S.A. Cosby, a Writer of Violent Noirs, Claims the Rural South as His Own

The crime writer S.A. Cosby in Shacklefords, Va.Credit...Donald Johnson for The New York Times

By Dwight Garner

- Sept. 5, 2021

SHACKLEFORDS, Va. — The J. K. Redmond Funeral Home is a low-slung brick building in this small town in southern coastal Virginia. It's owned by Kimberly Redmond Cosby, the wife of the crime writer S. A. Cosby. He still puts in hours there, though fewer since his crime novels began to appear on national best-seller lists.

"I do the utility work, she's the boss," he says, noting that, unlike his wife, he isn't a licensed mortician. He drives the hearse; he picks up the bodies. He laughs: "I also sneak off and write sometimes."

It's a warm afternoon in early August, and we're sitting outside next to Redmond's navy-blue hearse. Cosby, who goes by Shawn, is a big, gregarious, bearded man in a small black cap; his hands move in his lap when he speaks. We're talking about undertaking.

Of his three crime novels, only the first, "My Darkest Prayer" (2019), is set in that milieu, but that book included the stark observation that funeral homes

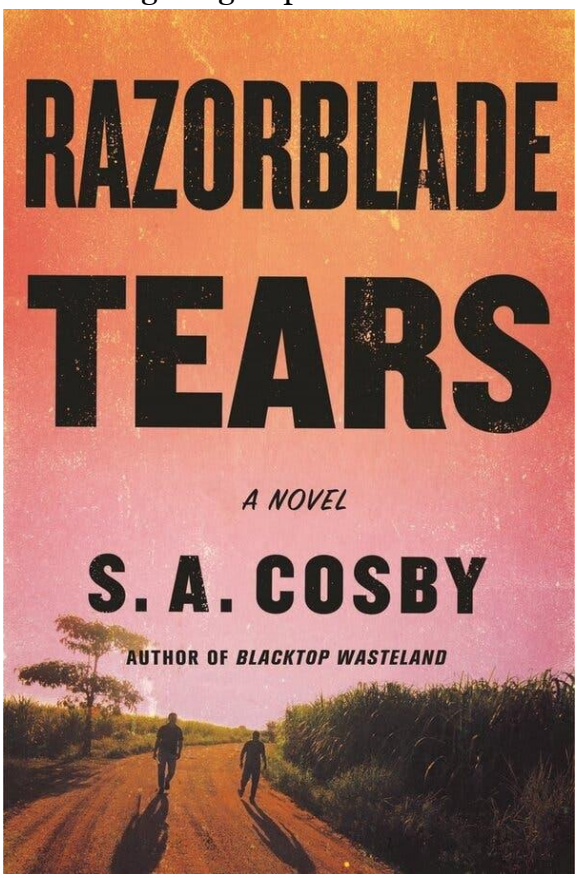
were, and mostly still are, “the last place where segregation was openly tolerated in America.” I ask him about that.

“Well,” he says, “I think there are certain white people who can’t conceive of an African American person seeing their grandmother naked, dressing and washing and preparing the body.” Until recently, he says, his wife’s clientele was 99.9 percent Black.

Cosby compares the pageantry of a Black Southern funeral to a second line parade in New Orleans, solemn yet boisterous. “The Black funeral home has historically been a linchpin in the Black community because the director was one of the most educated people in town,” he says. “That person became the de facto banker and counselor and lawyer.”

The most important thing about Black funeral homes, Cosby tells me, is this: “They gave African American people, in death, the respect they rarely got in life.”

Cosby, who is 48, is getting the kind of respect as a writer that he’d all but given up hoping for. His most recent novel, “Razorblade Tears,” about two ex-cons out to avenge the murders of their sons, was published in July and debuted at No. 10 on the New York Times best-seller list. Jerry Bruckheimer’s production team was among the group that won the film rights in an auction.



Before that there was “Blacktop Wasteland,” a kinetic heist novel about muscle cars and being sucked back toward the midnight side of life that won a landslide

of awards, including a Los Angeles Times Book Prize in 2020. It, too, has been optioned for film, with Virgil Williams ("Mudbound") writing the script.

Cosby's novels aren't about private investigators; they're about flawed everyday men, often ex-cons, who are after various types of redemption. They're propulsive, violent noirs. They're sneakily funny, too. The phrase "bless your heart," Cosby wrote in "My Darkest Prayer," is Southern for — well, for a phrase that can't be printed here. His novels are also about fathers and sons, and sex and race and class, and the stain of Southern history.

As a Black crime writer in the rural South, Cosby is an anomaly. Despite Attica Locke's claim on red-dirt East Texas, most of the better-known African American crime writers have set their stories in urban environments: Think of Chester Himes's Harlem detective series, or Walter Mosley's Easy Rawlins novels, set primarily in Los Angeles.

"I think for a lot of African American writers, especially those who moved away from the South, there's just such a history here, and that can be painful and abhorrent," Cosby says. "A lot of people don't want to tackle it."

The South, he says, is as much his as it is anyone's. The nearby Emmaus Baptist Church was founded in 1867 by his ancestors. "Every scrap of land that a Confederate apologist walks upon," he says, "somebody who looks like me has bled and cried and worked and died on. They don't get to define it."

Afternoon is blurring into evening, and the heat is easing off. We climb into his car, a 2020 Dodge Journey, one of the few things he's bought with the money that's begun to come in.

He and his wife both grew up poor. They're the kind of people, he says, "who still eat the whole loaf of bread, heel and all." They live in a small, neat white bungalow and have two cats.

The *first* thing he bought with book money, he tells me, starting the car and laughing, was an electric recliner. "Twenty-year-old Shawn would have been so ashamed of me buying a $600 recliner," he says. "He would have been like, 'Let's go to Vegas and blow it all on a weekend.'"

The chair has a heated seat and other extras. Cosby writes in it in the evenings, sitting next to Kimberly in their living room while she watches TV. He's got a lap desk, and he types while listening to music, often Stevie Ray Vaughan, on Spotify.

Cosby grew up in nearby Mathews County. His father worked on a scallop boat in the Chesapeake Bay. His mother, who was partially disabled, mostly raised him and his brother, alone in a trailer, getting by with the help of food stamps. Other family members lived nearby.

Cosby pulls in behind a defunct bar along Route 14. His family's faded trailer still sits out back, about 50 yards behind it. When Cosby was a kid, the bar was called Club 14, and it was the most popular Black bar in the county.

He spent his childhood trying to sneak into it, and he succeeded often enough. He saw his first bar fight when he was 11. He grew to know, and understand, the kind of florid characters who would later populate his fiction. He calls his childhood "a pastoral, almost Huck Finn type."

Racism in this part of Virginia was pervasive. His school was named Jackson Lee Elementary, after both Stonewall Jackson *and* Robert E. Lee. Cosby recalls being made to write essays about how the Civil War was a war of Northern aggression. A Confederate statue stood outside the county courthouse.

Cosby was, he says, saved by reading. There were books in his house because his mom liked biographies, his grandmother read "trashy true crime stories," an aunt read Stephen King and Clive Barker, and an uncle gave him John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee novels.

Cosby was an unapologetic critic of the stuff he read, so much so that his exasperated mother asked him, "Why don't you go write your own books?"

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The first thing he recalls writing was a 75-page werewolf story, composed in sixth grade, that was so gruesome it got him sent to the school psychiatrist. “My mom was so mad, *so* mad,” he says, laughing. “I just thought it was cool.”

He had good teachers in high school, and read everything he could get his hands on: the Beats, Theodore Dreiser, Nikki Giovanni, James Baldwin. He dropped out of community college because he couldn’t afford it. He kept attending classes, though, until he was told he had to stop coming.

After some years of what he calls wandering, Cosby ended up back in Mathews County. He got a job in a Lowe’s home improvement store and worked there for 11 years, rising to become assistant manager. He credits that job with settling him down, getting him insurance, turning him into an adult. He still wrote, however, and he talked books with some of his customers.

One ran a bookstore and encouraged him. Another, a writer named Dave Lee, would come into Lowe’s to buy parts to make steampunk costumes. This was around 2012. Lee was affiliated with a publishing collective called Hatton Cross Steampunk, which later published Cosby’s first novel, a fantasy/martial arts book titled “Brotherhood of the Blade,” in 2014.

We drive past the lot where the local Tastee-Freez used to be. Cosby’s characters have a thing for chocolate Tastee-Freez milkshakes. So does he. We drive past more than a few “Trump 2024” signs as well.

Cosby got his next break, he says, thanks to a belly dancer who was a friend of his and Kimberly’s. In the fall of 2013, she went to perform in Manhattan and ended up in a bar called Shade in Greenwich Village. The bartender that night, Todd Robinson, was the publisher of Thuglit, a magazine of hard-core crime fiction.

Cosby’s friend talked up his work to Robinson. Before long he was publishing regularly in Thuglit. He found an agent and wrote “My Darkest Prayer,” but the agent couldn’t sell it.

He and the agent amicably split, and the book ended up being published by a small outfit called Intrigue Publishing.

Cosby kept writing, hundreds of short stories, and the small breaks kept coming. The next occurred at a crime writing symposium in Florida. Cosby was onstage with several other writers when a woman stood up and began praising the manners and morals of the antebellum South. The moderator raised his eyes, looked over at Shawn, and said, “Do you want to take this one?”

He did want to take that one. A Manhattan literary agent, Josh Getzler, was in the audience. He was so taken with Cosby's response that he chased him down afterward and asked him for a drink.

"Shawn took this fraught situation, which could have been angry and extended, and without sugarcoating anything brought the temperature down with a great humanity," Getzler says. "I had to meet him."

Getzler soon read the first 50 pages of what would become "Blacktop Wasteland." There's a car race on the outskirts of town, a double-cross by some apparently dirty cops and a beatdown from the hero. Getzler remembers thinking to himself, "This reads like the scene before the opening credits of a movie."

The two began working together. Cosby credits Getzler with changing his life.

Soon he was fully at work on the two novels, "Blacktop Wasteland" and "Razorblade Tears," that would make his name.

It's the next morning now, and we're sitting in the funeral home's lobby. Cosby's books are arranged in a small glass display case, amid candles and replicas of angels.

The best thing about spending time with Cosby is talking books with him. He appears to have read everything, and he still has strong opinions about it all. His "Mount Rushmore" of crime writers, he says, is Mosley, Elmore Leonard and Dennis Lehane. (His favorite Mosley is "A Little Yellow Dog"; his favorite Leonard is "Swag"; his favorite Lehane is "Darkness, Take My Hand.")

He's an enthusiastic reader of novels by women crime writers of color, including Rachel Howzell Hall, Kellye Garrett, Gigi Pandian, Yasmin McClinton and Zakiya Dalila Harris.

He'll take Raymond Carver and John Updike over Philip Roth and Norman Mailer. ("Roth exists in a world that is so far removed from my reality, you know, that I couldn't sometimes wrap my mind around his work," adding that Mailer isn't his kind of macho.)

John Irving and Donna Tartt are in his pantheon. "Tartt is genius personified," he says. "She only writes one book every 10 years, but it's always a banger." About her three novels, he says, "I don't know of anyone who's had such a good run."

David Foster Wallace? "I think it's unfortunate that he's become shorthand for a certain type of toxic male, and I don't know if I agree with that," Cosby says. "I understand where it comes from. There's a certain type of guy who reads 'Infinite Jest' and tries to quote it, the way people used to quote Ayn Rand."

Wallace had “a level of precognition about certain things,” he adds.

We sit and talk about William Faulkner and Toni Morrison and Harry Crews, until it becomes plain that Cosby needs to get back to work. His next novel, tentatively titled “All Sinners Bleed,” is about the first Black sheriff in a small Southern town.

He’s glad he has readers everywhere. These include, he says, some East Coast academics. “But I’m always going to be writing from the perspective of a country boy, you know — the one that grew up picking crabs and shucking corn.”

He tells me: “You can be poor, but you can educate yourself for free.”