THE MAN IN MY BASEMENT

A novel by

Walter Mosley

A Reading Group Guide
A Writer’s Life

Walter Mosley talks with Marcus Warren
of the Telegraph (UK)

America’s best-known black male author is a self-disciplined sort. He bangs out the words daily, every morning, seven days a week. Indeed it is fair to say that nothing gets between Walter Mosley and his writing, not even clothes.

If it were not for the matter-of-fact way in which Mosley lets slip this arresting admission, you might suspect he was pulling your leg. But he blurts it out as though it were the most natural thing in the world. “Usually, I don’t wear anything. I’m naked,” he says and, clearly sensing that the point needs to be made again, “I write naked.”

“You’re not hearing this, Carine,” he yells at his assistant, who, among other things, meets and greets visitors to the Greenwich Village flat that is Mosley’s office.

“I knew about that before I started working for you,” echoes her voice from the upstairs floor.

“And you still came to work for me?” he fires back with a cackle of laughter.

Closer questioning reveals that the nude writing sessions take place not here in the office in front of Carine but at Mosley’s home nearby. He doesn’t feel uncomfort-
able without clothes and fails to understand why anyone else would: “Why would you?”

He is scrutinizing me now. “Do you feel self-conscious when you take your clothes off?”

It’s nothing to do with prudery, I suggest, adding that few people are narcissistic enough to feel absolutely at ease with their physique. To myself, I think that Mosley, while not bad-looking for his age, is still 52 years old. But he won’t let the matter rest there. No one can see into his apartment from outside, and he feels no shame in walking around in the nude.

“Don’t people do that?” he asks. “Not you, I guess.”

Clothes or no clothes, Mosley is something of a Renaissance man in modern American letters. His books only began to be published in the 1990s, but already there are noirish crime novels starring the detective Easy Rawlins, two collections of short stories featuring the urban philosopher Socrates Fortlow, science fiction, and a polemic, *What Next: A Memoir Toward World Peace*. His latest work is *The Man in My Basement*, a meditation on good and evil and race that he describes as a novel of ideas in the tradition of such French thinkers as Albert Camus.

Some have hailed the new book, which revolves around a confrontation between the black owner of a mansion on Long Island and a white stranger who rents the cellar for the summer, as representing a new direction in his output. But for Mosley it amounts to “a seamless fit” with
what has gone before. “It’s a departure for my readers and critics in America but it’s not a departure for me,” he says.

The sum of Mosley’s somewhat eclectic parts is on striking display in his workspace in the office, a venue for meetings and talks, as he puts it — talks, as in business negotiations, not literary soirées. It is also the headquarters for his production company, and sitting on a sofa behind a multiline phone and remote controls for the television, Mosley looks more the flamboyant film type than the jobbing author.

To enhance the atmosphere of miscellany, the flat also boasts a stepping machine, a water cooler, two editions of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and, open at the letter *N* on a bookstand, a Webster’s dictionary. “This is the real treasure,” he whispers as he ushers me into a back room filled to overflowing with his collection of comic books, some 20,000 of them, he estimates.

Mosley is as flamboyant as his surroundings. Two features catch one’s eye straight away: the first is the gap where his front teeth should be; the second, the enormous ring he wears on his left hand. “I couldn’t tell you how gold it is but it’s golden,” he says of the Ghanaian ornament, a magnificent sculpture in metal of a bird pecking at coral. Later, on leaving, Mosley strides out into the Manhattan streets in a white straw hat, which would look less odd if it weren’t a drizzling, grey, overcast afternoon.

The overall effect is one of nonchalant self-confidence, part of a desire to make his life look easier than it really is.
But Mosley has always been up-front about the demands of writing, which he has likened to “gathering smoke” or “guerrilla warfare” with “no vacation, no leave, no relief.” He is insistent about the need to write every day, without fail, for fear that the ideas and the flow of creation will dry up. In fact, the day before our meeting, he broke the rule, overwhelmed by the demands of seeing an old friend from high school and escorting his 83-year-old mother to the airport. Doesn’t his near-obsession with work border on the compulsive?

“How isn’t being a human being compulsive?” he counters. “Cats and dogs are not compulsive. They always have food, they sleep most of the time, they eat, they want to have sex if they’re not neutered. That’s a noncompulsive life.”

Mosley has always had “a good life,” he says, even when his circumstances looked less than promising. His father was a black exile from the Jim Crow Deep South, his mother was Jewish. He jokes that the usual reaction his parents’ background prompts in strangers is: “Man, they’re against you on all sides.”

He was born in Watts, Los Angeles, a district ravaged by the 1965 riots, which he witnessed as a child. Nowadays, his home is one of the smartest neighborhoods of Manhattan. Monica Lewinsky lives nearby, and as I arrive, outside the block of flats where he has his office a precious-looking middle-aged white man has an animated chat with his Airedale dog.
Mosley has railed against the “limited circles of middle-class America” and their “utopian majesty,” but he seems well-established in a comfort zone of the bourgeoisie. What about “keeping it real,” I ask?

“My understanding of living in the ghetto is that it’s not a place you want to live,” he replies laconically. “Even if I’m not living in East New York [a particularly rough part of Brooklyn], my heart and my mind and my work are there, so I’m not removed from it.”

Sustaining empathy with people and places outside what is now his daily experience is a challenge Mosley can meet. But there are others as well, such as his political battles. He is a vocal and active opponent of the Bush presidency, which he calls “illegal.” And then there is the creative struggle he submits to every morning.

The books keep coming and he is pretty prolific, though, I venture. He throws the word back at me. “‘Though?’” he asks. “What’s the though? Though I write naked?”
Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. Anniston Bennet’s plan is shocking, and his only explanation: “I’m a criminal wishing to pay for my crimes” (page 120). What are Bennet’s reasons for not recognizing the already existing channels of law enforcement? Why do you think he chooses this form of punishment instead? What does he hope to accomplish by serving time in Charles’s basement?

2. Individual history can be a potent, lifelong force, this novel reminds us. What does Charles learn about his own history in the course of the novel? Does his estimation of one’s history rise or fall?

3. Masks play a significant role within the narrative — in both a literal and an abstract sense. Discuss the various masks that appear in the story. What do they hide? What do they reveal?

4. As the novel unfolds, Charles reads a story about a young prince. Explain the relevance of this particular story. How does this story reflect the way Charles views himself in the world?

5. Bethany and Narciss appeal to very different parts of Charles’s nature — one is passionate, the other more cere-
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bral. Yet the two women have something in common. As Charles notes, “Bethany and Narciss saw something that was like me — an image of what I thought I wanted to be — but they had no idea what was on my mind” (page 208). Discuss. What do Charles’s respective relationships with these two women reveal about him?

6. Discuss Extine’s role relative to those of Bethany and Narciss. What can be drawn from Charles’s behavior during his encounters with Extine?

7. Early in the story, Charles makes an intriguing link between Bennet and his own uncle, Brent, a detail that resurfaces at various points in the novel. Why would Charles make this connection? What does this association suggest about Charles’s state of mind?

8. Bennet and Charles’s relationship challenges historical roles based on the color of one’s skin. Why do you think these very distinct men are drawn to each other? Describe the way in which each man perceives the other.

9. Discuss the nature of the conversations between Bennet and Charles. How does the dynamic between them shift in the course of the novel?

10. The struggle between good and evil is a key theme in the conversations between Bennet and Charles. Initially,
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how does Charles define the two? Does his perception change?

11. At one time Bennet declares, “I am a good citizen and the worst demon” (page 217). What does he mean by this? In view of Bennet’s past, what do you think might be his idea of a true act of evil?

12. What crimes does Charles feel he has committed? Whom does he consider his “warden”?

13. Ultimately, Bennet and Charles construct unique prisons for themselves as punishments for apparent transgressions. Evaluate these prisons. How are they similar? How are they different?

14. At the end of his self-imposed sentence, Bennet writes in a letter, “I want to pass something on, but I can’t think of a thing” (page 246). Discuss Bennet’s influence on Charles’s life. What has Bennet passed on, if anything?

15. Bennet has one final request for Charles, a request that Charles chooses not to honor. Examine Charles’s motives for this. What does his choice suggest about Charles himself at the end of this story?

16. Do you think Bennet ultimately paid for his crime? Why or why not?
Suggestions for Further Reading

Walter Mosley offers a list of some of his favorite books:

*The Stranger* by Albert Camus
The book that probably had the greatest impact on my life and career. I suppose that’s because it was a novel about ideas in a very concrete and sensual world. This to me is the most difficult stretch for a writer — to talk about the mind and spirit while using the most pedestrian props. Also the hero is not an attractive personality. He’s just a guy, a little removed, who comes to heroism without anyone really knowing it. This makes him more like an average Joe rather than someone beyond our reach or range.

*One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez
*Lord of Light* by Roger Zelazny
The Simple stories by Langston Hughes
*The Country Girls Trilogy* by Edna O’Brien
*Four Quartets* by T. S. Eliot
*Kindred* by Octavia Butler
*An Alien Heat* by Michael Moorcock
*Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston
*The Galton Case* by Ross Macdonald
Also by Walter Mosley

**Walkin’ the Dog**

“The pleasures of *Walkin’ the Dog* are abundant. It’s the language, the deft characterizations, and, finally, it’s the triumph of Socrates Fortlow himself, a man whose wisdom is hard won.”

— Thomas Curwen, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*

“Time and again *Walkin’ the Dog* surprises the reader, like a fable or like life. . . . It contains moments of sharp insight and scenes of sudden poignancy. . . . Moving and subtle, gritty and poetic, *Walkin’ the Dog* is a memorable and admirable work.”

— Tom Nolan, *San Francisco Chronicle*

“Mosley’s prose style, light as a butterfly and sharp as a bee sting, is fully evident in these stories. . . . Each is a small, perfect moral fable about some injustice or indignity to the human heart — and what could be more wicked than those.”

— Adam Woog, *Seattle Times*

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