



Cotton Comes to Harlem

Chester Himes

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Black flim-flam man Deke O'Hara is no sooner out of Atlanta's state penitentiary than he's back on the streets working the scam of a lifetime. As sponsor of the Back-to-Africa movement he's counting on the big Harlem rally to produce a big collection-for his own private charity. But the take-\$87,000-is hijacked by white gunmen and hidden in a bale of cotton that suddenly everybody wants to get his hands on. With Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones on everyone's trail and piecing together the complexity of the scheme, Cotton Comes to Harlem is one of Himes's hardest-hitting and most entertaining thrillers.

Cotton Comes to Harlem Details

Date : Published November 28th 1988 by Vintage Crime/Black Lizard (first published 1964)

ISBN : 9780394759999

Author : Chester Himes

Format : Paperback 160 pages

Genre : Fiction, Mystery, Crime, Cultural, African American, Noir, Hard Boiled

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From Reader Review Cotton Comes to Harlem for online ebook

Richard says

I was really in the mood for more of Chester Himes's Harlem Cycle books and this was the easiest one I could get my hand on at the moment. I'd read the first two books, *A Rage in Harlem* and *The Real Cool Killers*, and loved them. I had gathered that they don't need to be read completely in order, so I decided to jump into this one! In this installment, ace Harlem detectives Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson rush to track down a slimy con man, who's been swindling hard-working Harlem families out of thousands in a phony Back-To-Africa movement, and ends up getting all of the money jacked. But all roads seem to lead to a bale of Southern-grown cotton everyone seems to be interested in!

While not as awesome as the first two books, this one had the same dry wit and sly social criticism that I love from Himes! It was definitely entertaining, but I found that I prefer reading about the more colorful supporting characters and criminals over the detectives Grave Digger and Coffin Ed. Maybe that's why I prefer the first two novels, where the detectives played more supporting roles. Also, a lot of the writing and ideas seem to be rehashed from the earlier novels.

But no biggy! It was still irresistibly readable, and I look forward to reading the other 1950's Harlem adventures!

Ka'leneReads says

Brothers this maps is older than me and if you go back to this Africa you got to go by way of the grave.....I enjoyed this read just as well as I've enjoyed the movie.

Surbhi says

Read this for school and I have to say it was interesting. Not too shabby and good mystery read with focus on the African Americans!! Great to see other point of views of history.

ΠανωςK says

Στα ελληνικ? «Βαμβ?κι στο Χ?ρλεμ», εκδ?σεις Αγρα.

Katherine says

This is the first book by Chester Himes that I have read. This book is one of the 8 Harlem Detective mysteries that he published between 1957 and 1969. The detectives, Coffin Ed Johnson and Gravedigger Jones fit in with the Harlem milieu, and use this to solve the crimes. Reading the books now gives me a taste of what life was like in Harlem in the 50's and 60's.

Rhys says

Gravedigger Jones and Coffin Ed are two of the most original detectives in crime fiction. And a perfect opportunity for them to demonstrate their talents is provided by this caper, an extraordinary blast of mayhem, dark humour, social insight, perversion, irony and simmering sensuality, as conman Deke O'Malley persuades families to hand over their savings in order to buy passage on board ships going back to Africa. But the ships are fictions. The money scammed from the families is stolen by the thugs of a Back to the Southland movement, run by Alabama 'gentleman' Colonel Calhoun. The interweaving of callous agendas, double crossing, ploys, tricks and bluffs, creates a dense net of intrigue that is bewildering but ingenious, and gives structure within which the barely controlled chaos of the action can erupt. This is tremendous absurdist literature in a crime context.

Lisa Ciarfella says

Mr. Himes is a classic detective fiction writer who I will take notes from, from here on out!

Himes writes fast, furious, independent unique characters with oh so vivid details jumping off the page! His detective names are the bomb, Coffin Ed and Grave Digger Jones, and they scoff and scour and dance their way through the gritty streets of Harlem with enough savvy sarcasm, wit, irony and humor to make both Sam Spade and Phillip Marlowe take notice....

The mean and lean streets of 1960's Harlem, along with Brooklyn, the Bronx, and the city come to life in all their shady seaminess, and Coffin and Jones wield guns with the worst of em!

My first Himes, but not, by far, my last!!!

Emmkay says

I read *A Rage in Harlem* a couple of years ago and enjoyed it, and this 7th book in the series featuring hard-boiled black police detectives Grave Digger and Coffin Ed is a good read too. Written a few years later in 1964, its Harlem setting has acquired a "Back-to-Africa" movement, a competing "Back to the Southland" movement led by a sinister white Southern colonel, and some Black Muslims who hold a tense rally. Kind of a cross of Raymond Chandler and blaxploitation films. The women characters all belong on the covers of lurid pulp fiction, the police dole out slaps and threats to suspects merrily, and it's very much of its time. Fun.

Bettie? says

Bettie's Books

Daniel says

A short take:

Chester Himes wrote fantastic crime fiction and it is wrong that he is omitted from the frequent praise that mentions Chandler et al.

More thoughts:

Himes concocts a crazy story and then sets Digger and Ed loose to solve the case. The characters are lusty, violent and crafty. Himes is an excellent writer and his stories are bizarre and toothsome. I want everyone who likes crime fiction to read his work and experience its greatness.

Ben Winch says

Chester Himes is the bomb, he's the shit, he's a genius. You're into crime and you ain't read him, you're missing out. You're into the African-American experience and you ain't read him, you're *really* missing out. You think some lowly thriller-writer's beneath you? Chester Himes can *write*. The style is half the fun: baroque hip gritty black humour ramped up to eleven in the service of thrills and satire. Check this:

With a flourish like a stripteaser removing her G-string, she took off one shoe and tossed it into his lap. He knocked it violently aside. She took off the other shoe and tossed it into his lap. He caught himself just in time to keep from grabbing it and biting it. She stripped off her stockings and garter belt and approached him to drape them about his neck.

He came to his feet like a Jack-in-the-box, saying in a squeaky voice, 'This has gone far enough.'

'No, it hasn't,' she said and moved into him.

He tried to push her away but she clung to him with all her strength, pushing her stomach into him and wrapping her legs about his body. The odor of hot-bodied woman, wet cunt and perfume came up from her and drowned him.

'Goddamn whore!' he grated, and backed her to the bed. He tore off his coat, mouthing, 'I'll show you who's a pansy, you hot-ass slut.'

But at the last moment he regained enough composure to go hang his holstered pistol on the outside doorknob out of her reach, then he turned back towards her.

'Come and get it, pansy,' she taunted, lying on the bed with her legs open and her brown-nippled breasts pointing at him like the vision of the great whore who lives in the minds of all puritanical men.

First Himes I ever read, *The Heat's On*, opened with the best action sequence I've seen in print ever - made me realise action is a glorious thing. In *All Shot Up* a motorcycle rider is decapitated by a pane of glass off a glass repairer's truck and *keeps riding*, while Grave Digger and Coffin Ed (the anti-heroic detectives who feature throughout Himes's Harlem crime novels) watch through the frosted-over windscreen of Ed's jalopy.

Thing is, Himes can do 'literary'. His first novel, *Cast the First Stone*, clearly part-autobiographical, is an acute analysis of homosexuality in prison (or bisexuality, since most of the characters were straight when they were free), with desperation, confusion and pride-versus-shame centre-stage. For 1950s America, coming from a black man, it must have been shocking, but (unlike Burroughs, say) it's not played for shock value. It's touching, it's true, it draws you in. But it didn't sell, and after 4 or 5 such professional misfires Himes moved to Paris, where he was convinced by translator and Serie Noir publisher Marcel Duhamel to try his hand at the crime novels which ultimately made him famous.

Harlem through the eyes of a Parisian emigre *encouraged* to write the black humour that always goes over better in France than the States. This is one-of-a-kind cult noir par excellence, the type of writer who obsesses you, fully the equal of Hammett or Chandler or Jim Thompson or David Goodis. Yeah (like Chandler's) the plots can be stupid, but try *Cotton Comes to Harlem* for the tightest of them, and for a healthy dose of race relations Chester Himes-style. Himes, man! If I haven't reviewed him until now it's cos I didn't know where to start. But, pulp writer though he may be, he's one for the canon.

Other classics: *A Rage in Harlem*, *The Real Cool Killers*, *Blind Man With a Pistol*.

Oh yeah, and most of the Harlem novels were re-released by Penguin in 2012.

Keach says

Mother-raping cinematic.

Daniel Polansky says

really don't know why this guy isn't more famous. First, you've got the pedigree – so far as I can tell the only black crime writer during the golden age of noir, friend of James Baldwin, etc. – which alone would get him a peek. And on that whole end of things, he holds up nicely, offering an unflinching, indeed brutal, view on racial politics in New York during the tumultuous years of the 1960's. Himes's is a world in which everyone is pretty terrible, white or black (though the blacks have a better excuse), in which greed and barbarity are the operating motivations behind virtually everyone's actions irrespective of race. Coffin Ed and Gravedigger Jones are Harlem's top cops, working to keep black Harlem from exploding in the face of the white power structures, and the white power structures from brutalizing its inhabitants as much as possible. There is a lot of pistol whipping in this novel, to put it another way.

But apart from the whole racial aspect of it, Himes just has a really interesting narrative style. Coffin and Gravedigger disappear for long portions of their books, and indeed Himes excels best when he is following around the criminals they are attempting to catch, in this case a two-bit conman using the 'back to Africa' moment to try and dupe Harlemites out of their hard-earned money. The plot itself is more coherent than your average Chandler and less coherent than your average Ross McDonald, but it's fast and brutal and fun

and even perhaps a bit more than that. Recommended.

Mariano Hortal says

Publicada en <http://lecturaylocura.com/clasicos-no...>

Con la ingente cantidad de novelas policíacas que se están sacando en la actualidad, tendemos a olvidar de dónde venimos; es decir, quiénes son los padres del género; este post busca que no se pierda la perspectiva en este aspecto, entre otras cosas porque un buen gusto literario se construye desde el pasado, desde las verdaderas fuentes originales.

Y digo esto porque no puedo evitar enervarme al comprobar el montón de medianías que se hacen con el corazón de lectores gracias a campañas publicitarias cargadas de sensacionalismo pero sin mordiente ni buen hacer. Esto es patente día a día desde la publicación de los famosos libros de Stieg Larsson, con el caso de la literatura nórdica; me hizo gracia comprobar las últimas manifestaciones de la madre de la novela negra sueca Maj Sjöwall, creadora de la fantástica serie de Martin Beck junto con su marido Per Wahlöö, de la que pronto haré una retrospectiva aprovechando la publicación completa de todos sus libros; la sueca no se casa con nadie y declaraba, sin complejos: “No entiendo el éxito de la novela negra nórdica: le falta calidad”.

Tampoco reconoce que tenga discípulos que sigan su legado: “Los libros que me gustaría leer no existen. Escriben historias medio de amor medio criminal en las que no me reconozco. Los autores ya no se interesan por la política, solo por el dinero. En una historia de amor ponen cuatro cadáveres y un policía y ya está: una novela un poco esquizofrénica. Hay menos compromiso político”.

Lo que está ocurriendo es que, con esta vorágine de nuevos títulos, lo nuevo es lo que se lleva, olvidando las raíces; y ocurre no solo en novela negra, sino en todos los géneros; la mayoría de lectores se enfrasca en la novedad y nunca deja tiempo para recuperar a los clásicos; conclusión final: nunca se lee a los clásicos de cada género y te acostumbras a leer medianías que ponen el listón de lectura a ese nivel, de ahí que cualquier “novelucha” se ensalce a unos límites insospechados teniendo en cuenta la verdadera calidad que atesora.

Todo esto sustenta mi tesis de que, lo que falta, es un poco de visión de las obras que estructuraron y dieron la fama y calidad que merecía al género, de ahí que aproveche hoy para ensalzar a tres de estos autores que no deben permanecer en el olvido, más bien, deberían estar en lo más alto, a pesar de las irregularidades que tengan; hablaré de ellos sacando a colación su última novela publicada por aquí:

“El atracador de mujeres” de Ed McBain (1926-2005), seudónimo del escritor Evan Hunter con el que escribió muchas de sus novelas policíacas, concretamente, las referentes a la serie que le hizo más famoso, las del Distrito 87. En esas novelas McBain inauguró lo que se dio en llamar “novela coral” y que servía para separarse de las típicas novelas de detectives/investigadores asociadas por defecto al género. Dos son los hallazgos que llevó a cabo en esta serie: 1) El emplazamiento de la comisaría del distrito 87 no está ubicado en una ciudad conocida, en ningún momento se menciona; esta ciudad mítica refuerza la idea de la posible existencia de un cuerpo de policías parecido en cualquier ciudad que conozcamos, es la extensión de este concepto lo que lo lleva a lo mítico y a que nosotros podamos extrapolarlo a cualquier lugar conocido. 2) La mencionada “coralidad”, que consiste, ni más ni menos, en que ningún protagonista lleva la voz cantante como papel principal, sino que todos ellos constituyen, en sí, una coral de secundarios protagonistas, un colectivo sorprendente que puede variar de un libro a otro y en medio de cualquiera de ellos sin que lo veamos venir. Esto es llevado con singular maestría en el primer libro de la saga “Odio” (Cop Hater) (1956) donde los policías empiezan a ser asesinados y no sabemos quién se quedará para las siguientes novelas haciendo gala de suspense y emoción en cada página. Ciertamente puede ocurrir que, al no tener un detective principal, no se logre la necesaria empatía con el lector más típico, pero lo genial de la situación es que el escritor conseguía renovarse en cada novela. “Atracador de mujeres” es una historia bien hilvanada, aunque es bien cierto que se queda un poco atrás del ya mencionado “Odio” o de esa obra maestra posterior que es

“Ojo con el sordo”. Lo bueno es que, con suerte podremos ir viendo la evolución que llevó a cabo el autor si las ventas acompañan.

“Acuéstala sobre los lirios” de James Hadley Chase (1906-1985), es la última novela publicada del gran escritor inglés de novela negra; clásico entre los clásicos desde la publicación de su excepcional “El secuestro de miss Blandish”, una trama donde la mala leche más hardboiled no ahogaba una trama estupendamente orquestada por el británico. En esta ocasión, tenemos una novela que, aún basándose en elementos clásicos, le sirve para crear una adictiva acción que tiene uno de sus mejores momentos en la parte en que Vic Molloy (el sufrido investigador de circunstancias) es encerrado en un manicomio y cómo saldrá de allí, rodeado por un interno loco y peligroso capaz de matar a una mujer a dentelladas. Es imposible no sorprenderse por los vuelcos de violencia que, en ocasiones, es capaz de mostrar este autor, clasicazo mayúsculo. No dudo que en poco tiempo RBA recuperará para su serie negra la novela que he mencionado anteriormente, mientras tanto podemos disfrutar de esta o de “Un loto para miss Quon” o “Eva”.

“Algodón en Harlem” de Chester Himes (1909-1984), y quería dejar para el final a uno de los grandes padres del género; sobre todo porque este escritor de color no dudó en reconocer la influencia que le produjeron Hammet y Chandler, pero, partiendo de ello creó algo totalmente distinto. Sus novelas están ambientadas en Harlem, el barrio de los negros por excelencia de Nueva York y en ellas se respira, se sufre, se huele, se siente lo mismo que ellos. Qué ejemplo de sabor policíaco es el comienzo de esta novela donde se cocinan unas costillas al mismo tiempo que se produce un tiroteo. Los protagonistas, inimitables, son una potencial fuente de problemas. Se ha optado en esta traducción por mantener los nombres en inglés (“Grave Digger” Jones y “Coffin” Ed Johnson), opción muy respetable y correcta, pero, en mi opinión, se pierde la fuerza que tienen sus nombres para el público general que antiguamente los conoció como “Sepulturero” Jones y “Ataúd” Ed Johnson. Como se les describe en el libro te puedes hacer una idea de su magnitud (“Pero él ya se había ido: un hombre alto, duro, peligroso, que necesitaba afeitarse, vestido con un arrugado traje negro y un viejo sombrero del mismo color, con el bullo de una pistola marcándose claramente en el lado izquierdo de su amplio pecho.”). Tremendas humanidades en busca de la justicia, aunque esta tenga que ser a palos, quizás la única forma posible, en boca de “Grave Digger” Jones: “- La población negra de Harlem tiene el mayor índice de criminalidad del mundo. Solo hay tres modos de enfrentarse a ello: hacer que paguen los criminales (y usted no desea eso), pagar a la gente para que pueda vivir decentemente (cosa que no se hará), o dejar que se maten unos a otros, que es lo que queda.” Este es el mundo que refleja en sus obras Himes, y no hay lugar para medias tintas, pero sí, mucho sabor a buena novela negra.

Lemar says

Chester Himes once again mines the street life of mid century Harlem for the setting in which to unspool a great thriller. Like all writers who endure beyond their time, Himes' observations are about human traits, frailty and strength, greed and generosity, here emerging from the crucible of poverty and violence. His writing is gripping, eloquent and funny. Himes captures a moment and renders it immortal as he conveys the moment and puts us there.

Here is how he describes the music at the Cotton Club, famous Harlem jazz club, "A piano was playing frenetically, a saxophone wailing aphrodisiacally, the bass patting suggestively, the horn demanding and the guitar begging".

The recurring characters, African-American police officers Grave Digger Johnson and Coffin Ed Jones are tough guys that are still believable as they approach near mythic status. One can see how the community in Harlem and their fellow officers, see them this way but they never see themselves this way.

It will be a sad day for me when I read the last of these books. Luckily I have a poor memory which frees me to re-read!

HBalikov says

Himes is no James Baldwin or Richard Wright but there is an angry power to his writing that certainly affected writers from Walter Mosley to Rachel Howzell Hall.

Cotton Comes to Harlem is one of a series of novels that focus on the Harlem section of New York City and feature two black police detectives known as Gravedigger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson. These two, if not the only black detectives in their precinct, are unique because of their success and their style of “policing.”

The plot involves a Harlem “preacher” who is getting his flock to put down money for space on an ocean liner that will take them to a fresh start in “Africa.” Coffin Ed and “Digger” know that this is a scam perpetrated by an ex-con. When the money, \$87,000, is stolen in a brazen robbery, they are determined that those poor people who gave everything will get their money back.

Himes takes us through various levels of Harlem crime complete with the vernacular (with the exception of one word, for which he substitutes “mother-raper.”) The action is almost non-stop but you get a good sense of what Harlem bars and eateries were like in the 1950s-60s. There is plenty of opportunity to play on stereotypes and show how the white cops involved have little understanding of the people they have sworn to protect. And, how little protection and civility they offer.

If you can get through Himes own hang-ups about women, Puerto Ricans and brutality, there are some very interesting things going on in Cotton Comes to Harlem. 3.5*

As you may have noted, I listened to the audio CD read by Dion Graham. The reading was excellent and added immensely to my enjoyment.

Maria Altiki says

Ευκολοδι?βαστο βιβλ?ο που μαζ? του περν?ς ευχ?ριστα διαβ?ζοντας τις περιπ?τειες των δ?ο ντετ?κτιβ στο σκληρ? μα?ρο X?ρλεμ. Γλαφυρ? η αφ?γηση του Himes γεμ?τη χρ?ματα, μυρωδι?ς, α?μα, σφα?ρες, αραπ?νες μα?ρες ερωτι?ρες, ευκολ?πιστους μαυρο?ληδες, μια μπ?λα απο μπαμπ?κι και 87.000 δολλ?ρια.

Andy says

Another manic cartoony excercise in eyeball-popping, jaw-dropping Tex Avery psychosis. This time our favorite badass behemoths Coffin Ed and Grave Digger Jones step in between two huckster ops in old Harlem, Back to Africa (black) and Back to The South (white), the BS group led by a fake Southern plantation colonel type. Avoid the lousy movie adaptation at all costs and pick up some solid pulp, my brother.

Srinivas Veeraraghavan says

Magic is a hugely abused word and can be as elusive as a loutish runt, trying to lose himself in a Mardi Gras crowd.

Very rarely, it manifests itself in some obscure form or the other. Himes wrote some ground-breakin', spine tinglin', nerve janglin' classics but here, he reaches the zenith.

GOD (He is black by the way) decided to put pen to paper one day and this macabre, bawdy, freak Masterpiece was the result.

If ever I dream of writing a novel, I only pray to GOD (That nigga again!) that it turns out to be something like this.

Read this before you die. Bet your rump yo'd regret it otherwise.

Laura says

From BBC radio 4 Extra:

Harlem, 1965: Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson are the most notorious Detectives in the Harlem precinct. Their methods are unorthodox, and some people think they're trigger happy, but ask any law-abiding citizen of Harlem and they'll sing their praises. So when the Reverend Deke O'Malleys Back to Africa movement collects \$87,000 from poor black families - only to have it stolen from under their noses - Jones and Johnson get put on the case.

Read by Hugh Quarshie.

Chester Himes' fantastically atmospheric novel is not just a great thriller it reveals the lives of black people in a white city at a time, three years before the death of Martin Luther King, when under Alabama law killing a Negro did not constitute murder. It was filmed in 1970 and has become a cult classic.

Chester Himes was born in 1909, and grew up in a middle class home in Missouri. His first real experience of racism was when a white hospital refused to treat his brother who had damaged his eyes in a schoolboy prank. He went to Ohio state University but was expelled. In 1928 he was arrested and sentenced to 25 years hard labour for armed robbery. He started writing in prison and sold stories to magazines including Esquire. He was released in 1936, lived in Los Angeles for a time - the basis of his novel If He Hollers Let Him Go, and moved to Paris in the 1950s where his Harlem precinct novels were first published. His novel For Love of Imabelle became very successful film A Rage in Harlem.

Hugh Quarshie is a TV regular in Holby City playing Ric Griffin. He has extensive film, tv and radio credits.

Abridged and produced by Chris Wallis.

Made for BBC Radio 4 Extra by Autolycus Productions.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01pbp6y>
