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"He was, critics claimed, too black, too angry, and too honest for American readers"

FEATURE: Chester Himes: Race and Rage

BY NEDA SEMNANI

America is not a peaceful nation. It never has been. We are, after all, a country born of revolution and slavery. Racism and violence are integral to our nature. So, hundreds of years after we began, news stories featuring our twin demons should feel like old hat. It is to our collective credit, therefore, that we are not numb to it. Indeed, America's race problem has been the major story of the past two years. It includes the story of a black teenager shot down by his neighbor, the numerous tales of white cops killing unarmed African Americans, the protests and riots on the streets of our American cities, and, last month, the story of a white man perpetuating mass murder in a historically black church. The news has not only horrified and saddened, but has started to shake the complacent awake. If we're ever going to overcome our American race problem, we will have to confront the worst in our nature.

Better than anyone living or dead, the work of the late writer Chester Himes lays bare the intricacies and brutality of American racism. In so doing, he employs dark humor and a prose so hardboiled it sticks in the reader's brain. His work reads like missives from an enraged prophet. He could have been writing today. He could have been writing for now.

A Life of Absurdity

Chester Bomar Himes begins the second volume of his 1976 memoir, *My Life of Absurdity*, with a quote he attributes to the writer Albert Camus. Racism, he writes, is absurd. Himes continues:

It introduces absurdity into the human condition. Not only does racism express the absurdity of the racists, but it generates absurdity in the victims. And the absurdity of the victims intensifies the absurdity of the racists, ad infinitum. If one lives in a country where racism is held valid and practiced in all ways of life, eventually, no matter whether one is a racist or a victim, one comes to feel the absurdity of life. Racism generating in whites is first of all absurd. Racism creates absurdity among blacks as a defense mechanism. Absurdity to combat absurdity. So it was with me.

Himes is able to write affectingly about America's race problem because he was both raised in the muck of it and eventually got free from it. By the early 1950s, he was living in Europe and the physical distance from America gave his work a clarity of purpose, while providing him the space to incorporate the surrealism and grotesquery that was absent from his early work. Perhaps it isn't necessary to know anything of the author to understand his work, but it helps.

Himes was born in Jefferson City, Missouri, in 1909, the youngest son of an unhappy middle-class African American couple. His father, Joseph, Sr., was a dark-skinned man who had managed to rise from punishing poverty to relatively comfortable middle class status. He was a well-respected department head at a technical college. Himes's mother, Estelle, hailed from a well-to-do Southern family. She was so light skinned, she could pass for white and sometimes did. She was also a teacher, a poet, and hugely ambitious. Unlike her husband, Estelle was frustrated by the limitations placed on her by her race. Her husband, on the other hand, was an unassuming man — quiet and content with his level of success. The marriage was a tense one and ultimately fell apart while Himes was still in grade school.

One of the most traumatic moments for the Himes family was an accident at a gunpowder demonstration held at the boys' school. Chester's older brother, Joseph, Jr., was leading the demonstration, when suddenly the gunpowder exploded in the boy's face. The Himeses rushed Joe to the nearest emergency room, but the child wasn't allowed inside. It was a Whites Only hospital and they were a black family in Jim Crow South. As Himes describes in *Absurdity*,

White clad doctors and attendants appeared. I remember sitting in the back seat with Joe watching the pantomime being enacted in the car's bright lights. A white man was refusing; my father was pleading. Dejectedly my father turned away; he was crying like a baby. My mother was fumbling in her handbag for a handkerchief; I hoped it was for a pistol.

His brother was physically blinded, while Himes spent the next decades blinded by rage. Following the incident, the young Himes boys witnessed their father's career collapse and their parents' marriage implode. The couple separated. Eventually, they divorced.

At eighteen, Chester Himes was accepted to and attended Ohio State University. Always attracted to the seedier side, he was kicked out of school his first year and committed himself to life as a pretty criminal. He worked at a gambling saloon, stole guns from a National Guard station, and was arrested for passing bad checks. Then, he was arrested again, this time for armed robbery, and was sentenced to serve up to twenty-five years in prison:

I grew to manhood in the Ohio State Penitentiary. I was nineteen years old when I went in and twenty-six years old when I came out. I became a man dependent on no one but myself. I learned all the behavior patterns necessary for survival.

It was in prison that Himes learned to write and, in 1932, four years into his sentence, his first short story was published in *Abbott's Monthly Magazine*. Soon Himes was being published regularly in well-respected periodicals like *Esquire*. After serving almost eight years in prison, Himes was granted release. Not long after, he moved to California.

Whatever horrors he witnessed during his Midwestern and Southern childhood, they were nothing compared to what he witnessed in Los Angeles:

Up to the age of thirty-one I had been hurt emotionally, spiritually and physically as much as thirty-one years can bear. I had lived in the South, I had fallen down an elevator shaft, I had been kicked out of college, I had served seven and one half years in prison, I had survived the humiliating last five years of Depression in Cleveland; and still I was entire, complete, functional; my mind was sharp, my reflexes were good, and I was not bitter. But under the mental corrosion of race prejudice in Los Angeles I became bitter and saturated with hate.

In Los Angeles, he wrote his first novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), about four days in the life of a young black shipyard worker in that city. Himes was prolific and well respected amongst his peers, but his work never caught on in the United States. He was, critics claimed, too black, too angry, and too honest for American readers.

Finally, the novelist Richard Wright, a great admirer of Himes's, urged the author to come to Paris where his work was lauded and he would be able to write as he pleased. Himes did. Although he struggled financially, he was able to cobble together a living. Then, one day in 1953, Himes ran into his French translator, Marcel Duhamel. Duhamel, the editor of the influential *La Serie Noire* imprint at the Gallimard publishing house, commissioned Himes to write a crime novel. Duhamel had two demands of the author: the novel be set in Harlem and that it feature a detective.



Himes thought genre fiction was beneath him, but he needed the money. Reluctantly, he began to write his first crime novel, *A Rage in Harlem* (1957). The novel featured two black detectives, Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed, and it was a commercial and critical success in France. In 1958, Himes won the prestigious *Grand Prix de Littérature Policière* award for the novel and was the first American to receive the honor. In all, Himes completed eight Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed novels. The ninth, *Plan B* (1993), was incomplete at the time of his death, though he had a detailed outline for the conclusion. The novel, his most radical, was published posthumously. His other detective novel, *Run, Man, Run* (1966), didn't include Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed, but had a drunk, sadistic white detective at the center of the story. It is sometimes considered one of these Harlem novels. Himes called the collection the Harlem Domestic Series (1957-1993). It's also known as the Harlem Detective Series or, more popularly, the Harlem Cycle.

Himes's Harlem: Shadows and Shade

These books aren't meant for delicate readers. This is Himes's world, and in this world the vulnerable will get their throats sliced, cops will have acid thrown in their faces, and fathers will get their arms chopped off. Rape is common and so is murder. A person of the cloth must never be trusted. This Harlem is filled with liars, cheats, whores, gamblers, hypocrites, and pervers. Police and criminals are sadistic and cruel. Most white cops can't tell one black suspect from another. As a result, the innocent are often accused of crimes, while the guilty hide in plain sight. In Himes's world, people come in a variety of skin tones. He doesn't just describe black and white or dark and light. He vividly evokes every shade of human. In these books, queerness is a fact. Sex is a fact. Religion, money, and lust usually corrupt. The middle class and the very poor are struggling rise above their station, but often find themselves trapped in place by their race.

In the first novel in the series, *A Rage in Harlem*, the reader is introduced to Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed. These two men are the first major black detectives in American literature. Unlike most fictional detectives, they aren't private dicks. They are part of the police force. Grave Digger and Ed were not only raised in the city they are attempting to police, but they are trying to raise their own families as well. These men are middle class and well read. They are empathic and passionate, not frigid sleuths or logical savants.

As the series progresses from first novel to last, Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed not only get older, but also become more troubled the longer they are with the force. Unlike other hardboiled detectives in literature, these cops change, physically and emotionally, over the course of the series. They are tough guy cops who have "to be tough to work in Harlem." As Himes writes in *Rage*,

They took their tribute, like all real cops, from the established underworld catering to the essential needs of the people—game keepers, madams, streetwalkers, numbers writers, numbers bankers. But they were rough on purse snatchers, muggers, burglars, con men, and all strangers working any racket. And they didn't like rough stuff from anyone but themselves. "Keep it cool," they said. "Don't make graves."

In the first book, the detectives' code of ethics is tested after a con man throws acid in Coffin Ed's face. Then in the third novel, *The Real Cool Killers* (1959), Ed is still experiencing the emotional aftershocks from the attack. When a teenage boy tosses perfume at the detective, Ed shoots:

All he could think of was a con man named Hank throwing a glass of acid into his face. And this looked like another acid thrower. Quick scalding rage turned his acid-burnt face into a hideous mask and his scarred lips drew back from his clenched teeth.

After Coffin Ed learned he killed a kid over what amounted to a misunderstanding, he explained his reflex. Just as "a burnt child fears fire," he said any person who throws anything at him is in danger of being shot. Ed isn't boasting about the change brought on by a traumatic situation, but he's resigned to it. Throughout the Harlem Domestic Series, the detectives struggle to retain their humanity and stay on the right side of their code. It's a line that gets shakier over time.

Unlike Ed, Grave Digger Jones is the cool-headed detective at the start of the series. After years of policing, however, he becomes increasingly aware that he is upholding a legal system that favors white and wealthy above the rest of society. In the third novel in the series, *The Real Cool Killers* (1966), Grave Digger Jones says to a white man chasing women in Harlem:

"I'm just a cop," Grave Digger said thickly. "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."

Later in the novel, after Jones confronts a teenage girl implicated in a murder, he is overwhelmed with a kind of existential sadness.

"He sat there listening to her, a big, tough, lumpy-faced cop, looking as though he might cry. ... 'Well, Sissie,' Grave Digger said, getting slowly to his feet, 'you made your bed hard; if it hurts lying on it, don't complain.'"

It is in the final novel in the series, *Plan B*, that Jones reaches his breaking point. After questioning a junkie who had just admitted to killing his wife, Jones's anger begins to build.

The whole of Grave Digger's head had begun to swell and his voice became tight and cotton-dry with rage. The veins in his temples roped as though air had been pumped into them.

"You lived off what this black women made selling her body to white tramps," Grave Digger choked. "You lived off her faith and her sweat and her depravity. ... And you wasted her because she wanted to be free."

Soon, as a race revolt began to build, Jones and Ed lose their jobs. The two men are faced with a choice to join the revolution or put it down. Tomsson Black, the leader of the uprising, confronts the pair. Coffin Ed rejects Black's proposal, while Grave Digger embraces it.

"You can't kill Black, man," Grave Digger explained. "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, chagrined.

"If that's the way the cat jumps," Digger replied.

Rather than let his partner stop the revolt, Jones kills him and is killed in return. Digger, who began the series as the more rational of the two, ends the Harlem Cycle wanting to destroy the system he had worked so long to uphold.

The Critical Rage

Before his death in 1984, Chester Himes asked his wife, Lesley, to keep his books alive:

I don't want to feel that I have lived without having accomplished something that's going to be remembered and I don't want to leave this world a common shade and I do so hope that my books will be read and that people will remember me.

Today, America barely remembers him. His books are largely out of print and, with a few exceptions, *Plan B* is only available in reference libraries. And we are the worse for it. It isn't that Himes presented a solution to race relations in America, but he never simplified it. With each novel he wrote, he stared down America's basest nature and he didn't flinch from the worst. When we read Himes, we're forced to do the same. We are forced to see ourselves mired in absurdity and hurt; wounded, and struggling toward change.

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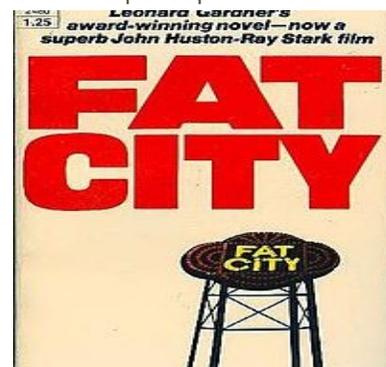


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