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Subtle hues: character and race in Dorothy B. Hughes' *The Expendable Man*

Abstract:

In his 1984 essay on Dorothy B. Hughes' novels, Lawrence J. Oliver, Jr points out that one of the distinguishing features of Hughes' work, differentiating her from some of her more famous English and American contemporaries, is that she focuses on a type of evil they either ignore or help perpetuate: the evil of racism. Oliver concludes that, despite her well-meaning intentions, Hughes' efforts to offer readers characters from a variety of racial backgrounds, she produces her own of one-dimensional stereotypes. However, Oliver fails to give sufficient credit to the subtle way that Hughes develops character, offering cues to show how people of colour negotiate life within hegemonic white culture. Reviewing the 2012 re-release of *The Expendable Man* (1963), Charles Taylor recognises that Hughes' evocation of Hugh Densmore's justifiable paranoia, is the result of both her mastery of noir as well as her ability to recognise racial divides that continue to exist in the United States. An examination of Hughes' character-building skills in that novel will demonstrate how they fuel the power of her narrative suspense.

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Introduction

In *The Expendable Man* (1963) Dorothy B. Hughes follows the plight of a young intern, Hugh Densmore, unwittingly snared in a morass of racial tensions and murder in Arizona. In the heat of the rising civil rights movement, after the Freedom Rides but before Medgar Evers' murder and the Civil Rights Act, Hughes offers a compelling look at a tense situation steeped in a noir ambience amplified with contentious racial politics. As Walter Mosely writes in his afterword to the 2012 edition of the book, 'A white woman writing of a young black man's problems with the law was certainly a kind of gamble – but Hughes often chose to write from perspectives far from her own' (loc 4020). Hughes brings Densmore's trials to life with the same skills that fuelled the exquisite tension in her classic noir *In a Lonely Place* (1947). Mosely describes those abilities as a 'poet's eye for detail and feel for language'.

Hughes long had an interest in the inequalities of life in the United States, including a concern for how the colonising forces wreaked havoc on the indigenous nation throughout its history, as portrayed in *Ride the Pink Horse* (1946). In his overview of Hughes' novels, Lawrence J. Oliver, Jr. points out that 'what distinguishes Hughes from her more famous English and American contemporaries … is her focus on a form of evil they either ignore or help perpetuate – racism', but he concludes that despite her well-meaning intentions, 'Hughes drains her black, brown, and red characters of their humanity and serves up a series of one-dimensional stereotypes of her own' (1984: 27, 37). However, Oliver fails to give sufficient attention to the subtle way that Hughes develops character, offering cues to show how people of colour negotiate life within hegemonic white culture. As Christine Smallwood writes of Hughes' exquisite touch, 'her brilliant descriptive powers make and unmake reality' (2012). Reviewing the re-release of *The Expendable Man* in the ambience of President Obama's bid for re-election, Charles Taylor recognises that Hughes' evocation of 'Hugh Densmore's justifiable paranoia is not just due to her mastery of noir' (though that is important), but to her recognition of the reality of the racial divides that continue to exist in the United States (Taylor 2012: 37). It is, however, the skills she has honed in writing noir and mystery that give power to the portrayal of a black man under suspicion merely for existing.

Noir

Noir as a genre has many definitions; in their overlap it is possible to see the primary characteristics that give Hughes' fiction such power. The genre is a curiously contentious one, defined retrospectively first in film and then in the novels that often supplied their sources. French film critics first identified the genre amongst the American films arriving belatedly after World War II's end, most notably in Borde and Chaumeton's *Panorama du Film Noir Américain* (2002) where they pointed to its characteristics being 'nightmarish, weird, erotic, ambivalent, and cruel' (qtd. in Silver and Ursini [1996]2006: 18). Only gradually did American critics begin to grapple with the genre and its 'essential traits' (3). While debate raged on about the visual genre, the term began to be applied to

the texts associated with it, particularly the works once described as 'hard-boiled', though again the division between the genres is a porous one. 'The addition of *noir* sentiment to the hard-boiled formula invariably evokes a sense of a sinister world, or an inevitably problematic atmosphere' (Mallon 2015). Yet it is sinister with a purpose: Borde and Chaumeton in an afterword to the 1983 edition of their iconic work argue that the genre 'fulfilled its role, which was to create a specific malaise and to drive home a social criticism of the United States' (qtd. in Silver and Ursini [1996]2005: 11). That social justice theme carries on in noir novels too, right up to the present neo-noir (Seeley 2016), so it is entirely appropriate that Hughes would use the genre to explore the increasingly combative fight for civil rights.

Noir anthologist Otto Penzler has often repeated that noir is about losers: 'the lost characters in noir who are caught in the inescapable prisons of their own construction'; stylistically the genre focuses on 'the artful plots, the often baroque style, and the thick air of desperation' (Crouch 2010). 'In more common parlance, noir has come to connote a marked darkness in theme and subject matter, generally featuring a disturbing admixture of sex and violence, accompanied … by a spare and unsentimental prose style' (Hodgkins 2012: 47). While purists like Penzler focus on individual crime, the genre as a whole also indicts the system: 'Institutions are corrupt, public moralities hypocritical, the watchmen un-watched. One person may pull a trigger, but that act is part of a sprawling web of mendacity and exploitation. No one gets away clean' (Seeley 2016). What makes the paranoia reasonable is the omnipresent existential malaise.

It is easy to see how slippery the genre definition remains, yet its mobility is its strength. The overlaps between these contrasting views are instructive: sex and violence, a sense of being trapped in nightmarish darkness, all told in a spare and unsentimental style. Hughes employs all these characteristics with her clear 'poet's eye' to construct a narrative that begins in trouble and soon descends into a prison of darkness as the noose around Hugh Densmore's neck begins to draw tight. The overlap of noir and blackness offers a rich canvas upon which to explore how the self-conscious paranoia of the noir character, trapped by his own desires, informs the vigilant watchfulness of a black man under pressure from a culture that doubts his right to exist.

A close reading

An examination of Hughes' character-building skills will demonstrate how these aspects of noir fuel the power of her narrative suspense. 'For fifty pages before the girl dies, a humidity of suspicion and paranoia hangs over the novel' (Smallwood 2012). Indeed, the opening section leading up to the murder masks the issue of race for the casual reader by never mentioning it. Densmore's race is not specified in any direct way. What comes through in these pages is the uneasy sense of paranoia which nothing in the action or landscape causes. The seemingly innocuous first line turns out to be full of pointed markers: 'Across the tracks there was a different world' signals all those intersections of race, class and gender that collide in the novel. It evokes the commonplace American

phrase 'the wrong side of the tracks' for the impoverished side of any town, but it also lays the ground for the revelation of Densmore's identity as a black man in a white Western town and all that evokes. Even today Arizona remains a bastion of 'wild-West' thinking typified by the would-be assassin of Representative Gabby Giffords and the eighteen other folks shot in 2011, of whom six died, and notorious Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio (Hagan 2012). Back in the early 1960s Hughes was writing at a time when 'the Western was showing signs of decline' (Indick 2008: 180). This book indicates her hopes that change was imminent for the West (and indeed the nation), although Mosely's comments in 2012 make plain that the better future remained elusive. The 'different world' experienced by different races in America remains sadly evident in the #BlackLivesMatter movement right now, which arose in the wake of numerous police killings of unarmed people of colour (Day 2015).

Hughes downplays the weight of that opening sentence by painting the desert ambience surrounding Densmore as he drives along 'long and lonely country' that is 'the color of sand' – indeed the whole 'world was all sand, brown and tan and copper and pale beige' (3). By making the sky also the colour of sand, Hughes emphasises the apparent blandness of the landscape, but subtly suggests that what we conflate into one thing (sand) in fact has a rich texture of hues (brown and tan and copper and pale beige). Likewise when we become aware of Densmore's blackness it is as a contrast to whiteness, but in his eyes, the world – and especially that blackness – is a much broader palette encompassing the varying levels of paleness of the law enforcement officers to the shades of his own family and most particularly of the woman he meets in the midst of all the trouble, Ellen Hamilton. The only thing black in his observation is the description of her 'enormous' and 'slightly tilted' eyes; her skin, instead, was 'like golden sand' (33). That choice of simile calls back to the calm before the storm of the first paragraph and situates her within his familiar Arizonan context despite Densmore's avowal that he 'had nothing to offer an Ellen Hamilton' whose father was a judge of 'the Washington, D.C. Hamiltons' and who looked 'like a model' to the abashed intern. Every detail about her, right down to her presidential name, suggests to Densmore that she is out of his league.

Hughes gives Ellen the seemingly unattainable beauty of the traditional *femme fatale* and uses that genre trope to build suspense. The lethal woman characterised in James M. Cain's novels and the films based upon them, like Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity* (1944) or Cora Smith in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), has often been seen as the downfall of the male protagonist, mostly by usurping his masculinity, for she functions as 'as a psychic projection of male subjectivity in crisis' (Hales 2007: 225). Yet even that truism has been re-evaluated in recent years as careful scrutiny has brought out the nuances in that picture: 'She may present herself as tough and independent but she is desperately needy and insecure emotionally, particularly when compared to her warm but self-contained sister' (Jancovish 2011: 105). That distinction is important.

While Hamilton's beauty and independence might fool us into thinking she is the *femme fatale* – and certainly Densmore often agonises over where her loyalties lie – it should soon become obvious that the 'desperately needy and insecure emotionally' woman is the

doomed hitchhiker he meets as Iris Croom, which he later discovers to be a false name. Everything about her insertion into his life reeks of fatality: 'He knew better than to pick up a hitchhiker on the road; he'd known it long before the newspapers and script writers had implanted the danger in the public mind' (4). Though Hughes delays revealing the primary reason Densmore should 'know better', she also highlights the reason the doctor feels such sympathy for the 'shadow' that turns out to be a young girl. His concern for *her* danger does not mask Hughes' evocation of *his* danger: there is a delicate balance between the two kinds of peril. 'Even as he slowed his car, he was against doing it' but 'he had sisters as young as this' and 'it chilled him' to think about the kind of man 'with whom, in desperation, she might accept a lift' (5). Densmore's empathy allows him to make mistakes a more callous person would have avoided.

Her apprehensiveness is subtly rendered, too. The girl does not respond to his offer of a ride at first, and stares through the window at his face. It could simply indicate the teen's shyness about hitching a ride. But we quickly become aware of Densmore's growing nervousness about the matter for 'he didn't like this situation at all' though the reader is uncertain whether it is his deciding to stop for the hitcher, or her continuing to look at him (5). As he imagines another car coming along and seeing them, 'a chill sense of apprehension came on him and he wished to hell he hadn't stopped' (6). Without a clear reason for his anxiety, the reader must begin to supply some, adding to the suspense. Why should this adult man be so afraid of a teenage girl?

Hughes builds on that feeling by having a car appear as they drive away once 'the sand world had darkened' (6). It was just a car full of kids, like the many others he had seen at the drive-in where he had to patiently wait to be served, yet 'just for a moment, he had known fear' (6). Densmore fears a trap, with the girl complicit, and it is only when the scenario fails to develop that he relaxes and feels foolish. Hughes presses on the discomfort by offering a sense of foreboding and foreshadowing as we hear his thought, 'It was surprising what old experiences remembered could do to a presumably educated, civilized man' (6). There is so much packed into that sentence. Are the old experiences his? Or is he drawing on the history of violence against African-Americans? There's a hint of an almost atavistic fear carried through generations in his evocation of both education and 'civilisation' as talismans against that threat. Without realising the racial component the reader will nonetheless get a clear sense of Densmore having been 'burnt' in the past.

One could almost see him as paranoid or perhaps become suspicious of Densmore's past. What had he done to expect such potential violence? For the moment Hughes allows that thought to lie fallow in the back of the reader's mind as she conjures the conversation between two very different people, each with a reason to be suspicious of the other. The awkward back and forth highlights the differences between the situations of the young intern and the girl from 'across the tracks' for, as he reveals his profession, Iris seems surprisingly interested. He turns to the subjects of school and college – his sister is at University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) – while the teen finds Allegra's name strange. His attempt to give context by way of a Longfellow poem shows up her

ignorance and Densmore assumes 'she didn't read anything out of school but comics and lurid romance magazines' (9–10). His casual dismissal of her intellect from the point of view of being older, professional and male fits standard assumptions of our culture, but soon after we get another little reminder that everything is not as it seems when Iris mentions being hungry and Densmore is adamant about not stopping until they reach the next sizeable town. As the girl falls asleep, he begins to worry about the bus schedule in the next town and whether there was a bus that night to Phoenix. The reader can't help wondering why Densmore is so worried, why he's already thinking about lending her money for a room 'in a motel as far as possible from the one where he would stop' and musing that 'the sooner he could be shed of her, the safer he'd be' (12).

On the face of it traveling with an underage companion has the risk of violating the Mann Act, which had a long history of 'being used as a tool for political persecution' (WETA 2005). Hughes frames Densmore's concerns with a dramatic avowal that 'he'd never pick up another hitchhiker, never. Not even a ninety-year-old grandfather or the chief of police' (12–13). The former demonstrates the strength of his commitment. We've already seen him be kind to a stranger, so his vow to ignore a frail elderly man seems extreme and, initially, puzzling. Surely it's inconvenient to deal with a runaway, but his reaction seems excessive without knowing the racial component. The invocation of the police chief adds another subtle suggestion of the trouble that lies ahead. The reader seeing Hugh Densmore as kind, thoughtful, educated and 'civilised' can't help but wonder why he's so fearful. Hughes, however, does not expect them to jump to the realisation that it is attitudes toward his skin that would bring unwanted attention.

The issue of family is a touch point as well. Densmore's closeness to his family comes across in his journey (he's heading to his sister's wedding), the car borrowed from his mother, and his easy familiarity with his younger sisters' lives. He has presented such a picture of decency and kindness that it's a bit jarring to see a hint of violence lurking beneath his exterior. A careful reading of the novel demonstrates that Densmore offers a much more complicated portrait than the 'one-dimensional stereotype' that Oliver contends. He has the full range of human emotions, including all the anger that living within an unequal system inspires. When he presses Iris to admit she's a runaway, she claims to have told her father her plans: 'He told me to go on and go'; when asked about her mother, Iris tells him she left six years ago: 'She was a tramp' (13). Densmore knows next to nothing about Iris or her mother, yet 'his hand clenched to keep from striking her' (13). Unable to countenance a slur on his own mother, Densmore can hardly bear an insult to any mother. While it speaks to his filial affection, the subdued violence of the reaction indicates a much more volatile issue. Generically, we are not surprised to find lurking violence in a noir protagonist, so the reader might take it as a sign of the story to unfold, expecting Densmore to be the one to break into violence soon.

Hughes uses a series of fractures to leave space for the reader to fill in the gaps using those generic assumptions rather than the connection to race, but the author has laid the traps with subtlety and expects they will be filled with the wrong conclusions. When Densmore accuses the girl and her friends of having planned to trick him into giving her a

ride, Iris is adamant – 'That's not the way it was at all. I wouldn't have' (15) – then stops. Next the girl explains that she had been looking for a family to hitch a ride with, an excuse for her rescuer to swallow, but also one the reader is likely to accept. Arriving in Blythe, the next large town, Densmore heads off to see about getting her a bus ticket so he can 'be solitary and safe again' but when he enters the bus station something odd occurs. The ticket seller is talking with three workmen and 'all of them became silent at Hugh's entrance' (16). Their silence and her 'unsmiling' responses to him fit the cruelly suspicious world of noir, notoriously hostile to strangers, but an alert reader should pick up that there is something more going on. Densmore hopes that the people in the depot don't watch to see where he is going. He is pointedly relieved that they cannot see Iris in his car, which is why he has made sure to park far enough away. His increasing frenzy to get rid of the girl points to something beyond inconvenience or irritation. Densmore hands over money as well as the ticket, 'Anything to be rid of her before the local law or a busybody wondered why they were parked there' (16). Why a small street near the bus depot should be so dangerous is not quite clear. The gaps in the conversation leave room for noir paranoia; a reader is unlikely to look farther abroad for a reason like the modern coinage 'driving while black' (Brown and Jantzi 2010).

Shed of the unwelcome presence of Iris, Densmore should be able to relax and shake off the persistent sense of doom, because the underage girl appeared to be the reason for his concern. But as he gives into fatigue and hunts out a motel for the night, more clues as to his difference appear. Pulling into a motor lodge where he has stayed before, Densmore anticipates the possibility of disappointment, averring that 'sometimes even when the sign said there was [a vacancy], the last unit had been rented just before you arrived' (18). It could be mere cynicism, the perpetual assumption that life will always offer the fuzzy end of the lollipop. Certainly Densmore expects a hostile reception and is relieved to see a clerk he has had pleasant interactions with in the past. It hardly seems a reason to be grateful that, 'there was a vacancy and she didn't up the price for him' (18). It could just be the jaded view of the frequent traveller, taken advantage of by opportunistic motel operators. But the gratitude for not only the vacancy but the lack of spurious surcharge suggests something more than the typical opportunistic shafting. An astute reader might begin assembling the clues, but there is a long way to go before Hughes chooses to reveal Densmore's race unequivocally.

The danger that Iris represents – which soon turns out to be far worse than anticipated – is striking. A trafficking charge was serious but the odds of being sought out for it without an angry family trailing behind would seem small indeed. Yet after she is gone, the danger persists. Fatigued as he has been by the day of unexpected complications, Hughes betrays that the motel is as much sanctuary as rest, and 'it could have been that he was less tired than he was afraid he might come upon Iris again' (18). The teen who made him – however briefly – almost violently angry is also a source of fear. The complications of her presence come into sharp focus in the exuberant release he feels setting off to Phoenix without her. Bypassing a greasy diner for some cinnamon rolls and milk from a grocery store, he drives on, enjoying crossing the Colorado River: 'The river was full and lush

and green, from green-white winter snow of northern mountains, from spring rains that never fell on this parched earth. Even this early, there were little sunbrowned, near-naked boys splashing along the green banks' (19). The pastoral beauty of the moment, the repetition of green and the lushness of the watery place splitting the dusty desert gives a vibrant life to the sand-filled scenes that preceded it. Like an oasis, it gives a break to the tension and allows both Densmore and the reader to breathe even with the subtle play between 'sunbrowned' and whiteness.

It is the last breather for a while. At the border Densmore not only runs into a snapping official, 'a big wart-hog' that he contemplates carrying a 'complaint up to the governor's office' but also once more with painful inevitability, Iris Croom. She lives up to the *femme fatale* script here (oddly reminiscent of Anne Savage's turn in the pitch-black noir 1945 film *Detour*), forcing him into giving her a ride now that he is safely across the border, for even she acknowledges the danger there. The little girl is gone and in her place appears a hardened woman with 'smug triumph' in her eyes and ready answers for his questions.

> 'You're a practiced liar, aren't you?'
> 'I manage' (21).

Her familiarity with the Mann Act suggests previous experience encountering it; her explanation that she 'just kicked around' all night with 'some kids' suggests a much wilder life than her small-town girl act did. Like many a fatal heroine, Iris has played him like a trout. 'She knew what she'd done, could boast of it. She was an evil little girl' (21). Densmore for all his intelligence, anger and carefulness is no match. It seems a typical noir scenario, the gullible guy rooked by a clever dame. We already have the feeling he will not be able to get rid of her the next time either. But Hughes also drops more clues as we get closer to Phoenix and the crime to come. Densmore's anxiousness to keep moving despite Iris' complaints seems natural enough, but his desire to get to the city has an additional component. 'The closer he drew to Phoenix, the less he cared … In a city, people were too busy with their own affairs to wonder about a strangely assorted couple' (24). It is an odd description to use. True he is older than she, but what would be so strange about, say, an older brother driving his sister around? The only 'strangely assorted' detail Hughes has spelled out is their age difference.

His palpable relief when he drops her at the final bus depot cannot be shared by the reader. We know that he will not see the back of Iris that quickly. It's another moment to breathe. His hope is too naked: 'The bad dream was over. He was rid of her' (26). Densmore drives on to join the bosom of his family and all is well, loving and familiar. In quick sketches his grandparents and parents are particularised and the happy chaos of the wedding brought to life. He thinks, 'It was all so homey and safe. Iris was only a small memory far back in Hugh's consciousness' (29); but Hughes wants the reader to be sure that Iris is not gone from their minds and hints broadly that Densmore already contemplates the likelihood of her return, 'making trouble', which he can handle but wants to keep separate from his family. Though of course, he insists to himself 'she

wouldn't want to see him again any more than he wanted to see her' (29). Again it's plausible that 'trouble' might be a whiny teen barging into his family wedding, but the details hint at something more: his 'fear' of her returning, his 'strange sense of relief' to be staying at a motel she could not possibly know about.

At the motel he makes certain that his car will not be seen from street, though he chides himself for even imagining it. 'Why on earth should she look for him? He was obsessed and it was nonsense' (30). The reader might wonder too, particularly when Densmore muses about hotels, obliquely 'remembering stories his mother told of traveling when she was a girl, personally recalling trips he'd taken as a child, he could believe that times had definitely changed' (31). If the reader hasn't put together the clues yet, this is a much more pointed statement yet still rather tenuous. The days of the *Green Book* were nearly over and the Civil Rights Act would be passed in another year; however, travel through unfamiliar areas continued to be a potentially dangerous undertaking for people of colour (Goodavage 2013).

All is well, or seems well: his family is well, the wedding is on schedule, even the groom meets his exacting standards. Yet Densmore cannot let Iris go completely; he tries to locate the aunt she was supposed to be visiting without success. 'He'd written off the money, it wasn't that. It was being played for a sucker' (32). He manages to almost forget about her, enjoying meeting the enchanting Ellen, but returning to his room late after the rehearsal dinner, everything gets worse: 'Only when he saw her standing outside did he realise that he'd been afraid it might be Iris' (34). He warns her that she could get in a lot of trouble coming to see him but thinks 'and get him into worse trouble', though we still don't have a clear idea why. He's taken by surprise when she asks for his help with her 'trouble', not only that she would ask him, but also that it had never occurred to him that was why she was so interested that he was a doctor.

For Hughes as for Densmore, the real evil was abortion, an unforgivable crime. Smallwood argues that 'Hughes was able to explore race and difference because she put 'evil' somewhere else. For noir, everything in the world is in some way tainted' (2012). The young doctor's character is pristine because he, too, finds the very idea of abortion loathsome. For Hughes it is the proof of his character. The paranoia that has gripped him from the beginning of the novel, therefore, cannot be something he bears responsibility for, even though he continues to fret over Iris and surreptitiously seeks out a newspaper in the midst of the family extravaganza to see if there is news of a missing girl so he can alert someone. He even imagines what it would have been like to help her 'get in touch with some organization who would protect her' (41).

Yet when he sees the screaming headlines about the girl's body found in a canal, Desnmore acts like a guilty man. He 'fumbles' for a dime, 'manages' to look steady and unhurried, then drives to the edge of town to read the paper. Certain that her death was from a botched abortion, 'he could not risk telling the police' because 'he knew his truth would not be believed' (44). Why an innocent doctor's word would not be taken over a rebellious teen's remains unclear, but we have been so close to Densmore's nervous

doubt, it is hard to question it. 'His story was straight and true, why should he think it wouldn't come across that way?' (46) The reader has clues but no definite answer until the police show up outside the bridal dinner. They are as hostile as any of the dubious lawmen in noir, seemingly corrupt or corruptible and definitely hostile: 'the big one looked surly and the little one mean' (52). The questioning at last reveals the lurking source of Densmore's fear. As the two cops interrogate him about 'Bonnie Lee Crumb' who of course turns out to be Iris Croom, Densmore carefully repeats the key facts until one of the cops, 'lips pursed', asks, 'This Iris Croom a white girl?', and at last all the pieces of the careful jigsaw fit. Densmore knows 'he couldn't get angry … Hugh had long learned to control his voice no matter what burned within him' (53). His fear is not paranoia but an astute understanding of the precariousness of his situation. It doesn't take long for the cops to use racial slurs and imply his guilt, though he clings to the notion that 'this wasn't the Deep South. It was Arizona' (57). Hughes seems to suggest the differences were not as great as one would like to hope in 1963.

Conclusion

The remainder of the novel builds on this carefully constructed base to offer a complicated and increasingly tense crime narrative with unexpected help and hindrance from various directions, some quite surprising. While this is hardly unusual for the genre, the author blends both her aim of social dissection with the narrative requirements of the genre. We do not know for sure who is guilty, we just know that the protagonist is not, however much all the characters around him ignore this. Hughes renders Densmore with great sympathy, but far from a one-dimensional stereotype. He is wilful, proud and has a chip on his shoulder that has nothing directly to do with race as much as it has to do with gender, particularly when it comes to Ellen Hamilton. Running out of confidence and freedom, he's willing to go to dangerous lengths to clear himself of the accusation of murder, as any noir protagonist might, but with a surprisingly nuanced reflection of the varying reactions the colour of his skin evokes in those both indifferent and hostile to him. Hughes evokes a crime drama that relies on out-guessing the reactions of those both friendly and hostile, while demonstrating the effects of continuous pressure on a man already under daily social pressures. The author compiles a tight narrative that offers abundant if subtle clues that keep the reader in delightful suspense. While the overarching issue of race may be an enormous one, Hughes tackles it on the small scale by focusing on one man. Densmore is no cipher for a political agenda. After her insightful dissection of a misogynist killer in *In a Lonely Place* (1947), Hughes' picture of a black man thrust into a murder investigation in the once-Wild West offers a thoughtful and surprisingly perceptive character study in the form of a noir novel that retains a powerful impact as well as a breathless pace.

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