A Little Yellow Dog Short Guide

A Little Yellow Dog by Walter Mosley

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Characters

Mosley's series hero Easy Rawlins is critically acclaimed as a breakthrough character in mystery writing. Easy is a unique, well-drawn adaptation of the stock tough private eye to an AfricanAmerican social milieu and historical setting. He is at the same time created from universal elements of human nature.

In spite of a harsh childhood of poverty, Easy displays a keen knowledge of the streets, a strong moral sense, and a fine intelligence. He loves to read, and his interests are as diverse as Ian Fleming, Emile Zola, and Marcus Aurelius.

Easy no longer dreams of "making a fortune on speculation," as he once did.

He greatly appreciates the respectable home and work life he has managed to establish, thanks to his job as head custodian. Easy's efforts to survive in his position include identity shifts to fit the situation. Easy adopts phony names, varies his speech, play-acts the expressionless man from "the deep south" when a police lineup overseer calls him "boy." Easy lies if he must, and is always "ready for a new game." He may not know beforehand what awaits him, "but that's what street life is all about—you get thrown in the mix and see if you can get your bearings before your head's caved in."

Easy grips the reader's attention at once and remains there as he makes his way among an almost dizzying array of characters, none occupying his narration for very long at a time. Jesus and Feather, recurring characters in the series, testify to Easy's love of family life and deep concern for children's welfare. Jesus displays the maturity forced early upon children of poorer neighborhoods. He takes care of Feather and the household in Easy's absence, to the extent of hiding away for tougher times some of the grocery money. The children are strong motivation for Easy to solve the case, partly because he cannot allow the police to discover that they were never legally adopted.

Feather hopes for a "mommy" in the home, but Easy's prospects to provide one are grim. Easy brings home to Feather only Idabell Turner's little yellow dog.

Idabell, with her "curves that even a suit of armor couldn't hide," otherwise represents the lust that passes for love in Easy's broken world, and the complicity that entangles him in unwanted sleuthing.

Idabell is the means by which Easy meets Bonnie Shay, the woman with whom he has his most complex relationship. Easy is drawn to Idabell's friend, the beautiful Bonnie, especially when he sees her at home with his children.

The character of Bonnie underscores the issue of racism. Bonnie was born in French Guiana but raised in New Jersey.

She works for Air France, a sign that better race relations exist elsewhere.

"You're the first black stewardess I ever heard of," Easy tells her. As to why she has a home in racist Los Angeles instead of a foreign country, Bonnie admits her former tie with Idabell's brother- in- law, Roman Gasteau. Idabell and Bonnie, and murdered smugglers Roman and Holland Gasteau who abused them, exemplify the broken gender relations prevalent in Easy's environment. Bonnie's failure to be straightforward about her part in the murders taints the romantic attraction Easy feels for her.

Realization of Bonnie's deceptive character sharpens the anguish Easy feels over the coincidental climactic events that draw the novel to a close, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and the gunning down of Mouse. Throughout the mystery series Easy has relied for backup on Raymond Alexander, the "cold-blooded killer" nicknamed Mouse.

"In the hard life of the streets you needed somebody like Mouse at your back."

Even when Raymond—Mouse—was not there, Easy could draw inspiration from their relationship. "Thinking about Mouse and his drive to survive flowed through me like molten steel," Easy says, during one fistfight.

Easy dates a change in Mouse to the year President Kennedy took office, 1961.

Mouse mended his ways then because he thought he may have gone too far and gunned down his own father. Easy hired Mouse and his wife EttaMae for school jobs, at her request. "I'd been in love with her, off and on, for my entire adult life." During the novel Mouse is seen working as a janitor, living with his wife and son LaMarque, talking to a preacher, resorting to peaceable means to settle disputes. "You always did look after Raymond," EttaMae happily tells Easy. She will no longer speak to him after Easy mistakes Mouse's changed approach and takes him to a shootout with gangsters.

Mouse fails to bring a gun, gets shot, and is last seen "in a coma and fading out" as EttaMae brushes off protests and carries him bodily out of a hospital.

Although no other series character comes close in importance to Mouse, Easy occasionally deals with Jackson Blue.

In this novel, Jackson provides Easy with the means to make a deal with the white top bookie Philly Stetz. Jackson is smart, untrustworthy, "better than a library when it came to the criminal side of L.A.—both black and white." Jackson's situation is an example of how AfricanAmericans too often cannot trust each other. Because Jackson was "running a numbers and bookie operation to oppose the established white gangsters," Easy hides him. Jackson "thought that he was open to any black man who knew the price that the gangsters had put on his head." Jackson in turn steals the stash of grocery money Easy's son Jesus hid away for a rainy day.

Gangster Sallie Monroe, present at the shootout that brings down Mouse, is another example of "a good mind" with no legal outlet but crime. Sallie hates whites because they will not respect his abilities. "Like most black men Sallie took out his anger on other Negroes." Various other characters provide Easy the opportunity to display his

cleverness in manipulating the lines of intrigue and vice among a racially mixed group of school personnel, police, and thugs. Mexican American Sergeant Sanchez, white Captain Fogherty and brutal white police officer Drake exemplify the corrupt justice system Easy evades.

Easy owes his custodial job to white area supervisor Bertrand Stowe, who hired him in exchange for a favor. Gangster Sallie possessed compromising photos of Bertrand, a married man, with African-American prostitute Grace Phillips. Blackmailer Bill Bartlett is the man Bertrand ousted from the custodial job, thus setting off the chain of events that haunts Easy now. Haughty white principal Hiram T. Newgate hates the fact that Easy will not "bow down" to him, and so is ready to suspect him of current crimes.

A refreshing change is provided by Ace Muldoon, "the first white man who was ever properly in my employ." Ace defends Easy to the police as "the best boss I ever had."

The best morale booster of all for Easy is trumpeter Lips McGee, a series character who appears infrequently but with force. Lips and his horn have inspired and unified African-Americans in the face of the worst racist oppression. When Lips finishes a set, he is cheered "for all the years he'd kept us alive in northern apartments living one on top of the other," Easy reflects. Lips is cheered "for remembering the pain of police sticks and low pay and no face in the mirror of the times." Lips represents African-American cultural identity, and while he complains that he is getting old and "there ain't nuthin' new t'play," Easy rejoices. "That horn spoke the language of my history," Easy says, when he hears Lips play at the Black Chantilly Club.

Social Concerns

In this fifth novel of the Easy Rawlins historical mystery series the plot turns on urban criminal activity in the racist milieu of November 1963. The AfricanAmerican sleuth Ezekiel or Easy, who narrates, is in his early forties and a single parent of two children. He owns a house and a few rental properties in his usual noir southern Los Angeles locale, which seems to invite trouble. "Southeast L.A.

was palm trees and poverty; neat little lawns tended by the descendants of exslaves and massacred Indians." When his story begins, Easy has abandoned his role of reluctant private sleuth. He has stayed off the streets and away from liquor for two years. He is the supervising senior head custodian at Sojourner Truth Junior High School, situated in a "primarily black" neighborhood mixed with Mexicans and Asians.

Easy's peace is shattered after a morning visit to the classroom of a delightfully lusty mathematics teacher, Mrs. Idabell Turner. The lady vanishes after Easy agrees to hide her beloved but vicious little dog Pharaoh from her dog-hating husband. An anonymous caller to the principal fingers Easy as a suspect for school thefts. A dead man turns up on the school grounds. The man's twin brother—the lady's husband—is found shot in their home. The lady herself surfaces eventually, long enough to be murdered. An international heroin-smuggling operation and marijuana parties enter into the case. Easy is back on the streets as a sleuth because he is innocent and on the short list of suspects.

There are freedom marches going on in the country, but the atmosphere around Easy is rank with racism. The school has a white principal, who thinks Easy must be guilty. "White people like to keep their eyes peeled on blacks, and vice versa." The press provides small coverage of the murders. "You had to kill somebody white to get any kind of news splash in the sixties." The criminal justice system is controlled by whites. The police are inclined to believe that an African-American did it when a crime occurs. They apply the tactics of intimidation or brute force. In the 1960s, "black men couldn't take a leisurely drive in white Los Angeles without having the cops wanting to know what was going on." Besides, if the police suspect someone, "then makin' up evidence is just cuttin' corners for them."

Police corruption extends to collusion with white crime. A well-placed phone call to the police department from a white gangster is all it takes for him to get Easy's home address. The existence of ethnic hatreds makes matters worse. The investigating officer on the case is Sergeant Sanchez, and he has no sympathy for Easy. Sanchez had to struggle to get his job "because the bosses downtown didn't believe that a Mexican could speak good English or work hard." He had to make himself "perfect" to get hired.

"They think our people are lazy, Ezekiel.

They think that we're all no-good crooks.

Because of people like you."

The kinds of power plays occurring among social groups emerge starkly when Sanchez takes Easy to see a white police captain at the Hollywood station. "We went in through the large garage doors; a black man and a brown one strolling through a cavern full of white cops."

White guards react with distrust of both men as they enter, delaying Sanchez and voicing ethnic slurs. In order to frighten Easy, Sanchez takes him to a police lineup by way of jailed inmates who show evidence of brutal treatment. White officers oversee a lineup of suspects whose skin colors reflect "the variety of peoples of Africa and of the white masters who raped those ancestors."

At the jail Easy witnesses a vicious cell beating of one African-American man by another, which white jailers condone.

Easy ponders how African-Americans take out their anger at racist treatment by preying upon each other. The novel presents ample evidence that a corrupt, racist milieu encourages social breakdown. A prostitute connected with the case is unable to care for her baby because of drug addiction. A father repeatedly beats his boy until the school's gym teacher intervenes. Custodial staff find evidence daily that some school children engage in dangerous glue sniffing. In addition, abuse of women was a tactic used by the murdered men to aid their criminal cause.

Techniques

In order to make the novel's intricacies of plot and character work for the reader, Mosley employs a realism that emanates from his own childhood knowledge of South Central Los Angeles. Easy's vocation and his real-estate investments are based upon the actual employment of Mosley's parents with the Board of Education. Mosley's father Leroy Mosley was a school custodian who also owned rental properties. Easy's occasional recollections of a harsh, racist past in Louisiana and Texas are based upon the actual background of Leroy Mosley and his friends, who often talked about the pre-1950s South they knew. In addition to general praise for the characterizations of Easy Rawlins and those with whom he interacts, critics cite Mosley's ability to create dialogue that is true to varying dialects and rhythms of speech.

There are enough characters in the novel to intimidate the most attentive reader, but this too is a realistic device. A superabundant racial and ethnic mix of school personnel, police officers, gangsters, club bouncers, barmaids, children, or old friends of Easy serves to convey the teeming, shifting atmosphere of an early 1960s southern Los Angeles that is described as "almost a nation" of "lost peoples." The use of first-person narration helps to stabilize the reader, who can always rely on Easy's sense of things.

Mosley's realism extends to the attachment of identifying tags to the least characters. Thus Easy's work place comes alive with staff like dark-eyed Jorge Pena, "a red-colored Mexican-American who was loose-limbed, chubby, and fast with a grin," or like Helen Plates, "an obese blond Negro from Iowa" who credits her good health to a daily diet of pies.

Mosley's careful attention to detail is evident even in depictions of the schoolground corpse that turns out to be Roman Gasteau. The body is "maybe Negro, maybe not," light-colored, with straightened hair. Themes of confusion, change, blurred identity are apparent in the comment that the corpse's "racial roots could have been from at least four continents, or a thousand islands around the world." The novel's historical setting is reinforced by references to news events like the civil-rights march on Selma and the dramatic death of President Kennedy.

An early 1960s cultural context is conveyed by occasional comments about the era's popular music stars, television shows, brands of cigarettes. Reminders of the strong theme of unjust racist oppression recur in plantation or slave imagery, most notable when Easy describes the jail.

Mosley's capacity for clever, economical, and hard-boiled detective-novel prose is apparent from two sentences that describe Easy and Sanchez. "He was a living lie detector. I was a living lie."

Mosley often employs animal imagery to bring greater power to a scene. The gangster "Stetz was a cat in the window, frozen before his leap. I was a bird on the ledge, praying for glass." Easy's relationship with the dog Pharaoh has powerful symbolic value in the

novel. Easy's initial ecstatic encounter with Idabell Turner is juxtaposed with a bite by her dog. The dog's recurring hostile presence is a reminder that Easy is dogged by evil he cannot shake. At one point Easy sympathizes with the animal. "He was no good to anybody. But I had lived a dog's life and knew what it was to have the big world turn against you." Easy later sees that the dog is a part of his life, "the dark, dangerous part that always threatened."

In this dark tale that ends unusually bleakly, the dog provides the rare touch of humor. It takes at once to Feather, but hates Easy enough to soil his neatly made bed.

Themes

Easy Rawlins is confronted with problems of how to survive and preserve moral integrity in a society without ideals and values. There are racist overtones to his situation, and the morally corrosive effects of racism bring a vital theme to the Easy Rawlins novels. At the same time, the struggles Easy goes through have much to do with the universal theme that human life is precarious. In an inevitably imperfect society, and especially in one as unprincipled as Easy's, hard work and good morals are not enough to ensure anyone a solid foothold. When the novel begins, it seems that Easy has moved up in life to a respectable Board of Education job because of his good efforts and qualifications. It soon becomes clear from a flashback that Easy got the job by the usual means open to him, which is taking advantage of a situation and making a deal.

In this case, he extricated a white area supervisor from blackmail.

5940 A Little bellow Dog Easy achieves justice by orchestrating criminal elements or his own shady contacts, not by resorting to the corrupt white power system. What marks the mystery series is the way Easy confronts the problem of evil's existence by accepting it, then using it—as best he can—for good. Easy also is the "little guy" who confronts evil as the basically decent working man of any ethnic or racial background. Easy realizes this universal humanity when a white subordinate, Ace Muldoon, supplies him—not the police—with a needed clue in the case. Easy distrusted Ace before, thought the respect he showed was "guile," but "now all I saw was a kindred spirit; a man trod on by his history, his poverty."

Life's problems of survival are compounded by the inevitability of change.

The individual must be adaptable, and Easy certainly is. Yet before the novel ends, he is almost overwhelmed by the shifting scene. "I could feel the world turning under my feet," Easy says, when he sees his friend Mouse, a violent killer, turn into a family man. "You couldn't just live life anymore." It almost seemed that "you had to take notes and study charts just to know how to take the same road to the same place you'd always gone. And even when you got there, it was no longer the same."

Family life brings Easy a special solace and stability throughout his struggles, and the concept that children are important is a significant theme. Easy often thinks of, or returns home with gladness, to his teen-age son Jesus and seven-year-old daughter Feather; Jesus was a child prostitute until Easy rescued him. Easy acquired racially mixed Feather "after the police had forced me to help them catch her mother's killer." Like the glue sniffers at Easy's school, Jesus and Feather illustrate how vulnerable children are in a society without sound values.

Adaptations

In 1997 Books on Tape published A Little Yellow Dog on six sound cassettes, read by Howard Weinburger. In 1996 Audio Renaissance Tapes published an abridged version consisting of two sound cassettes, read by Paul Winfield.

Key Questions

An expansive context in which to discuss A Little Yellow Dog is the obvious one of different portrayals of detective heroes. The group might read a novel by Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, or some other major mystery novelist for points of comparison. Readers might also focus at length on Easy Rawlins as an African-American hero. What specific problems does he face? What moral values does he espouse that are thwarted by the power system he confronts? This line of discussion also should turn the attention of readers to Mosley's innovative use of the novel as social history. The reading of any other novel in the Easy Rawlins series will aid in understanding this approach. Readers will find Mosley's novel Gone Fishin' of particular interest as background for the lines of relationship among a number of characters who recur in Easy Rawlins novels.

1. Easy obtained his supervisory custodian's job by manipulation in the tricky, treacherous world he must inhabit. Once he is established at this higher rung on the ladder, why is it difficult for him to hang on and live "the American dream"?

2. What does Mosley imply when he juxtaposes the shooting of Mouse with the assassination of the President? What is meant by Easy's response to a phone call from Bonnie that comes as Mouse lies fading away in a hospital and the news programs report the President's death? Consider Easy's words "it was like the lie of peace and brotherhood that had hoodwinked so many of my kind."

3. What significance can be drawn from the fact that the school is named for Sojourner Truth?

4. The murder victims Roman and Holland Gasteau are identical twins. Is this a mere device Mosley employs to inject mystery at an early point in the novel, or do reasons of plot, of theme, of symbolism play a part?

5. Why has Mosley injected so many characters into the novel? Is this a device to sustain theme? If so, is it effective or merely confusing?

6. Easy makes it a point to say that Jesus has "a lot of Indian blood" in him and that Feather is racially mixed. Mouse admits that his "momma was part Indian, part Negro, an' then there was some white in there too." What purpose might these blurred lines of origin have to do with the novel's themes or social concerns?

7. To what extent are the two female characters most involved with the novel's crime/plot—Idabell Turner and Bonnie Shay—effective as victims of men's abuse? Consider especially the revelation about Bonnie's part in the case.

Literary Precedents

Mosley has received critical acclaim for creating a detective hero in the hardboiled private-eye tradition of Dashiell Hammett (The Maltese Falcon, 1930; see separate entry) and Raymond Chandler (The Big Sleep, 1939; see separate entry).

Easy's discovery of the culpability of Bonnie Shay in A Little Yellow Dog has been compared to the ending of Hammett's The Maltese Falcon, when detective Sam Spade confronts the deceptive Brigid. Mosley's hero, of course, unlike Spade, understands the workings of crime from the perspective of white racism, blight in African-American urban life, and gangsterism on both sides of the racial line. In the specific area of African-American mystery writing, Mosley's Easy Rawlins novels have precedent in Rudolph Fisher's The Conjure-Man Dies:A Mystery Tale of Dark Harlem (1932). Fisher belonged to the 1920s to 1930s Harlem Renaissance, generally regarded as the first arts movement to involve African-American writers. He is considered the first mystery novelist to focus directly on AfricanAmerican characters in a story set in their community, and to address their issues of concern, notably racism.

Easy Rawlins also has precedent in characters created by Chester Himes.

Harlem police detectives Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones appear in a series of Himes novels concerned with themes of crime and racism, including Cotton Comes to Harlem (1965; see separate entry). To a degree Easy Rawlins emanates from the dark, angry vision of Himes, which was shared by non-mystery novelist Richard Wright (Native Son, 1940; see separate entry). The bleak quality of A Little Yellow Dog owes a debt also to Mosley's appreciation for French existentialist writers like Albert Camus (The Stranger, 1942; see separate entry).

There is a kinship between Easy, a master at hiding openly by changing demeanor or speech, and Ralph Ellison's narrator in Invisible Man (1952; see separate entry). The police lineup scene in A Little Yellow Dog particularly evokes Ellison's novel. Easy comments as he walks away from the police station. "Somewhere on the lineup I had become invisible again. I'd taken on the shadows that kept me camouflaged, and dangerous."

Critics agree that Mosley's work most belongs within a recent renaissance in African-American arts which tends to celebrate African-American vernacular culture. Mosley's reading of Alice Walker's The Color Purple (1982; see separate entry) helped inspire him to write.

Mosley is praised for his innovative creation of the African-American sleuth Easy Rawlins. Easy is not a loner like Hammett's Spade or Chandler's Philip Marlowe, nor a stereotypical victim of the kind found in the "protest" literature of writers like Wright. Easy, a single parent with two children, ages with each novel and functions in a changing milieu of social history. In addition, Easy displays universal qualities of human nature. He appeals to a readership that transcends racial boundaries.

Related Titles

A Little Yellow Dog is fifth in a series of Easy Rawlins mysteries which are set in South Central Los Angeles and its environs at progressive periods of real historical time. Themes typically center on racism, poverty, urban blight, police brutality, and overall survival of the human spirit in tough times and prejudicial circumstances. Devil in a Blue Dress (1990; see separate entry) introduces Easy as an unemployed aircraft worker in 1948 Watts. Easy takes money from a white gangster seeking to find a blond woman who frequents the African-American clubs. The search leads Easy into a dark world of murder, child abuse, and political corruption. He emerges with a small boy to raise, a windfall of stolen money, and a business as unofficial crime-solver in the African-American community.

A Red Death (1991; see separate entry), set in 1953, involves Easy in the McCarthy era fears. Easy owns properties as a result of the stolen money he came by in the previous novel but did not declare for income tax purposes. To avoid a tax penalty he agrees to help an FBI agent spy on a Jewish communist engaged in charity work at the local church. Besides solving murders Easy struggles not to betray either his new friend who is the Jew he must spy on, or his old friend Mouse whose wife EttaMae seems irresistible.

White Butterfly (1992; see separate entry) centers on troubled family and gender relations, miscegenation, and racist police attitudes. Friend Mouse has been jailed in 1956 as a suspect in the murders of several "party girls" in Watts. Easy must help the police in order to bail out Mouse, who is innocent this time, while he rues the fact that the law ignored the murders until a white victim turned up. At the same time Easy, now married, tries but fails to communicate with his unhappy wife. He loses his marriage but solves the crimes and takes to raising the white victim's unwanted, racially mixed baby girl.

Black Betty (1994) is set in 1961, the time of President John F. Kennedy and civil- rights leader Martin Luther King.

Easy ponders a changing world, how "a black man in America had the chance to be a man for the first time in hundreds of years," but his detective work is as tough as ever. This novel explores racially mixed parentage through the search for a Beverly Hills family's missing servant, the seductive Betty whom Easy knew years ago in Houston. Easy also has to convince the violent Mouse that he is not the informant who set him up for his recent jail term.

A prequel to the series, Gone Fishin', (1997; see separate entry), is not a mystery but a coming-of-age philosophical novel. It centers on the bond that is forged in South Texas between nineteen-year-old Easy and the diabolical Mouse. Easy is drawn into a racially segregated world of witchery, desperate poverty, violent killing, and back-country morality when he accompanies his friend Mouse on a mission to South Texas.

Mouse is determined to reclaim his deceased mother's dowry from his hated stepfather.

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