

Plan B Short Guide

Plan B by Chester Himes

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Characters

Himes' protagonists, Grave Digger and Coffin Ed, have a partnership so close-knit that they are almost a single character. Dig ger and Ed struggle throughout *The Harlem Cycle* to achieve some justice for black Harlemites, either ignored or oppressed by the racist legal system, and especially by white cops. In the course of this struggle, they routinely employ savagely violent methods, breaking and bending the law to achieve the Biblical justice of "an eye for an eye", rather than strictly observing the letter of the law. At the end of Plan B, the detectives find themselves holding opposing views about the possibility for violent revolution. Coffin Ed believes that an armed black uprising would result in a genocidal response from the far greater number of white Americans, while Grave Digger believes that a violent revolution is the only way forward for black people following the failure of the Emancipation and the Civil Rights Movement to achieve any kind of equality between the races. At the very end of the work, surprisingly, Ed is shot and killed by Digger. Through the shocking ending, Himes demonstrates the dangers implicit in a violent revolution, and perhaps questions even the possibility of its success.

Tomsson Black, the source of the mysterious machine guns, effortlessly manipulates the stereotypes that rich white people hold about blacks in order to both finance and organize the violent revolution under their very noses. Himes reveals, however, that even Black's brilliant mind underestimates the explosive potential of racial hatred kept in check by the balance of white economic, political and legal power. In the end Black, a figure who can control almost any situation, is as much at the mercy of these volatile historical forces as anyone else.

The figures of Barbara Goodfeller and Henry Hopkins are Himes' grotesque portraits of white liberals. In the figure of Mrs. Goodfeller, Himes asserts that the racist stereotype of the black man as uncontrollable sexual force is not rooted in the reality of black men, but rather is a projection of the desires of some white women. Historically, if the black man was caught with a white woman, he would be brutalized, often killed by a white male lynch mob, avenging the "despoiled flower" of white womanhood.

Himes, through Tomsson Black, asserts that white women like Mrs. Goodfeller want to be ravished by black men. In this way, white female sexuality is one of the greatest threats to black men. Through Hopkins, the man who offers up the venture capital for Black, Himes contends that the white man also desires the black man. To be more exact, Hopkins is vicariously turned on by Black's account of violent sex with Barbara Goodfeller. Like Barbara, Hopkins believes in the stereotype of the black man as oversexed animal. While he does not desire the black man sexually, he desires the sexual power that he believes the black man possesses.

Perhaps the greatest physical danger posed to black people in the work comes from the racism of white policemen. The omnipresence of these racist sentiments is symbolized by Captain Brice, the most senior officer in the work. Like the aforementioned Pan and Van, Brice could not care less about black people, viewing huge numbers of black civilian casualties as acceptable losses for taking out the first black gunman.



Furthermore, Brice tries to stop Digger and Ed when their investigations threaten the rich and powerful whites who line Brice's pockets. Such concepts as "law and order" and "justice", with regards to black people, are meaningless to Brice.

Himes opens Plan B with the figures of T-Bone and Tang, a poor black couple eking out a living through prostitution and drug dealing in a Harlem slum apartment. Through the hopelessness of these two characters, Himes demonstrates the crippling effects of the Harlem ghetto, created and maintained to serve white economic interests and sexual needs. The crucial difference between T-Bone and Tang is dramatized by the mysterious delivery of a package, which contains the first of the machine guns distributed by Tomsson Black. In the mind of T-Bone, the weapon must be given to the white police: even though he knows that he can expect nothing except mistreatment at their hands, he is too scared of their power to think of any other course of action. His wife, Tang, on the other hand, represents the first outpouring of anger at four hundred years of white exploitation of black people. Like the gunmen later in the work, Tang sees in the machine gun a means of revenge, a chance to strike back at the white policemen, the symbols of ongoing racist oppression. Thus, from the very beginning, Himes hints at the racial apocalypse to follow.



Social Concerns

Plan B is the ninth and final work in Chester Himes's "Harlem Cycle", a series that focuses on the investigations of Himes's protagonists Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson. Digger and Ed are two black detectives in a predominantly white police force, who work in the black neighborhood of Harlem. In the novels, they struggle to achieve some measure of justice, both inside and outside of the law, for the poor black residents of Harlem, who seldom receive a parity of treatment under a racist law enforced by a corrupt police force. In Plan B, however, Himes details the failure of his heroic pair of detectives, who struggle from the beginning to right what is presented as a hopeless situation. The work ends with the deaths of both detectives, who have failed to save Harlem, and America as a whole, from a race war between blacks and whites.

Before examining the detectives' downfall, it is essential to look at Himes's Harlem setting. He underlines the fact that Harlem is becoming a slum through urban decay, a degeneration that is maintained by the economic and political power of racist white public officials, and fills the pockets of slum landlords. Himes builds up a detailed and vivid picture of Harlem, a picture that highlights the effects of the racist exercise of power. In a previous novel, *The Real Cool Killers*, he neatly describes both the space of Harlem and the bitterness that this engenders in Digger and Ed, in the words of Digger: "I'm just a cop. . . . If you white people insist on coming up to Harlem where you force colored people to live in vice-and-crime-ridden slums, it's my job to see that you are safe." Himes demonstrates how white interests have created the violent crime-ridden Harlem slums, and how racist economic and legal systems conspire to keep it that way. Harlem is a contained space in which vices are kept sealed away from white communities outside. For Harlem's black residents, poverty and racism are insuperable boundaries, preventing them from breaking out of the hopeless slums. The exoticized mixture of black people and vice, however, appeals to white people, who demand access to Harlem's forbidden treats. It is the actions of powerful white people that have created the slums, yet those self-same white people come to Harlem to frequent the brothels and gambling dens. Himes asserts that the white people who hold positions of power are unwilling to address the underlying problems of poverty, unemployment, crime and drug dealing which drive the decay of Harlem. They like the situation the way it is.

In Plan B, the already dangerously violent Harlem streets are even more claustrophobic, even more hopelessly closed in, and Himes depicts a pressure steadily building with no means of release. What characterizes Himes' depiction of Harlem in this work is the omnipresent heat, and the layers of oppressive smells. The heat "cooks" the residents, simmering their brains along with their resentments, which are ready to explode. In addition to the killing heat, it seems that the scents of generations of wasted, hopeless lives, pointless back-breaking labor to keep inescapable poverty and hunger at bay, have seeped into the buildings. In a blazingly horrific passage, Himes shows the Harlem residents continually confronted with the hopelessness of their own situation. They will be crushed by the same oppressive economic forces that ground the sweat and blood and tears of previous generations of residents into the very fabric of the buildings and



streets themselves: It was not only unbearably hot, but it stank . . . from body odor . . . underarm sweat, unwashed vaginas, unclean beds, rotting semen, unflushed feces, from the mating odors not only of black people, but from black bugs, gray rats, black cats. . . .

It stank from the yearly accumulation of thousands of unlisted odors embedded in the crumbling walls, . . . [the] gangrenous sores, maggoty wounds, untended gonorrhea, body tissue rotten from cancer or syphilis.

Himes describes in angry sickening detail the ways in which the heat and stench cook the residents, symbolically keeping tensions and resentments near the boiling point. Harlem as a whole resembles a rotting body, worn out by generations of impoverishment, enforced vice and suffering. The corruption is physically manifested in the stains left by the symptoms of horrific diseases that rage unchecked. It is in this increasingly hopeless space that Digger and Ed must struggle to operate.

As well as underlining the physical aspects of the horror of the Harlem ghetto, Himes portrays a society fractured by endemic racism. He writes: "[Black people] lived in an atmosphere of fear of the whites and suspicion of each other that had, itself, been caused by white fear. It was like a deadly carousel." The cycle of racial hatred creates a downward spiral that is impossible to reverse, and which further hinders Digger and Ed's work. The most firmly entrenched racist views are voiced by white policemen showing that racism taints every aspect of public office and service. First, there is the figure of Captain Brice, the most senior officer in Digger and Ed's district, who responds to the murder of a black couple thus: "One more dead nigger meant very little to Captain Brice, and [the death of the man] saved the state the cost of convicting him for the murder of the woman."

This chilling attitude is reproduced in the lower ranks: The two blond cops in the cruiser, Pan and Van, were laughing to beat all hell. . . .

T'm going to write a book,' said Van, 'and call it Niggers is niggers is niggers.' . . .

'Yeah, there's something to be said for the gas chambers,' said Pan.

"The stink blew away,' said Van. 'Give them a burst from the siren,' said Pan.

With their near-identical comic names, and their identical Aryan blonde hair, Pan and Van are Himes's caricatures of the worst racism and inhumanity of the white police.

They laugh at the suffering and squalor that the blacks endure in Harlem, and their passing resemblance to Hitler's template for the Aryan master race is reinforced by their callous reference to the gas chambers of the Holocaust. Pan and Van would welcome an American Holocaust.

The threat posed by these fascist policemen is answered and destroyed by a burst from a heavy caliber automatic weapon, wielded by a hidden black gunman. Here we come to the center of the novel's plot, which follows the police investigation into the



appearance of machine guns in the hands of black people across the country, some of whom use the weapons to attack racist whites in positions of power, and even white people in general. In this case, both Pan and Van are killed, along with most of the other white police officers who arrive quickly on the scene. Here, as in the rest of the work, Himes is sharply drawing the lines dividing blacks and whites, showing an America slipping towards a race war.

In Plan B the forces that drive the escalation of present hostilities are powerful historical forces, born of racial tensions and animosities that have been building for four hundred years. Himes' focus on these forces is made plain by the course of the narrative, which shifts between a depiction of the crumbling of the United States due to the race war, and Himes' retrospective on four hundred years of race relations. With a race war looming, the whole country splits along racial lines. In a terrifying, violent, farcical manner, the black threat in the work becomes the black phallus, or its prosthetic extension, the mysterious machine guns being distributed as murder weapons. The white police, characterized in this work as murderous and inhuman, seek in vain to meet the increased violence of the heavy machine guns wielded by the black gunmen. In bitterest sarcasm, Himes describes the police "restoring law and order" by indiscriminately massacring black people.

Amidst the bleak humor of this chaos runs the retrospective, in which Himes charts the growth of the forces which drive the seemingly ludicrous action. The two strands of the plot come together in the gleeful description of the massacre of a whitesonly police parade by a hidden black gunman. Himes makes it plain that this conflict represents in microcosm the many years of racial conflict. Himes draws the opposition of white and black carefully: [The six-thousand-strong parade of white police officers] had been billed as a parade of unity to demonstrate the strength of law enforcement. . . . Only the white race was on view, and it seemed perfectly unified. . . . [The gunman] sat patiently, as if he had all the time in the world, waiting for the parade to come into sight. He had all the rest of his life. He had been waiting for four hundred years for this moment.

The gunman in the cathedral stands for the black race, a symbol of the rage four hundred years in the building. He faces an all-white parade that, Himes writes, seemed to deny that there is a black race, carrying the implied threat of racial genocide. Himes fills five pages with the account of the carnage, as white bodies are literally blown apart. Here, as throughout the work, Himes offers violent vignettes that suggest that racial reconciliation is an impossibility. Facing a conflict of this magnitude, Digger and Ed can only be ineffectual. In a society lethally divided on racial grounds, there is no middle ground between white world and black world in which Digger and Ed could serve as buffers, as hidden forces of moral order and justice.



Techniques

In Plan B, Himes uses the omniscient third person narrative so familiar from the hard-boiled detective fiction of Raymond Chandler. Himes often reports even the most horrific of incidents in an unemotional, clinically descriptive way, so as to subtly heighten the reader's horror, and hint that these atrocities are fairly commonplace. There are moments, however, when Himes' narrative is full of rage, such as his description of the horrific living conditions of slum apartments, or the violent racism of the white policemen. In contrast with the mostly clinical narration, these passages seem to jump off the page, so that Himes' outrage becomes the reader's own.

In the figures of Coffin Ed and Grave Digger, Chandler presents the reader with two heroic protagonists: they seem to be larger than life, their deeds little short of miraculous. In this way, Himes primes the reader's expectations: in a piece of detective fiction, with two heroic protagonists, surely they will save the day, no matter how desperate the situation. There is, however, a sense of futility surrounding Digger and Ed, as when they cruise around at the start of the novel, looking for drug users. Digger and Ed only seem able to react to events, to deal with effects, such as drug users, while the causes, such as racial oppression, poverty and the multi-million dollar drug-dealing operations, remain untouched and untouchable. They rush madly around the city, trying to save the day, but Himes' description of their actions carries something of the frantic and the desperate.

In this way, Digger and Ed's mystique, as the heroic good guys, is punctured, and readers' expectations foiled. This contributes to the sense of a situation spiraling downward out of control as exemplified by Himes' description of racial hatred as a deadly carousel. This comes to a head in the ending of the novel: the two heroes, betrayed by their superiors, dismissed from the force, intuit the identity of the villain behind the distribution of guns, who is fueling the racial war. This scene, reminiscent of a hundred last-minute rescues both in fiction and in Hollywood films, is very familiar to the reader. By having Digger shoot Ed, and then be shot in turn by Tomsson Black, Himes shatters the reader's expectations utterly: the heroes are casually killed, and the villain comes out on top easily. The tale ends with no indication that America's crisis will be resolved short of a war of racial annihilation: even the master villain has lost control of events. In this way, Himes makes it clear that the action in the work is driven by historical forces and hatreds too old and too powerful to be controlled or stopped by anyone. The reader is left with the impression that, unless the underlying causes of suffering in the work are addressed, there may be more than a hint of prophesy in the work.

Themes

One of the defining characteristics of Plan B is Himes's use of the grotesque, a mixture of horror and laughter, in his descriptions of the Harlem slum and the upsurge in racial violence. A case in point comes when a black man interrupts a production of *Porgy and Bess*, attacking the racism in the work: "Why don't you white mothers leave go them slavery-time songs about lazy sinning black people?" The scene degenerates into a brawl as a young white man tries to silence the black man, who fights back with a knife. Once the black man has been disarmed, Himes's manic humor highlights the grotesque spectacle that ensues: Not only did the blond young man with the slashed chin take charge of the knife, he flaunted it in the black man's face and threatened to cut out his nuts and feed them to the squirrels. But his four companions were not animal lovers, so they let the black man keep his nuts, no doubt to the frustration of local squirrels.

The humor here is dark and brutal, but the worst is yet to come: the white man proposes, with the support of many of the crowd, a mock lynching, which the crowd sees as "a new kind of minstrel show."

Racial violence in the work, especially lynching, the most dramatic and historically grounded expression of absolute white vigilante power over black people is viewed by the white characters as a racist comedy. The horror implicit in this humor becomes more apparent when the fake lynching turns into a real lynching. Similarly, as the racial war escalates, Himes offers the spectacle of "The Black Hunt," where white people hunt black people as if they were game animals.

This key link between the grotesque and racial violence comes through most clearly in Himes' depiction of the aimless violence of the white police: "police cruisers were coming like avengers, their sirens screaming like escaped souls from hell, their red eyes blinking like Martian space ships. . . .

No police in the history of the world looks as dangerous and acts as violent as the American police." The police cruisers are terrifying, filled with the most violent of men. The violence and inhumanity of the police are symbolized by their alien equipment. The farcical degree of aimless violence that they employ is heightened by their secret weapon of urban pacification, an insectoid, alien-like tank, absolutely featureless except for its 105 mm cannon. The cannon acts as an unseeing eye, blindly annihilating all in its path. Whenever the tank is used, the number of innocent bystanders and white policemen killed outnumbers the casualties of the black gunmen tenfold. Thus, Himes shows the laughable ineptitude of the police response to the gunmen, and underlines the horrific cost in human lives.

Himes's protagonists, Grave Digger and Coffin Ed, seek to protect the black community from the callous idiotic brutality of the white policemen. Digger and Ed struggle to trace the source of the machine guns that are fuelling the conflict, and thus to prevent the massacre of the Harlem residents. Digger and Ed are not naive and unskilled. In the previous novels, they have been a force of justice for Harlem residents. They are



surrounded by an almost mythical aura of violence, embodied by their ever-present nickel-plated pistols. Himes sets the scene when we meet the two detectives in the first novel in the series, *A Rage in Harlem*: Grave Digger and Coffin Ed weren't crooked detectives, but they were tough. They had to be tough to work in Harlem. Colored folks didn't respect colored cops. But they respected big shiny pistols and sudden death. It was said in Harlem that Coffin Ed's pistol would kill a rock and that Grave Digger's would bury it.

Throughout the series, Digger and Ed whip heads with their big pistols, employing extra-legal methods which afford them the slightest chance of solving the cases, often bending the law to recompense the Harlem residents for their suffering. As for their disempowerment in the face of a racist police system, they have developed ways of working around it, and continually turn the tables on their unwitting superiors. Digger and Ed's advantages lie in their silent, unseen movement between the black world of Harlem's criminal underground and the equally corrupt white world of law enforcement. Intimidating or manipulating the powerful figures in both worlds has previously allowed the detectives to succeed in the face of overwhelming odds. Unfortunately, their methods will fail them in *Plan B*, as the looming race war closes down Digger and Ed's ability to move between these worlds and to serve as a buffer between black people and white people. Their investigations are hampered by the racism and corruption of their superior officers. Himes, moreover, suggests in this work that Digger and Ed's extra-legal ring of criminal informants, and their use of violence to beat information out of suspects, may exacerbate the situation rather than resolve it.

Finally, Digger and Ed guess the identity of the culprit, Tomsson Black, the most respected black man in the United States, and the ultimate trickster figure. Black uses a rich white woman's sexual infatuation with him (as a black man, he represents for her the ultimate in violently virile sex), and white liberals' insulting patronage of black people, to build a fortune. This money, milked from racists, finances the purchase of guns, and a countrywide corporation to complete their distribution to all black people in America, in order to overturn the racist hierarchy. The ironic measure of Black's success as a trickster can be seen in the fact that Digger and Ed are fired for slandering the greatest black friend of the white race, when they voice their suspicions about Black.

Forced to operate as private individuals, the detectives go to see Black, who tells them that he initially intended to arm the whole black race in secret. This plan has fallen apart, however, as the guns are immediately used by their recipients: Black has misjudged the power of the four hundred years of suppressed racial resentment.

He states that he has no option but to continue to arm the black race, and to hope that white casualties dissuade the white race from wiping the black race from the face of America. In this confrontation, Himes shows that the absolute divisions in the work are lethal to Digger and Ed, who rely on their ability to move between black and white worlds. As a result of their loyalties to their race, they are forced to take sides: 'You can't kill Black, man,' Grave Digger explained [to Coffin Ed]. 'He might be our last chance, despite the risk. I'd rather be dead than a subhuman in this world.'



'And all your relatives and friends and the rest of the black people killed in the process,' . . . Coffin Ed said, reaching for his pistol with his left hand. 'I'm gonna kill him so my people can live. . . . If you try to save this maniac's life, you're gonna have to kill me, Digger.' Grave Digger let his gun answer. He shot Coffin Ed through the head. As he stood over the body of his dead friend, Tomsson Black drew a small automatic . . . and shot Grave Digger through the back of the head.

Finally, Digger and Ed die on opposite sides of the insoluble racial tangle, driven by inexorable yet contradictory historical forces. With racial lines drawn so starkly, there is no space between white and black worlds for them to forge a compromise or prevent the chaos. Himes depicts the failure of their many techniques and skills, which are useless in the lethal climate of the race war. The last words of the book belong to Tomsson Black's secretary, who says "I hope you know what you're doing". These hesitant, final words imply that Black is completely caught in the chaos as well, no more in control than Digger or Ed.

Literary Precedents

In terms of literary precedents, one of the most important influences on Himes' work is that of the hard-boiled school of American detective fiction, by Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler and Mickey Spillane.

Himes himself acknowledges his debt to the hard-boiled school, claiming that all he did to the form was "make the faces black."

This comment should not be taken at face value, as Himes's work shows a keener race and class consciousness than earlier hardboiled writers, as well as an intimate knowledge of the harshest of city areas, far more dangerous than Chandler's "mean streets."

Indeed, Himes's Harlem setting could almost be said to be a character in itself.

Nonetheless, his mode of narration, his heroic protagonists, their wry humor, their level of violence and the breathless, lastminute resolution of convoluted plots all owe a great deal to hard-boiled detective fiction.

Himes' detective fiction is also influenced by elements from the African American racial protest novel, made popular by writers such as Richard Wright. Like Wright, Himes' work shows an attention to the politics of segregated spaces, and the ways in which black people are physically marginalized by being driven into the ghetto.

In *The Harlem Cycle* there are passages filled with as much rage as ever filled Wright's work, perhaps even more so. However, Himes' usually objective unemotional narration and the humor prevalent in his work (though it is often dark and brutal), contrast utterly with Wright's deadly serious and more overtly political writing. Himes' characteristic style comes in part from his skillful fusion of these disparate genres.



Related Titles

While Plan B, as with the rest of Himes's detective novels, stands perfectly well alone, it can also be read as the conclusion of the long-running "Harlem Cycle". In this way, the reader can chart Himes' development of Digger and Ed, from their relative unimportance in *A Rage in Harlem* (where the narrative focuses more on the criminals than on the police), to their central role in *All Shot Up*, and their eventual demise in this work. It seems as if Himes' vision gets more bleak as the series progresses: the scams that the criminals run on Harlem residents become nastier, while Digger and Ed's violence seems more pointless, and their ability to bring events to a fair conclusion becomes more and more suspect. In the final three works, Digger and Ed, previously heroic and dangerously competent, are shown to be increasingly clumsy, slowing down under the aches and pains of numerous beatings suffered during the course of the novels. They become disaffected with the worsening state of Harlem and their growing powerlessness in a racist and increasingly corrupt police force.

In his development of his aging characters, and the ways in which he highlights the difficulty of his protagonists to react to sweeping social and political change, Himes' "Harlem Cycle" can be paralleled with Walter Mosley's *Easy Rawlins* books, such as *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990) and *Black Betty* (1994). Mosley's work, like Himes's, shows the ways in which public space is segregated, as Mosley's protagonist Easy Rawlins, normally a dangerous and extremely competent character, is often rendered ineffective when he strays into white neighborhoods. Furthermore, Mosley underlines the racism among white policemen and politicians, whose position is secured through their dominance in economic, social and political spheres.

IDEAS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION In Plan B, Chester Himes shows, through the abrupt and shocking deaths of his protagonists, that the heroism of individuals is often useless in the face of larger historical forces. Throughout the narrative, Himes underlines the ways in which racist power systems are organized to maintain the suffering of ghetto residents. These same power systems hinder his protagonists, preventing them from getting justice for the Harlem residents while Harlem is torn apart by the overkill approach of the so-called "forces of law and order." Through the lack of resolution in the ending, Himes hints that a racial apocalypse is the inevitable result of America's history of racist oppression.

1. Do you think that Digger and Ed are heroes in this work? Could Tomsson Black be read as the hero of the work?
2. Thinking about the grotesque, and the tension it creates between laughter and horror, do you think that Himes succeeds in discomfiting and disturbing his audience? What are the consequences of Himes' use of the grotesque?
3. Chester Himes said: "for a revolution to be effective, it has to be violent. . . ."



In any form of uprising, the major objective is to kill as many people as you can." Does this surprise you in light of the book's ending? Do you think that Himes presents such a revolution in this work as both a possibility and a positive force?

4. How do you read Digger and Ed's violence? Is the violence more or less problematic for a contemporary reader?

5. Do you agree with Edward Margolies who, in his study of Himes' work, dismissed "The Harlem Cycle" series as "a number of lively potboilers"? Do you think that there is literary merit in the work? If so, would you regard Plan B as a work of literature?

6. Do you think that Himes' portrayal of Barbara Goodfeller is sexist and/or racist? Why or why not?

7. How do you read Chester Himes's intermingling of the basic plotline with a retrospective on racial history? Do you find the strategy effective?

8. Thinking of such atrocities as the beating of Rodney King, do you think that Himes' portrayal of racism among white police officers reflects an ongoing problem?

9. Ending with the failure of the detectives to stop Tomsson Black and bring him to trial, can this work can be called a detective novel? Why or why not?



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