

BOOKS

Walter Mosley on the Black Male Hero

by Charlotte Watson Sherman

"You don't understand how it was for us back then. You think all that drinkin' and consortin' an' playin' wit' danger was too much an' why didn't we do sumpin' else? But you don't know our place back then. We was the bottom of the barrel. We were the lowest kinda godless riffraff. Migrants and roustabouts, we was bad from the day we was born. Blues is the devil's music an' we his chirren. RL was Satan's favorite son. He made us all abandoned, and you know that was the only way we could bear the weight of those days."—From *RL's Dream*

Walter Mosley's latest novel, *RL's Dream*, is as achingly beautiful as the blues. In it, we are introduced to Atwater "Soupspoon" Wise, an elderly man evicted from his apartment on New York's Lower East Side in spite of being on the verge of death. Soupspoon, who once played backup to legendary blues guitarist Robert "RL" Johnson, is taken in by Kiki Waters, a white, alcoholic incest survivor. As the lives of these two bottom-of-the-barrel characters intertwine, we are taken on an exquisitely dark and moving journey across the bittersweet terrain of the blues.

Mosley has long been one of my favorite male writers. His Easy Rawlins mystery novels—*Devil in a Blue Dress*, *A Red Death*, *White Butterfly* and *Black Betty* (all by W.W. Norton)—are typically multi-layered, with a depth that not all writers of the genre are able to create. (The film of *Devil in a Blue Dress*, the first Easy Rawlins mys-



All photos by J. Miccolo Johnson

tery, starring Denzel Washington and Jennifer Beals, is scheduled for release this September.)

With *RL's Dream*, Mosley has proved that his writing is not limited to a particular genre. He is now working on a short-story collection, "The Socrates Stories," to be published in 1996. But he has not abandoned mysteries, for he is also busy completing his next Easy Rawlins tale, "A Little Yellow Dog."

However, he's never too busy to talk! Though he lives in New York City, I caught up to him in Los Angeles, where he was born. He took time out from promoting his movie to discuss with me his concern and love for black people and his determination to illuminate the lives of black males.—C.W.S.

I'm writing a new series of stories, "The Socrates Stories," to do a few things. I'm using Socrates, my character, to address the racial problems the community faces, to deal directly with the double nature of everyday life, where you have a system of laws and rules and morals and ethics and a concept of right and wrong that is basically a template laid on all of society. But in Socrates' particular part of society, the template doesn't fit. And so what he's doing is trying to understand how to deal with the world according to his analysis, in opposition to other people and other analyses.

Langston Hughes is a guy whom I really think of as a paradigm for me. Langston Hughes really loved black people, all black people—men, women, everything. He really loved them. He loved writing about them. He didn't feel like he had anything to apologize for. He didn't feel that he had anything to prove, intellectually or emotionally. He said: "I love these people. I want to write about them." And this is where I came in

with my writing.

I love my characters. I love talking about them. I especially love black men. Not that I have anything against black women, but I especially love black men and the way that we deal with life in America, the way that we understand, the way that we pass through things.

There's a lot of weight put on black men. And the weight is: You shouldn't have been born. This is your problem. If indeed you did something wrong, you have to pay for that and you have to keep on paying for that, and there's no room for you to apologize for it.

And we ask: "Well, what? We're supposed to stop existing?" There has to be a way in which to include and understand and allow us to overcome things, because certainly we do lots of things wrong, which lots of people depict in lots and lots of fiction. But we do lots of things right, too. We have to be given that room to overcome these issues, and at the same time the good sides of our nature have to be talked about and brought out.

I guess I'm always talking about black male heroes one way or another, and I beg to differ that my characters *aren't* Martin Luther King types of heroes. I think we're not allowed to talk about Martin Luther King in any kind of way that brings him down to human scale, but it's not like Martin Luther King wasn't on human scale. What it is, is that he might not fit in with this group of men. What it is, is that in order to deal with heroes in the black community, we find ourselves stuck with people who are absolutely heroic or not at all heroes. And this becomes a big problem. You have to go out and die to be a hero.

So here I am, at a point when I start writing, people start coming to me—Wesley Snipes and Denzel Washington and Danny Glover and

lots of people like that. The reason is, because I've been writing fiction about black men as heroes.

There are not so many people doing it. I don't want to say there's nobody doing it, but I'm trying to figure out who there is doing it. So one of the problems when I was writing about black male heroes was, Who wants to read about that? "Black women don't want to read about black men"—that was the thought. And I have talked to black



women who have said that when they're writing fiction and there are black male heroes in the fiction, they're not brought into the center as easily as a strong black woman character would be.

I think that's changing. I think there's a whole new generation of writers who are younger than me, but are thinking: "Well, you know, listen: We all have problems, and we have to bring black men and women back together again."

I think what you start to have with my fiction is black men and women who are reading about black male heroes and *remembering* something: "Oh, yeah! I remember my mother used to tell stories like that," or "My father used to

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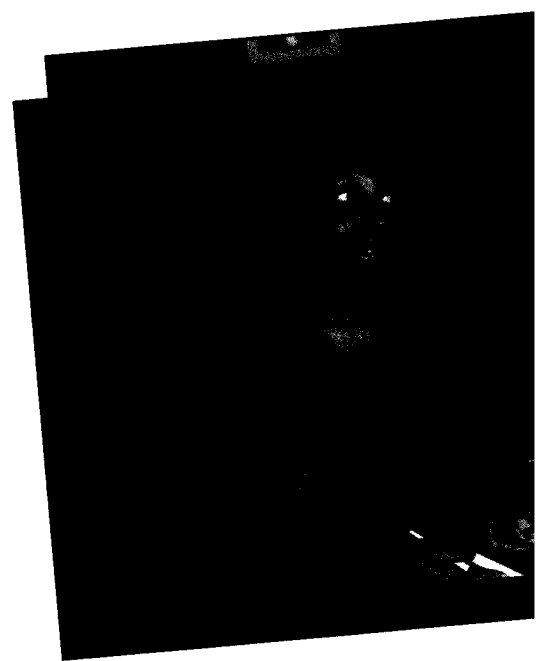
tell stories like that." "Oh, yeah! I know that. That's the dream I had that the media has told me doesn't exist anymore, and I have to remember that the media lies to me."

My audience is a broader audience than the normal mystery writer's. Part of that is because I'm black; part of that is, I think, I'm an OK writer. But another part of it is that I'm dealing with issues that are important issues—black male heroes, but not black male heroes whom we like out of hand.

You have someone like Mouse, somebody like Easy. Though Easy's a nice guy, he does some things wrong. You have people like Soupspoon, who, in a completely different way, is not like your everyday kind of hero. The reason you like him is because if you knew somebody like him in your family, you would love him. You see his flaws, but you accept them. And that's the whole thing I've been talking about: acceptance. Yes, there's a lot of rage in black men against black women. No, we can't accept it, and we can't condone it. But it's not completely true, and we have to give people the kind of motion, the ability to change, because if we don't accept that, then there's no hope for us.

Regardless of how much black women are upset with black men, it's white people who are the problem. What it is, is a kind of displacement of rage. Well, yeah, sure, a lot of black men did a lot of things wrong, but it's black people who have to get together and help themselves. White people are really not going to help.

I didn't only want to write the Easy Rawlins mysteries. I had always been interested in Robert Johnson. For a long time, I thought about how I might be able to write about him. I finally decided I couldn't write about him directly, because it would lessen him in stature. Except for the music, the rest



of his life could be anybody else's life. There's nothing to be particularly happy or unhappy about in that. He was a guy who lived in this time and survived or didn't survive under all this pressure and went on. But the music lives forever.

Nobody was interested in other stuff I was writing before the Easy books. It wasn't my publisher, particularly: nobody was. Part of that was because I was starting out, even though I think the books I wrote originally were good enough to be published, and I intend to publish them. But the problem, I think, was that it's been hard for black men to prove that they have an audience in the world, from the mid-'80s on up until now.

There's two reasons for that. One is that black women writers have been writing popular fiction—Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, certainly Terry McMillan, and lots of other people to different degrees who are writing popular fiction. I don't know what they would think of me calling their writing popular, but it's fiction that talks about the feelings of our times in a kind of positive and uplifting way, even when they talk about terrible things. The identity of the characters in the books resonates with the readers, and the readers want that.

So in that way it's popular fiction, whereas a lot of men writers have been writing much more challenging fiction. And when I say challenging, I don't mean more intellectual. I mean emotionally pushing the reader around a little bit more—Ishmael Reed, Charles Johnson, Reginald McKnight. This is not trying to say these people are writing more literary or deeper fiction; I don't think that. But I think that when you read it, you don't necessarily have this resonance of identity with the characters: "I feel good about reading this because this person is writing what my problems are, or the writer is giving me a character or a heroine who I feel represents me and who, even in her degradation and misery, has a kind of a quality and heroic nature which makes me feel dot dot dot."

Ishmael doesn't do that; Reginald doesn't either. What they're doing is more challenging emotionally because you're not identifying with this character. You might not even like the characters that they're writing about. You might say: "Well, who is this and what are they doing? I wouldn't do that." There are precedents in this all the way back to Richard Wright. Chester Himes is the same thing. Their characters are so internal and brooding and angry, and you're reading the stuff, and it's like you might agree with it, you might like it, you might think about it in a certain kind of way, but it's not what you would call uplifting. You don't look at *Native Son* or *Black Boy* or *The Outsider* and say: "Oh boy. Ooh!" And you don't particularly like these people.

In publishing, the thought that nobody wants to read about black men is changing, but that's because of money. Now it's easy for people to start to get behind it. President Clinton being a fan has certainly given me a lot of visibil-

ity, especially in the media. The media knows who I am, so they talk about me, but there's a whole other level of this.

I often think that if I went back five, seven years and all of a sudden you thrust all this upon me, it would probably have given me a heart attack. It would be so wonderful—You know what I mean?—because it's so much of what I dreamed for. But I worked hard for all of this, and so it's like climbing a mountain.

If you're working really hard climbing the mountain, you're very aware of your progress. You know it, and you have learned to rely on it and believe in it. Otherwise,

you wouldn't know what you were doing. You wouldn't know where you were. You don't wake up the next morning and find yourself at the bottom of the mountain, you know. "I'm near the top. I'm working, I'm working"—that's how I felt. I'm happy with the success, but in that way of being very aware of having worked so hard for it.

Charlotte Watson Sherman, a freelance writer in Seattle, Wash., is the author of the forthcoming novel Touch (HarperCollins, 1995). Her last article for American Visions, "A Conversation With Colleen J. McElroy," appeared in the April/May 1995 issue.

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