Gone Fishin' Short Guide

Gone Fishin' by Walter Mosley

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BOOKRAGS

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Characters

The strong moral sense Easy displays is unusual for the sort of childhood he has endured, and it signals a keen intelligence at work. Easy seems to have been content to let his remarkable potential remain undeveloped until Mouse and Pariah tax his introspective mental energies. In this novel constructed with characters who are quite unique, Easy is the most striking for his thoughtful interpretations of people and events, and for the changes he undergoes. Easy begins as a semiliterate, naive, rather aimless, and friendly youth. He ends as an adult whose tender concern for truth and justice is reworked to fit life as it really is, especially life as survival under the cruel conditions of white racist oppression. The potential in Easy is enhanced by contrast with seventeen-year-old fugitive Clifton, who is honest but foolish.

The important agent in Easy's change is Mouse, who is cold-blooded, violent, and calculating. He is the "devil" in Easy's life, feared and yet necessary. Mouse is practical. "Easy, you cain't be worried 'bout every little thing," Mouse advises, because it is not a poor man's option. "If all you got is two po'k chops an' ten chirren what you gonna do?" Easy eventually concludes that Mouse is inspiration.

He is an artist who always said that a poor man has got to work with flesh and blood. Like Easy, whose struggles with a sad past form part of the maturation process, Mouse must lay to rest the effects of a grievous childhood.

Mouse's devil is his stepdaddy Reese, a violently angry man. Besides physical beatings, the hateful Reese always taunted Mouse for illegitimacy of birth. Ultimately Reese is disarmed by the very evil he embodies and Mouse manipulates so well.

Mouse hangs a voodoo doll on the path to the farm. Before the final shootout, Reese changes from a powerful figure to a stooped, scared old man. "Some men believe in evil," Easy explains. "And when you believe in it the way daddyReese must have, you open yourself up to people preying on that fear." Mouse's aunt Miss Alexander, manager of Pariah's general store and bar, understands as the surviving sister of Reese's battered wife.

"Evil calls on itself," Miss Alexander says.

Life's dark side emerges to a degree in Mouse's friend Momma Jo and in Domaque, Mouse's childhood pal who supplies the doll. Momma Jo seems a giant mother, larger than life in size and in effect upon Easy. Her earthiness, strong smells, seductiveness, and witchcraft have their frightening aspects. At the same time, Momma Jo is a healer, a woman of strength and importance in her culture.

She has risen above an abusive and violent past. She plays a critical part in healing Easy of the fever and weakness that accompany his deep spiritual struggles.

Momma Jo's son Domaque displays similar dualities of character. He is a shambling hunchback, a keeper of many little rubber dolls, a gleeful participant in Mouse's frightening fish slaughter. Domaque also values beauty and surrounds his shack with flowers.

In this community of largely illiterate people, Domaque stands out because he can read and quote the Bible. He even has a sense of African American pride. In an obvious reference to Olympic gold medalist Jesse Owens, Domaque claims his reading has enabled him to know "that a colored man runned a race in Europe an' beat all the rest of the runners of the world." Domaque most inspires Easy toward the self-improvement and enlightenment he needs to lay to rest his personal ghosts and go forward. The congenial way Domaque relates with his white teacher, Miss Abigail Dixon, shows Easy how learning can help to bridge the gap between people of vastly different walks of life. The relationship reflects also the freedom that comes when people can let go of the past. Miss Dixon has farmlands handed down by generations of her family, but she does not own the bayou homes of Domaque and Momma Jo.

The sharecropper Reverend Nathaniel Peters addresses the need for strong spiritual resources because of Miss Dixon's absolute ownership. "Because even in poverty, even with nothing, Job realized he had God within him," Peters preaches.

Easy reports that there is truth in the room when Peters speaks. "I remembered the poverty of my daddy's sharecroppin' days and thought about Job," Peters says. "I feel love for my land and my labors. I feel rage when I am being mistreated and cheated." Peters expresses courage and hard-headed realism about adversity, but he heightens Easy's mental turmoil. His preaching of the inevitability of doom fosters dark thoughts of helplessness and fate.

When Easy looks back on Pariah, he mentions Miss Dixon's death and the claims of land and back rent the heirs imposed. Local farmers could not pay, and ran away. Ultimately Easy rejects the religious reasoning Peters represents. At Mouse's wedding, a big social event, Easy concludes that the African-Americans of Houston and Pariah were all "living between Miss Dixon and Mouse." They all had to walk a deadly line, and only some kind of faith could keep them going.

"Either you believed in God or family or love. I didn't believe in any of those things anymore," Easy says. "I didn't have a thing, just like everybody around me." He lets go of guilt. "You couldn't hold me responsible for anything because I didn't have anything. And, realizing that, it was time for me to go."

Social Concerns

In Gone Fishin', Walter Mosley explores the African-American experience in the harshly racist South of 1939. His primary focus is the social adjustment of the novel's narrator Ezekiel Rawlins, called Easy. Although the novel is a prequel to the historical mystery series which features Easy, the character is not the usual shrewd Los Angeles sleuth in this outing. He is a nineteen-year-old observer searching within himself for answers. The quest begins in segregated Houston, where Easy resides at the time.

The limited opportunities open to young men like him are apparent from his job of filling in for a sick gardener.

Easy drops the work when he is approached for a favor by his dubious and idle friend Raymond Alexander, better known to series readers as the violent Mouse. For a fifteen-dollar IOU, and a willingness to forgive the one night Easy spent with EttaMae Harris, Mouse asks to be driven in a borrowed Ford to the South Texas farming town of Pariah.

There Mouse plans to get money for his upcoming wedding to EttaMae by retrieving his deceased mother's "dowry" from his hated stepdaddy, Reese Corn. At dawn Easy heads with Mouse southeast from Houston on an unpaved road, built on soil "shipped in or strained over by poor farmers trying to make the land work."

Easy is happy at first, thinking "that magic hides in the early morning." The belief is based on a childhood memory of waking one night to see his father feeding a horse they were too poor to own.

When his father denies the event, fiveyear- old Easy concludes that he saw "a magic horse and man." Easy's bright enthusiasm for the drive dims as the diabolical Mouse fosters fear of the white police in two teenage fugitives they pick up along the way. On a turnoff Easy thinks "about that horse in the backyard and how it got there." He takes a first step in adjusting to the hard realities of life. A child's fantasy yields to the knowledge "that my daddy had stolen that horse and sold it for meat."

Easy's mood grows blacker when he reaches the insect-ridden bayou Mouse directs him to. There Easy meets Mouse's trusted friend, the "witch" Momma Jo.

She lodges the travelers in her dank, scantily furnished one-room hut, a reflection of the area's dire poverty. Momma Jo tells a tale about the father of her grown son Domaque, a grotesque hunchback, that initiates Easy into the workings of back-country justice. Domaque's father was a roving, married farmhand Momma Jo fell for when she was barely in her teens. The man abused her, then wept because her father "would have to fight ovah what happened." The issue was settled when "one day Daddy shot 'im." Momma Jo displays, along with other grisly tools of her trade, her lover's skull.

The unpleasant stay with Momma Jo includes a fish slaughter which physically sickens Easy, and reminds him that he has his own sad tale to tell. His mind flashes back to a

slaughterhouse, where his father confronts a white racist boss who cheated him on pay. "I ain't got time t'talk to you, boy," the butcher says.

When his father persists, the butcher voices a racial slur. The white boss is surprised to find himself flat on his back on the bloody floor. Later in his narration Easy mentions that his father ran off that day and never returned. In those years an African-American had no chance for legal recourse.

Mouse knows well that the law belongs to the white man, and he has his brand of justice to apply. From Momma Jo's he takes Easy to the farm of step-daddy Reese. It too reflects the area's substandard conditions in which family abuse seems to thrive. The house has walls leaning inward, and the yard is filled with debris as though the old farmer went into a rage, taking everything he had and throwing it from the house and barn. A venomous verbal battle with the unyielding Reese confirms that Mouse's mother died in terrible abuse and that Mouse himself was a victim of it.

Afterward, Easy experiences a striking change in lifestyle when Mouse leaves him with Miss Dixon, an elderly white woman who taught hunchbacked Domaque to read. Easy notices that the structure of the house has "all the walls standing straight." Inside, his eyes linger on sofas, chairs, tables, musical instruments, enough furnishings for five houses. "That was the finest living that I had ever experienced up to that time," Easy says. The hospitality is nonetheless offered in a racist spirit. "You know it's not proper for white and colored to sit together," Miss Dixon says at dinnertime.

She tells Easy that she is owner of the land all around Pariah, which inevitably promotes racial strife. "Miss Dixon lived alone out in a colored community that hated her because she owned everything, even the roads they walked on." Although Miss Dixon collects no rent, at her death her heirs will reclaim the property. Easy's thoughts that night reflect Mosley's own concern about the relationship between white racism and violence inside the African-American community.

That concern involves the novel's major plot line, the mission of Mouse. Easy ponders why Mouse would exert himself "to get money out of a poor farmer when this rich white lady would be so much of a better target."

The way Mouse metes out justice constitutes the novel's pivotal event, a fatal shootout with Reese that sets up the unwitting teenage fugitive Clifton, who also dies. Easy is a last-minute witness and blundering participant in a crime he tries to prevent. The reaction of Pariah residents to the deaths illumines the sense of community that exists among them and their alienation from the mainstream workings of the white justice system.

Pariah, one of the South's "little colored towns", has a thriving social life in spite of its precariousness and poverty. The local church is active and the county has a "colored deputy," but Easy sees that Reese "had turned the whole world against him and no one cared to look beyond what seemed to be the story."

In time, Easy looks back from the vantage point of completed service in the segregated World War II United States Army. He lived through taunts of white soldiers who called African-Americans cowards for obeying orders to stay behind the lines. He fought the white man's war and emerged a white man's hero, but none of that matters to him. His time in Pariah was his real war. Because Easy has managed to adjust, the novel ends in hope. Easy joins the great 1940s social movement of African-Americans migrating to Los Angeles to try to find a better life.

Techniques

Mosley's task in Gone Fishin' is to convey an intensely personal, darkly introspective journey. Plot and action are less important to this purpose than are settings, characters, and images that invoke mood. Flashback is one way Mosley establishes the sense of mental turmoil in his major character. Easy's chronological narrative is interrupted repeatedly by scenes with his long-lost father, or by delirious and broken images of parents.

The device of first-person narration helps to sustain the reader's sense of immediate contact with Easy's mental processes.

Easy is also remarkably believable because he is based partly upon the real- life experiences of Mosley's father in South Texas. Mosley uniquely blends the muchused, traditional coming-of-age story with actual social history. Critics have praised his ability to reconstruct real historical moments and to reproduce precisely actual dialects and rhythms of speech.

The characters Easy confronts are constructed richly, even if they are bizarre.

Primarily, Gone Fishin' is intended to explore the pact between Easy and the cold-blooded killer Raymond Alexander, Mouse, who recurs in the mystery series.

The two characters are built upon the juxtaposition of opposites and shades of dark and light that fill this novel. Mouse serves almost as alter ego, as the well-intentioned Easy's darkly violent side that gradually emerges because it is essential for survival in a starkly racist world.

At one point, Mosley establishes mood and signals Easy's spiritual descent into moral murkiness with a striking setting that places Mouse's dark form at the center of a shimmering net of firefly light.

"With those stars and lightning bugs I barely made out the path we walked on from the heavens," Easy says, as he moves toward Mouse. "It was like walking in the black skies of night; my whole sense of up and down was gone."

The interplay of odd and ambiguous characters—like the hunchback who quotes the Bible, keeps voodoo dolls, and reads—heightens the reader's impressions of moral complexity and turmoil in Easy. Relationships are reinforced by exotic settings, as in the case of Miss Dixon and Domaque. "That skinny woman and barrel-shaped hunchback looked so strange standing there amongst the umbrella stands and mirrors." Setting and character blend in the case of Momma Jo and evoke Easy's rising sense of moral darkness. Momma Jo, earthmother figure, is surrounded by insect swarms, smells, and tangled vines into which Easy must plunge. Thick swamp supports a sense of witchery as well as the oppressive social environment the novel portrays. Linked to Mouse,

whose dark nature she reinforces, Momma Jo properly beams at his advent "like a smiling black sun."

A mood of mental unease is often conveyed through images of animal or bird life, like the hummingbirds that flit in and out of Domaque's blossoms and make Easy feel funny, then light-headed. The violence in Mouse and the dark memory of Easy's father at the slaughterhouse are reinforced by scenes of fish stunned and dogs killed. Violent imagery lends an especially dark and ominous feel to the culminating moment of moral complexity, Easy's pact with Mouse on the drive back to Houston. It takes place in a morning drizzle that cakes the mud and dirties the world. Bugs by the dozens smash on the windshield, explode into bloody parts, and fall onto a road strewn with dead animals seeming still to bleed as the raindrops hit. The scene's impact is heightened when compared to the journey's start. Then Mouse slept; Easy wanted to sing. Both were quiet as the sun filled in the land with light. To Easy, it seemed "like the world was growing and I was happy to be on that road."

Themes

Easy's "real war" is the moral and philosophical soul-searching he goes through in Pariah. It takes him from naive perceptions of truth to adult realizations about survival in an imperfect world. Gone Fishin' is Easy's philosophical coming-of-age story, but readers familiar with the mystery series will find the typical introspection about moral complexities that a racist situation renders harder to resolve. Easy dates the outset of his spiritual journey from his father's disappearance and his mother's death. Coming to terms with childhood abandonment is a critical part of Easy's maturation process.

Getting over his passive and tenderhearted nature is another. Mouse accuses Easy of being too "sweet an' sensitive" to swat swamp insects. Momma Jo succeeds in a seduction Easy does not want. Easy is sickened by seeing many fish stunned by Mouse's gunshot into a pond, partly because their deaths stir his sense of victimization of the innocent. Often images of his father recur to Easy as he witnesses acts that contradict his strong sense of right and wrong. The fish episode prompts Easy to tell the pivotal memory of his father at the slaughterhouse.

Easy lapses into mental anguish when he sees Mouse coldly shoot and kill four dogs kept by stepdaddy Reese. A fever that plagues Easy since the stay with Momma Jo erupts in shivers as he questions Mouse afterward. "Why you kill them dogs?" Mouse's anger is not a reason to Easy, since there is a moral question of innocence involved. "But them dogs didn't hurt you." The disconcerting visit with white Miss Dixon turns into a stepping-stone as Easy continues to seek spiritual relief. Miss Dixon reinforces a suggestion to learn to read that Easy used to hear from his father. "Reading is one of the few things that separates us from the animals, Ezekiel," Miss Dixon says.

During a tormented night alone in a guest shack at Pariah, Easy comes to the momentous conclusion that he will learn to read and write. Easy sees the pile of papers on the floor. "I looked at those papers and thought that if I could read what was in them I wouldn't have to think about those dogs," or "have to hang around people like Mouse to tell me stories." Easy feels feverish, too weak to warn anyone about the evil manipulations of Mouse. Easy ponders his moral duty.

"Mouse was my friend and you don't cross your friends. Or maybe I just didn't care." Easy's last thought reflects the theme of moral degeneration as a commonplace of dire poverty, complicated in his case by racist segregation. "Life was so hard that we were too tired from just living to lend a hand."

A sermon in Pariah increases Easy's mental turmoil. It invokes also the theme of how religion can bring solace to the hard-working poor. Reverend Peters, a sharecropper, preaches about the biblical Job's great losses, and despair as the devil to conquer. He tailors his topic specifically to African American sharecroppers whose lives can be swiftly swept away. He speaks of the land as God's, and its certain loss as a test of faith. Easy ponders the sermon and Miss Dixon's words.

"Why did I have to live so close to disaster?" Easy wonders. "Why would God want that?" The questions persist. "Was everything I experienced the whim of God or his test to see if I was worthy?"

In his room Easy gives in to bodily weakness and sheds thoughts of responsibility.

"I thought about how Mouse was like Job's devil," Easy reports. "I didn't even care about the dogs."

The fever begins to rage at the same time Easy lapses into fatalistic thoughts.

"There was nothing I could do to stop what was going to happen." Easy's illness bears the markings of spiritual malaise, moral confusion, and powerlessness to exist effectively within a system that fails to provide even the least tool of literacy.

Tortured images of his parents fill his delirium, until Easy wakens clear- eyed and takes the path to Reese's farm. He brought Mouse to Pariah and feels morally responsible. Although shocked at first by the casual attitude displayed in Pariah toward the killings, Easy toughens mentally during the eulogy for Reese.

Easy's last stand for moral idealism occurs on the drive back to Houston.

When the exuberant Mouse offers a cut of Reese's money, Easy lets the bundle set untouched on the dashboard. "I don't believe that Clifton shot Reese," he says, when Mouse lies about his role. "For a moment there I thought that the truth was more important than the need to survive," Easy notes. Mouse changes that approach by making Easy a conspirator in the crime. "If you don't take that money then I know you against me," Mouse says.

Easy realizes that his innocence is no protection. The "wrong words" would bring an end to his life in a matter of seconds or a few days at most. Of this moment, Easy records "that whatever I said would be my first words as a man in this world." Easy takes the payoff bundle of money. "Thanks, Ray," he says to Mouse. The bond thus forged with Mouse marks Easy's arrival at the mature recognition that survival demands a compromise with the worst evil in life, and a willingness to take the consequences. An unsettled moral sense still sickens Easy until Mouse's fiancee EttaMae helps him adjust. "No matter what's wrong," she tells Easy, "you gonna have to stand up to it." She adds the wisdom appropriate for people of his kind. "'Cause when po' people like us stop movin' fo'ward then we die." Her words evoke an important theme of the novel. Success depends upon getting on with life.

Adaptations

In 1997 Dove Audio published an abridged Gone Fishin' in two sound cassettes, read by Paul Winfield.

Key Questions

Moral dilemmas are an important feature of this novel and of the Easy Rawlins mystery series. Readers might dwell in discussion on the pact sealed between Mouse and Easy on the drive back to Houston. What is its symbolic value? What aspect of the pact is impelled by the injustices of white racism? Does impoverishment lead inevitably to diminished moral values? Is moral compromise a fact of life today? Easy's introspective quality is another feature of the series, and as a particular study of mental states Gone Fishin' relies strongly upon the establishment of mood. Readers should find it fruitful to consider the various ways Mosley creates mood. Special attention should be addressed to the ambiguities and contrasts in characters and settings. It is always intriguing to discuss the Easy Rawlins's novels in terms of actual social history. What can be learned about the African American experience in 1939?

Another profitable point to consider is the effectiveness of Gone Fishin' as a novel in its own right, rather than a prequel.

Does it work well that way? Readers should consider also the novel's effectiveness as a prequel to the mystery series. A good way to start is by reading Mosley's Devil in a Blue Dress or A Little Yellow Dog.

1. The novel relates to Mosley's Easy Rawlins mystery series. Does the shootout at Reese's farm make the novel partly a thriller, or exclusively a coming-of-age story?

2.What sort of character is Easy Rawlins? What drives Easy to rush to the final confrontation at stepdaddy Reese's farm?

Is Easy's terrible guilt over Mouse's behavior justified?

3. Consider the women in the novel, especially Momma Jo, Miss Alexander, and Miss Dixon. How does racism affect them? Are they strong characters compared to the men?

4. How would you describe the character of Mouse? Does he represent any sort of morality?

5. What does Easy infer from the congregation's happy reaction to the violent death of stepdaddy Reese? What does this reaction say about the community?

6. What does Easy mean by "Sacred Cow Thinking"? Does it explain the phenomenon he is considering?

7. Is Mosley's use of flashbacks effective?

8. Considering that Easy is the narrator, do his feverish visions truly convey state of mind or do they disrupt narrative flow?

9.What can be said of Pariah's spiritual life when Momma Jo practices witchery, Domaque quotes the Bible and keeps dolls, Peters preaches the Bible in terms of Miss Dixon's land ownership, and a frightened stepdaddy Reese appears at church?

Literary Precedents

Gone Fishin', actually a first novel unpublished until five mysteries were in print, emanates in part from Mosley's reading of the French existentialist writers, among them Albert Camus (The Stranger, 1942; see separate entry). The influence of Camus is evident in the way Easy thinks through moral precepts while he confronts the absurdities of a white racist society. It was not the French novelists, however, but Alice Walker'sThe Color Purple (1982; see separate entry) that opened to Mosley the possibilities for his narrative voice.

Because of its locale and characterizations, Gone Fishin' has been called a Southern Gothic and related to the novels of William Faulkner. Because of efforts to depict the realities of everyday life for African-Americans, Mosley and reviewers of his work place him in the literary tradition of Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Toni Morrison (see separate entries). Critical commentary relates Mosley's dialogue, built upon a remarkable ear for vernacular speech, to that found in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man (1952; see separate entry).

In the broad context of African American literary history, Mosley's work bears a relationship to the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and early 1930s. During this time authors like Hughes and Hurston celebrated African American culture.

There is a touch also of the spirit found in 1940s novels which stressed the desperation of urban African American life.

Stepdaddy Reese's rage recalls that depicted by Richard Wright in Native Son (1940). However, although Mosley places his characters in a strongly racist and impoverished setting, they are survivors rather than the stereotypical victims of protest novels like those of Wright. Mosley is a strong voice in a recent trend of novels about African-Americans that have a multiracial appeal. Easy Rawlins is a particularly outstanding "everyman" success. To aid the recognition that African-Americans belong very much to the publishing world, Mosley gave the manuscript of Gone Fishin' to Black Classic Press.

Related Titles

Gone Fishin' is a philosophical prequel to the Easy Rawlins series of novels, each of which engages the hero in unofficial work as a sleuth during a successive period in actual historical time. The primary setting in the mystery series is the SouthCentral Los Angeles to which Easy flees.

A prominent series theme is survival in the midst of the threatening and morally complex situations that result from urban blight, corruption, and a white racist justice system. Mouse recurs, and less frequently other characters like EttaMae Harris. Easy sometimes recalls the incidents in Gone Fishin'.

Devil in a Blue Dress (1990; see separate entry) introduces Easy as a 1948 aircraft worker fired from his job by a racist boss.

Easy has honored his decision to read by finishing high school. To keep his tiny house in Watts, he accepts money from a white gangster to find a blond woman often seen in African American clubs.

Easy ends up as a reluctant sleuth with an abused orphan to raise and a windfall of stolen money with which to buy the rent al properties he owns in A Red Death (1991; see separate entry). This second novel, set in the 1953 McCarthy era, finds Easy avoiding a tax penalty for not declaring the stolen money. He helps an FBI agent spy on a Jewish communist.

Easy undergoes crises of conscience as he tries not to betray his newfound Jewish friend or Mouse, whose EttaMae is too enticing to resist.

In White Butterfly (1992; see separate entry), gender-related issues mingle with the recurrent series theme of racially motivated police brutality as Easy, married in 1956, tries to keep his wife from leaving him and Mouse from going to prison. The plot turns on solving the killings of "party girls" employed at bars in Watts. In the course of things, Easy loses his marriage but takes in a victim's racially mixed baby girl, whom nobody wants. Black Betty (1994; see separate entry), set in 1961, finds Easy thinking hopefully about President John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King. Easy is trying to be a good single parent while searching for a Beverly Hills family's missing servant, the seductive Betty he knew years ago in Houston.

In A little Yellow Dog (1996; see separate entry) it is November 1963, and Easy is working respectably as a supervising head custodian for the Los Angeles Board of Education. The murder of a seductive schoolteacher at his junior high school involves Easy with murders, school looting, and heroin smuggling.

Besides striving to exonerate himself as prime suspect, Easy copes with Mouse's startling interest in religion and family life.

Coinciding with the shooting of President John F. Kennedy, Mouse ends up a gunshot victim slowly fading away.

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