

Walkin' the Dog

by

WALTER MOSLEY

A READING GROUP GUIDE

“Mosley has constructed a perfect Socrates for millennium’s end — a principled man who finds that the highest meaning of life can be attained thorough self-knowledge, and who convinces others of the power and value of looking within.” — San Francisco Chronicle

A PORTRAIT OF SOCRATES FORTLOW'S CREATOR,
WALTER MOSLEY
BY BOB MINZESHEIMER, *USA Today*

In *Walkin' the Dog*, Walter Mosley describes one of his characters as being "the color of coffee mixed in with an equal amount of cream."

Which is also Mosley's complexion. He says he has been asked about his "white side." And, "of course," he points out with a gap-toothed smile, "that's my Jewish side, and depending on where you're from, that might not be considered really white."

At forty-seven, Mosley seems to enjoy turning everything on its head, refusing to be pigeonholed. The bestselling mystery writer hasn't abandoned mysteries but has moved on. At lunch, he can be as complex and oblique as his new book, a series of loosely connected parables dealing with race, violence, and poverty.

First, some family history: Mosley's mother, still a school administrator at seventy-eight, is Jewish, from a family that fled Poland and Russia, where "they lived in poor ghettos and sometimes were hanged and burned," he says.

His father, a former school custodian who died five years ago, was black, from a family that fled Louisiana and Texas, where "they lived in poor ghettos and sometimes were hanged and burned."

They met and married in Los Angeles, where Mosley was raised. When he turned to writing, after a decade as a computer programmer, he used his old neighborhood as the setting for mysteries starring Ezekiel "Easy" Rawlins, a black, street-smart, reluctant private eye.

But whenever Rawlins would pause to read the memoirs of Hadrian, the Roman emperor, or discuss the pros and cons of the

writings of Mark Twain, Mosley says, some of his white readers would say “that came from my white side.”

They’re “well-meaning people,” he says, “but it was beyond their expectations that in a poor working-class neighborhood, you’d find thinking, some philosophical thought.”

So he began thinking of creating a black, street-smart philosopher who would prove “you don’t need a degree, you don’t need to know everything,” to grapple with moral questions about right and wrong in a harsh and violent neighborhood.

His character’s name, an echo of ancient Greece, “just popped” into his head: Socrates Fortlow, an ex-con with “rock-breaking” hands who struggles to find redemption and live a decent life after twenty-seven years in prison for a pair of drunken murders.

A penitentiary philosopher?

Mosley mentions one of his favorite poets, the late Ethridge Knight, who used to say, “When I was in the penitentiary, I defined myself as a poet. I went to the library to learn what I had become.”

Mosley introduced Socrates in 1997 in *Always Outnumbered, Always Outgunned*. In *Walkin’ the Dog*, Socrates is older and wiser but afraid he can’t “control his own urges and that those urges would wipe out all the good he had tried to do.”

To the cops, black or white, Socrates is the first suspect in every local crime, a “prisoner-in-waiting.”

“They dropped by on a whim at times just in case he had done something that even they couldn’t suspect,” Mosley writes. “Because Socrates was guilty, guilty all the way around. He was big and he was black; he was an ex-convict and he was poor. He was unrepentant in the eyes of the law, and you could see by him that he wasn’t afraid of any consequence no matter how harsh.”

At one point Socrates asks, “What I wanna know is if you think that black people have a right to be mad at white folks or are we all

just fulla . . . an' don't have no excuse for the misery down here an' everywhere else?"

When Mosley is asked the same question, he says that in the tradition of the original Socrates, the question is more important than the answer. And the answers may not make sense, he says, imagining a dialogue:

"So you hate all white people?"

"Yeah, I hate them all."

"Well, what about that woman who helped your mother?"

"Well, she's different."

"Oh, so you hate white people except for her?"

"Yeah."

And so it goes, he says, in conversations in black neighborhoods that whites rarely hear and aren't reflected on TV, in newspapers, or in books.

When Socrates meets a cabdriver named Milton, Mosley has them discuss their literary namesakes:

"You just like me, eh, my man?" Milton's words were wrapped in the rhythms of sixties jazz.

"What you mean?"

"The name. Some old dead white man wrote a book an' our mommas hoped the name'd rub off on us. They didn't think that a famous black man is usually dead before his time." The driver's laughter sounded hollow to Socrates.

"I don't know 'bout all that," Socrates said.

"All what?"

"How you know somebody's a white man? I mean Augustine was a African. Socrates come up around the Mediterranean, you know that's spittin' distance from the Arab world. Maybe your name is really a black man's name too."

Mosley says: “A lot of people would say to me, ‘Well, you’re multiracial.’ And I am. But in this society, I’m black. That’s not my color, but that’s how I’m seen by others. I respect the biracial arguments, but America is such a racist country. It’s hard to go against an ocean. And the ocean of racism is as wide as the Atlantic Ocean from the East Coast to the coast of Africa.”

Mosley says he wants to use the stories of Socrates Fortlow to challenge assumptions about how poor people go about “raising yourself, making something out of yourself, becoming more like ‘them’ — the dominant, white culture.”

In *Walkin’ the Dog*, Socrates gets a job at a grocery and, for the first time, is lifting himself into “what we call the middle class, which is really working class,” Mosley says. “He’s getting \$17,000 and benefits. He’s never had that before. But he may not be willing to give up everything he’s expected to give up just for a job.”

Mosley himself wasn’t always sure what he wanted to do. After college in Vermont, he moved to New York and worked as a computer programmer, but he recalled his father’s advice about “two important things: pay the rent and do what you love to do.”

He was paying the rent, but “looking for what moved me,” when he “fell into writing” with one sentence. Tired of writing computer code a dozen years ago, he wrote a sentence: “On hot sticky days in southern Louisiana, the fire ants swarm.”

“I had read a lot, and I said to myself, ‘That’s a good enough sentence to start a novel.’ And I started writing and have been writing ever since.”

That first sentence never was published. “I had the voice but no story behind it. But it was my voice.”

Now he’s working on a screenplay for HBO based on the stories of Langston Hughes, writing a play, and writing a book, *Workin’ on the Chain Gang*, about “what we give up in this life to make money.”

He wants to do at least one more Socrates Fortlow book and says there will be more mysteries, but “if all I did was Easy Rawlins, that would become a job. I already had a job.”

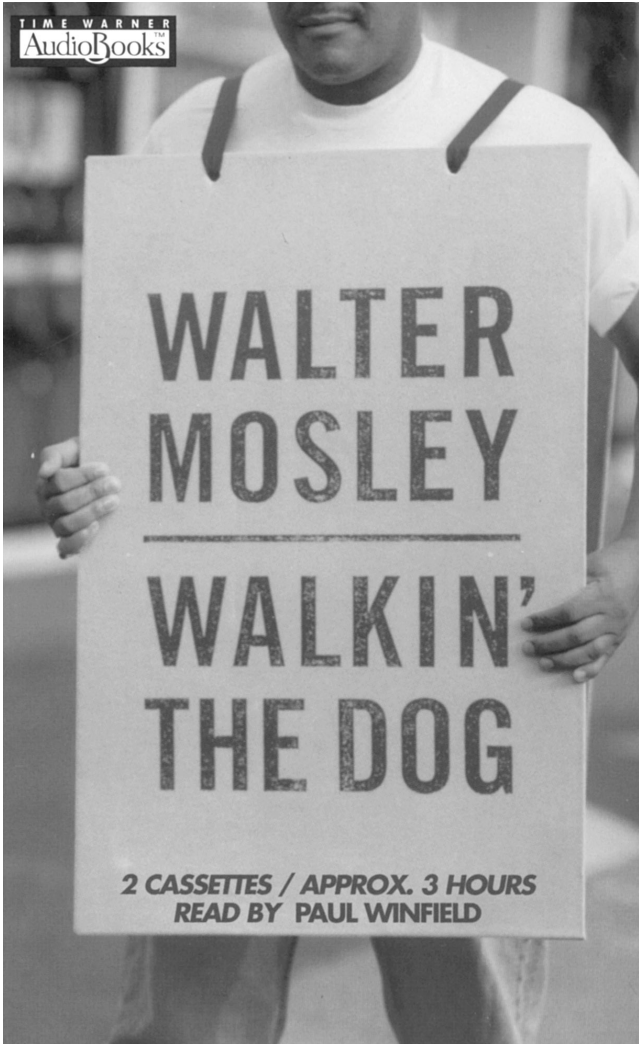
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READING GROUP QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discuss Socrates' approach to daily life. Was he always so confident about what is morally right and wrong? What are the sources of his strength and hopefulness?
2. Socrates didn't "learn" through formal education. Discuss where his knowledge comes from and how it might be different from knowledge gained through formal education. Is Socrates aware of the power of his knowledge?
3. Discuss Socrates' relationship with Darryl. What did this relationship provide for Socrates that he did not have when he was in prison? What lessons does Socrates hope to teach Darryl? Is he successful?
4. How does Socrates feel about freedom in L.A.? Did he feel free as soon as he left prison? If not, why?
5. How does Socrates achieve personal triumph? What is it that compels him to "do the right thing" in each story?
6. Discuss Socrates' views on violence. Are there times when Socrates considers violent behavior acceptable? Do you agree with Socrates' position?
7. How does Socrates deal with issues of race and politics in his community?
8. When Darryl asks Socrates whether he is afraid of getting in trouble and being returned to jail, Socrates replies, "I'm scared'a

livin' in my own skin, I'm scared of all the evil and sad I know" (p. 196). What does Socrates mean by this?

9. When Darryl asks Socrates whether he intended to kill Officer Cardwell, Socrates says, "The gun was out and he passed not three feet from me. But I just stood there— smiling, thinkin' 'bout how good it felt to be in my own skin" (p. 241). What accounts for the difference in Socrates' attitude? How has Socrates changed toward the end of *Walkin' the Dog*?
10. Discuss Socrates' community of African-Americans in Central L.A. Discuss their support system.



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