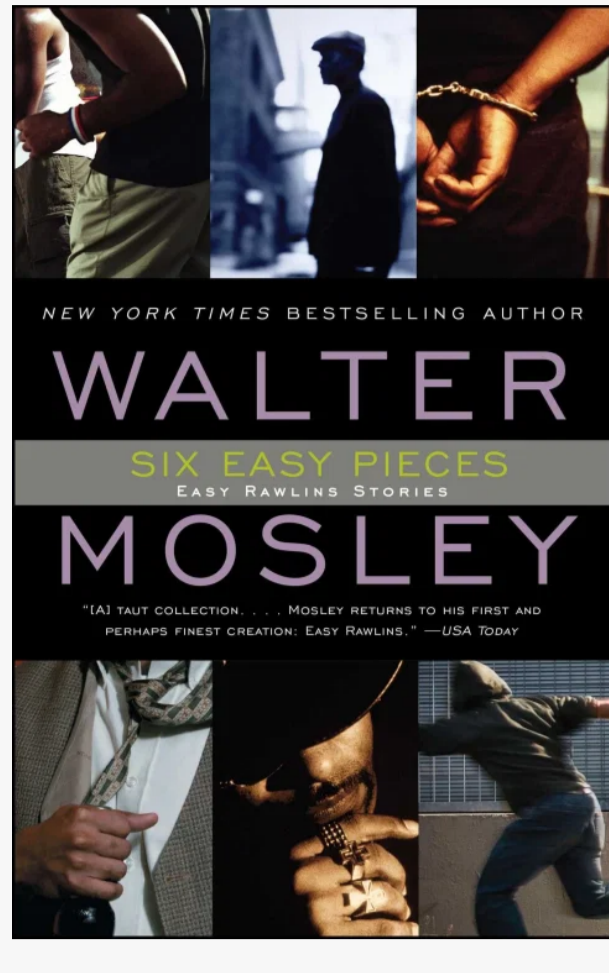


JET FUEL REVIEW BLOG

Solving Crime is Easy, A Mysterious Analysis

October 22, 2018 Editor

One author whose work I've had on my to-be-read list is Walter Mosley. Most famous for his novel *Devil in a Blue Dress*, many of Mosley's books focus on the tales of the hard-boiled private investigator and Los Angeles resident, Ezekiel "Easy" Rawlins. Easy, as an investigator, always drew my interest. His character is methodically, sometimes morally, opposite from detectives like Hercule Poirot or Sherlock Holmes, since he's more willing to blur the lines between right and wrong in the name of justice and truth. After reading and analyzing the 1930s Harlem novel *The Conjure-Man Dies* by Rudolf Fisher, one of the first mystery novels written by an African American, I wanted to dip my toes into the 1960s experiences of Easy Rawlins. I figured the best way to skim the surface would be with one of Mosley's more recent releases, a short story collection entitled *Six Easy Pieces*.



<http://bit.ly/2yRNbzg>

The stories are set in L.A. during the 1960s—a period where organized crime and gang activity was ever-present in the city. Throughout the short stories, we see L.A. citizens, especially those within the black community Easy navigates, possessing a mistrust for police. This mistrust has citizens seeking Easy's help to solve their problems instead of the authorities. We see the traditional influence of the times in religion and gender roles. We see generous play with diction and vernacular, creating an immersive and authentic reading experience (similar language strategies in black vernacular were also recreated in Harmlemites in Fisher's *The Conjure-Man Dies*). We also see Easy Rawlins struggling to accept the death of his best friend, Mouse, so much so that he searches for evidence of Mouse being alive—an underlying plot that strings together all of the small, side mysteries within each short story.

All of these small mysteries operate as a subversion from the monotony of life. Mosley commands the narrative to flit back and forth between Easy's everyday life as a head custodian for a junior high school and a foster father of two children to Easy questioning L.A. citizens connected to the mysteries presented to him and questioning citizens for information on Mouse.

Mosley also subverts some of the typical elements of mystery for a narrative more indicative of the times of L.A. in the 1960s. The stories contain various scenes of action—fitting for a vigilante and anti-hero investigator. In one scene of the murder mystery "Crimson Stain," Easy meets and questions a minister about his love affair with the dead party and former member of the congregation. Following that meeting, two deacons from the church follow Easy out to his car—one deacon garnishing a lead pipe (Quick PSA: Don't forget your lead pipes when you go to church next Sunday). However, Easy's opponents were always met with his resistance: "I wasn't worried. When I got to my car, I bent down to tie my shoe. I also got the .25 caliber pistol out of the elastic band of my sock" (Mosley 76). In many scenes, Easy is armed with a pistol. In one scene he even uses a bat for defense, unlike Hercule Poirot who wields a dapper cane and an even dapper moustache.

Within this collection, Easy is also a lone wolf in his investigations since Mouse, his crime partner, has passed away. Also, since Easy works on the fringes of the law, he is without the help of other detectives, police officers, or doctors. Instead, Easy must play telephone and garner gossip from the other characters—taking very proactive steps to uncover secrets. He must take the mystery into his own hands. He must eavesdrop. He must stalk as in one short story, "Silver Lining," Easy follows a man he suspects of kidnapping his friend's sister. The narrative is written in first person with stream of consciousness elements, allowing for the audience to be present in every step of Easy's thought process.

Easy also isn't a stranger to lying and manipulation himself. As he searches for the person behind a fire at the junior high school where he works, as he searches for the kidnapped sister of a close friend, as he searches for the killer of a prostitute who may possess knowledge about Mouse, he interrogates the citizens he meets, sometimes threatens them, sometimes manipulates them with lies or empathetic stories to attain the truth. He is not above breaking the rules to get to the bottom of a mystery.

Instinct and street knowledge also become elements Mosley intertwines into Easy's detective work. While Easy's character is well-read, he is also an unlicensed investigator without law enforcement training. However, his lack of license doesn't seem to matter as what he possesses most of all is a grand understanding of the people in his community, of the way the world works. This embedded instinct and knowledge guides Easy throughout the mysteries and keeps him persistent in the search for his friend Mouse.

His persistence or his character's motivation—finding truth about the death of his best friend—inserted in the narrative, serves as a backbone for this collection. The motivation drives Easy as well as the readers to seek the truth and become emotionally invested in the crimes. Easy's quest also becomes a coping mechanism in his time of loss as well as a quest to free his guilty conscience—since Mouse died trying to protect Easy.



In turn, we are freed through his exploration, through the satisfaction that comes with Easy piecing each mystery—big and small. We find a freedom in the danger Easy explores as Mosley notes, "Loving freedom and loving danger are one and the same thing for most black men. Freedom for us has always been dangerous. Freedom for us has been a crime as far back as our oldest memories" (Mosley 99). Mosley freely navigates topics of social inequalities and social injustice, themes of grief, loss, and the complexities of relationships between friend and friend, mother and son, sister and sister. While grim, these stories call on us to cherish our relationships while we have them and acknowledge the immense influence they hold over us.

— Kayla Chambers, Art & Design Editor; Layout Editor

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