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Rahmenthema: Black America



Montag, 22. März 2010, 17:30 Uhr

Devil in a Blue Dress

Devil in a Blue Dress

Author: Walter Mosley

Walter Mosley's impressive career as a popular American author began with the publication of his first novel, *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990). Taking its place within the commercial genre of detective novels, *Devil in a Blue Dress* was the first in a series of seven novels presenting the exploits of recurring hero-protagonist Easy Rawlins, a black everyman and reluctant private investigator.

In the novel, which is set in Los Angeles in 1948, Ezekiel "Easy" Rawlins, who migrated from Houston, works at the Champion Aircraft Factory. With no family ties, Easy loves the comfort and security of his house, but after a confrontation with his foreman, Easy loses his job. With the help of his friend Joppy, Easy gets a job with Dewitt Albright, a white man who hires him to find Daphne Monet, a white woman who socializes in the black section of the city. Needing to keep his house, Easy takes the job and slowly finds himself pulled into a volatile world of ambitious, wealthy, and violent people.

When an acquaintance is killed during Easy's search, the police harass him, looking to charge him with the murder. Then Daphne contacts Easy, presenting herself as a woman in danger and in need of his help. When he extends himself, a white man turns up dead, and Daphne disappears, leaving Easy to face both Albright and the police. Feeling pressure from both sides, Easy calls for his friend Raymond "Mouse" Alexander to come to town and back him up. Hearing that Daphne Monet associates with a black bootlegger named Frank Green, Easy begins looking for him. Unfortunately, more dead bodies show up. Easy then learns that Daphne is connected to the two white men running for mayor: Matthew Teran and Todd Carter. It soon becomes evident that the former is a pedophile and the latter is Daphne's former lover who wants her back, forgiving the \$30,000 she took from him.

When the mysterious Daphne contacts Easy again, he tries to get her out of town, but she refuses until she sees Frank Green, who is later found dead. Taking her to a safe house, Easy becomes Daphne's lover, and she reveals her incestuous past with her father. Shortly thereafter, Easy is outmuscled by Albright and Joppy, who are partners in crime and murder, and they take Daphne to force her to repay the \$30,000. Easy traces them down, shooting Albright while Mouse kills Joppy. At this point, Easy hears the truth about Daphne: Her real name is Ruby Hanks and she is actually black, passing and living in white society. Frank Green was Daphne's half-brother who kept the secrets about their common past and background.

Splitting the money with Easy and Mouse, Daphne confesses to Easy that she shot Matthew Teran, partly because of his sexual abuse of a little boy. Daphne asks Easy to let her go away on her own and to take care of the abused boy (whom Easy raises as his son in later novels). With mixed emotions about her, Easy concedes, as Mouse reminds him that Daphne will never find peace until she accepts who she is racially. Mouse also warns Easy to remain black in his thinking and aspirations.

Stylistically, *Devil in a Blue Dress* renders the necessary elements of the detective genre story: murdered victims, first-person narration, terse dialogue, generous physical action, and an informal diction rooted in slang. Negotiating a morally ambiguous world, Easy, similar to most detective-protagonists, is introspective, leaning toward male chauvinistic attitudes, while possessing abilities in deductive reasoning, critical analysis, and metaphorical language.

Beneath the genre trappings, however, there are discernible themes that emanate in this novel. One of the more interesting ones revolves around Daphne Monet; specifically, a denial of her racial self leads to emotional chaos, psychological confusion, and spiritual emptiness. Despite the possible social and material advantages of "passing," particularly during the 1940s, the price of denying her blackness is too high to pay.

Complementing that theme, the novel serves as a barometer for the ethnic and cultural relationships in Los Angeles after World War II. As black migrants came to the city for better jobs and opportunities, they moved into de facto segregated neighborhoods as racial lines were drawn between communities. The novel recounts the black business and cultural center of the city's Central Avenue, a site of black entrepreneurship and artistic expression, particularly in music. The nearby enclaves of Hollywood, Santa Monica, and Malibu remain distant worlds for Easy and other black Angelinos. Easy remains aware of where he should and should not travel after dark, comprehends the racial profiling of the police; and understands the inextricable connection between race and class. Demonstrating this last point, Easy appreciates his relationship with Primo, a Mexican-born American, when he reflects, "Primo was a real Mexican, born and bred. That was back in 1948, before Mexicans and black people started hating each other. Back then ... a Mexican and a negro [sic] considered themselves the same ... just another couple of unlucky stiffs left holding the short end of the stick" (177).

Devil in a Blue Dress emerges as an entertaining novel that carries serious messages about identity, ambition, friendship, and morality. Walter Mosley achieved an outstanding first novel that won awards and the praise of then President Bill Clinton. Following *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Mosley went on to present the development of Easy Rawlins as a private detective and a private man in eight additional works: *A Red Death* (1991), *White Butterfly* (1992), *Black Betty* (1994), *A Little Yellow Dog* (1996), and *Bad Boy Brawly Brown* (2002), *Six Easy Pieces* (2003), *Little Scarlet* (2004), and *Cinnamon Kiss* (2005). His novel *Gone Fishin'* (1997) is not a detective novel but explores the teenage friendship and experiences between Easy and Mouse before the former moves to Los Angeles.

Text Citation: Donalson, Melvin. "Devil in a Blue Dress." In Samuels, Wilfred D., ed. *Encyclopedia of African-American Literature*. New York: Facts On File, Inc., 2007. *Bloom's Literary Reference Online*. Facts On File, Inc.

Rahmenthema: American Democracy



Freitag, 16. April 2010, 17:30 Uhr

Wag the Dog

'Wag the Dog' / Duane Byrge
In: The Hollywood Reporter, December 15, 1997

This is a tale about the tail that wags the dog, in this balmy case the tail being a White House media team that manipulates public opinion by misdirecting the media, i.e., the dog.

It's a deliriously funny and decidedly cynical sendup of hardball spin management, starring Robert De Niro as a White House media troubleshooter who is a hired gun for extreme and delicate situations and Dustin Hoffman as a vainglorious Hollywood producer secretly hired by the White House to "produce" a war.

Cerebral and silly all at once, this smart Barry Levinson satire will tickle the fancies of sophisticated viewers everywhere _ except perhaps those currently in residence at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue _ and New Line should have a fine time wagging the political press with this daffy delirium.

At this point in time, as Congressional testifiers might declare, we have a president (dubbed by some as Slick Willy) who has been known to get in a sticky situation now and then and whose sexual history makes for great tabloid teases. Accordingly, "Wag the Dog's" narrative springboard is that the president has had a quickie in the White House with a Fire-Fly Girl (think Girl Scout but purer) just before the election. Although he holds a strong lead in the polls, a sex scandal could turn the tide.

What to do?

Call in the firepower _ in the person of a master media manipulator Conrad Brean (De Niro), who is sort of a cross between Joseph Goebbels, James Carville and Dick

Tuck. He's a sleight-of-hand artist who can get the media to look at the misdirection razzle-dazzle all the while he's safely pulling the rabbit out of his hat. Dirty tricks and misinformation are this guy's specialty, and not only does he put spin on his releases, they're filled with spit as well.

With a ticking clock _ eleven days to the election _ Brean goes into overdrive. A sex scandal with an underage teen is about the only thing that could keep this wishy-washy prez from being re-elected, and Brean realizes that although he can't keep the girl's story (she's going to file suit) from the press, he can at least downplay it and, perhaps, divert the press's attention.

But what _ short of a war _ would supersede a sex scandal involving the president? Bingo!

So, it's off to Hollywood to solicit a reclusive Hollywood producer, Stanley Motss (Hoffman), who has had experience, Motss reasons, that make him invaluable as a White House Fire-Fly Girl fighter _ he's produced the Oscars. If Brean can feed the mass media with enough misdirection, phony leaks, misinformation and then crank it to a hysterical pitch, perhaps the Fire-Fly Girl story will, well, drop to an inside page and be forgotten.

In the grand political tradition of bread and circuses while the city is burning, Brean and Motss create a "pageant," namely a war in Albania that monopolizes TV news time and ink-stained press coverage. With Motss orchestrating the "war" with victim symbolism that ranks right up there with Joseph Goebbels' "genius" in staging mass-march funerals for fallen Hitler youths, the deadline press is deluged with misguided images and red herrings, making them think they are actually uncovering "news."

The vanity of the press is perfectly captured in this droll mockery. Hilary Henkin's and David Mamet's script is a brainy and wicked satire of how easily the mass media can be manipulated, recalling Michael Ritchie's excellent political satire "The Candidate," starring Robert Redford as a vacuous John Tunney-type who seeks a Senate seat in California.

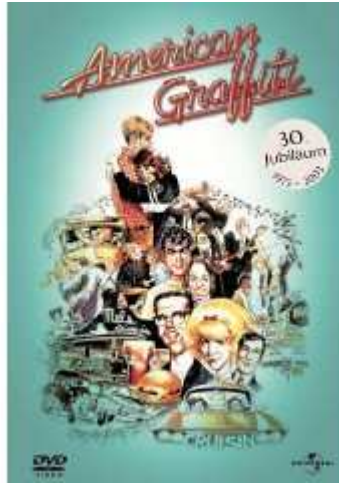
Levinson's satirical grip is just perfect _ light, somewhat distanced and understated. Such a deadpan take, letting the absurdities speak for themselves, also allows the acid to seep through without corroding the film's entertaining nature. Sure, one could nit-pick on certain implausibilities in the plotting, but anyone who has ever been near a newsroom or a Hollywood public relations firm could easily top every narrative extravagance here with a real-life, even goofier, story.

De Niro is marvelous as the cynical and unscrupulous pied piper of the press. His crisp performance and Machiavellian demeanor (the goatee, the dorky press hat) are smart accouterments for this breed of cat. Hoffman's full-blown performance as the megalomaniacal producer (reportedly based on Robert Evans) is wickedly droll. With his sky-tilted stare, fussy walk and scarfmanship, Hoffman is a romp as the self-absorbed nut case who has no connection to the real world. In short, he's truly Mr. Hollywood.

A well-chosen batch of supporting actors breathe further lunacy into this amusement. Willie Nelson, as a whacked-out songster (hired to compose the theme music for "The War"), and Woody Harrelson, as a medicated rapist, are particularly effective, while Anne Heche is downright credible as a straight-arrow White House press person who gets all stirred up by the bogus story they're creating.

The technical credits are powerful, chiefly because of their delicate execution. Under Levinson's well-played hand, Robert Richardson's dead-on framings are a droll hoot, while editor Stu Linder has stoked the satire with a salvo of low-key, incendiary cuts. Special praise to Mark Knopfler for the tangy music, including a wondrously wayward theme song and a daffy "We Are the World" -type schmaltz anthem.

Rahmenthema: American Popular Culture



Montag, 19. April 2010, 17:30 Uhr

American Graffiti

"**American Graffiti**" / Michael Sragow
In: Salon.com, October 13, 2000 Friday

HIGHLIGHT: From the days before George Lucas second-guessed himself, a treasure of ingenious '70s filmmaking that uses rock 'n' roll like a Greek chorus with a beat.

"American Graffiti" Directed by George Lucas Starring Richard Dreyfuss, Ron Howard, Paul LeMat, Charlie Martin Smith, Candy Clark, Mackenzie Phillips, Cindy Williams, Wolfman Jack Universal; widescreen (2.35:1 aspect ratio) Extras: Making-of documentary, including screen tests and interviews with Lucas, producer Francis Ford Coppola and the cast and crew; production notes; trailer

George Lucas' memories of growing up with carhops, cruising, hot rods and hoods produced a film that sent the whole country into an early-'60s flashback. Its in-and-out vignette style and nonstop rock-oldies soundtrack quickly became standard issue for teen movies. Some of Lucas' characters -- the nerd (Charlie Martin Smith), the deceptively "dumb" blond (Candy Clark), the hot rodder (Paul LeMat) -- were stock figures even in 1962, the year in which the story takes place. But Lucas reanimates the clichés, using them to externalize and flesh out the cruising mind-set of his teen era. He gets at the archetypal bonds and tensions between eternal high school types like the brainy semioutsider (Richard Dreyfuss) and the sharp yet inertia-prone class prez ("Ronny" Howard). And the rock 'n' roll moviemaking rhythms give "Graffiti" a souped-up engine all its own. This 1973 movie recaptured the idea of teen years' being fun -- a notion that has since gotten way out of hand.

The uncanny casting, including Harrison Ford as LeMat's nemesis and Suzanne

Somers as Dreyfuss' dream girl, doubly ensures this film's place in history. By now, it too is a nostalgic memory -- not just for the supposedly innocent time of 1962 but also for the seat-of-the-pants innovations of early-'70s moviemaking. One reason to buy the DVD is that its Dolby Digital audio allows you to appreciate how Walter Murch's sound montages awoke a generation on the rise to the power of the soundtrack. He uses classic rock 'n' roll in ways it had never been used before. It becomes the natural sound of a small-town California night -- more natural than crickets or coyotes. Murch and Lucas don't just exploit rock to set a mood; they use it to fix the movie's meanings in the viewer's mind, like a Greek chorus with a beat. At times, the sound alone makes you feel like you're in the middle of a giant rainbow-colored jukebox.

But the filmmakers also know how to blow away that aural mist to exploit silence and sound effects -- usually in places where conventional movies would use a musical score to pound home emotional tension or crises in the plot. When Dreyfuss has to sneak a hook onto the undercarriage of a police car to prove himself to a gang known as the Pharaohs, the rock 'n' roll subsides. All you hear is the nerve-rattling sound of an approaching train. A couple of years before, the sound of an unseen train had worked for Michael Corleone's murder of a rival mobster and a crooked cop in "The Godfather." In a different manner and context, it works just as brilliantly here.

The DVD also contains a terrific "making of" documentary. It's notable not just for never-before-seen, improvisational screen tests, and for interviews with Lucas and Coppola and with actors from Dreyfuss and Howard to Phillips and Ford, but also for enlightening comments from less-known luminaries like casting director Fred Roos. You have to be in awe of Roos' ability and appetite for spotting talent: He found Mackenzie Phillips at the Troubadour rock club in Los Angeles and Kathleen Quinlan through the drama club at Mount Tamalpais High School in Marin County, Calif.

As quoted in the useful liner notes, cinematographer Haskell Wexler says that what was groundbreaking for him was that "we were able to use documentary techniques, we were able to use smaller equipment, we were able to work in a simpler way and still have what ultimately was on the screen be interesting and good." That seize-the-day spirit infected everyone on the set. These days, Lucas is known for erasing errors digitally (he even digitally altered one shot of Mel's Drive-In for this DVD). But what makes this movie click, as "The Making of 'American Graffiti'" shows, is the edge the actors got from knowing that Lucas was capturing their most spontaneous reactions, including their stumbles and "mistakes."

Rahmenthema: *American Literature in the 20th Century*



Donnerstag, 29. April 2010, 17:30 Uhr

The Virgin Suicides

Eugenides, Jeffrey

Born: 1960

From: *Facts On File Companion to the American Novel*.

Jeffrey Eugenides is the author of two novels, both of which received laudatory reviews and awards: *The Virgin Suicides* (1993), excerpted in the *Paris Review*, won an Aga Khan Prize in 1991, and *Middlesex* won the Pulitzer Prize in 2003. Eugenides, intrigued with the erotic and sometimes destructive powers of sex, limits the scope of both his novels to adolescence, which for many people is a time of pain, bewilderment, and angst. Most critics take special note of his poetic style, often combined with a dreamlike tone accented by the author's sense of humor.

Jeffrey Eugenides was born in 1960 in Grosse Point Park, Michigan, to Constantine Eugenides, a mortgage banker, and Wanda Eugenides. He earned a bachelor's degree (magna cum laude) from Brown University in 1983, where he studied with novelist John Hawkes, and a master's degree from Stanford University in 1986. Readers responded with fascination to *The Virgin Suicides*, the compelling story of five sisters, immigrants from Lisbon, Portugal, told from the perspective of a group of middle-aged men, who were once the neighborhood boys. As they watch helplessly, the sisters commit suicide, one by one: perhaps this author's disenchanting commentary on 1970s American suburbia.

[...]

Text Citation: Werlock, Abby H. P., ed. "Eugenides, Jeffrey." *Facts On File Companion to the American Novel*. New York: Facts On File, Inc., 2006. *Bloom's Literary Reference Online*. Facts On File, Inc.