

Interview

SA Cosby: “The holy trinity of southern fiction is race, class and sex”

By Ashish Ghadiali



Author SA Cosby photographed in Shacklefords, Virginia. Photograph: Amanda Voisard/The Observer

I spoke to a friend who said: 'If you sign with him it will change your life.' My friend was right

The bestselling Virginia crime writer on getting his big break, what southern fiction means to him, and setting his next murder mystery right after Trump is elected.

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Crime writer SA Cosby was the talk of the US literary scene last year when his novel *Blacktop Wasteland*, a heist thriller set in his native Virginia, topped Amazon's mystery and thriller chart. As well as being named a New York Times notable book of the year, it won an LA Times award and is currently being developed for cinema by producer Erik Feig. Cosby's new book, *Razorblade Tears* (published, like its predecessor, by Headline), is a revenge thriller that confronts homophobia across various communities in the deep south. Film rights have been bought by Paramount Players.

Were you surprised by the success of *Blacktop Wasteland*?

Immensely.

You were already a writer, but what was life like before?

It had a sort of punk rock ethos. I was working with a small independent publishing firm, really good people. My first crime book, *My Darkest Prayer*, came out with them and when you're working with an independent, they do as much as they can, but you have to do a lot. I was riding around in my car with a trunk full of books, going around bookstores, attending events. It was very much a catch-as-catch can sort of existence.

So what happened between *My Darkest Prayer* and *Blacktop Wasteland*?

There's a worldwide mystery convention called Bouchercon in Florida. I went down there to promote *My Darkest Prayer*, handing it out to anyone who would listen. A friend of mine, [Eryk Pruitt](#), was a moderator for a panel about southern crime fiction and he asked me to be on it. At the end of the event, a lady got up and made an obtuse, somewhat racist comment about the south and how she missed the manners of the antebellum period. Eryk invited me to respond and I was like, "Ma'am, I understand that you miss that period of time but, you know, for people who look like me, that period of manners and etiquette wasn't so great..." I was a bit of a smartass. People laughed and it broke the tension in the room. After the event, an agent called Josh Getzler walked up to me and said: "I loved what you said. I loved how you handled that lady. I loved your ideas about southern fiction. Are you working on anything now?" I was kind of gun-shy. I'd met people in the past who said they were agents. It didn't work out. But I spoke to a friend who was already attached to Josh. He said: "If you sign with him it will change your life." My friend was right – he changed my life. I was working 60 hours a week as a manager at a hardware store. Now I'm writing full time.

What about southern fiction? What does it mean to you?

I say the holy trinity of southern fiction is race, class and sex. Those are the underpinnings of the great books of the south, whether it's William Faulkner's *Light in August* or Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*. For me, the best southern fiction takes the hypocrisy of the south, a region that seeks to steep itself in religion and moral rigidity, and melds that with the reality of a multitude of social, sexual and class backgrounds and situations.

You were raised 40 miles south of Richmond in Virginia, the capital of the confederacy...

I can give you one better. I live in a small town where there is a confederate statue in front of the court house building where we go to adjudicate cases, legal and civil. I

went to a school – Lee-Jackson Elementary – that was named after Robert E Lee and Stonewall Jackson, two soldiers of the Confederacy who, if they had their way, would have me still in a field picking cotton! It creates this incredible mental anguish but also this mental fortitude because over every scrap of land that a confederate apologist walks upon today somebody who looks like me bled, worked, cried, sweat and died. I'll be damned if I give it up or cede them one foot, one inch, one hectare, one millimetre. **When people read my books, they see the African American characters in my books and talk about their strength and depth of character. That's me paying homage to the people I knew and the people who came before me and suffered these outrageous indignities.**

What are you writing at the moment?

I'm working on a southern gothic murder mystery, tentatively titled *All the Sinners Bleed*, about the first black sheriff in a small southern town in 2017 right after Trump is elected.

Did the Derek Chauvin (el policía asesino de George Floyd) trial influence the plot?

Oh yeah. I honestly did not think he was gonna be convicted. I have seen so many guilty police officers get away with murder. I want my character to try to reform his police force, but what he's gonna learn, and what I'm learning as I write the book, is that it's difficult to do that because in a small town, the deputy that you want to fire is related to the chairman of the town council, or the deputy that you want to punish for their behaviour is related to the commonwealth's attorney.

Do you read much while you're writing?

At one time I didn't. I was afraid that it would influence my style. What I learned is that's never going to happen. Your style is your own. I have a very specific style. I write long sentences. I like similes (maybe too much, according to some reviewers). I like to write esoterically. I pontificate and wax poetic in the middle of gunfights. That's my style. That's the SA Cosby style. Now that I recognise it, I can read a book while I'm writing a novel. I actually finished three books while I was writing *Razorblade Tears*.

What were they?

Blackwood by Michael Farris Smith; *The Cipher* by Kathe Koja; *November Road* by Lou Berney. They're fabulous writers, all three of them, but they each have their own style and it's very different from mine.

What are you reading now?

Just finished *Bath Haus* by PJ Vernon. Just started *The Forest of Vanishing Stars* by Kristin Harmel, which is a second world war novel.