amateur Florida PI Travis McGee:

*The Deep Blue Good-by* (1964)
*Nightmare in Pink* (1964)
*A Purple Place for Dying* (1964)
*The Quick Red Fox* (1964)
*A Deadly Shade of Gold* (1965)
*Bright Orange for the Shroud* (1965)
*Darker than Amber* (1966)
*One Fearful Yellow Eye* (1966)
*Pale Gray for Guilt* (1968)
*The Girl in the Plain Brown Wrapper* (1968)
*Dress Her in Indigo* (1969)
*The Long Lavender Look* (1970)
*A Tan and Sandy Silence* (1972)
*The Scarlet Ruse* (1973)
*The Turquoise Lament* (1973)
*The Dreadful Lemon Sky* (1975)
*The Empty Copper Sea* (1978)
*The Green Ripper* (1979)
*Free Fall in Crimson* (1981)
*Cinnamon Skin* (1982)
*The Lonely Silver Rain* (1985)

¹ The pen-name of Evan Hunter, born Salvatore Lombino.
Adding white and black, Mosley’s colours come in order from MacDonald’s: blue, red, yellow, brown, scarlet, cinnamon. Additionally, six of the stories in *Six Easy Pieces*, published as ‘bonuses’ in a 2002 re-issue of the novels to date, also feature MacDonald’s colours: ‘Crimson Stain’, ‘Silver Lining’, ‘Lavender’, ‘Gator Green’, ‘Gray-Eyed Death’, & ‘Amber Gate’. The colourless ‘Smoke’ accompanied the equally colourless *Gone Fishin’*.

Though very different from Easy, McGee is similarly without professional status yet called in as go-between and fixer, and also has a strong fetish about his home, a houseboat called the *Busted Flush* moored in Fort Lauderdale. McGee has ever-changing female companions, and Rawlins, less promiscuous, is equally marked by a greater persistence of friendships than ‘relationships’. What really matters about the connection, though, is more to do with conceptions of crime writing and modes of narration than with these topoi, for MacDonald’s series was (and is) important for its sociology. Introducing a 1995 reprint of *The Deep Blue Good-by*, McDonald’s greatest Floridian successor in crime writing, Carl Hiaasen (b. 1953), remarked:

For me and many natives (of Florida), some of McGee's finest moments were when he paused, mid-adventure, to inveigh against the runaway exploitation of this rare and dying paradise.

If a cypress swamp got plowed to make way for another shopping mall, he took it personally: "This was instant Florida, tacky and stifling and full of ugly and spurious energies." [...] Most readers loved MacDonald's work because he told a rip-roaring yarn. I loved it because he was the first modern writer to nail Florida dead-center, to capture all its languid sleaze, racy sense of promise, and breath-grabbing beauty.

He had the same sort of wise, cynical eye that Raymond Chandler cast so stylishly upon the misled mankind of Los Angeles, yet MacDonald’s McGee seems more outraged than Chandler’s Marlowe.¹

MacDonald’s stress (to little avail) on ecology is distinctive, but with that allowance one might say something similar of Mosley and south LA, particularly Watts. Real estate development and loss of recreational land is not ignored—the conurbanisation of LA county is a running theme—but greater prominence of race and poverty make it likely to be welcomed as economic opportunity and redress. And if Hiaasen is right to see the force of Chandler’s Marlowe in McGee, it is equally in Easy, and by

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Mosley’s own choice of titles the influence must have worked as much via McGee in Florida as directly from Chandler’s own Californian work.

Given explicitly African-American identity and concerns as a writer, one might expect Mosley’s colours to relate overtly to race, but even in White Butterfly and Black Betty no simple symbolism is evident. Titles do of course constantly parade the issue of colour before every reader, but interpretation is complex and uncertain. Devil in a Blue Dress appears to be an original phrase, and clearly refers to Daphne Monet, reaching through her (pseudo-)French identity to the European tradition in which a ‘blue gown’ was a dress of ignominy for a woman committed for harlotry, and so a term for prostitutes. Additionally, in the American Civil War a ‘Blue Devil’ was Confederate Army slang for a Federal soldier, as Easy was in World War 2. It is also (i) a term for alcoholic delusions, (ii) a Trinidadian carnival mas (a role defined by mask, props, & behaviours), & (iii) a jazz-band from Texas and Louisiana famous in the late 1920s and early ’30s (see Ch. 4, p. 24). To all these must be added the melancholic, musical, puritan, bruised, and pornographic colour of the LA sky.

1.2.2 The Cast

Devil in a Blue Dress was first in the series, and those introduced here form the core cast of later books: Easy, Mouse, EttaMae, and rescued Hispanic boy (Jesus). Easy has various business and sexual partners, but friendship with Mouse and guardianship of Jesus (and later an adopted daughter, Feather) are consistently important.

Ezekiel ‘Easy’ Rawlins was born in Louisiana c.1920, but grew up in the notorious 5th Ward of Houston, Texas. In 1939 he was a partial witness to two killings by ‘Mouse’, and left for Dallas, where he volunteered in 1941. He served in North Africa and Italy (1942–4), and saw combat during the advance to Berlin after D-Day (1944–5). After demobilisation in 1945, he returned briefly to Houston but then migrated to south LA to work at ‘Champion Aircraft’ (a fictional version of Donald Douglas’s Santa Monica factory), until being fired in 1948—when Devil in a Blue Dress begins. In later novels Easy still acts as an amateur PI but also becomes a landlord and Head Custodian at Sojourner Truth High School. His cases have so far taken the series through the 1950s and into the 1960s.

Raymond ‘Mouse’ Alexander was born in Texas c.1920, and met Easy in Houston. A savage childhood and adolescence produced a man psychopathically ready to kill.
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