

# WALTER MOSLEY

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Teaches Fiction and Storytelling



# Right on Crime

How Walter Mosley's inventive writing and complex characters have breathed new life into classic detective novels

This story, like all great stories, begins with a single sentence: 'On hot sticky days in southern Louisiana, the fire ants swarm.'

In the mid-1980s, Walter Mosley, a computer programmer, types out these words in a quiet moment. He's 34 years old. He's never thought about being a writer, but something about the sentence stays with him. He thinks it sounds like something that could be in a book – and it's the first time he thinks *maybe I could be a writer*. He's been reading Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and is excited by what that book opens up in his mind about the kinds of stories one can tell.

He starts taking classes, he joins a writers' group. He writes poems and short stories. He experiments. A teacher, the famed Irish novelist Edna O'Brien, encourages him to write a novel, and so he writes what would later be seen as the 'first' novel in the world that Easy Rawlins inhabits: *Gone Fishin'*. Fifteen publishers reject the work. Walter decides to adapt the lead character into a new manuscript, a mystery this time, but he isn't thinking of genre. He is thinking of the story he can tell about this character moving west.

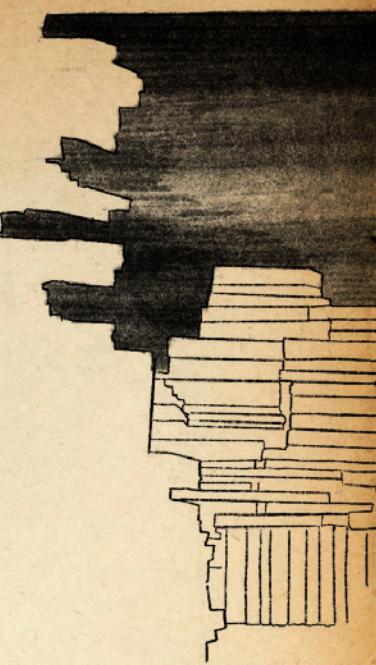
The resulting novel, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, is a revelation: a detective story that investigates the Black experience in post-war Los Angeles. Its protagonist, an out-of-work World War II vet named Ezekiel 'Easy' Rawlins, is hired to find a missing white woman all while navigating the deeply tarnished and conflicted promised land of Southern California. Critics fall in love with the rich storyline, the evocative language and the unofficial detective who is not the typical loner, but a man deeply connected to friends, his past and the city he has adopted.

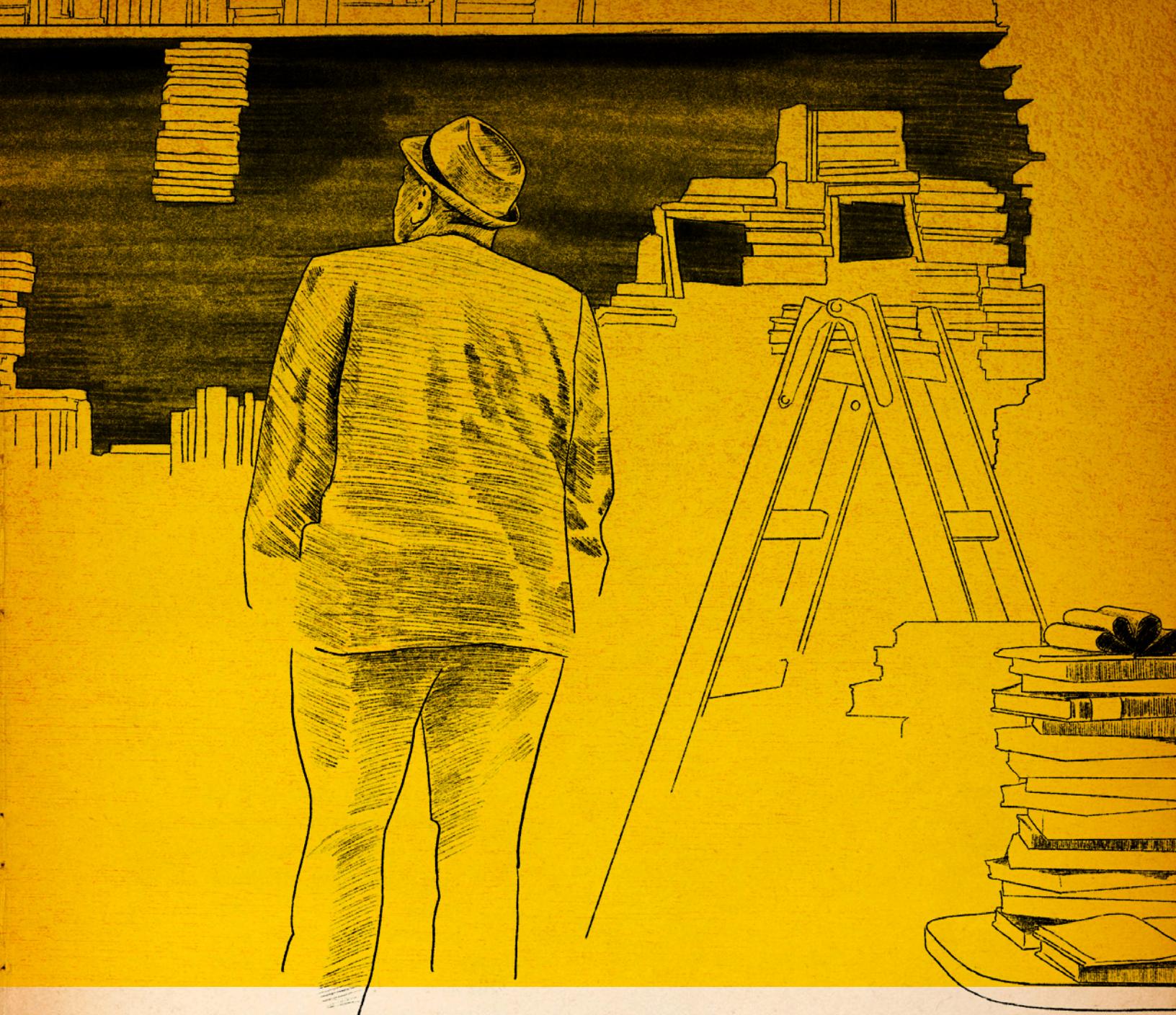
Over the next three decades, this first novel snowballs into an expansive literary universe. Soon, there are other kinds of Black male heroes inhabiting not only mysteries, but literary fiction, science fiction and young adult novels. There is non-fiction, comic books, political commentary – in all, more than 60 books translated into 25 languages – a body of work that earns both a PEN America Lifetime Achievement Award and the National Book Foundation's Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters.

Walter was born in 1952, the son of a Black man from Louisiana and a Russian-Jewish file clerk who both worked for the City of Los Angeles school district. His early years were in Watts, a neighbourhood of colour that would be the focal point of the 1965 riots. Eventually, the family moved to Mid-City – an L.A. neighbourhood, Walter says, that has always been in flux.

'First, it was mostly white, mostly Jewish. Then Black people moved in. When we came, it was mostly white people. After a while, mostly Black people lived here,' he recalled in a *Los Angeles Times* interview. 'But then, the white people moved back, which I thought was wonderful. I never saw anything like that, and so it became truly mixed.'

In the Rawlins novels, Walter's protagonist also moves through the shifting neighbourhoods of Los Angeles, looking for new homes for his growing family, but the character's relocation isn't just an echo of Walter's own experience; it's a way of opening his fiction to broader concerns. This has become, perhaps, the most essential element of Walter's work: his desire to share the neighbourhoods and lives that had been left out of the





fictional chronicle, the lives that faced not only crimes that need solving, but racism in all its social and financial forms, and love in all its complications.

The terrain of the detective story, according to the literary biographer Frank MacShane, 'can involve an extraordinary range of humanity, from the very rich to the very poor, and can encompass a great many different places.' This makes the form fertile ground to cultivate all kinds of heroes, men and women who might not otherwise have been seen as important enough to stand up to injustices and corruption.

Perhaps a surprising source of inspiration to Walter was not so much other detective fiction, but the 19th-century French novelist Émile Zola's episodic novels. In his exploration of the everyday lives of those with little means or power, Zola told stories about what mattered, about the hardships and losses ordinary people endured and fought. Those concerns also became a guiding principle of Walter's work. He firmly believes that people are motivated to read novels not only for entertainment, but as a means to better understand human nature. So he hopes you will take his

techniques and philosophy – writing habitually, invoking poetic language, separating plot from story, turning the setting into a character – and make them your own.

That might sound daunting, and Walter makes no bones about it: you will get knocked down, but we're all storytellers and, utilising the right tools, capable of shaping history through works of fiction. The particulars of genre aren't so important as overcoming the blank page, seeing it as an opportunity instead of the enemy. Your story, like all stories, begins with a single sentence.

# Book 'Em

10 essential Walter Mosley reads, from mystery to science fiction to political commentary

## The Easy Rawlins books (1990–present)

This 14-book series (and counting) follows the character of Ezekiel 'Easy' Rawlins, a family man and reluctant detective, from 1948 to 1968. He traverses a Los Angeles fraught with crime, corruption and racism.

## *RL's Dream* (1995)

Walter's first non-Rawlins effort focuses on Soupspoon Wise, a Delta bluesman caught between his conditional existence on the Lower East Side of Manhattan and his dreamlike memories of Robert Johnson, the highly mythologised real-life 1930s guitarist.

## The Socrates Fortlow books (1997–2008)

These three collections of interwoven short stories revolve around the ex-con Socrates Fortlow. After serving time at an Indiana prison, Fortlow is in South Los Angeles and trying, like so many of Walter's protagonists, to live according to his own moral code.

## *Blue Light* (1998)

Walter's science fiction debut, set in the Bay Area, concerns an otherworldly blue light that transforms many of the novel's characters into a kind of hybrid species – if not



quite superheroes, then heightened versions of themselves.

## *Workin' on the Chain* *Gang: Shaking Off the Dead* *Hand of History* (2000)

In his non-fiction monograph, Walter makes an elegant case for American capitalism as a system of cultural and economic oppression – not only for Black people, but for everyone.

## The Fearless Jones books (2001–2006)

Walter's second mystery series also takes place in Los Angeles in the mid-1950s. The hero is a detective, Fearless Jones, but the story is told through a timid bookseller named Paris Minton. These novels are lighter and looser than the Easy Rawlins books, with plots that grow out of the collaboration between Jones and Minton rather than self-protective solitude.

## *Fortunate Son* (2006)

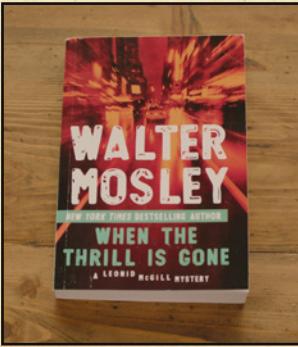
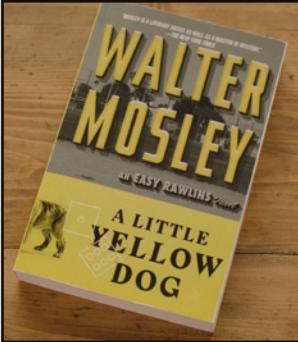
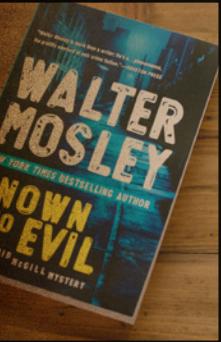
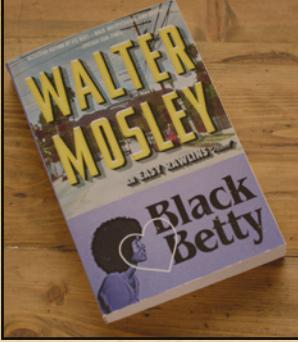
Walter again returns to Southern California, telling the story of two men – one Black and one white. They grow up together and, after many years apart, reunite as adults, offering contrasting realities of privilege and hardship.

## The Leonid McGill books (2009–2020)

For his third mystery series, Walter takes on New York City, which he writes with gritty grandeur. Here we're introduced to Leonid McGill, a former boxer turned private detective adrift in a city – and a world – he doesn't quite recognise anymore.

## *The Last Days of Ptolemy Gray* (2010)

After watching his mother struggle through early-stage dementia, Walter conjures up a protagonist wrestling with age and illness. In a novel that



recalls some of the dynamics from *RL's Dream*, the character undergoes an experimental treatment for dementia, unlocking difficult – and unavoidable – memories.

#### ***Down the River Unto the Sea* (2018)**

Recipient of a 2019 Edgar Award for Best Novel, this standalone follows Joe King Oliver, an ex-cop from Brooklyn once framed for rape, who must solve both his own case and that of a Black militant accused of killing two NYPD officers.

# The Writ Parade

Walter's fiction and storytelling transcend genre. So do his inspirations. Here he gives you his abridged reading list

#### **Breath, Eyes,**

#### **Memory**

**by Edwidge Danticat**

■ ‘Born a French speaker, Ms Danticat came to America, learned English and proceeded to translate into fiction the most common experience of the American imagination – that of the emigrant soul.’

#### **Living My Life**

**by Emma Goldman**

■ ‘A memoir that is at once wild, feminist, anarchist and a view of America and the Western world that few authors would dare to imagine, much less live.’

#### **The Bluest Eye**

**by Toni Morrison**

■ ‘We all know Toni – through her writings, that is. This is her first offering and one of the best. She could take a small section of a small city and make a world out of it.’

#### **The Interpretation of Dreams**

**by Sigmund Freud**

■ ‘What is it like to discover a place that doesn’t exist? This is the conundrum of

every writer. Freud did it with a place that exists in our souls –

the unconscious. If anywriter can approximate this feat, she will have immediate entrée into the canon.’

#### **The Stranger**

**by Albert Camus**

■ ‘The North African existentialist novel. In a world dominated by corporations, despots and cultural fads, we find our deeply flawed hero fighting, and maybe dying, for the right to be himself.’

#### **One Hundred**

#### **Years of Solitude**

**by Gabriel García Márquez**

■ ‘This beautiful novel experiences the world the way the writer does: through laughter and tears, fallacies and truth, lies and beliefs. You won’t find a better writer – anywhere.’

#### **The Simple**

#### **Stories** by Langston Hughes

■ ‘Jesse B. Semple narrates, through dozens of short stories, how the everyday blue-collar citizen makes

it through a world that doesn’t care if he makes it or not.’

#### **Four Quartets**

**by T.S. Eliot**

■ ‘I’ve read this slender volume 100 times. I’ve never understood all of it, but with each new reading, I understand a little more. It’s a deftly written quartet of poems that contain within it past, present, future and the universe at large.’

#### **Belly Song**

**by Etheridge Knight**

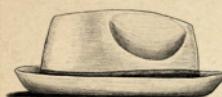
■ ‘Etheridge was in turns a heroin addict, thief, con man, convict and poet. And, man, was he a poet. The only American I would compare him to is Walt Whitman.’

#### **Das Kapital**

**by Karl Marx**

■ ‘Forget communist and socialist labels. What Marx did was to describe the impact of a free economy on the everyday worker. No one had done this before. He created a vocabulary of the modern world. Isn’t that the main job of any writer?’

# Killing Time



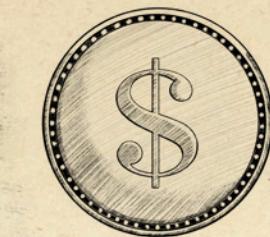
Walter writes his first novel, *Gone Fishin'*, in six weeks; it remains unpublished until 1997, but he decides to cast the main character, Easy Rawlins, in a detective story.

**1987**

*Devil in a Blue Dress* is adapted for the screen and stars Denzel Washington and Don Cheadle; Walter's short story 'The Thief' appears in Esquire magazine.

**1995**

NOW A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE!



*Gone Fishin'* is published by Black Classic Press, an indie group dedicated to preserving Black literature; Walter forgoes an advance and donates his royalties to the publisher.

**1997**

**1990**

**NEW YORK TIMES NOTABLE BOOKS OF THE YEAR!**

*Devil in a Blue Dress*, the first Easy Rawlins book, is published by W.W. Norton & Company.

**1994**

**NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER!**

Walter's fourth novel, *Black Betty*, sells more than 100,000 hardback copies; he signs a multi-book deal to continue writing the Easy Rawlins series.



**1996**

'The Thief' wins an O. Henry Prize; Walter becomes the inaugural artist-in-residence at New York University's Africana Studies Institute.

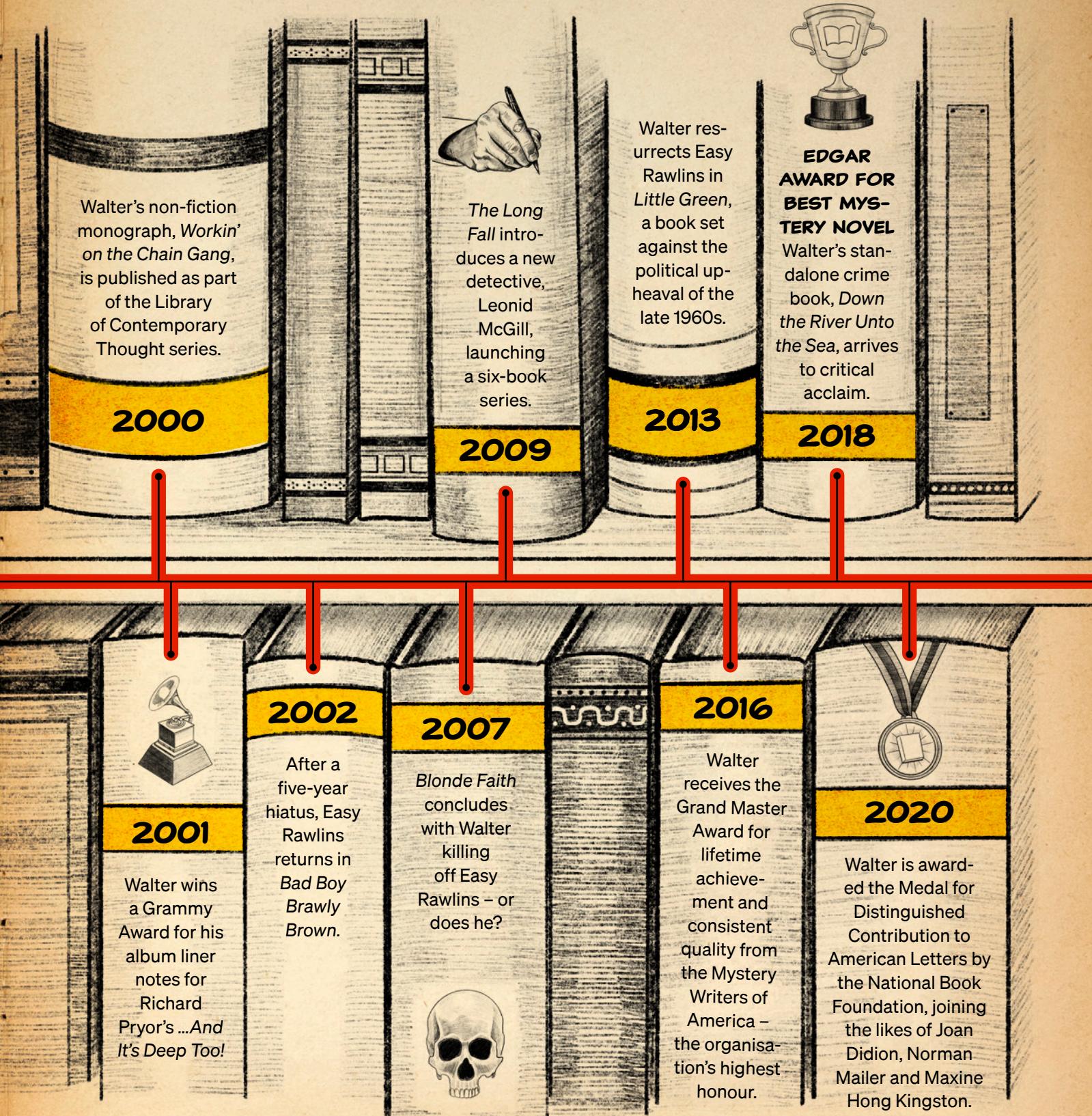
**1998**

**ANISFIELD-WOLF BOOK AWARD WINNER!**

HBO adapts Walter's book *Always Outnumbered, Always Outgunned* into a film starring Laurence Fishburne.



# Tracing Walter's rise to the top of crime fiction - and beyond

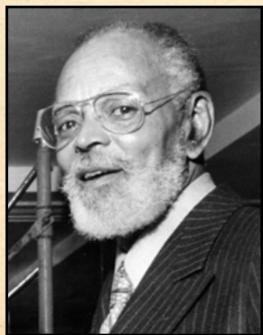


# Forensic Bibliophiles

Several writers of colour have, like Walter, made detective fiction their own - and have kept the genre from becoming stagnant

Decades after its publication, *Devil in a Blue Dress* remains one of the more startlingly original debut mystery novels in history. Even so, when Walter wrote the book, he was operating within the boundaries of some long-standing literary traditions: first, that of hard-boiled crime fiction, as pioneered during the 1920s and 1930s by authors like Raymond Chandler; second, that of the crime writer of colour, less recognised in 1990 than today (but essential all the same).

If one of Walter's progenitors was Chandler – whose books were based on a certain moral architecture, as well as the idea of the detective as a knight – then the other was the Black crime writer **Chester Himes** (below), whose 1945 novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, traces WWII-era racism with a penetrating eye. Himes later expatriated to Paris, where he began penning new crime fiction in the late 1950s. His celebrated eight-book *Harlem Detectives* series, written into the late 1960s, is riddled with absurdist violence that could be seen as holding up a mirror to the absurdity of racism; nonsensical criminal acts, including those committed by the anti-hero protagonists while on the job, are encouraged by a nonsensical system.



Walter can't be directly compared to Himes, whose writing stings with a type of anger and disillusionment specific to his era, but both authors are innovators, cracking open the conventions of genre, acknowledging literary roots while pushing into new terrain. While the bars and juke joints of *Devil in a Blue Dress* echo Chandler's 1940 classic *Farewell, My Lovely*, Walter writes them out of a larger ambition. The idea is not only to create a clever mystery, but to also trace a way of life. Crime, and detection, offers a lens through which to look at the city and the culture as a whole. Here are a few more modern crime writers of colour who are doing the same.

It's difficult to imagine a writer like **Steph Cha** – whose 2019 novel, *Your House Will Pay*, examines the legacy of the 1992 Rodney King riots in L.A. through the lives of two Southern California families – working without Walter's oeuvre on her bookshelf. She too reconsiders Chandler's road map to pave a new avenue through the genre. Cha's debut, *Follow Her Home*, introduces a young detective, Juniper Song, who idolises Philip Marlowe

and romanticises her own investigations – until real danger shows itself. That danger is physical, but also emotional; in her work, Cha expertly traces the line between desire and necessity, as well as the divide of perception and reality.

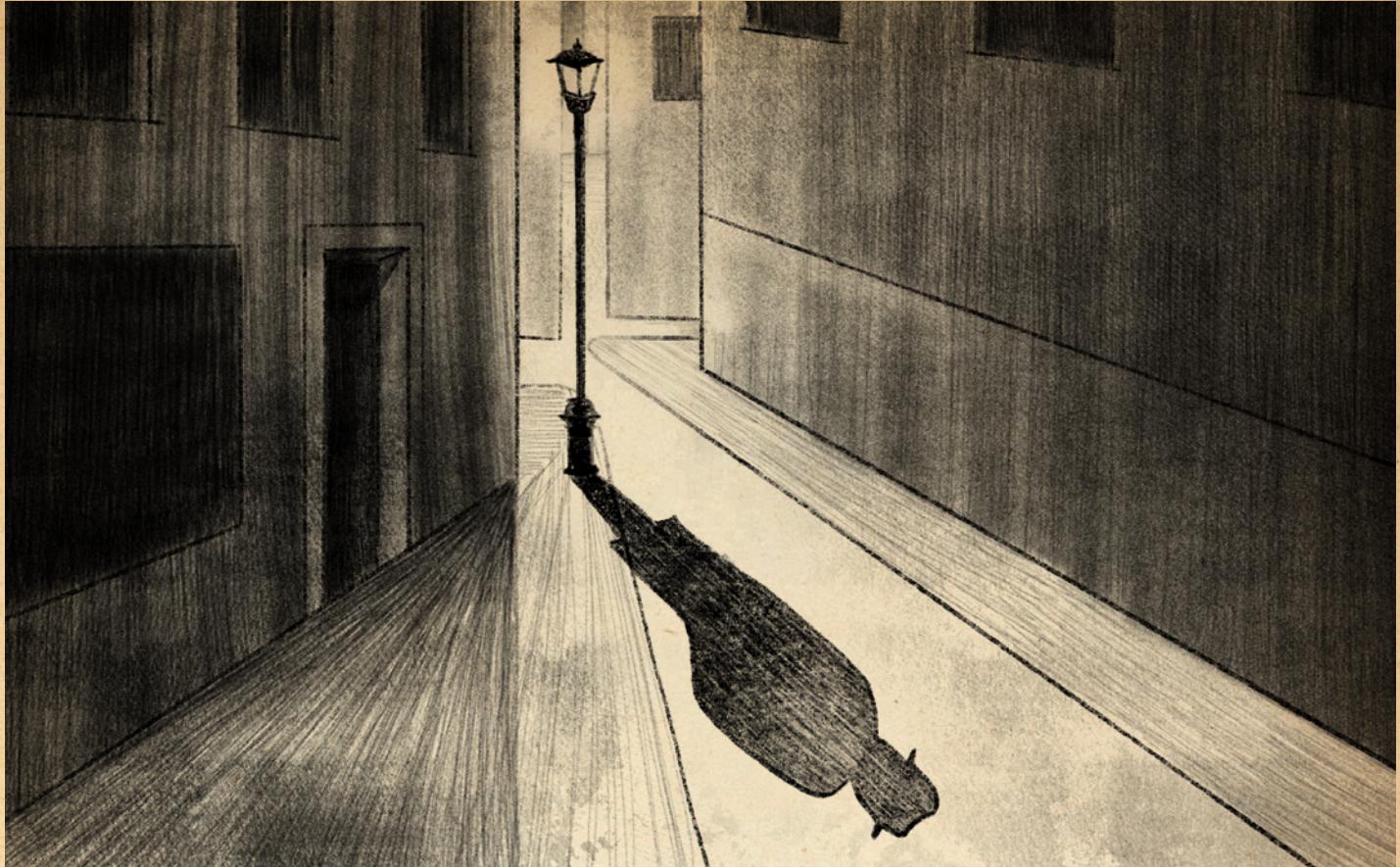
Then there's **Naomi Hirahara**, who writes about Mas Arai, a Japanese American detective who survived the bombing of Hiroshima and became a gardener in Pasadena, giving him the access necessary to solve crimes.

**Gary Phillips** has published a host of novels and comics since his first, *Violent Spring*, appeared in 1994; it involves a Black private investigator named Ivan Monk and, like *Your House Will Pay*, unfolds in the aftermath of the Rodney King beating.

## BUT WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

The anthology *Spooks, Spies, and Private Eyes: Black Mystery, Crime, and Suspense Fiction of the 20th Century*, edited by Paula L. Woods, gathers works of crime fiction by Black writers dating to 1900.

And it's impossible to forget about **Attica Locke**. Locke has published five novels since 2009, including *Pleasantville*, winner of the Harper Lee Prize for Legal Fiction; *The Cutting Season*, which received the Ernest J. Gaines Award for Literary Excellence; and the Edgar Award-winning *Bluebird, Bluebird*. Locke's novels unfold in Louisiana and Texas, and her work is sharply rendered and concerned with social justice, although never at the expense of narrative. Her books are astonishing in their ability to spin stories that evoke a sense of place, highlighting the complexity of character and the influence of a given setting – not unlike the pioneering work of Walter.



# On Location

How cities can become literary characters

Literature takes place in the world, and that world must be built and developed. It needs to be believable and real. ‘When you’re a writer, making up different ways of seeing the world, understanding the world, considering what happened, what didn’t happen,’ says Walter, ‘you are actually changing the world.’

He’s not speaking figuratively. Often, the setting operates as a character unto itself; the weight of place can influence the action. Walter has played with this idea from the very first sentence he ever jotted down as a capital-W Writer: ‘On hot sticky days in southern Louisiana, the fire ants swarm.’

Why is that such a good sentence? The answer is specificity. It shows us

something, recreates a landscape. It is particular, rooted in the real. These transferences occur regularly in literature. Take James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the plot of which unfolds across Dublin, Ireland, over the course of a single day. The author once joked that if the city were destroyed, his novel would allow it to be rebuilt brick by brick. It’s not that his text is a guide, but that the place has infiltrated the fiction.

The same could be said of William Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County, Nikolai Gogol’s St. Petersburg and Charles Dickens’s London. In *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens’s tale of working-class life in Victorian England, the author tells us: ‘It was a foggy day in London, and the fog was heavy and dark. Animate London, with smarting eyes and irritated lungs, was blinking, wheezing, and choking; inanimate London was a sooty spectre, divided in purpose between being visible and invisible, and so being wholly neither.’ Worldbuilding animates a narrative,

connecting it to larger concerns. The novelist E.M. Forster called this the ‘buzz of implication,’ the way great novels come encoded with a portrait of their place and time. There’s another aspect too: a collective vision, in which we read and recognise cities, not as monoliths or abstractions, but as accumulations of human toil and blood. Every city, after all, is a ghost story, populated by the living and the dead. Its residents move through the present by moving also through the past.

Walter, like so many authors before him, understands that setting is a powerful device. How will you use it in your work?

# West of the West

## The endless appeal of Los Angeles in detective stories

Mike Davis, the Southern California social historian, called it ‘the master dialectic of sunshine and noir.’ He was addressing the sensibilities of crime fiction and how they seem inextricably woven into the broad tapestry of Los Angeles’s identity. The genre speaks to the promises that California makes but cannot keep – and L.A. is a city, it often feels, where nothing is as it

seems. What better setting for so many of Walter’s mysteries?

L.A.’s complexities drive the tormented heart of crime fiction, which is, in essence, a desperate art. Of course, a character like Easy Rawlins sees the defining contradictions of his surroundings, which are by turns paradisal and chaotic. It requires a deft hand and a keen eye to investigate these ideas, but Walter

was born and raised in Los Angeles; he’s aware of its obscuring surfaces, and, as a Black man in America, he knows the narratives that have been forgotten or were never told.

‘If you want to be in the culture,’ Walter says, ‘in the history of the culture, considered in that history, then you have to exist in the fiction.... If you don’t exist in the literature of that country, your people don’t exist.’

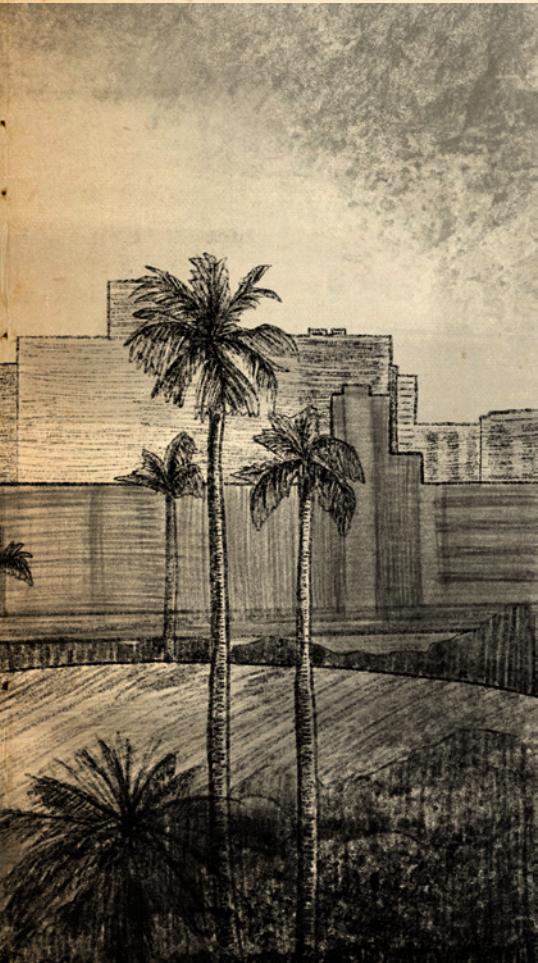
He’s talking about communities of colour, but he’s also talking about Los Angeles – the ‘nowhere city,’ as the novelist Alison Lurie once called it. If that’s the case, though, how can L.A. exist if it doesn’t pop up in literature? It’s a signature concern for Walter, most evident in his Easy Rawlins books. Rawlins is a protagonist through whom we are invited to trace a different history of Southern California in the decades following WWII.





Rawlins is a Black man in a white world, and he must think through every incident, every encounter. In an early novel, he's confronted by young racists in Santa Monica; his very existence is at risk. That tone reverberates throughout the series, even more so after he becomes an adoptive parent. Rawlins is left caring for two children in a city that is at best indifferent and more often outright hostile.

Because of his family situation, Rawlins – not unlike Walter's parents – has no choice but to think beyond himself, looking for opportunities, for the places where the city has a bit of give. His navigation of Los Angeles, then, becomes a mystery as all-consuming as any he confronts in the business of sleuthing. It demands detection of another kind.



# L.A., I Love You

Five scribes whose fiction captures the essence of Southern California

## Raymond Chandler

■ It all starts with Chandler. During the 1930s, he developed the character detective Philip Marlowe and, along the way, a signature voice for Los Angeles: wise but weary, cynical but engaged. Marlowe is a knight errant, a loner who must live by his own solitary code.

## James M. Cain

■ Perhaps the greatest of all the American crime writers of the 1930s and 1940s, Cain was an acute social observer and a propulsive storyteller. His early books (*The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Double Indemnity* and, especially, *Mildred Pierce*) are masterpieces, in which trouble is everywhere and nobody gets what they want.

## Dorothy B. Hughes

■ Hughes began her career as a poet (her first book, *Dark Certainty*, published in 1931, was selected for the Yale Series of Younger Poets) before moving into novel writing. Her 1947 tour de force, *In a Lonely Place*, tells the story of a genial Southern California psychopath. The 1950 feature film adaptation, starring Humphrey Bogart, dulled down the book's razor edge: In Hughes's treatment, there's an atmosphere of true menace.

## Ross Macdonald

■ Born Kenneth Millar, Macdonald was the first great inheritor of the Chandler tradition: a spare and piercing writer with the ability to make landscape a character in his work. Beginning with *The Moving Target*, published in 1949, he wrote 18 novels about Southern California detective Lew Archer,

a Marlowesque PI with an air of tragic gravitas.

## Joseph Wambaugh

■ Still an LAPD detective when his first novel, *The New Centurions*, arrived in 1970, Wambaugh is known for writing about police from the inside. His characters are flawed, beset by personal and emotional issues, driven by the pressures of the job. He has penned several non-fiction books too, most notably *The Onion Field*, a dark and striking true-crime account.

## Michael Connelly

■ Connelly is best known for his books about Harry Bosch, an L.A. detective with a chip on his shoulder and strong, personal opinions about justice and authority, (many Bosch books provided storylines for an Amazon show called, aptly, *Bosch*). The author has introduced several other protagonists however, and often brings these characters together in his plots. Over 35 novels, Connelly builds an expansive and nuanced fictional universe.

## Denise Hamilton

■ Her 2001 debut novel, *The Jasmine Trade*, introduced us to the detective Eve Diamond, kicking off a five-book arc. Two expertly edited anthologies of L.A. noir (released in 2007 and 2010) bookend her standalone *The Last Embrace*, a beguiling 1940s period piece.

# Ten-Point Plan

Walter's tips for writing your novel

**1.** 'A novel isn't putting the left front tyre on the Volkswagen on the production line. The novel is creating a whole new mode of transport, a whole new mode of understanding the world.'

**2.** 'Write your truth and believe in it, and if your mother doesn't like it, too bad.'

**3.** 'The beautiful thing about any day is that this is the day that "it" can happen. Today, all of a sudden, you realise, "Hey, my wheels aren't spinning anymore. They are spinning, but I'm actually moving forwards. I'm not sitting in place."

**4.** 'You will find, if you write every day, that the next day, ideas have bubbled up from some place that you had no idea were there.'

**5.** 'Any person who wants to do anything with writing – from the great novel to a love letter – needs to understand poetry.'

**6.** 'There are so many different kinds of genres, but in the end, writing is writing. It's the same language, it's the same words, it's the same grammar.'

**7.** 'If you follow your heart, if you do what you love, if you get to the place where you succeeded, and starting from the beginning of a novel and getting to the end of the novel, then you're doing the best you can do. You're living in the best moment of your life.'

**8.** 'The blank page makes no judgement on you.'

**9.** 'It has to be a story that speaks to us, that helps us understand our world and ourselves, and if it lasts, it's great literature.'

**10.** 'If you write a novel... you have created something. You have made something. You have started from the beginning and gone to the end of something that is a transformation itself, but also has transformed you in the making of it.'



