

WHAT LIES BENEATH

Subterranean homestead blues in Walter Mosley's new novel.

BY BEN GREENMAN

In 1992, when reporters asked Bill Clinton about his favorite writers, he named Walter Mosley, a forty-year-old African-American mystery writer who had published a pair of novels featuring a hardboiled detective named Easy Rawlins. The endorsement made Mosley's career; before long, he was among the most popular writers in America. But it also insured that in the public's mind he would be bound forever to Easy Rawlins. This is misleading. Since 1995, Mosley has published a blues novel, two sci-fi novels, two short-story collections about a homeless sage, and a book-length essay called "What Next: A Memoir Toward World Peace." And yet this apparent diversity is misleading as well. All his works share an abiding interest in the moral dimensions of everyday life, and none more so than his new novel, "The Man in My Basement" (Little, Brown; \$22.95), a compelling, peculiar exploration of race and identity.

The protagonist of Mosley's book is Charles Blakey, a thirty-three-year-old African-American whose life isn't exactly moving in the direction he wants. Charles hasn't worked since he was fired from a local bank for petty theft, has no close relatives and few close friends, and spends most of his time alone in his house in the black section of Sag Harbor, reading science fiction and drinking too much. The house, which has been in his family for generations, is his main source of pride, but he's about to default on the mortgage. (Home ownership means a lot to Mosley: his first mystery novel, "Devil in a Blue Dress," opened with Easy Rawlins in a similar predicament—out of work and about to lose his house to the bank.)

One day, a small, bald white man named Anniston Bennet arrives at his door and says he'll pay fifty thousand dollars to rent Charles's basement for

the summer, as long as Charles complies with a few basic conditions. Soon a delivery truck drops off boxes of materials for the construction of a large holding cell. Charles wonders "what kind of animal Bennet would bring with him that was so dangerous it had to be kept in a cage." The animal is Bennet himself, who plans to spend two months con-



Walter Mosley

fining in the cell as a form of absolution. Though he works in finance, he is also a former intelligence operative who has spent most of his adult life involved in what he says are unimaginable atrocities. "Your whole life could be called a failure," he tells Charles. "Every second up until this moment has been wasted. But still you are truly innocent while I,

who have changed the course of nations, am not worthy to call you friend." The penitent climbs into the cell. The innocent snaps the lock shut. The experiment begins.

White man, black man, cell. It will surprise no one that there are overtones of slavery in this arrangement, and some readers may groan at how undisguised they are. The lock on the cage, supplied by Bennet, is a nineteenth-century slave-ship padlock from Mali. But, as any good Hegelian would expect, the relationship between master and slave is hardly stable. The two men begin to talk, warily at first and then more openly. And not just to talk but to read and discuss. Bennet plans to use his time to catch up on his reading. (His list includes "Moby Dick," "Four Quartets," and Pynchon's "Vineyard.") He likes to inject his reading into his conversations with Charles, and the effect is like a kind of Cliffs Notes from the underground.

Mosley has been staging these colloquies for a while: Easy Rawlins spent much of his time considering the world as will and representation, and one of Mosley's other protagonists is named Socrates Fortlow. But Socrates (both Mosley's and Plato's) was a peripatetic, and nothing here is free to move. In an essay entitled "The Philosophy of Composition," Edgar Allan Poe explained his penchant for claustrophobia: "A close circumscription of space is absolutely necessary to the effect of insulated incident—it has the force of a frame to a picture. It has an indisputable moral power in keeping concentrated the attention." Bennet's mind is circumscribed by the cage, which is, in turn, circumscribed by the basement; the force of the frame is doubled.

Bennet may enjoy unwinding with his Eliot and his Pynchon, but existentialist literature exerts the greatest influence on him. He patterns himself on Camus (those trapped at home during the plague come to mind) as well as Kafka (the hunger artist, of course). And many of his monologues could be lifted right from "Nausea." "Maybe the universe has laws, but they aren't concerned about you or me or the people we touch," Bennet says. "We're just mistakes who got up and walked off. The only things

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that are certain are death and the will to survive."

All this angst could have been exhausting. It is no easy task to stuff a novel full of philosophy and still allow for characters and plot—or, indeed, readers. Consider Richard Wright's "The Outsider," a 1953 novel that was acclaimed in its day as the first American existentialist novel (Wright had moved to Paris in the forties and was befriended by Sartre and Camus) but not acclaimed for much else. "The Outsider" revolves around a feckless young black man given to drink; its highly recondite exploration of the relationship between social and personal good makes it an ancestor of Mosley's book. But Wright's book is swollen and stilted, four hundred pages of stagy set pieces and turgid speeches, and although its moral rage has an undeniable force, it also demonstrates a high-handed disregard for the business of ordinary existence. Mosley, by contrast, never forgets that lives have to be lived, not just examined. As Bennet comes clean about his exploits in the dirty-tricks business, Charles, who begins the book sleeping in the bed he slept in as a child and nursing a sense of injustice over the abusive comments of a long-dead uncle, starts to grow, and to grow up. For him, Bennet's insistence on ethical accountability serves as a kind of self-help seminar.

The novel's brevity accounts for much of its success: "The Man in My Basement" is slim and fleet, just under two hundred and fifty pages, and it has a subtle sense of humor that leavens the philosophical inquiry. It's to be expected that Mosley can manage an investigation; he is, after all, a mystery writer. But he has a special talent for touching upon these sticky questions of evil and responsibility without getting stuck in them. This, too, seems like a strategy learned from mysteries, where good detectives are able to identify with the perpetrator—but only so far—and where they have to finish the job quickly, because they're always working against the clock. The novel does sag a bit under some excess plot, and, when Bennet's identity proves even more precarious than Charles suspects, the peeling of masks becomes audible. But, in the end, Mosley's novel, like the

characters that inhabit it and the world that it reflects, remains unknowable.

Mosley began this book well before the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, and yet the event shadows every page. One of the first times that Bennet calls Charles, their connection is broken by another conversation. "It was some foreign tongue, sounded Arabic but I'm not too good with languages," Charles says. Later, Bennet alludes to "a device that could cause terrible damage if put into the wrong hands." Static from the Middle East? A shadowy weapon? But this is a novel of thought, not action. In Mosley's view, the breakdown of national certainty and the rise of national defensiveness have increased the importance of self-examination—in short, increased the importance of the man in the basement.

Early on, Charles recalls a party in his basement, in a memory that mixes pleasure and premonition: "I suppose that it was called a basement because it was under the house, but it was more like a crypt." There is a long tradition of finding spiritual renewal in the lower altitudes; underground spots are safe, sheltered both from outside attack and from the self-deception of success. Rabelais attributed this notion to the Greeks ("Let us seek the solution at the bottom of the undrainable well, where Heraclitus says that truth is hidden"), and twentieth-century authors have reupholstered it with existentialist fabric. Mosley agrees: when you have been mired in corruption, he seems to say, the only way to achieve moral uplift is to sink to the bottom. ♦

DEPARTMENT OF PATHOLOGY
From the Oakland (Calif.) Tribune.

PITTSBURG—A group of pigeons that picked an inopportune place to roost caused a power outage Friday morning and died, officials said.

The pigeons had gathered on top of a pole holding a 21,000-volt power line and may have all flapped their wings together killing themselves and causing a short in the line, Pacific Gas & Electric Co. spokesman Jason Alderman said.

The short occurred around 7:30 a.m., and left about 11,000 customers without electricity in Pittsburg and parts of Antioch.

Repair crews restringed the wires and restored power two hours later.

During the outage, the Pittsburg Police Department said it was a mess driving through the city because traffic signals were not working.

No dental records exist for the pigeons, so they have not been identified, Alderman said.

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