

Walter Mosley, one of the most versatile and admired American writers, is the author of more than forty critically acclaimed books, including the bestselling mystery series featuring Easy Rawlins. His work has been translated into twenty-three languages and includes literary fiction, science fiction, political monographs, and a young adult novel. His short fiction has been widely published, and his nonfiction has appeared in *The New York Times Magazine* and *The Nation*, among other publications. He is the winner of numerous awards, including an O. Henry Award, a Grammy and PEN America's Lifetime Achievement Award. He lives in New York City.

Praise for *Devil in a Blue Dress*

"A brilliant novel. Period. Mosley's prose is rich, yet taut, and has that special musical cadence that few writers achieve... I read *Devil in a Blue Dress* in one sitting and didn't want it to end. An astonishing first novel"
Jonathan Kellerman

"A magnificent novel by Walter Mosley in which, from the first page, it's clear we have discovered a wonderful new talent... the most exciting arrival in the genre for years" *Face*

"A novel of astonishing virtuosity, upending Chandler's LA to show a dark side of a different kind" *Sunday Times*

"There is a splendid freshness to Mosley's prose and we sense that here is a real world we are hearing about for the first time" *Financial Times*

"For a writer who has the legacy of Chester Himes and more to live up to, Walter Mosley makes a distinctly confident start to his career" *Time Out*

Published in 1990, *The Devil in a Blue Dress* was awarded the John Creasey Award for the best first crime novel of the year.

Praise for the Easy Rawlins Series

“When I had finished reading *A Little Yellow Dog*, I went out and got all four of Walter Mosley’s previous Easy Rawlins novels and read them straight through... To write five novels about a character as interesting and complex as Easy and never to flag, never to miss a beat, is pretty amazing” *Guardian*

“His Easy Rawlins novels are a series of perfectly balanced concoctions of lust, violence, politics and race. You crack a new one open knowing exactly what sort of pleasure is in store” *Sunday Times*

“Mosley has claimed his turf – and heaven help anyone who tries to get in his way” *Sydney Morning Herald*

“Mr Mosley makes us root for Easy Rawlins, a black knight-errant, and his lawless sidekick, Raymond Mouse Alexander, an armed and dangerous Sancho Panza” *New York Times*

“What makes Mosley so important in American literature is not just his ability to pen novels that grab you by the throat, but the way his heroes reflect the uncertainty, the fears, and the moral dilemmas of America” *Daily Express*

DEVIL IN A BLUE DRESS

WALTER MOSLEY

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY VAL McDERMID



A complete catalogue record for this book can be
obtained from the British Library on request

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Introduction

One of the reasons for the ongoing success of crime fiction is the genre's ability continually to reinvent itself. What fuels that reinvention is writers who are innovative, ambitious and iconoclastic. That Walter Mosley is one of those was obvious from the first paragraph of *Devil in a Blue Dress*. I can still remember the shock of reading it, that sense of being in the presence of something quite different from anything I'd read before.

It's a dramatic beginning that echoes Raymond Chandler's iconic opening to *The Big Sleep*. But it is distinct and distinctive. Mosley has the tone of voice and the laconic style of the classic private eye novel, but because his protagonist Easy Rawlins is black he brings a new perspective to the genre.

But there is far more to this book than novelty. Mosley writes with real verve and style, transporting us in time and place to a Los Angeles that Philip Marlowe would have recognised, though probably not understood. His storytelling is vivid and gripping, his characters compelling and credible. We may never have met a devil in a blue dress like Daphne Monet, but we're in no doubt that she exists. Me, I'm just grateful that she never walked into my life.

At its best, the crime novel shines an unforgiving light on the society it grows out of. Writers like Mosley are not afraid to lift up the stones and stare unflinchingly at the low life crawling underneath. What Mosley brings to his Easy Rawlins novels is the unmistakable whiff of authenticity. It's clear that he understands what he is writing about and he has the skill to make us also understand it in all its richness, its rage and its despair.

Traditionally, the private eye has always been the outsider, the knight in somewhat tarnished armour riding into town to right

wrongs and take temporary comfort where he can find it. Then afterwards, he leaves, always alone, always searching for the next battle, because that's the only time he's ever sure of his place in the world.

For Easy Rawlins, there is a double battle to be fought – on the one hand, the perennial American battle of civil rights; on the other, the battle of a man trying to do the right thing within his own community. Mosley chose to begin the Easy Rawlins stories in the post-war 1940s, when the solid ground of white supremacy was starting to shift underfoot. The series moves forward through the first stirrings of serious political change, through the anger of the civil rights movement to a new world of real opportunities and poisoned possibilities.

In Easy Rawlins, Mosley has created a fascinating, complex character. He's a smart man in a world where that doesn't necessarily reap rewards. He's loyal in love and friendship in spite of the risks attached to such commitments. There's something quite dull about his slow building of a rental property business that contrasts with his willingness to take on difficult and threatening conflicts. He has one foot in the gutter and the other in respectability. But most of all, he has the ability to charm us, to make us care about his choices and his fate.

With *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Walter Mosley kicked open a new door in crime fiction. He has described his books as “emotional histories of the heart and soul of black America” and has said that Easy is “a black man talking to everyone”. Certainly, Mosley makes us question what goodness, justice and criminality mean when the American dream has never been within a man's grasp. The answers aren't always comfortable.

But the books are always a damn good read.

DEVIL IN A BLUE DRESS

I

I was surprised to see a white man walk into Joppy's bar. It's not just that he was white but he wore an off-white linen suit and shirt with a Panama straw hat and bone shoes over flashing white silk socks. His skin was smooth and pale with just a few freckles. One lick of strawberry-blond hair escaped the band of his hat. He stopped in the doorway, filling it with his large frame, and surveyed the room with pale eyes; not a color I'd ever seen in a man's eyes. When he looked at me I felt a thrill of fear, but that went away quickly because I was used to white people by 1948.

I had spent five years with white men, and women, from Africa to Italy, through Paris, and into the Fatherland itself. I ate with them and slept with them, and I killed enough blue-eyed young men to know that they were just as afraid to die as I was.

The white man smiled at me, then he walked to the bar where

Joppy was running a filthy rag over the marble top. They shook hands and exchanged greetings like old friends.

The second thing that surprised me was that he made Joppy nervous. Joppy was a tough ex-heavyweight who was comfortable brawling in the ring or in the street, but he ducked his head and smiled at that white man just like a salesman whose luck had gone bad.

I put a dollar down on the bar and made to leave, but before I was off the stool Joppy turned my way and waved me toward them.

“Com’on over here, Easy. This here’s somebody I want ya t’meet.”

I could feel those pale eyes on me.

“This here’s a ole friend’a mines, Easy. Mr. Albright.”

“You can call me DeWitt, Easy,” the white man said. His grip was strong but slithery, like a snake coiling around my hand.

“Hello,” I said.

“Yeah, Easy,” Joppy went on, bowing and grinning. “Mr. Albright and me go way back. You know he prob’ly my oldest friend from L.A. Yeah, we go ways back.”

“That’s right,” Albright smiled. “It must’ve been 1935 when I met Jop. What is it now? Must be thirteen years. That was back before the war, before every farmer, and his brother’s wife, wanted to come to L.A.”

Joppy guffawed at the joke; I smiled politely. I was wondering what kind of business Joppy had with that man and, along with that, I wondered what kind of business that man could have with me.

“Where you from, Easy?” Mr. Albright asked.

“Houston.”

“Houston, now that’s a nice town. I go down there sometimes, on business.” He smiled for a moment. He had all the time in the world. “What kind of work you do up here?”

Up close his eyes were the color of robins’ eggs; matte and dull.

“He worked at Champion Aircraft up to two days ago,” Joppy said when I didn’t answer. “They laid him off.”

Mr. Albright twisted his pink lips, showing his distaste. “That’s too bad. You know these big companies don’t give a damn about you. The budget doesn’t balance just right and they let ten family men go. You have a family, Easy?” He had a light drawl like a well-to-do southern gentleman.

“No, just me, that’s all,” I said.

“But they don’t know that. For all they know you could have ten kids and one on the way but they let you go just the same.”

“That’s right!” Joppy shouted. His voice sounded like a regiment of men marching through a gravel pit. “Them people own them big companies don’t never even come in to work, they just get on the telephone to find out how they money is. And you know they better get a good answer or some heads gonna roll.”

Mr. Albright laughed and slapped Joppy on the arm. “Why don’t you get us some drinks, Joppy? I’ll have scotch. What’s your pleasure, Easy?”

“Usual?” Joppy asked me.

“Sure.”

When Joppy moved away from us Mr. Albright turned to look around the room. He did that every few minutes, turning slightly, checking to see if anything had changed. There wasn’t much to see though. Joppy’s was a small bar on the second floor of a butchers’ warehouse. His only usual customers were the Negro butchers and it was early enough in the afternoon that they were still hard at work.

The odor of rotted meat filled every corner of the building; there were few people, other than butchers, who could stomach sitting in Joppy’s bar.

Joppy brought Mr. Albright’s scotch and a bourbon on the rocks for me. He put them both down and said, “Mr. Albright lookin’ for a man to do a lil job, Easy. I told him you outta work an’ got a mortgage t’pay too.”

“That’s hard.” Mr. Albright shook his head again. “Men in big business don’t even notice or care when a working man wants to try to make something out of himself.”

“And you know Easy always tryin’ t’be better. He just got his high school papers from night school and he been threatenin’ on some college.” Joppy wiped the marble bar as he spoke. “And he’s a war hero, Mr. Albright. Easy went in with Patton. Volunteered! You know he seen him some blood.”

“That a fact?” Albright said. He wasn’t impressed. “Why don’t we go have a chair, Easy? Over there by the window.”

Joppy’s windows were so dingy that you couldn’t see out onto 103rd Street. But if you sat at a small cherry table next to them, at least you had the benefit of the dull glow of daylight.

“You got a mortgage to meet, eh, Easy? The only thing that’s worse than a big company is the bank. They want their money on the first and if you miss the payment, they will have the marshal knocking down your door on the second.”

“What’s my business got to do with you, Mr. Albright? I don’t wanna be rude, but I just met you five minutes ago and now you want to know all my business.”

“Well, I thought that Joppy said you needed to get work or you were going to lose your house.”

“What’s that got to do with you?”

“I just might need a bright pair of eyes and ears to do a little job for me, Easy.”

“And what kind of work is it that you do?” I asked. I should have gotten up and walked out of there, but he was right about my mortgage. He was right about the banks too.

“I used to be a lawyer when I lived in Georgia. But now I’m just another fella who does favors for friends, and for friends of friends.”

“What kind of favors?”

“I don’t know, Easy.” He shrugged his great white shoulders. “Whatever somebody might need. Let’s say that you need to get a message to someone but it’s not, um, convenient for you to do it in person; well, then you call me and I take the job. You see I always do the job I’m asked to do, everybody knows that, so I always have lots of work. And sometimes I need a little helper to get the job done. That’s where you come in.”

“And how’s that?” I asked. While he talked it dawned on me that Albright was a lot like a friend I had back in Texas—Raymond Alexander was his name but we called him Mouse. Just thinking about Mouse set my teeth on edge.

“I need to find somebody and I might need a little help looking.”

“And who is it you want to—”

“Easy,” he interrupted. “I can see that you’re a smart man with a lot of very good questions. And I’d like to talk more about it, but not here.” From his shirt pocket he produced a white card and a white enameled fountain pen. He scrawled on the card and then handed it to me.

“Talk to Joppy about me and then, if you want to try it out, come to my office any time after seven tonight.”

He downed the shot, smiled at me again, and stood up, straightening his cuffs. He tilted the Panama hat on his head and saluted Joppy, who grinned and waved from behind the bar. Then Mr. DeWitt Albright strolled out of Joppy’s place like a regular customer going home after his afternoon snort.

The card had his name printed on it in flourished letters. Below that was the address he’d scribbled. It was a downtown address; a long drive from Watts.

I noted that Mr. DeWitt Albright didn’t pay for the drinks he ordered. Joppy didn’t seem in a hurry to ask for his money though.

2

“**W**here’d you meet this dude?”
I asked Joppy.

“I met him when I was still in the ring. Like he said, before the war.”

Joppy was still at the bar, leaning over his big stomach and buffing the marble. His uncle, a bar owner himself, had died in Houston ten years earlier, just when Joppy decided to give up the ring. Joppy went all the way back home to get that marble bar. The butchers had already agreed to let him open his business upstairs and all he could think of was getting that marble top. Joppy was a superstitious man. He thought that the only way he could be successful was with a piece of his uncle, already a proven success, on the job with him. Every extra moment Joppy had was spent cleaning and buffing his bar top. He didn’t allow

roughhousing near the bar and if you ever dropped a pitcher or something heavy he'd be there in a second, looking for chips.

Joppy was a heavy-framed man, almost fifty years old. His hands were like black catcher's mitts and I never saw him in shirt-sleeves that didn't strain at the seams from bulging muscle. His face was scarred from all the punishment he had taken in the ring; the flesh around his big lips was jagged and there was a knot over his right eye that always looked red and raw.

In his years as a boxer Joppy had had moderate success. He was ranked number seven in 1932 but his big draw was the violence he brought to the ring. Joppy would come out swinging wildly, taking everything any boxer could dish out. In his prime no one could knock Joppy down and, later on, he always went the distance.

"He got something to do with the fights?" I asked.

"Wherever they's a little money to be made Mr. Albright got his nose to the ground," Joppy said. "An' he don't care too much if that money got a little smudge or sumpin' on it neither."

"So you got me tied up with a gangster?"

"Ain't no gangster, Ease. Mr. Albright just a man with a finger in a whole lotta pies, thas all. He's a businessman and you know when you in business sellin' shirts and a man come up to you with a box he say done falled off'a truck, well . . . you just give that man a couple'a dollars and look t'other way." He waved his catcher's mitt at me. "Thas business."

Joppy was cleaning one area on his counter until it was spotless, except for the dirt that caked in the cracks. The dark cracks twisting through the light marble looked like a web of blood vessels in a newborn baby's head.

"So he's just a businessman?" I asked.

Joppy stopped wiping for a moment and looked me in the eye. "Don't get me wrong, Ease. DeWitt is a tough man, and he runs in bad company. But you still might could get that mortgage payment an' you might even learn sumpin' from'im."

I sat there looking around the small room. Joppy had six tables and seven high stools at his bar. A busy night never saw all his chairs full but I was jealous of his success. He had his own business; he owned something. He told me one night that he could sell that bar even though he only rented the room. I thought he was lying but later on I found out that people will buy a business that already has customers; they wouldn't mind paying the rent if there was money coming in.

The windows were dirty and the floor was rutted but it was Joppy's place and when the white butcher-boss came up to collect the rent he always said, "Thank you, Mr. Shag." Because he was happy to get his money.

"So what he want with me?" I asked.

"He just want you t'look for somebody, leastwise that what he said."

"Who?"

"Some girl, I dunno." Joppy shrugged. "I ain't ax him his business if it don't gotta do wit' me. But he just payin' you to *look*, ain't nobody says you gotta find nuthin'."

"And what's he gonna pay?"

"Enough fo' that mortgage. That's why I called you in on this, Easy, I know'd you need some fast money. I don't give a damn 'bout that man, or whoever it is he lookin' fo' neither."

The thought of paying my mortgage reminded me of my front yard and the shade of my fruit trees in the summer heat. I felt that I was just as good as any white man, but if I didn't even own my front door then people would look at me like just another poor beggar, with his hand outstretched.

"Take his money, man. You got to hold on to that little bit'a

property,” Joppy said as if he knew what I was thinking. “You know all them pretty girls you be runnin’ wit’ ain’t gonna buy you no house.”

“I don’t like it, Joppy.”

“You don’t like that money? Shit! I’ll hold it for ya.”

“Not the money . . . It’s just . . . You know that Mr. Albright reminds me of Mouse.”

“Who?”

“You remember, he was a little man lived down in Houston. He married EttaMae Harris.”

Joppy turned his jagged lips into a frown. “Naw, he must’a come after my time.”

“Yeah, well, Mouse is a lot like Mr. Albright. He’s smooth and a natty dresser and he’s smilin’ all the time. But he always got his business in the front’a his mind, and if you get in the way you might come to no good.” I always tried to speak proper English in my life, the kind of English they taught in school, but I found over the years that I could only truly express myself in the natural, “uneducated” dialect of my upbringing.

“‘Might come to no good’ is a bitch, Easy, but sleepin’ in the street ain’t got no ‘might’ to it.”

“Yeah, man. I’m just feelin’ kinda careful.”

“Careful don’t hurt, Easy. Careful keep your hands up, careful makes ya strong.”

“So he’s just a businessman, huh?” I asked again.

“Thas right!”

“And just exactly what kind of business is it he does? I mean, is he a shirt salesman or what?”

“They gotta sayin’ for his line’a work, Ease.”

“What’s that?”

“Whatever the market can bear.” He smiled, looking like a hungry bear himself. “Whatever the market can bear.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Don’t worry, Ease, I’ll take care’a ya. You just call ole Joppy now and then and I’ll tell ya if it sounds like it’s gettin’ bad. You just keep in touch with me an’ you be just fine.”

“Thanks for thinkin’a me, Jop,” I said, but I wondered if I’d still be thankful later on.