



Walter Mosley, The Art of Fiction No. 234

Interviewed by Thomas Gebremedhin

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According to Walter Mosley, he wrote his first good sentence in 1986 while working as a programmer for Mobil Oil in New York City. He was thirty-four. Since then, he has published fifty-four books, in genres as varied as science fiction, erotica, and drama, and has been honored with numerous prizes, including a PEN Lifetime Achievement Award, a Grammy (Best Album Notes, 2001, for Richard Pryor's . . . *And It's Deep Too!*), and the Grand Master Award, in 2016, the highest honor granted by Mystery Writers of America. He has also written a number of screenplays for film and television; he's currently at work on a television adaptation of his book *Futureland* (2001) with Forest Whitaker. But Mosley is perhaps most celebrated for his crime series about the misadventures of Ezekiel "Easy" Rawlins, an African American World War II veteran turned detective. The fourteen Easy novels—starting with *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990)—span nearly three decades in their protagonist's life, from 1939 to 1968, tracking the shifting political and social landscape of South Central Los Angeles in

the process. Like Philip Marlowe and Sam Spade, Rawlins struggles with rocky romances and heavy drinking, but, as a black man, he also faces police harassment and racist clients and must negotiate the constant code-switching required to work in and out of white neighborhoods.

Mosley, sixty-five, was raised in Watts, a blue-collar neighborhood in Los Angeles. His mother, a Jew from New York, and his father, an African American from New Iberia, Louisiana, worked in the same school district, as a clerk and a janitor, respectively. In 1965, when Mosley was thirteen, Watts went up in flames following a disagreement between a white policeman and a black motorist suspected of drunk driving. The Watts riots, which lasted five days, drew attention to the routine violence and segregation directed at the black population of Los Angeles, which had surged since the start of World War II as hundreds of thousands of African Americans migrated from the South in search of jobs. Mosley doesn't shy away from such realities in his work, but they don't consume his characters' lives either—lives that abound in resilience, intrigue, laughter, and friendship.

This interview took place over two breakfast meetings in New York City last summer: one at Soho House, a hotel and members' club in the Meatpacking District; the other at a Sicilian restaurant in Lower Manhattan. Despite the heat, Mosley wore a trilby hat and a sport coat. For our second meeting, he added a lapel pin: a Dalmatian. Each session began a little stiffly, with formal questions and guarded answers, but both times he soon opened up and proved expansive, curious, and patient.

INTERVIEWER

You've written that your parents were big readers. What did they read?

MOSLEY

They read everything from science fiction to psychology, from Dickens to Twain to Conrad to Mickey Spillane.

INTERVIEWER

I imagine they encouraged you to read, too?

MOSLEY

They read, and so they expected me to read. They weren't on my ass about it.

INTERVIEWER

Were you a good student?

MOSLEY

No.

INTERVIEWER

In what ways were you bad?

MOSLEY

In what ways are you asking the question?

INTERVIEWER

Academically, were you a good student?

MOSLEY

No, I was not.

INTERVIEWER

Did you behave in your classes?

MOSLEY

I did not. I was loud. I was playful. I didn't necessarily have great concentration.

INTERVIEWER

What kinds of things were they trying to get you to read in school?

MOSLEY

History, geography. And, you know, there were no black people in it. Sometimes it felt like it wasn't my world. It was like some other world I was reading about.

INTERVIEWER

But your day-to-day world was the almost entirely black neighborhood where you lived. What was Watts like at the time?

MOSLEY

It was a working-class neighborhood. But we moved over to West LA when I was thirteen, barely six months before the riots.

INTERVIEWER

What's your strongest memory of the Watts riots?

MOSLEY

I remember my father was sitting in the living room, drinking, and he was saying—he was almost crying—that he wanted to be out in the riots, rioting, because he felt the anger that everybody else felt, but he didn't want to go out because he knew it was wrong. So instead, he sat there drinking and kind of sobbing a little bit, because he was so frustrated.

INTERVIEWER

What about it was wrong?

MOSLEY

It's wrong to shoot at somebody or burn down their store if you don't know what they've done. He wouldn't have minded going after

somebody he knew did something wrong. Now, of course, some people would have argued that all the businesses were bad, but my father, he was too country to think like that.

INTERVIEWER

When did you leave California?

MOSLEY

In 1971. I went to Vermont for school, Goddard College. I just needed to get as far away from my parents as I could. I had a great time there, although I'm not sure they liked me. I was studying, but it was a freewheeling education, and I really wasn't ready for it.

INTERVIEWER

Did you graduate from Goddard?

MOSLEY

No. They kind of kicked me out. I kept hitchhiking back and forth across the country, and eventually my adviser said, You're really not getting much out of this experience. Your parents are spending all this money—maybe you'd better do something else.

INTERVIEWER

Where were you hitchhiking?

MOSLEY

California, Oregon, Seattle. Up to Maine. Down the coast. We were hippies. We'd get high and have sex.

INTERVIEWER

Sounds nice. So what did you do after Goddard?

MOSLEY

I became a computer programmer. I took a six-week course—didn't learn a thing, but I still got hired as a trainee. Then I went to Johnson State College, in Vermont. I graduated after a while, and I attended a political-theory Ph.D. program at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Something happened there. One day I was reading a Time-Life book about the painter Goya. I forget who the king was at the time, but he was one of the few enlightened kings of Spain. In the capital, there was a lot of crime. Men wore these big capes and hats, which made for a great disguise. The king was mad about all the crime, so he made that outfit illegal, but then there was a riot because men were so attached to the capes and hats. So the king repealed the law. He found a new adviser and said, Look, you've got to stop all this thieving. The new guy said, Don't worry, your Majesty, I got it covered. And the next day, he made the cape and hat the uniform of the executioner, who worked out in the open every day. People stopped wearing them just like that. Nobody wanted to be identified with the executioner. And I thought, I've learned more in reading this one stupid page in this Time-Life book about Goya than I have in my Ph.D. program. So I quit.

INTERVIEWER

Is that when you moved to New York?

MOSLEY

I moved to Boston. I was a programmer for a while. Then I moved to New York in '81. I started writing in 1986.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you start writing?

MOSLEY

No reason. I knew I wanted to be creative, and one day I just started writing. I wrote a sentence—"On hot sticky days in Southern Louisiana the fire ants swarmed." I said, That's a good sentence. I'd never been to Louisiana. I'd never seen a fire ant.

INTERVIEWER

And you enrolled in a writing program at City College?

MOSLEY

Yeah. Edna O'Brien was my teacher. I love Edna to death. I don't think people appreciated her enough. I knew I wasn't a very good writer. And how the fuck could I be, right? I also knew that Edna O'Brien was one of the greatest living writers in English. I'd read her books. It wasn't one of those classes where you read your own story. If you wrote a story, Edna would read it to the class. And with that Irish brogue of hers? It was like, Oh my God, an angel is reading my story—it doesn't matter how bad it is!

INTERVIEWER

She was a generous teacher.

MOSLEY

Yes, but she didn't like to have meetings with her students. Many of the other students were very unhappy about that. I just said, Who the fuck do you think you are that you should be meeting with Edna O'Brien? What are you going to do? Are you going to argue with her about how your bad sentences don't work? I was happy. I mean, we had lunch, we had coffee together, stuff like that, but we just talked. I loved it. She actually wrote about me in her memoir.

INTERVIEWER

What did she say?

MOSLEY

It was funny—she said, I told Walter that he had a Jewish history and he had a black history, that he had so much that he could say, and he needed to write about it. I'm like, Of all the things Edna didn't need to tell me, that was it. I knew that. But she did say something else that

mattered to me. One day, after she read a new story I'd written, she looked at me and said, Walter, you should write a novel. I went home and six weeks later I had written *Gone Fishin'*.

INTERVIEWER

You wrote *Gone Fishin'* before *Devil in a Blue Dress*? Why wasn't it published first?

MOSLEY

I sent it out to a lot of agents, and they all said, It's wonderful writing, but it's not commercial. There was this notion at the time, in the late eighties, that white people didn't read about black people, black women didn't like black men, and black men didn't read. So who's going to read my book about two young black men coming of age in the Deep South? They were wrong, of course.

Then I wrote *Devil in a Blue Dress*, which I didn't expect to be a mystery, but it turned out to be. They said, Wow, that's new. A black detective.

INTERVIEWER

From my experience, the book-publishing industry is very white and very upper middle class.

MOSLEY

All industries in America that don't rely on money from the government remain whatever they were in the beginning. And most of these, of course, are white companies. My response was to start the Publishing Certificate Program at City College, where people from publishing—those white people from publishing—taught people of color about it so the people of color could get jobs later, but they could also talk with and relate to people like themselves. If you experience a hierarchical problem at work, you can call one of your teachers from the program. If you encounter a social issue, you can talk to one of the friends you made at the program. You bolster yourself with these types

of connections. One of the problems with the publishing industry is that you hire one black person and nobody understands them. Like a black woman comes in and says, I want to do a book about hair. And white people go, But people aren't interested in hair. She goes, No, *you* ain't interested in hair. Black women could read books about hair for five years straight. It's unconscious racism. It's about their inability to understand. I would argue with my editor—

INTERVIEWER

Your editor was white?

MOSLEY

All my editors have been white. Except Paul Coates, who published *Gone Fishin'* at Black Classic Press. But one day, I'm talking with my editor at Doubleday, and we're having this argument about my book *Debbie Doesn't Do It Anymore*. There's a part where she goes to visit her dead husband's white mother. It's six o'clock in the morning and she's going back and forth to her car, getting her makeup to get ready to go out into her day. Somebody calls the police, the police come, and they put her in handcuffs for burglary. My editor says, They wouldn't do that.

INTERVIEWER

They wouldn't put her in handcuffs?

MOSLEY

Yes. And I said, Well, they did it to Henry Louis Gates, and he says, He's a man. Well, they did it to a seven-year-old girl in Florida. My editor's response was very funny. He goes, I read the news!

And I get it—*he* probably wouldn't put a black woman in handcuffs. But let's be clear, when you arrest somebody, you put them in handcuffs. Anybody. Including the seven-year-old girl. That's the law. The problem is that they arrest us more than they arrest them, and maybe they should have looked in the house before they blamed

Debbie for burglary.

INTERVIEWER

How did you resolve it?

MOSLEY

I just said, We're gonna leave it the way it is. People push back and we fight. But so what? Sometimes they're right. Sometimes the editors make sense.

INTERVIEWER

In *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Easy Rawlins is getting beat up by the police for no reason and says, "I didn't believe that there was justice for Negroes." That novel is set in the late 1940s. Do you think things have changed in any meaningful way since then?

MOSLEY

Well, it's certainly different. A cell phone means that I can take a picture of you doing whatever you're not supposed to be doing—or maybe what you are supposed to be doing. And, because of the Internet, I can make that image available to a billion people. And I say, You know this event that you think is new? This event has happened every single day, somewhere between Argentina and Alaska, for five hundred years. Every day. Nobody has taken a day off. Every day it's happened at least once. But now more people are aware because of a kind of broadening of culture, which comes not just from the Internet but from a lot of different things, including hip-hop music. A lot of people who do not consider themselves people of color identify with the events because they identify with the music. And so, the cell phones, the five hundred years of events, the people who now listen to music by black people and identify with those black people—all of that together means there's a change in the air.

INTERVIEWER

Which writers inform your work? Clearly you've read Dashiell Hammett.

MOSLEY

I read a lot of Hammett, Chandler, Ross Macdonald. Macdonald is the best wordsmith, even if all his stories are kind of the same. I do like Doyle, for Sherlock Holmes. And I like Langston Hughes and his Simple stories. I go all over the place with science fiction. I like science-fiction short stories. I like them even more when they're interrelated. And I like Baldwin—he is one of the great voices of African American writing, though I'm mostly drawn to his nonfiction. He's so cool in his anger, so smart. *Giovanni's Room* is very good.

INTERVIEWER

Giovanni's Room is excellent. I'm frequently looking for that sort of overlap in the African American experience, specifically the overlap of race and sexuality, like Baldwin's experiences as a gay black man. It's not easily found.

MOSLEY

I remember talking to a writer about Langston Hughes. She said that Hughes took her to Paris, but then got off the boat and just disappeared. She didn't see him again until it was time to get on the plane and leave. That's because his life as a gay man had to be hidden. That's why the interlocutor in the Simple stories just didn't have a character, didn't have a life. It's hard. Chester Himes wrote an autobiography in which he discusses his time in prison, talking about all of his gay experiences, and I'm thinking, God, I like Himes so much more than Ellison. Ellison just wrote that one novel and, excuse me, but you can get better. But the honesty of Himes, about his life, is just extraordinary.

INTERVIEWER

Has any of your fiction been inspired by experiences from your own

life?

MOSLEY

Probably. Nowadays, a lot of people—I'm sure it was true for some of your classmates at the Iowa Writers' Workshop—are writing about themselves. You know, like, I was in the car and I was driving and we had an accident and I broke my leg and for three weeks I had sex with my sister.

INTERVIEWER

I think I turned that story in once.

MOSLEY

But I'm writing about a people, about black male heroes. Who writes about black male heroes? Langston Hughes, somewhat. And then, after that, it gets really sparse. I mean, there are a lot of black male protagonists, from Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ellison, Chester Himes. But someone like Easy? Or Mouse or Jackson Blue or Fearless Jones or Paris Minton—the guy you want to go to if you're in trouble? There are very few people who write about those kinds of heroes. When white people do it, they're always drinking Dom Pérignon from the neck. It's bullshit.

INTERVIEWER

Do you, as a writer, feel a responsibility to write about these black heroes?

MOSLEY

That's like saying, When you're having sex with your girlfriend, do you feel a responsibility to make her feel happy? I guess you would say yes, but it's not really about that. I'm writing about people I love. Your grandmother is sick, you're going to take care of her. Somebody says, Do you feel a responsibility to go take care of her? It's my grandmother, she's sick, man, what the fuck? I got to go there.

INTERVIEWER

When you started writing the Easy Rawlins novels, were you trying to subvert earlier detective fiction? There's so much sexism and racism baked into those books. Poorly drawn female characters. Poorly drawn people of color.

MOSLEY

It's true. Except in Dashiell Hammett. Dashiell Hammett has really interesting women. They're usually pretty evil, but everybody is evil in his books. I write about the world I live in. It's like this—one day, when I was seventeen, I was visiting my half-aunt Henrietta with my father in Galveston. Galveston on New Year's Eve—in the morning, they have to count the bodies, because people get killed, at least they did back then. And I was scared. We're sleeping on the floor in some room and I couldn't go to sleep, and my father said, Henrietta, come in here. Walter's scared. And she says, Baby, you scared? You think something's going to happen to you? And I said, Yeah. It's happening to other people out there. She said, Baby, I got a .45 in this here purse. Anybody coming after you got to come through me, and ain't nobody coming through me. I fell asleep, just like that.

INTERVIEWER

Did your parents ever read any of your books? If so, how did they respond?

MOSLEY

My father would say, You know, people tell me that I'm in here—because everyone always said that Easy Rawlins was my father. He said, Well, I don't see it.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever write to impress your parents, to make them proud?

MOSLEY

No, I was too old. By the time I had success as a writer, at the age of maybe thirty-eight or thirty-nine, I was already a failure.

INTERVIEWER

What do you mean? A failure how?

MOSLEY

You know, in life. You have a job, but it's not an important job. You make some money, but it's not a lot of money. I hadn't done anything. You hear, Oh, so-and-so's on a television show, so-and-so made a million dollars, so-and-so met the president, so-and-so murdered three people—they did something. I hadn't done anything. I had a job. I was not in jail. I worked at Dean Witter, I worked at Mobil Oil, I worked at this insurance company. I wanted to be an artist, or even what you might call a successful artist. Was I going to paint? Was I going to be a potter? I went from place to place. I lived in the Village for a while. When I was really broke, I lived on Staten Island. But once you're a failure, you're always a failure. And people who are successful very young carry that arrogance all their lives. I had a friend who was a poet—he had been very successful as a poet since he was in his twenties. He told me that he was on the subway once and a guy came up to him and said, Are you a movie star? You're famous, right? I understood why he asked that. My friend carried himself a certain way.

INTERVIEWER

But surely you don't still feel like a failure.

MOSLEY

I still feel like that. I'll always feel like a failure.

INTERVIEWER

Is that something you have to work against?

MOSLEY

I kind of like it, actually. Listen, I can remember when Kennedy was shot. I'm like eleven, and Kennedy was dead. For the black community, that was an arrow through the heart. And, on top of that, I was addicted to television, and the only thing on TV was about him. One day, I'm looking at the TV with my dad, and I see Jackie Kennedy and this really tall guy, and I'm like, Who's that guy? And he said, That's Lyndon Johnson. That's the president of the United States. And I said, No, Dad, John Kennedy is the president of the United States. And he said, As soon as he died, that man became president. That was the best lesson I ever learned in my life. The minute the president of the United States is gone, there's another president? All right, shit. And I'm important? Motherfucker, you are not important. If you die tomorrow—

INTERVIEWER

The world keeps on spinning. Have your books ever been influenced by television or film?

MOSLEY

Almost everybody from my generation on is influenced by television. The technology of a time is always going to inform the writing, talking, explaining, remembering. But there's no film that has affected me as much as novels.

INTERVIEWER

Which ones especially?

MOSLEY

If you ask other writers this question, I promise you one thing—they will all, and I mean every one of them, lie to you about who their influences are, because they want you to look at them in the same way they look at themselves. Today a young black woman might say Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, or ZZ Packer. They might throw Shakespeare in there, but the truth is what most influenced them as a

writer was Nancy Drew. In *Aspects of the Novel*, E. M. Forster says that there are two kinds of great books—there are the great books like Shakespeare and Tennyson and Homer and then there are the books you read as a child, because when you're a child, your imagination is gigantic. If an eight-year-old girl reads *Beloved* she's gonna kill herself. Or her mother.

INTERVIEWER

Do you hang out with other writers?

MOSLEY

I don't hang out with writers. I'm not particularly interested in writers, honestly, because I'm a writer and I don't find myself particularly interesting. My father used to tell me, As you get older, you have fewer and fewer friends. Paul Coates is a really good friend of mine. I have friends from high school—two live in the city and one lives in the Bay Area—but I don't really talk to them. After my father died, in '93, I kind of backed off from the world. I was very close with my father.

INTERVIEWER

What do you mean when you say you backed off from the world?

MOSLEY

What happened was, soon after my father died, my wife and I broke up—it was on the way anyway. I got an apartment, and I just didn't have any friends. I didn't go out. I bought all this IKEA furniture that I was trying to put together but really couldn't. That first apartment had only one tiny window that looked out on a courtyard. Because there was no sun, I got a plant they said didn't need sun, couldn't have sun, but even that plant died! And the guy at the plant store says, When we said no sun, we didn't mean absolutely *no sun*. For a few years, I was pretty much out of contact with people. I was in a state of grief over my father's death. I was writing, of course.

INTERVIEWER

That didn't stop?

MOSLEY

No.

INTERVIEWER

In your memoir, *Life Out of Context*, you write, "The context of other writers' lives are closed to me. I don't associate with them. I don't do work that would get me access to their clubs." It seems that you are referring in part to a group of writers known as the Brat Pack—Jay McInerney, Tama Janowitz, Bret Easton Ellis. What is so different about you?

MOSLEY

Well, they're all white, but I don't think that has anything to do with it, really. There are a lot of black writers in "the club"—there are a lot of clubs. They seem to think they have some kind of hold on something. Another important thing, especially for literary writing—I don't teach in the university. Teaching is collaborative. You work with people and you have to be friendly with them. If you want to get offered a job, to be a writer in residence, or maybe do an event, it's good to know these people. You know what I mean? People like Chester Himes, they did wonderful things, but they were not invited into these clubs. That's my whole thing about being in the company of writers, why I'm not so interested. I can write about Mouse and Jackson Blue and Easy and Fearless and Socrates. And that's a life! That's a real life. Another problem I have with literary writers is they're thinking about legacy.

INTERVIEWER

What do you mean? You don't think about your legacy?

MOSLEY

At one point, there were very few writers—now there are so many of them. Those earlier writers were thinking about the future, and some of them even survived into the future, like Faulkner. But so what? It's not like you're a better writer than someone who is forgotten. Melville was completely forgotten, and then rediscovered in the twenties. What difference did that make to Melville? That idea, of trying to set yourself up for importance and legacy, to say, I'm the voice that speaks for this generation—who cares? The idea of being important as a writer is not completely alien to me, but there's a lot of struggling in my career. My publishers should definitely think that I'm an important writer, but I'm often not able to convince them of that.

INTERVIEWER

I imagine that gets very frustrating. Your publishers should be the people who believe in you the most.

MOSLEY

I have this book called *John Woman*. It's very long. It's like a hundred and twenty thousand words. There's a hundred-page preface and a three-hundred-and-fifty-page novel after it. It's about a guy named Cornelius Jones. His father is an autodidact, a black man from Mississippi who knows everything and teaches him everything intellectual. He has an Italian mother who is kind of wild and not very intellectual at all. She's very self-centered, but she loves him. So he lives between them. He commits a crime. His mother disappears. His father dies. And he decides to take his life into his own hands. He renames himself and creates a false history for himself.

INTERVIEWER

Holy shit. So where's this book?

MOSLEY

I gave it to one of my editors and his response was, Too intellectual. And that was it. No discussion. Part of it is that thing about genre.

When I give that book to somebody who thinks of me as a mystery writer—I've shown it to people and it hasn't worked. I've reread the book many times, and I do think it works as a novel, but maybe it won't be all that commercial. That becomes a problem. I am in a world where, if you're a mystery writer, that's who you are and what you are and where you belong. A lot of writers stay within those boundaries, even if they seem to go outside them. I love Kurt Vonnegut and Gabriel García Márquez, but if I write science fiction it's really going to be science fiction. And being confident in an African American writer? Publishers don't know how to market all that. That's one of the reasons I'm doing so much work in Hollywood—I'm working on projects with MTV and Spike TV, among others—because it's one of the best ways to sell books. They have a strong publicity machine.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think publishing has changed in that respect?

MOSLEY

In the old days, fairly wealthy people owned publishing houses. They found writers they really liked, committed to those writers, and published them for years with very small sales. And then either those writers became something or they didn't. But now it has to be—and I'm not even arguing about it—it has to be pure business. But for me, I have to find a way to make my stuff work. In Hollywood, people actually like me. I'm not really sure why. I think they understand me more. There isn't the same hierarchy—like, Who are you in relation to Philip Roth?

INTERVIEWER

Earlier, you mentioned an idea in publishing—that white people don't read books by black people, black women don't like black men, and black men don't read. Do you think that's still the consensus?

MOSLEY

It was not a true statement, but if you're in power and you make this statement, it becomes true. That said, there were true elements to it. For instance, black men didn't go out of their way to read fiction because they were misrepresented in fiction. They were the sidekick or the pimp or the shoeshine. But when I started writing the books and putting them out there, black men started reading. And now I have thousands and thousands of black male readers because when they read the books, either they see themselves in the books or they see people they know, people from their world—men who are married or who have an important profession, who have children or who have some kind of neurotic quirk. I love that. A guy came up to me the other day and said, I became a private detective from reading your books. That's so cool. Now publishers are selling a lot to black people. The more they target that audience, the more books black people buy. But the elders who run publishing are living in a time that doesn't exist anymore. One of the truisms of human life is that the older you are, the more you live in the past, and so their thinking about genre fiction or what black people read is limited. And I can't even blame someone for living in the past—I mean, we all do—but I have to be able to rethink what I'm doing and who I'm working with.

INTERVIEWER

How do you think the representation of black people in literature compares to the representation of black people on TV?

MOSLEY

The younger the presentation, the younger the audience of a network, the more likely they are to get it right. You'll go over to HBO and they'll have something like *The Wire*, which is extraordinary television, but how they treated black people is ridiculous. But then you go over to the CW, which is there for really young people, and Jimmy Olsen in *Supergirl* is black. You look at it and go, Wow! This is a place where things are actually moving forward.

INTERVIEWER

Do you write every day?

MOSLEY

Yeah, when I wake up in the morning.

INTERVIEWER

Weekends?

MOSLEY

Every day. People ask me if I write even when I'm on vacation. And I say, Man, do you take a shit on vacation?

INTERVIEWER

So what happens when you miss a day?

MOSLEY

A day doesn't bother me too much. Like if I have to wake up at four o'clock and fly somewhere or have to have a meeting with somebody. But two days is bad. You know, if you just sit down in front of the screen and read what you wrote yesterday, that's enough. Writing is all about the unconscious, and the unconscious should be checking in with the story every day. So if you write ten pages, great. If you write one page, okay. If you just read the pages you did before, fine. Because your unconscious will take it in and start working. And the next day, there'll be connections that weren't there the day before.

INTERVIEWER

Do you write on a computer?

MOSLEY

I write all kinds of ways. I write on everything but a typewriter. I write long hand. I speak into a tape recorder. But, yes, mostly I write on the

computer.

INTERVIEWER

Is there anyone you show your work to, besides your editors?

MOSLEY

Paul Coates. Always. I give him all my books—when I finish. I've never been in the middle of a book and said, What do you think about this choice or that choice?

INTERVIEWER

If he doesn't like it, do you go back and revise?

MOSLEY

No, I just listen to what he thinks.

INTERVIEWER

Do you plot your novels in advance?

MOSLEY

No, I just start writing. I don't have any plan. I wait to find out where it goes. Sometimes I do an outline, but even then, that's not really a plan, because I don't really follow it. The novel is bigger than your head. A novel is a gigantic, rambling, incredible thing. All you can do is start. Roy Lichtenstein, who I knew quite well actually, would say the reason most painters fail at art—not at painting, but at art—is because they know what the picture is going to be before they approach the canvas. So the whole idea that there are things you should say or want to say or have to say—fuck that.

INTERVIEWER

Charcoal Joe is your fourteenth Easy Rawlins book. You once said that the eleventh novel in the series, *Blonde Faith*, was going to be your last,

yet you continued writing. Why do you keep returning to Easy? What is it about him?

MOSLEY

When I finished *Blonde Faith*, I couldn't see another book coming out of Easy. I couldn't even imagine it. I realized, finally, that I'd reached the border of my father's life and was entering into the world of my life. I decided if I wrote from that vantage point, from that point of view, I could write the novels exactly the same but with my experience forming it, rather than the experiences of my father and his generation.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have an end in mind?

MOSLEY

I don't know if I have an end plan. It depends who lives longer, Easy or me.

INTERVIEWER

What's the key to sustaining a series without telling the same story over and over again?

MOSLEY

We're moving through time. Easy was twenty-eight in the first mystery, *Devil in a Blue Dress*. He was nineteen in the first book, *Gone Fishin'*, but twenty-eight in the first mystery. And he's forty-eight in *Charcoal Joe*. He's a different man. Also, the time is different. How black people dealt with life in the forties and how they deal in the sixties, after the riots—it's a whole different thing. People didn't notice Easy before. He was a good detective because they didn't notice him. He was just some Negro walking in and out. Now, everybody notices him. He walks in a room and they think, Uh-oh, you think he's one of them bad ones? But they still don't see him. They're afraid. The world has changed, politics has changed, and people have changed. So those two things—his aging

and the world getting older—make it a little easier.

INTERVIEWER

You've also written short stories. How does that compare to novel writing?

MOSLEY

A novel is like a mountain. Like Mount Rainier. You ever seen Mount Rainier? It's like you're looking at God. It's so gorgeous and dynamic and powerful and meaningful. Then as you walk toward it, things change. At one point, it's not even a mountain anymore. There's an incline, but you don't see the whole thing. There are different levels. When you get to the top, you look out from the mountain and it's just as majestic because now you're looking from God's point of view. So the novel is a mountain. Now, the short story is an island—some trees and a beach and a little creature running around. You go on the island, but then you realize that underneath it is a mountain, but it's just underwater, so you never see it. You have to describe the whole mountain, but only from the point of view of that island. Whatever detritus gets washed up, whatever the weather is there, whatever is happening underneath, you have to somehow give that to the reader without making it explicit.

INTERVIEWER

Is it more difficult for you to write short stories?

MOSLEY

I think it's more difficult for anybody. But what I do is just keep writing stories about the same character. From story to story to story, the character builds. I can slowly add things in, and they work because they rely on each other. That's a good way to write short stories. Listen, in a novel, if a woman wears a red dress, maybe you just want her to wear a red dress. But in a short story that red dress has to have at least two meanings. Forster says a novel is fifty thousand words, more or less, of

spongy prose. It's true. But a short story is crystal and poetry is diamonds. You can learn to be a good writer, but you can't do it by studying fiction. You have to study poetry. It will teach you everything. I still read poets. I hate T. S. Eliot's politics, but I love his writing, especially the *Four Quartets*.

INTERVIEWER

Have you written poetry yourself?

MOSLEY

Yes, but I've never shown it to anybody. It's really, really bad.

INTERVIEWER

And yet you've written in so many prose forms. You've even written an erotic novel, *Killing Johnny Fry*. How did that one come about?

MOSLEY

I was trying to make myself write a screenplay. What I was writing was *Killing Johnny Fry*, and I didn't even know it. There was him, there was the girl, and the girlfriend, and this crazy sex thing. By the time he started having sex, I said, Fuck my screenplay, man, I'm gonna write this novel.

INTERVIEWER

How do you write about sex well?

MOSLEY

How do you write about a good argument or about a good physical fight? How do you write about a good human being against nature? All of that's the same, really, when you get down to it.

INTERVIEWER

But the sex in your novels is a kind not encountered much in fiction—it

can be tender and sweet.

MOSLEY

It's rare. One of the problems about men—I'm going to have to say straight men because I'm not sure about gay erotica, though I've read some of it—is that when men write about sex, they write about power. How big, how strong, how this, how that. What I tried to do in *Johnny Fry* was write about his emotion. He was feeling bereft and guilty and inferior or impotent. Any man who only thinks about power having sex, I know he's not having good sex, either for him or for anybody else. Sex in life is different, but in novels, it's a revelation of character.

INTERVIEWER

When beginning a new work, do you already know what form it's going to take? Did you set out to write a science-fiction novel, for instance?

MOSLEY

It depends. You know pretty early on if you're writing a work of science fiction or not, but that's not necessarily the case when you're writing noir fiction. I knew from the beginning that *The Last Days of Ptolemy Grey* wasn't a mystery. I mean, it's a mystery in the sense that someone gets killed and one of the characters has to find out who did it, but that's a pretty weak reason for calling it a mystery. Most of Dickens's works were mysteries—Who's my mother? Who's my father?

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever felt marginalized by genre?

MOSLEY

It's time for me to back up into philosophy. Only for a minute though. We live in capitalism. Capitalism, no matter what you want to say, is based on a production line. The production line is based on specialization. You put the left front tire on the car, that's your job. You get tired of it, and you say, Look, I want to put in the automatic

transmission. Well, in order to put in an automatic transmission, we have to send you to be reeducated and reclassified and resituated. And once you go through the eight weeks of training, you will never be able to put on the left front tire again. So, if you write mystery, then you're a mystery writer. I was once at an event at the New York Public Library, and I was standing with a poet, who will remain unnamed, and Toni Morrison. A woman came up who was obviously rich—the poet wanted to get more money from her for the library, and she said, Let me introduce you to Toni Morrison, the novelist, and Walter Mosley, the mystery writer. I said, I'm a novelist. And she said, Well, yes, a mystery writer. And I said, No, I'm a novelist. And she said, Mystery writer. She wouldn't let me have that. But I can't help what people think. I don't care what people think. I only care what I do. So if I'm going to write a short story in Harlem that's kind of like a Western, that's what I'm going to write. Fuck 'em.



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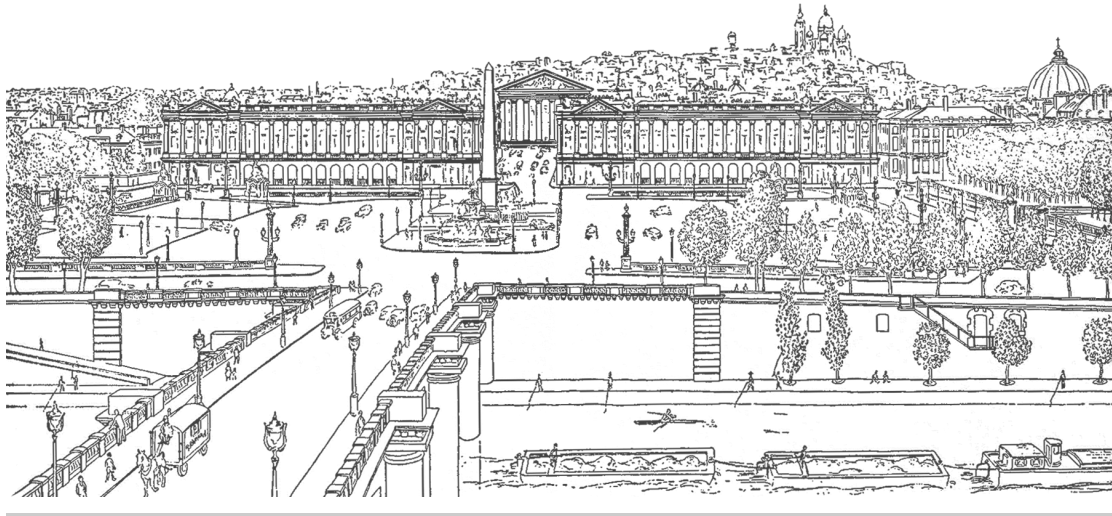
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