

As in all the best crime fiction, from the very first line of Walter Mosley's debut novel you know where you are but you know something's up. "I was surprised to see a white man walk into Joppy's Bar," begins *Devil in a Blue Dress* and there's an immediate tension. You know it's 1948, Los Angeles, a speakeasy and that times are hard. Familiar, too, is the first-person narrative, the focused scene-setting, the snappy, elliptical style. But what's different is that Mosley's hero – the 28-year-old streetwise war veteran Easy Rawlins – is black.

This fact alone makes Easy's creator a rare exception in the pantheon of American mystery writing. Certainly Mosley has precursors; most notably Chester Himes, whose *A Rage in Harlem* was made into a film last year. But what makes Mosley even more unusual is that he plunges Easy right into American crime fiction's heartland – Los Angeles, the mean streets walked by the greatest gumshoe of them all, Philip Marlowe.

Easy, however, is a long way from the



Easy does it

Walter Mosley is set for a classic crime-fiction career with his reluctant black gumshoe, Easy. By Philip Watson

macho, wise-cracking cynic that has become the genre's staple. He is a very reluctant detective, only taking the job of tracking down the dangerously irresistible Daphne Monet because he is down on his luck and behind on his mortgage. A clever combination of moral crusader and ruthless opportunist, Easy may be engaged in a struggle against the forces of evil and corruption, but he always has his own best interests at heart.

"Easy is limited by being black, but he won't accept those limits," says Mosley, a former computer programmer brought up in LA but who now lives in New York. "He's very capitalistic, but he also understands other people's problems and wants to help. That tends to get him into trouble."

This means that Easy always appears a very real, compassionate character. "I didn't want to create someone like Marlowe who is better than the reader," Mosley continues. "Easy is poor, intelligent and very human – he's scared shitless at times. I've tried to write a character people can identify with."

Add Mosley's highly visual writing style, his superb ear for the cadences and rhythms of black street speak and his refreshingly unpolemical explorations of racism and prejudice, and it's little surprise that *Devil in a Blue Dress* (Pan, £4.99) received a string of enthusiastic reviews when it was published last year. It also won the John Creasey Award for best first crime novel.

Mosley's second novel, *A Red Death* (Serpent's Tail, £6.99), out this month, will not soften that applause. Set in the same area (Watts) five years on, Easy has used his stolen money to buy a couple of apartment blocks. Hounded by a local tax officer, he agrees to work undercover on an FBI witch-hunt of suspected local communists. In doing so, Mosley sets up an even greater web of political and moral complexities than even *Devil* posed.

With his third Easy Rawlins mystery, *White Butterfly* (set in 1956 with Easy married) just published in the US and others planned, Mosley is well on his way to creating a new and fascinating crime series. Not only will it describe the social history of a section of black Los Angeles largely hidden, but also trace Easy's personal development and revelations.

"Easy's character will obviously change as he gets older," says Mosley. "By the time I reach the Nineties, Easy will be in his seventies. He'll be looking at death, maybe his children will die, and he'll have to detect in a different way. I don't know what I'm going to do with him, but it will certainly be a very different kind of mystery novel."

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