



Black Hornet

James Sallis

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A sniper appears in 1960s New Orleans, a sun-baked city of Black Panthers and other separatists. Five people have been fatally shot. When the sixth victim is killed, Lew Griffin is standing beside her. He's black and she's white, and though they are virtual strangers, it is left to Griffin to avenge her death, or at least to try and make some sense of it. His unlikely allies include a crusading black journalist, a longtime supplier of mercenary arms and troops, and bail bondsman Frankie DeNoux. Yet it is the character of Lew Griffin that takes center stage, as in each of Sallis's highly praised books. He is by now, well on the way to becoming what he will be; violent, kind, contradictory, alcoholic. Both naïve and wise, he is a man cursed by unspeakable demons. Nonetheless, he is seemingly encircled by redemptive angels, awaiting an opening.

Black Hornet Details

Date : Published January 1st 2003 by Walker Books (first published January 1st 1994)

ISBN : 9780802776433

Author : James Sallis

Format : Paperback 160 pages

Genre : Mystery, Crime, Fiction, Noir, Novels

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From Reader Review Black Hornet for online ebook

Jim says

A real find! It was a sales clerk at a long closed bookstore that recommended James Sallis to me, and I casually picked up a copy of Black Hornet. Now, some years later, I read Sallis story about Lew Griffin's attempts to track down a sniper in mid-Sixties new Orleans.

There's something different about this book: At the same time, it's hard-edged like Chester Himes (who actually makes a guest appearance in the book) and yet literate as all get-out. Griffin reads some really good stuff while he's trying to get a bead on the sniper without getting done in by the police or any number of tough guys who come knocking at his little place while he's trying vainly to get some sleep and recover from his last concussion and broken ribs.

Sallis, whose photographs make him look white, throws me for a loop. As I read the book, I was certain that he was Black -- but I have been wrong before, and often. He has an edgy style that cuts through anything that could slow down the story. I love his writing:

It takes a while for us to realize that our lives have no plot. At first we imagine ourselves into great struggles of darkness and light, heroes in our Levi's or pajamas, impervious to the gravity that pulls down all others. Later on we contrive scenes in which the world's events circle like moons about us -- like moths about our porch lights. Then at last, painfully, we begin to understand that the world doesn't even acknowledge our existence. We are the things that happen to us, the people we've known, nothing more.

I think I'm going to like reading more of his books. It seems he's also published poetry. An interesting guy, well worth looking into.

Toby says

"Mostly what you lose with time, in memory, is the specificity of things, their exact sequence. It all runs together, becomes a watery soup. Portmanteau days, imploded years. Like a bad actor, memory always goes for effect, abjuring motivation, consistency, good sense."

Black Hornet, the third memoir of black, New Orleans based, some time PI Lew Griffin. From his comfortable garden apartment in an unspecified "now" mentioned in Long-Legged Fly, enjoying the fruits of his genre writing success and the adoration of his literary students Lew is taking us back, way back to the 1960s, a time of political and racial upheaval, a time of Panthers, of an angry Chester Himes writing rallying calls to his de facto segregated American brothers from his Paris apartment, and in to that maelstrom comes a sniper serial killer who just so happens to shoot a woman of Lew's acquaintance whilst he walks next to her.

When considering this book and this series from Sallis it's important to understand that these are far more than your standard pulp potboiler. Sallis and Griffin have a constant philosophical struggle with their existence and the world around them and despite Black Hornet not reaching the depths of existential despair found in the first two memoirs it does discuss the concepts of identity and fate, as well as the changing nature of what it means to be black in America. It's not however making any grand political statements instead simply observing the inequalities that happen and the conflict within the individual. And of course there's the reference to the work of Juan Goytisolo and his discussion of memory and the foolishness of trying to

imprison memories via the written word. It's a handy tool for a literary author writing in a genre that is inherently flawed in terms of needing drama and effect and an occasional faithlessness to reality to succeed, almost a get out of jail free card perhaps, but the skill of Sallis' writing is that it doesn't feel dishonest or deus ex machina like, it's a seamless blending of character, memory and plot that consistently succeeds in entertaining the willing reader.

There are only six of these? No fair!

"At last, painfully, we begin to understand that the world doesn't even acknowledge our existence. We are the things that happen to us, the people we've known, nothing more."

Johnny says

The third book in the series takes us back in time to Lew Griffin's earlier years, in some ways offering the reader an origin story and insight into the beginnings of some of his continuing relationships.

As always, the writing is beautiful both in its content and its execution. The story is simple, the characters complex.

Another gem.

Guy Salvidge says

About as close to run-of-the-mill as Sallis ever gets, which isn't all that close.

Mohammed says

Another brilliant mix of noir and existentialism, character study. Reading this series is reading great Noir but also is like reading a Camus novel at the same time.

I have the next novel in the series but i cant read it now, being so real in human emotions makes them a heavy emotional read despite the books are less than 200 pages. I need something lighter in tone after this.

Emma says

In the Black Hornet, I met Lew Griffin again, a man who the word complex doesn't go far enough to describe. In his life, he has been many things – soldier, private investigator, criminal, author – and trouble always seems to come knocking.

The Black Hornet can be read as a standalone, and if you do, you will know non of these things about Griffin because this book takes us back to the beginning, before he was anything but a former soldier trying to make a life in a city that doesn't seem to care much about any of his residents.

New Orleans in the sixties sounds dirty, and hard, and not a place I would want to be but it suits Griffin and the people he meets perfectly, and it serves as a perfect backdrop for the civil rights movement that is brewing and the way life for black men is changing, but maybe not quick enough.

The setting, and the story, suit the way James Sallis writes to a tee. He doesn't waste words, with short sentences, short chapters and short books (this one runs at 150 pages), yet I never feel like I am missing out on anything. Plot lines move along quickly, we me rushing to keep up and characters appear fully formed and expecting you to know who they are and what they are about.

It took me a while the first book round to get into the style but now I have to say I look forward to it. I know what I'll get and I like it. It reminds me of the way people like Humphrey Bogart talked back in the day and of gumshoe novels. Simple is the wrong word to describe it, it's not, but it feels like that on the surface, whilst under it a lot is said and you have plenty to chew on and think about, long after the last page.

Saying all that, I know this book won't be for everyone. Most characters don't have much in the way of descriptions for example, you have to piece people together with the bits you know, which are given sparingly (so LaVerne, Griffins girlfriend starts to form when I find out about her red dress, which he finds hanging up in another mans flat).

Then there's the fact that the main story isn't always the main story (to not sound cryptic) because it's really about the characters and what drives them – usually it's sadness but with a fair bit of hope thrown in. When I got to the end here, the who the sniper was part, I was slightly disappointed because it meant the book was over and I didn't want it to be. I wanted to stay in New Orleans, seedy as it was, drinking bourbon and shooting the breeze with unsavoury characters.

For me, though, this is another winner from Sallis, who is one of my favourite authors. This was a great addition to a series with a character I find compelling and with a story I couldn't put down. I loved it!

Charles says

One of James Sallis's Lew Griffin mysteries. Griffin is a black detective in New Orleans and is one of the most original hard boiled characters in the mystery/noir field. Griffin is a flawed character but with a lot of sympathetic elements. These are, to some extent, literary mysteries, and are as much of an exploration of character and setting as they are mystery. I highly recommend them. My favorite mystery series, next to the Travis McGee series.

Owain Lewis says

As expected, Sallis slays it again. Race riots, snipers, heat, coffee, booze and characters called things like Doo-Whop, Hosie and Papa. Book three hits the ground in 1968, tensions are high in New Orleans and Lew finds himself in the middle of the chaos. Sallis's genius is that he gives us an account of events in the form of a memoir, which means that Lew's meditations and wanderings down life's weird paths are really what these novels are about - one man's daily struggles adrift in the sea of history. Another thing I really like about Sallis, and particularly the Lew Griffin books, is that he gives you a kind of further reading list scattered through the narrative - Chester Himes even gets a cameo in this one. Three more to go and I can't wait to read them, but I will.

Karl says

This is a re-read, originally read in 1995.

In this the third installment of James Sallis's noir series about Lew Griffin we are taken back to an earlier stint in his exploits in New Orleans. Back to the early sixties when the tide of race relations between black and white were beginning to come to a boil.

Something that Mr. Sallis does in this series is bring us, the reader, an awareness of other books and literature to awareness. There are a couple of pages dedicated to Chester Himes visiting on a lecture to New Orleans and Lew is hired as a body guard for the occasion. Allow me to mention at this point that Mr. Sallis has written an excellent biography of Himes and his work.

Back to the plot. A serial killer is loose in New Orleans and is killing white folks. Shoots em right in the head. Bam. One of the killers recent victims is new female friend of Lew's. So, the hunt is on.

Mr. Sallis's writing is exceptional, vibrant, well thought out and is a pleasure to read. I can't say enough about how well he creates mood, character and depicts events throughout this series of books.

What a joy to re-discover them and join Lew Griffin in his adventures through the dark side.

This copy kindly signed by the author.

Richard says

With *Black Hornet*, I'm realizing that the Lew Griffin series is entirely the written memories of an older man looking back on and contemplating major events in his life. While the first novel, *The Long-Legged Fly*, jumps around in time to study a changing man through different decades and the second novel, *Moth*, expands more on the 1990's part of his life, in *Black Hornet*, Lew remembers more events from the 1960's, expanding on the first part of *Fly*. What struck me, was how much the book actually did feel like a memory, even more so than the previous stories. Lew's narration seems to be unstuck in time, paralleling the past and present, cross-referencing not only things that have happened, but events to come and filling in some of the blanks between events that we are aware of from the previous books (maybe this is material for the later novels in the series?). All of this gives a great sense of an old man looking back on life with waning memory.

This story focuses on the younger Lew of the 1960's section of *Fly*, a raging drinker and debt collector, who is still far away from the best-selling novelist, professor, and sometime private detective that we know from the 1990's. He meets Esmé Dupuy in a bar, a white journalist who he has a drink with but who is soon gunned down right in front of him, the latest victim of a sniper that's been terrorizing New Orleans shooting white people. Lew is set on tracking the man down (an event that is alluded to in *Moth*). And in doing so, we get to witness Lew meeting different people that we know will be important friends in the times to come.

This book has a very different atmosphere from the previous books in the series. There's more of a focus on race and racial identity and protest, probably coming out of being set in the racially-charged and political '60's. Lew finds himself adrift in this world, bumping into militant groups like the Panthers, and even meeting and rubbing shoulders with a socially-angry Chester Himes at an event for the author, a scene that turns out to be a great homage to one of Sallis's inspirations. Although the book is pretty short, I took my time with it and soaked in Sallis's passionate prose, enjoying yet another great book in a series focusing on identity and memory.

David Ärlemalm says

Kaffe, bourbon, New Orleans, musik, en hel del litteratur och lite crime på det. Sallis när han är som bäst, vilket även gäller för de två föregående delarna i serien om Lew Griffin.

Graham says

I've read the Lew Griffin books in order, but I don't think I'll be reading any further. I've heard such good things about these books that I have persisted up to the third book hoping they would find their stride, or I would suddenly "get them", but it turns out they are not for me.

I don't care for Lew: he's (almost unbelievably) well read and he's also (luckily) rock hard at fighting. I like my protagonists a bit more flawed than this guy, who beats up the bad guys effortlessly then stares at his belly button until the plot works itself out...

Adam says

The third Lew Griffin book steps back in time and follows Lew in the sixties. This is my favorite of the volumes as it introduces all the characters and provides the usual literary references (Himes and Borges), and mix of intimate character study and existentialism but married to an evocation of the era and a consistent plot involving a sniper (that most existential and terrifying of all mass murderers.). Could be good for first timers to this strange and wonderful series. How much of this series does Griffin spend in a hospital?

Brian says

Sallis never let's you down. Great writing and an understated gentle delivery. Philosophy and a great storyline on the same page. Creates characters who sometimes just stop you in your tracks and his dialogue is masterful.

Roybot says

Sweet Jesus, this book. Set in the 1960s in the city of New Orleans, *Black Hornet* introduces Lew Griffin, sometime PI (technically, this is the third book of the series, but it's set prior to the first two, and it's the first one I picked up, so... introduces it is). Sallis is seriously channeling Chandler at times on this one, and it's brilliant. Griffin is narrating the story from the future, looking back at the case and trying to make sense of it all, a conceit that works excellently here, where he's able to comment on relationships with the clarity that only comes after it's far too late to act on.

Only much later, after almost thirty years with and without her, and when it was too late, did I realize that LaVerne had saved my life--that in some strange, indecipherable way we had saved each other's lives.

And in the years before that realization came, without meaning to I would hurt her terribly again and again, the same way I'd repeatedly damage myself. Each year, the ground pulls harder. Each year, the burden of what we do and fail to do helps push us down.

In Lew, Sallis has created a fantastic character. Sure, he drinks like Nick and Nora and he waxes philosophical like Marlowe, but it's not just ennui and existential angst that's bothering him. He's struggling with the question of racial identity in a world where his role as a black man is constantly shifting. The politics of race are handled deftly, here, and an array of perspectives, from the apathetic to the radical, are presented for Lew (and, of course, the reader) to chew on and ponder. I can't speak to the authenticity of his portrayal of New Orleans in the 60s (having never been to that city, and having not been alive at the time at any rate), but the struggles he describes resonate, and are particularly apropos given the current social landscape.

A must-read for fans of the Chandler-esque "thinking man's private dick".
