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Chester Himes , Michel Fabre , Robert Skinner

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Tomsson Black, political visionary, business genius, and underground revolutionary, plots to avenge injustice by instigating racial turmoil. The roots of racism extend far back into his ancestry, and persecution and suffering have affected many generations of his family. Tomsson's own misfortunes are the impetus for him to found a criminal underworld whose ultimate purpose is the overflow of white society. This novel, the history of Tomsson Black and an indictment of racism in America, ends in apocalypse. It is Chester Himes's ultimate statement about the destructive power of racism and his own personal fantasy of how the American Negro, through calculated acts of violence and martyrdom, could destroy the unequal system pervading American life. However, after reaching an ideological impasse, Himes, one of the angriest writers in the black protest movement, left this novel unfinished. After his death in Spain in 1984, a rumor persisted that he had left a final, unfinished Harlem story, in which he literally destroys both his Harlem backdrop and his heroes in a violent racial cataclysm. The manuscript, entitled Plan B, is that novel. It was edited and published in France, where it was widely hailed as an unfinished masterpiece by readers and critics alike. This new edition, appearing for the first time in the United States, includes an introduction by Michel Fabre (The Sorbonne) and Robert E. Skinner (Xavier University), who have prepared Plan B for publication.

Plan B Details

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From Reader Review Plan B for online ebook

Liz says

Just not my kind of book, I guess. Very violent, more like an experiment in shock value than any real societal observation / commentary. Interesting in some parts, but the narrative stream is always interrupted by gore...

Greg says

Let's say this is the most revolutionary novel ever printed in the U.S. No stretch at all, not even a little bit. I'm just waiting to see how long before it "disappears" out of print...

Justin Remer says

Blacks get guns. Kill white cops. What's not to like?

Bamcquern says

Written as a synopsis in the way some Richard Matheson stories are.

Philippe Malzieu says

The last Himes, unfinished, published after his death. But, was he able to finish it? Not sure. It begin very strongly, white cops died, revolution in Harlem. Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones died also. And after? Riot on Vth Avenue? Harlem vitrification? Too much violence, the death of his favourite characters, It is not surprising that he can not finish it. But the most interesting is not here. It make me thing to the last Harper Lee. At the end of their life, authors seem totally disinhibited. Miss Lee breaks his kindly image. Himes express his hate for police. Old age is not a wreck.

CK Malone says

More like 2 1/2 but I'll give it 3 for creativity. Takes place in Harlem in the 80's where random African-American residents find themselves recipients of packages containing assault rifles and other weaponry. This is seemingly setup from the mind of one very militant individual who seeks to violently write a new path for black people to be heard in a society where they're reduced to second class status. Needless to say things get out of hand quickly. Unfortunately, the book is unfinished and right around 150 pages in things, narratively

speaking, start to break down in broad strokes of exposition.

Jesse Baggs says

An incredibly dark story with a bleak take on humanity that also manages to be wildly over the top, even cartoonish, without losing too much believability. In some ways this makes “Plan B” most similar to the first book in Chester Himes’s Harlem Cycle, “A Rage in Harlem;” another similarity is that the nominal heroes of The Harlem Cycle—Grave Digger and Coffin Ed—are barely a part of the story. But whereas the rest of the Harlem Cycle is a granular look at the lives and miseries of the citizens of Harlem, “Plan B” is a reckless dive into an American race war. While enjoyable, the book is also deeply problematic, with the main character beating and raping a woman, who loves it. The critic Noah Berlasky recently wrote that we seem to like certain male authors not despite their misogyny but because of it, and “Plan B” reveals an ugliness toward women that is more subtle in the rest of the Harlem Cycle but no less troublesome.

Joshua Boydston says

Himes' last and unfinished novel, *Plan B* is a stirring, bold, uncompromising, thought-provoking and yet deeply flawed work.

No other book I've encountered (except perhaps Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*) so excellently captures the political and social conditions of racial oppression and militant response. Much of the African-American literature that preceded and followed it (including the rest of Himes' own work) seems wholly focused on merely reporting the degree of American racism and apartheid, often presented through either broken and victimized narrators or angry, black men who vent their rage wherever they can (Richard Wright's novels). That approach (which either subtly ignores or blatantly rejects the possibility for a radical response to racism) is ultimately an ineffective, unrealistic and politically debilitating way of presenting American racial dynamics.

Plan B partially corrects that flaw by presenting one of the most vividly realized literary accounts of racial unrest and revolution ever conceived. The novel is at its best when describing the murder of cops, the massive and genocidal overreaction by police and military to comparatively limited rebellion, the eventual assassination of leaders of the white establishment, and the political and social conditions that caused all this to happen in the first place. What makes the novel so good is that these conditions are pretty exactly the state of American in the late 1960s. You get the sense that a full out race war could have happened so very easily under slightly different circumstances.

Where *Plan B* fails is in the chapters about a black businessman/philanthropist's ancestry and upbringing, which alternate with the chapters about civil unrest and ultimately make up half the book. While these two strands do unite at the end of the novel (albeit very weakly, as the conclusion of the unfinished novel was cobbled together from sparse notes after Himes' death), it still seems as though Himes was writing two separately stories without really knowing how to best combine them.

Those lesser chapters are somehow more brutal and unsettling than the chapters about full-out race war. In scenes reminiscent of Voltaire's *Candide* , Himes recounts lynchings and rapes in a way that's supposed to make them cleverly funny. Even though I could see what Himes was trying to accomplish, I had a very hard

time stomaching these descriptions. There's something too miniature and personal about this satire, which renders it much more disturbing and unsuccessful than Himes' satire of race relations on the national scale.

Rather than buying a copy of this book, I decided to just photocopy the chapters (roughly half the book) that dealt with rebellion, while doing my best to forget about the other ones. The result is, in my opinion, a much stronger, coherent novel with a clearer and more direct sense of purpose. I'm sure, though, that others would disagree with me.

As far as I know, there's only this one edition of the book in print, which is published by the University Press of Mississippi. That makes it expensive to buy but ultimately more rewarding to read, as UPM has included a lengthy introduction that places this work in context, explains how Himes came to write it and gives a stronger sense of how this unfinished novel would have been completed.

In short, it's an unsettling, uneven, ultimately unsuccessful novel that happens to include the most stirring and radical scenes of rebellion I've ever encountered in literature and one of the best examples of social satire from the Black Power era ever written. It's an exciting yet troubling artifact from an exciting yet troubling time.

Nat Smith says

f-ing amazing. though, as it was published posthumously, the ending is a teeny disappointing and probably not what Himes would have wanted.

For any reader interested in imagining race wars.

William says

Fans of Chester Himes's great detectives, Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones, may be tempted to pick up Plan B, Himes's last Harlem Cycle novel, published posthumously in France in 1984 and released in the U.S. a decade later.

Caveat lector!

Plan B was never finished by Himes. The book published under that name is the draft of a novel Himes was working on at the time of his death that has been kludged together with an ending contrived from the author's own notes. It is by no means a finished product, and it has so many obvious flaws that it is not clear that Himes would have been able to put it into publishable form had he lived another twenty years.

The novel starts in typical Himes fashion, with a tenement dweller named T-Bone Smith "laughing like an idiot at two blackfaced white minstrels on the television screen who earned a fortune by blacking their faces and acting just as foolish as T-bone had done for free all his life."

Smith, like many of the low-life characters that figure in Himes's novels, is the broadest possible a caricature of an urban black: a shiftless, ignorant man who lives off his prostitute wife.

In a typical Himes novel, we would follow him through a series of misadventures, possibly as a sidelight to a

larger criminal plot, that culminates in a violent confrontation with Digger and Coffin Ed during which the bigger issues come to resolution and the loose ends are, if not neatly tied up, at least lopped off with a meat-ax.

But this is not your average Harlem Cycle crime programmer.

Almost as soon as he is introduced, a messenger delivers a package to T-Bone from an anonymous benefactor. Inside it he finds an assault rifle and enough ammunition to wage a minor war, along with these cryptic instructions:

Warning!! Do not inform police!!! Learn your weapon and wait for instructions!!! Repeat!!! Learn your weapon and wait for instructions!!! Warning!!! Do not inform police!!! Freedom is near!!!

T-Bone quarrels over the gun with Tang, the prostitute he lives with: he wants to turn it over to the cops, while she wants to keep it and follow the instructions. She seizes the weapon and tries to shoot T-Bone with it only to find the magazine is empty. The furious T-Bone kills her with his switchblade, police are summoned and Coffin Ed and Digger respond.

Here is where things get seriously strange: Digger, who is usually the more rational of the two detectives, explodes in rage and kills T-Bone for no good reason by smashing his skull with his custom-made long-barreled .38 Police Special. He is placed on suspension soon afterward and spends most of the rest of the book on the sidelines.

Coffin Ed, who is generally the more violent of the two detectives, remains on the job, but also ends up shunted out of action until the last few pages of the book.

Absent the two detectives -- who are the usual focal point of a Harlem Cycle story -- the remainder of the novel traces the history of a African-American militant named Tomsson Black and his forebears back to the Civil War era. It also follows a series of business transactions involving a company called Chitterlings, Inc.

These parallel stories unfold against the backdrop of a series of mass shootings involving disparate black men equipped with assault rifles almost identical to the one received by T-Bone Smith.

In each case, the gun was delivered without explanation by a messenger. The weapons have no identifying marks and their ammunition has been custom-made to eliminate features that would allow police to trace it back to its manufacturer.

Eventually, it becomes clear that the mass shootings are intended to provoke a racial war. Each massacre is described in gory detail, and each results in a violent counter-strike by white police officers or well-armed white racists.

Soon black citizens are issued identification cards, placed under strict curfews and restricted to their own black enclaves -- only to fall prey to roving bands of white people determined to eradicate them.

It is never explained why those who receive the weapons are so quick to use them in suicide attacks on whites. Because some of the gunmen are described as successful professionals, the reader is left to conclude that the only motivation that is necessary to turn any black man, rich or poor, into a race warrior is his pathological hatred for whites.

The random shootings, in any event, seems to backfire: instead of provoking a racial revolution, they result in a bloodbath that seems likely to end only with the extermination of the black minority by the white majority.

As the action proceeds, we come to understand that the mysterious Tomsson Black is behind the ten million guns that are flooding the ghettos and provoking racial Armageddon. But the only people who seem to be able to figure this out are Grave Digger and Coffin Ed, who confront Black in the final pages of the novel.

Plan B is by no means the first time Himes has looked at the seemingly intractable issue of conflict between blacks and whites in one of his books; in fact, it seems to be the central thread that runs through almost everything he ever wrote.

But this novel lacks the humor Himes brings to most of the rest of his hard-boiled Harlem novels, a bleak drollery that lampoons whites for their mindless racism at the same time as it spoofs blacks who conform to the stereotypes whites have assigned.

In Plan B, Himes is serious -- deadly serious -- about the inability of American blacks and whites to coexist. And in the final analysis Himes seems to conclude that the racial animosity that gives the novel its shape is actually insoluble -- even through the prophylaxis of violence.

"Tomsson Black would have liked to have had the time to organize the black race into effective guerrilla units, and the units into an effective force, in order to add weight to his ultimatum," Himes writes in the final chapter.

"He would also have liked to have granted white people the time for reflection and consideration before they made their choice. Somehow it had gotten out of his control. Now all he could do was complete the distribution of the guns and let maniacal, unorganized and uncontrolled blacks massacre enough whites to make a dent in the white man's hypocrisy, before the entire black race was massacred in retaliation."

But this passage seems as if Himes has suddenly realized that his plot has run off its tracks, and he tries to make up for inadequate story-telling by simply summarizing information that should have been explicated more thoroughly and skillfully as his narrative progressed, not thrown in at the very end.

But the worst is yet to come: Himes aware that he has painted himself into a corner with his fantasy of racial warfare, now cops out completely in a manner that is utterly incomprehensible to anyone who has read any of the other novels about Digger and Coffin Ed.

He has Digger, the most reasonable member of the team, come to Black's defense, while Ed, the man with the hair-trigger temper and the slippery hold on his emotions, inexplicably sides with the white racist status quo.

Given time enough, Himes might have worked out some mechanism that rationalizes this complete personality reversal, but not a word of explanation is offered.

Even more inexplicable is what happens next (spoiler alert!): Digger ends up shooting Coffin Ed, his long-time partner and closest friend, just before he is murdered himself by Black.

The novel ends with Black's unnamed companion, "a beautiful black woman," asking him why he shot Grave Digger since the detective was on his side.

Black lamely explains that Digger had to be eliminated "because he knew too much."

"I hope you know what you're doing," the woman tells him in the last line of the novel. It is a flat ending to a flat tale that is full of violence and mayhem, but to no particular purpose.

Unfortunately, Himes doesn't appear to have known what he was doing when he was writing Plan B. And the editors who pieced together the bits and pieces he left behind when he died seem to have been clueless as well. How else to explain such a radical transformation of Himes's two best-known characters and the holes that riddle the novel's plot like a sieve?

Plan B is a sadly unsatisfactory way to end the Harlem Cycle. Better that Himes hadn't bothered to start a final book at all than to have finished with this travesty that leaves a bad taste in the mouth of those who love his other work.

Kashiari says

This book has filled me with an overwhelming sense of repulsion and misanthropy. Not due to the content itself, but rather views of the author that are presented by it. The gruesome experiences of racism seem to left him twisted and corrupted.
