

CHAPTER FOUR: THE BLACK DETECTIVE

“And if people respect Easy, I think it’s not because of his hard past, but because he has taken on a tough job in the real world: he’s trying to define himself in spite of the world, to live by his own system of values. He’s trying to do what is right in an imperfect world. The genre may be mystery, but the underlying questions are moral and ethical, even existential.”

—Walter Mosley, “The Black Dick”

HISTORY

The first film with a black detective as the protagonist was *A Black Sherlock Holmes*, directed by R.J. Philips and released in 1918. Running for a total of twelve minutes, the film featured an all-black cast and starred Sam Robinson as detective Knick Carter and Rudolph Tatum as his assistant Reuma Tism. Not only a parody of the original Sherlock Holmes character, *A Black Sherlock Holmes* is an example of the “race films” popular in the early part of the twentieth century and targeted at African-American audiences. While the companies producing these films were usually white-owned, the casts were African-American and the content of the films designed to appeal to audiences disgusted by D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915), as well as by the otherwise demeaning portrayals of blacks in standard Hollywood fare.

Unfortunately, *A Black Sherlock Holmes* failed with black audiences, who found the caricature performances humiliating. The production company behind the film—Ebony Film Corporation—would find many of their releases similarly

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ignored by African-American audiences. The newspaper *The Chicago Defender*, which had primarily African-American readers, criticized the company’s releases, saying that they caused “respectable ladies and gentlemen to blush with shame and humiliation” (Sampson 207). The company would go out of business a few years later. Ironically, however, *A Black Sherlock Holmes* was a success with white audiences, who enjoyed the “original and inborn sense of humor,” according to a review in the *Exhibition Herald* (Sampson 241).

Perhaps because of the film’s commercial and critical failure among its target audience, or perhaps because of generalized racism in America, Knick Carter would be the only black detective protagonist to appear on screen until the release of *In the Heat of the Night* (Norman Jewison, 1967), almost fifty years later. In that film, Sidney Poitier plays Virgil Tibbs, a black police detective from Philadelphia—although he hails from California in the original book—sent to Sparta, Mississippi, to assist in the investigation of the murder of a wealthy industrialist. Despite that film’s success, films about African-American detectives continue to remain few and far between.

SIDEKICKS AND SUPPORTING ACTORS

Even though the detective narrative is primarily about the triumph of good over injustice and evil, that triumph almost exclusively happens at the hands of white men. As Philippa Gates writes, in her book *Detecting Men: Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film*, when “otherness” does show up in the detective genre, usually in the form of racial or ethnic difference, it is often reserved for the role of the villain or the sidekick, not someone at the center of the narrative. This

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way, the racial or ethnic (or even sexual) other functions as an effective contrast from “the heroism and Americanness of the protagonist,” defined or enhanced by his whiteness and masculinity (Gates 95). For instance, a survey of the television show *COPS*—a reality show that follows police officers on the job, airing on FOX from 1989-2013 before moving to Spike—found that the vast majority of police officers were white males (92%) and that the majority of offenders were non-white (62%). These numbers are completely skewed, making African-Americans seem much more likely to be guilty, and making white males appear less guilty than in real life (Monk-Turner et al.). Similar ratios are reflected on fictional shows, where there is usually one token African-American member of the police force—*CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (CBS, 2000-2015), *Criminal Minds* (CBS, 2005-present), *Southland* (NBC, 2009, TNT, 2010-2013), and *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* (NBC, 1999-present) are four examples.

The *Beverly Hills Cop* film franchise, starring Eddie Murphy as Axel Foley, a Detroit police officer in Los Angeles on a case, is a rare example of a black detective that has two white sidekicks, in the roles of detective Billy Rosewood (Judge Reinhold) and John Taggart (John Ashton). Significantly, Rosewood and Taggart are not there to assist Foley but, rather, to keep an eye on him due to his unorthodox techniques. Interestingly, the black police detective’s sidekick is often a white woman—as in *The Pelican Brief* (Alan J. Pakula, 1993), *Kiss the Girls* (Gary Fleder, 1997), *Murder at 1600* (Dwight H. Little, 1997), and *The Bone Collector* (Phillip Noyce, 1999). So either the sidekick is a woman or a chaperone—as if to not alienate potential white audiences by making the black detective appear too threatening or accomplished. This dynamic is quite

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different from the countless examples where the white lead detective has a black sidekick to assist in case solving. One memorable example is the character of Sgt. Al Powell (Reginald VelJohnson) who can barely perform as a cop but somehow rediscovers his masculinity as a result of assisting the white and invincible John McClane (Bruce Willis) in *Die Hard* (John McTiernan, 1988).

While the tendency of casting the racial/ethnic/sexual other as villain or sidekick does not allow for many African-American detectives, and even fewer African-

American private eyes, it also enhances the private eye's status as an outsider the few times it does occur. Even more of an outsider than the typical white private eye, the African-American private eye needs to negotiate a world that is already prejudiced against him for the color of his skin. And just as his outsider status benefits the white private eye, providing a perspective unfettered by loyalties, the black detective can have greater perspective thanks to his status as even more of an outsider.

Several interesting racial dynamics play out over the seven seasons of *The Shield* that reinforce a similar sort of treatment. While Mackey and the members of his team are all white, it is detective Claudette Wyms (C.C.H. Pounder), an African American woman, who represents the voice of integrity and moral authority on the show. Isolated twice over (as a racial minority and a gendered minority), Wyms is not only conspicuously different on the show in terms of appearance but also in terms of attitude. She repeatedly puts her career on the line, refusing to compromise her own moral code. Throughout much of the show's run, she is either an active antagonist or a passive antagonist to the misadventures of

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Mackey and his crew. She eventually forfeits an opportunity to be the new captain because she refuses to ignore the possible impact of a public defender's drug use on countless cases. While there is another African American on the department's force, Julien Lowe (Michael Jace), his role is smaller and more preoccupied with his own personal internal battles. At the same time, it is also clear that he, too, does not fit in with the mostly white police force.

It is not just that the hardboiled private eye is often white, but that his entire world is (for the most part) equally white. Roger A. Berger observes that "blacks have virtually no presence in Chandler's L.A. novels," despite the fact that "the presence of African-Americans was dramatically increasing in 1940s' and eventually 1950s' LA" (284). For the most part, private detective films and literature barely acknowledge a black presence in Los Angeles, and if they do, as in *L.A. Confidential*, it is as victims to be investigated or framed by white police.

This is especially ironic because the inspiration for Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe was supposedly the real-life black private detective Samuel Marlowe. Referred to as the first black private detective west of the Mississippi in his obituary, Marlowe is said to have corresponded for years with both Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, neither of them realizing that he was black until they finally met in person (Ransil). Daniel Miller, in an article for the *L.A. Times*, describes "Nightshade," a four-page story that is Hammett's only work to feature a black protagonist. Marlowe's cache of letters from Hammett included a copy of "Nightshade" with a personal note from Hammett suggesting that Marlowe had inspired the story. Marlowe also did some detective work for Chandler and acted

as a guide during “research expeditions” to the “tough parts of town” (D. Miller). In November 2016, the CW network announced that it was developing a period crime drama inspired by Samuel Marlowe, but that project never got off the ground.

The difficulty in getting Samuel Marlowe—or any other black private eye—on television should come as no surprise. In November 2017, *Variety* published the results of a study examining race in television writing rooms. The study found that only 35% of writers’ rooms for the 2016-2017 season had a black writer on staff, and within that 35%, fewer than 5% were black. Across the 18 networks examined, the study found that 91% of showrunners were white, and 80% were men. In 17% of the writers’ rooms that did employ a single black writer, “that writer is often excluded from influencing the creative process and passed over for advancement,” with AMC, CBS, and the CW labeled as the worst on “overall inclusion” when considering both race and gender (Turchiano). According to an analysis conducted by *Variety* of the new broadcast television shows for the 2017-2018 season, nothing changed. Specifically, Daniel Holloway outlines that of the lead actors, “only 20% were Hispanic or non-white, and only 35% were female,” while of the showrunners, “10% were non-white or Hispanic and 29% were female.”

EASY RAWLINS

In a sea of white private eyes (if not a sea of white leading men), Easy Rawlins stands out. He is the black protagonist in a series of novels and short stories by author Walter Mosley set in Los Angeles during the 1940s through the 1960s.

Rawlins is very much an atypical L.A. private eye and not only because of his skin tone. A World War II veteran living in the South L.A. neighborhood of Watts, Rawlins, for most of the novels, is an unlicensed and untrained private detective. Unlike his jaded and world-weary counterparts, Rawlins can be a bit naïve and inexperienced, and he does not own a gun. And, unlike many of his peers, Rawlins owns his house.

Walter Mosley’s first published book, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, was also the first novel in his Easy Rawlins series. The film adaptation, starring Denzel Washington as Easy and directed by Carl Franklin, was released in 1995, five years after the book’s release. It was a box office disappointment, the success of the original book, critical praise, and despite the star power of Washington. Ed Guerrero suggests that the film’s failure had to do with its release shortly after the O.J. Simpson trial and the heightened racial tensions that resulted from it (qtd. in Gates 213). However, Leon Lewis suggests that another reason for the film’s lack of commercial success could be the absence of a white sidekick (qtd. in Gates 213).

Mosley frequently comments on the racism and injustice experienced by many African-Americans, an issue rarely raised in other hardboiled detective narratives. Film critic James Berardinelli writes, about *Devil in a Blue Dress*, "As the film progresses, it becomes evident that skin color is more than a background issue—it's the first thing anyone notices, and can break careers, shatter marriages, and end lives." Both the book and film versions of *Devil in a Blue Dress*, as well as Mosley's work as a whole, demonstrate how the genre of the

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private detective can provide an opportunity for exploring evolutions of racial prejudice throughout America's twentieth century.

Devil in a Blue Dress is set in a post-war Los Angeles uncertain about the influx of African-Americans who had moved westward searching for work in war-related industries. As Rawlins himself explains in the film, "Black people from the south moved to California to get the good jobs in the shipyards and the aircraft companies." It was from one of these jobs that Rawlins is fired for insubordination. Even though he has no training or experience as a detective, Rawlins—desperate for any kind of work—accepts a job searching for Daphne Monet (Jennifer Beals), a white woman known to frequent the black jazz clubs of South Central Los Angeles. However, much like in other hard-boiled narratives, this case is not as simple as it seems. The plot thickens as Rawlins discovers layers of corruption and intrigue, and even gets implicated in two murders, while searching for—and eventually finding—Monet, who turns out to be Ruby, an African-American woman passing as white. By the end of the movie, Rawlins, perhaps emboldened by his success, decides to open his own private investigation business.

Unlike traditional hardboiled novels, where social divides tend to be demarcated by wealth (or lack thereof), Mosley sets up social divides based on race. Much as Philip Marlowe is noteworthy for his ability to traverse class lines in Los Angeles, Rawlins is noteworthy for his ability to traverse lines of race despite his blackness, rendering him well suited for the task of tracking down Monet. For instance, when Monet calls Rawlins, inviting him to her hotel, she tells him that

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he must slip into the white section of the hotel in order to find her, which he is able to do, but not without reservation. Later that night, when Rawlins drives Monet home, they pass a police car. Monet asks Rawlins if he is nervous. In voiceover, Rawlins tells us: "Nervous? Here I was in the middle of the night in a white neighborhood with a white woman in my car. Naw, I wasn't nervous. I was stupid."

The racial divide does not merely keep the blacks separate from the whites; it also keeps the whites separate from the blacks. As Rawlins explains, via voiceover: "Even though we had fought a war to keep the world free, the color line in America worked

both ways, and even a rich white man like Todd Carter was afraid to cross it.” Monet, who naively believes that Carter (Terry Kinney) can marry her now that he is certain to become mayor—thanks to the revelation that his opponent is a pedophile—Carter refuses to do so. Despite his love for Monet, and his privileged status, he cannot marry someone who is partially black.

In the book *Little Scarlet* (2004), set in Los Angeles in the wake of the 1965 Watts riots, Rawlins has an office, which is where he is approached by the LAPD, who want his assistance on a case. Aware of the hatred and distrust felt by the residents, white policemen do not want to wander through a smoldering Watts, and so police detective Melvin Suggs reaches out to Rawlins, asking him to find some answers. It is the specific connection that Rawlins has to his racially- defined community that sets him apart from other (white) detectives.

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There is another nod to race in the novel *Black Betty*, published in 1994 and set in Los Angeles during the early 1960s. In this novel, Rawlins is hired to find a missing black housekeeper, nicknamed Black Betty. When Rawlins visits a farm belonging to Albert Cain, Betty’s employer, he observes that it reminds him of a slave plantation: “It’s like I drove out of California, back through the south, and all the way into hell” (118). This is how Rawlins describes the racial divide of late 1960s Los Angeles in *Charcoal Joe* (2016):

It’s a long way from West L.A. to Watts. It’s the same city but a darkness descends as you progress eastward. You pass from white dreams into black and brown realities. There were many miles to cover but distance was the least of it. It was another world, where I was going. In West Los Angeles, when people looked at their TVs they saw themselves and what they wanted to be: James Arness and Lorne Green, Mary Tyler Moore and Lucille Ball...People in Watts saw the same shows but not their faces, their dreams, the hard facts of their lives. In Watts, people spoke the same language in different dialects and at separate schools. For darker-skinned citizens *employment* was synonymous with *toil*. The police were often the enemy (39).

In *Devil in a Blue Dress*, it is clear that the police are the enemy. Not only do they beat up Rawlins, for no reason at all, but they threaten to frame him. One of the cops tells Rawlins that they will send a team over to look through his house and that they will definitely find something to implicate Rawlins in the murder of Richard McGee (Scott Lincoln), not to mention the murder of Coretta James (Lisa Nicole Carson). As the second cop says to Rawlins in true Vic Mackey style, “Evidence has a funny way of showing up, you know?”

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Because the police are often seen as the enemy, Rawlins spends a lot of time helping people who turn to him rather than the police. Berardinelli observes that the most interesting element of the film is not the “whodunit” but the “whydunit.” The search for the guilty parties is less interesting than “learning their motivation, which is buried in society’s perception of racial interaction” (Berardinelli). Seeing the world through Rawlins’s eyes, through his perspective as a black detective, reminds us of these perceptions. Rawlins sees a world that few others can see, much less understand.

Another difference between Rawlins and the hardboiled detective is the amount of sexual activity depicted in the film. Unlike the more isolated private eye, who either avoids sexual activity outright or limits it to rare occasions, Rawlins is far more sexually prolific. Mosley can be quite graphic about these exploits, not only emphasizing the stereotype of the overly sexualized black male but even being critical of it. While gathering information on Daphne, Easy meets up with her friend Coretta. Philippa Gates, points out that, “Easy thinks that by having sex with Coretta he will discover the information he wants regarding Daphne. But as the sexual act occurs we see that Easy is desperate for sex and at Coretta’s mercy, quite literally, giving her information in return for sexual gratification. His sexuality then becomes a weakness rather than a strength, and he admits as much in his voice-over” (Gates 211).

In contrast, Philip Marlowe finds it all too simple to reject a woman’s advances. When Vivian invites him to come home with her following a kiss in his car, he

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tells her, “Kissing is nice, but your father didn’t hire me to sleep with you” (*The Big Sleep* 130). He drops a sulking Vivian off at her house before heading home to discover a naked Carmen in his bed. “That’s nice,” he tells her, “But I’ve already seen it all.” When she refuses to get dressed, he thinks to himself, “It’s so hard for women—even nice women—to realize that their bodies are not irresistible” (133, 134).

Despite his sexual aggressions, Rawlins is remarkably non-violent. In *Devil in a Blue Dress*, the violence is delegated to his friend Mouse Alexander (Don Cheadle) to perform. It is as though the notion of an “angry black man” is too intense for the film’s protagonist. So Rawlins maintains his thoughtfulness, patience, and physical restraint, leaving it to Mouse to do the shooting and punching. When Mouse kills Joppy (Mel Winkler), the only explanation is that Mouse did not have time to tie Joppy up. “If you didn’t want him killed, why did you leave him with me?” he asks Rawlins without any hint of apology. Despite the fact that the hard-boiled detective usually has to resort to the occasional violence as an occupational hazard, Rawlins generally avoids it. For instance, when DeWitt Albright (Tom Sizemore) and his crew break into Rawlins’s home and threaten him, it is Mouse who defends Rawlins before more damage can be done.

Another crucial aspect of Rawlins's character is his home ownership. Not only does it set him apart from others in his neighborhood, indicating an aspersions to white, middle class values, but it makes him a tangible part of his community, very different from the stereotypical hardboiled detective who belongs nowhere.

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When his home first appears in the *Devil in a Blue Dress* movie, Rawlins says, via voiceover: "I loved coming home to my house...I guess maybe I just loved owning something." Whatever troubles have plagued him, the very end of the film shows Rawlins to be at peace. "I sat with my friend on my porch at my house and we laughed a long time," he says, via voiceover. The emphasis is on the possession: *my* friend, *my* porch, *my* house. This possession anchors Rawlins in a way not commonly seen by a private eye. His house represents his roots not only in California but in his neighborhood, amongst his community, a community that he will continue to assist with his new detective agency.

His home is doubly significant because Rawlins does not have an office. Unlike most private eyes, who are rarely at home, he uses his home as his base, indicating just how unable he is to extricate himself from a case once he accepts it. However, in spite of the fact that he owns his house—a rare feat for a black man of that time period—Rawlins still maintains a degree of isolation from the community around him, an isolation further compounded when he leaves his black neighborhood to venture into white territory.

The African-American detective would become a more popular figure in contemporary film, especially in the 1990s—although he would almost always be a police detective, as in Eddie Murphy's portrayal of renegade police detective Axel Foley in the hugely successful *Beverly Hills Cop* (Martin Brest, 1984). There would be three sequels, one in 1987 (directed by Tony Scott), another in 1994 (directed by John Landis), and a third currently in development. Morgan Freeman would play soon-to-be-retiring police detective William Somerset in

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Seven (David Fincher, 1995), as well as detective and forensic psychologist Alex Cross in *Kiss the Girls* (Gary Fleder, 1997) and its sequel *Along Came a Spider* (Lee Tamahori, 2001). In 1993, two years before *Devil in a Blue Dress* would be released, Denzel Washington played investigative reporter Gray Grantham in *The Pelican Brief*, while in 1999, he would play forensics expert Lincoln Rhyme in *The Bone Collector*, as well as corrupt narcotics officer Alonzo Harris in *Training Day* (Fuqua, 2001). Wesley Snipes would be retired U.S. Secret Service Agent John Cutter in *Passenger 57* (Kevin Hooks, 1992), and Metropolitan Police homicide detective Harlan Regis in *Murder at 1600* (Dwight H. Little, 1997). Sidney Poitier would be FBI Deputy Director Carter Preston in *The Jackal* (Caton-Jones, 1997), while Samuel L. Jackson would play Zeus Carver, the reluctant partner of John McClane (Bruce

Willis) in *Die Hard with a Vengeance* (John McTiernan, 1993), as well as a hostage lieutenant in *The Negotiator* (F. Gary Gray, 1998), and NYPD Detective John Shaft II in *Shaft* (John Singleton, 2000), a sequel to the 1971 film of the same name (Gates 192-193). Black police detectives would also be featured in television shows such as *Homicide: Life on the Street* (NBC, 1993-1999), *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (NBC, 1999-present), *The Shield* (FX, 2002-2008), *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008), and *Detroit 1-8-7* (ABC, 2010-2011).

While there are many examples, on both the large and small screen, of black police detectives, black private eyes still remain few and far between. One rare example that provides an interesting contrast to *Devil in a Blue Dress* is the film *Shaft* (Gordon Parks, 1971), about John Shaft (Richard Roundtree) a black private detective in New York City. Much like Marlowe in Los Angeles, Shaft traverses the island of Manhattan, from his home in Greenwich Village to his

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office in midtown, and in and around Harlem. Unlike Rawlins, however, Shaft is a licensed private investigator. Because of his lack of credibility, Rawlins must rely on the support of Todd Carter (Terry Kinney), a white civic leader who will most likely be the next Mayor of Los Angeles (Berrettini 84). Shaft has no such allegiances.

With this ending, we notice that a key similarity between Mosley's narratives and others in the detective genre until the advent of neo-noir. They are fundamentally reassuring, in spite of the corruption and crime that happens along the way. Mosley, like Chandler before him, emphasizes the existence of an unwavering moral code that proves resilient against those who abuse or ignore it. The world may still be flawed, but for a moment, we are reminded that there are good people who do good things, even if we find them in unexpected places or in unexpected people.