

Memories of Things Past and Yet to Come

by Richard Martin
(April 1999)

A slightly different version of this piece was published in Crime Time 2.4 in 1999 and was subsequently uploaded, in edited form, to the James Sallis Web Pages. At the time it was written, Jim was preparing to publish both the novel Bluebottle and his biography of Chester Himes. Jim was always gracious with his time and encouragement, for which I am indebted to him.

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James Sallis, Allusion and Play

A new beginning, then, for the archetype of the world-weary detective, dusted off and reinvented – evolved, if you will – for his most recent venture as reluctant investigative protagonist. Yoked to an excess of cultural baggage, he boldly enters the maze of mean streets so expertly mapped by his brothers and sisters before him. What is more, for his creator – himself cautiously venturing into a labyrinth of bifurcating paths – there is an endless series of decisions to make: Setting. Era. Nationality. Race. Profession. History. A stream of signs to endow the fictitious being with enough little hooks for the reader to complete the process of creation. A hazy picture, then. Something that will have to take on a clearer focus as the narrative progresses and the adventurer nears the grail of self-knowledge. If indeed that ever proves to be the case, for already his creator seems inclined to condemn the poor man to a Sisyphean cycle of repetition.

I lived without personal identity, slipping in and out of roles and temporary lives as easily, and as readily, as others change clothing.
— James Sallis, *Death Will Have Your Eyes*

The character begins to take shape, comprised of so many human frailties and contradictions. He is an African-American from Helena, Arkansas, recently arrived in the metropolitan melting pot of New Orleans. A murderer who will become a debt collector and private investigator. An alcoholic man of violence and towering physical presence, who will become the subject of popular legend. A self-educated man who will become a man of letters; a novelist and lecturer. A Borgesian man who both writes and is written. Reality and illusion, fiction, memory and autobiography all poetically intertwine. A life story is offered, spanning the 1960s through the 1990s. *The Long-Legged Fly* (1992), *Moth* (1993), *Black Hornet* (1994), *Eye of the Cricket* (1997), *Bluebottle* (1998) and *Ghost of a Flea* (2000) all serve up pieces of the fragmentary jigsaw. Each book is merely a chapter in a larger narrative – or, in *Fly's* case, an introductory and episodic overview of the whole narrative trajectory; a preface to an extended study of and reflection on the

art of literary creation – moving back and forward through time, documenting the life of the (in diegetic terms) possibly imaginary Lew Griffin.

For we are of Language as / the world is of silence.
— James Sallis, *'Temptation of Silence'*

One of James Sallis's great achievements in the Griffin books is to create a character who not only shapes up as a uniquely complex individual, but who, as a literary construct, is at one and the same time every man and no man. More so than with the questing literary voice behind T. S. Eliot's narrative poem *The Waste Land* (1922), with Lew Griffin time, space and personality blur into one – it is not only Doo-Wop, the books' equivalent of Eliot's Tiresias, who functions on Hopi mean time, collating fragments of other people's lives. Again, echoing modernist literature, the detective activities that are narrated ultimately focus on the process of literary creation. With *Fly*, then, Sallis's narrator, who may or may not be Lew Griffin, lays out a blueprint for a fictional life and in the subsequent instalments this narrative voice picks a point in that life's flow to examine in more detail. But repetitions, elisions and variations ensue, recalling Mucho Maas's words to Oedipa in Thomas Pynchon's novella *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966): 'Everybody who says the same words are the same person if the spectra are the same only they happen differently in time, you dig? But time is arbitrary. You pick your zero point anywhere you want, that way you can shuffle each person's time line sideways till they coincide.' Or, indeed, the words of Sallis's own novel *Renderings* (1995): 'Finally it doesn't matter which moment of a man's life we choose to examine, because the whole life is within each moment. And it doesn't matter what one studies—a leaf, a stone, a door, oneself—since everything is there.'

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.
— James Sallis, *Black Hornet*

In this sense, a white, female journalist, Esmé Dupuy, can die at Lew's side in *Black Hornet*, only to be replaced by another sniper's target, Lew himself, in *Bluebottle*. Similarly, the same words can be repeated in different contexts from book to book. A black political activist can go temporarily insane in one novel, only to have her life saved, apparently in her first encounter with Lew, in another. A sentence can close one

book only to be reformulated for the opening of the subsequent instalment. The vagaries of memory – for if we accept that it is, after all, Lew narrating these events, then he is now an old man looking back on his life shortly before his death in the 1990s – account for such variations as, of course, do the novelist's own sense of play. The writer, Sallis and Griffin both, is accorded artistic licence to play with history and memory. The books, then, take the hardboiled novel as a point of departure, respecting the tradition while simultaneously expanding its horizons, subjecting it to formal experimentation and jazz-like innovation. In these novels we find the literary counterpart to the French nouvelle vague's playfully modernist reinvention of the B film noir; an effortless fusion of high art and popular culture.

We all create such fictions out of the stuff of our lives, small myths, private lies, that help us go on, help us remain human, reassure us that we understand our own tiny fragment of the world. But most of us don't share these myths with strangers. Most of us don't share them at all. And we believe them while knowing at the same time that they are fictions.

— James Sallis, *Death Will Have Your Eyes*

Like his Lew Griffin, James Sallis is a multifaceted man who, with time's passage, has negotiated and assimilated the harshest of life lessons, from alcoholism and the breakdown of personal relationships to the bleak realities of racism in Southern US society, brought home to him at the tender age of ten, when his parents prevented him from playing any longer with his African-American friends. Sallis is first and foremost a man of letters. There is no other way to describe someone who has accomplished so much as a novelist, short story writer, poet, essayist, musicologist, biographer, translator, editor and book reviewer. But he has also worked as a musician, teacher and in hospitals as a respiratory therapist. These experiences permeate all his literary work, from the images of solitude and destruction in the poem 'Temptation of Silence' (1985) and the haunting evocation of loss and the possibility of renewed human interaction in the short story 'Walls of Affection' (1994), to the delirious, alcoholic descent into the New Orleans's underworld in *Eye of the Cricket* and the moving and meticulously detailed account of Baby Girl McTell's fight for survival in the opening pages of *Moth*.

Finally, I guess, it wasn't that different from the way we all make up our lives by bits and pieces, a piece of a book here, a song title or lyric there, scraps of people we've known, clips from movies, imagining ourselves and living into that image, then going on to another and yet another, improvising our way from day to day through the years we call a life.

— *James Sallis, The Long-Legged Fly*

James Sallis was born in 1944 and spent his childhood in Helena, Arkansas, a rural town on the banks of the Mississippi River. There he was exposed to the uneasy commingling of black and white America and listened to blues legend Sonny Boy Williamson on the King Biscuit Time radio show broadcast on Helena's local station, beginning an enduring love affair with African-American culture, today reflected in his passionate knowledge of the blues and jazz and the literature of such authors as Chester Himes and Samuel R. Delany. As a child he was an avid reader – his eclectic tastes now suggested by his own diversified literary output – and from an early age considered himself a writer, dropping out of journalism studies to begin his life as a man of letters, albeit a life often interrupted by the need to eat and pay the bills. As he put it in a recent interview: 'I've lived as a writer—quite a different thing from making my living as a writer, I assure you, though sporadically I've done that as well—for some thirty years now.'

None of that's very close to the truth, I suspect; part of it's what my youthful mind made (and wanted to make) of the scaffolding of facts, the rest of it what memory (forever more poet than reporter) has pushed into place.

— *James Sallis, The Long-Legged Fly*

In the 1960s he began to write short stories, often with a surreal, fantastical slant to them. On the strength of these he was invited by Michael Moorcock to come over to London to work in an editorial capacity on the science fiction periodical *New Worlds*. As innovative then as a significant proportion of contemporary hardboiled fiction is now, science fiction was literature 'at the edge', and its significance to the entirety of Sallis's literary output cannot be underestimated. Indeed, the elisions of time, space and personality – not to mention cultural (allusion and quotation) and racial (Corene Davis passing as white in *Fly*) "blurrings" too – that feature in his work owe as much to the traditions of science fiction as they do to the modernist writers he admires, from Joyce and Borges to Cortázar and Pynchon, themselves indebted to the realm of science. Too

often, cultural commentators such as Robert Nadeau and Francisco Collado remind us, we forget the impact of scientific endeavour (Einstein's theory of relativity, Bergson's conception of time, space travel and nuclear physics) on our cultural heritage in the twentieth century. Sallis, like Pynchon before him, shows that it has not been forgotten.

Speculative fiction, by which I mean both science fiction and serious fantasy, at its best pursues a goal largely abandoned by mainstream literature: It attempts to place, however crudely, some kind of framework around man's place in the universe.

— James Sallis, *'Speculative Fiction'*

The early 1970s saw Sallis publish his first book, a collection of short stories entitled *A Few Last Words* (1972), and return to the USA. He also edited two story anthologies, *The War Book* (1972) and *The Shores Beneath* (1973). The next decade or so, however, was one of life lessons, music, teaching and hospital work, punctuated with the occasional book review assignment, short story, essay and musicological study, including the books, *The Guitar Players* (1982) and *Jazz Guitars* (1984). Music, science fiction, avant-garde literature and crime fiction all continued to play an important part in his life during this period as both reader and writer, culminating in a flurry of activity in 1985, in which several short stories were written and the novels *Renderings* and *The Long-Legged Fly* began to germinate and take root.

It was always arcane knowledge that we pursued; you know that now. Early fascination with science had given way to passions for magic and conjuring, astrology, religion, contemporary poetry in several languages, quantum theory, the New Novel, Buddhism, obscure musics, obscure heroes.

— James Sallis, *Renderings*

His labour would bear the greatest fruit, however, in the 1990s, his most fertile period of literary production. In addition to contributing to and editing *Ash of Stars* (1996), an appreciation of the life and works of science fiction writer Samuel R. Delany, his publications in this period have included a revised edition of *The Guitar Players* (1994) and an anthology of music criticism, *The Guitar in Jazz* (1996), a highly-praised translation of Raymond Queneau's *Saint Glinglin* (1993), a new collection of short stories, *Limits of the Sensible World* (1994), and the novels, *Renderings* (1995), *Death Will Have Your Eyes* (1997) and the first five Lew Griffin books (with at least one more

volume promised). Crime fiction, in particular, has been exercising a peculiar hold and, in addition to the Griffin novels, he has written several crime short stories – ‘Memory’ (1998) and ‘Shutting Darkness Down’ (1997), among them – and published *Difficult Lives* (1993), a collection of essays on the fiction of Jim Thompson, David Goodis and Chester Himes. A biography of the latter is also forthcoming in 1999.

I still believe it’s a body of work more important to literature than many academically approved oeuvres. As important as Hemingway or Fitzgerald, for instance.

— *James Sallis interviewed by Thomas Kaufsek*

During his stint with *New Worlds* in England, Sallis had been introduced by Michael Moorcock to the literature of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, and had rapidly become an enthusiast of the hardboiled form. He approached the writing of the Lew Griffin novels some two decades later, then, with a profound knowledge of the tradition into which he was interjecting, fully aware of its generic parameters even as he transcended those arbitrary, critically-imposed, boundaries between ‘crime fiction’ and ‘literature’. As he has protested in several interviews, however, this was no deliberate attempt to set out to subvert the genre, merely the manifestation of an artistic need to write literature that he would want to read but was unable to find on the shelves of libraries and book stores. As with the best of hardboiled detective writers, from Hammett and Chandler to James Crumley and James Lee Burke, plot has largely taken a back seat in his books, raising its head only occasionally in works in which language, character and mood (a legacy here of the blues?) are prioritised, in which allusion, quotation and homage are rife.

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.

— James Sallis, *Black Hornet*

In effect, there is a kind of synthesis both of hardboiled literary traditions and post-sixties US history, particularly from an African-American perspective (albeit filtered through a white writer's point of view), in the Griffin novels. While the idea of history is especially in evidence in the 1960s-set *Black Hornet* and *Bluebottle*, the notion of 'crime fiction summarised' percolates through the opening chapters of *The Long-Legged Fly*. The novel starts out, in the violent opening sequence, as a pulp culture crime novel – something in the tradition of Thompson and Himes – and then shifts, however temporarily, into the established patterns of the hardboiled detective novel epitomised by the work of Chandler and Ross Macdonald, with Lew Griffin arriving at his private investigator's office, sorting the mail and hitting the spirits bottle. Any sense of comfort and familiarity such generic cadences inspire in the reader are then gradually undermined as *Fly* – anticipating the trajectory of the Griffin books as a whole – evolves into autobiography, fiction-within-fiction, a form of literary criticism and, finally, a mind-teasing puzzle in which it is impossible to determine who writes and who is written.

I had no idea any longer what it was I might be writing—memoir, essay, biography, fiction. And as the book progressed in the following weeks I grew forever less certain. But I found, as well, that I didn't care.

— James Sallis, *Eye of the Cricket*

Structurally, too, *Fly* establishes a pattern for the Griffin books – I cannot say *series*, for that would misrepresent the way these novels interconnect and overlay one another; ingredients in a larger literary soup. The novel is full of repetitions and variations, investigative ventures in which so little detection takes place, but in which answers are gradually revealed, often to questions that were never asked in the first place. So, endlessly, Lew embarks on quests for missing people – Corene, Cordelia, Cherie, Denny and David in *Fly*; Alouette in *Moth*; the rooftop sniper in *Hornet*; Shon and David, again,

in *Cricket* – repeatedly learning that, as he knowingly observes in *Black Hornet*, ‘Those PI’s in the novels have it all wrong. You don’t have to go out and track people down. You just wait around the house and sooner or later the people come to you.’ Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the closing pages of *Eye of the Cricket* when, like moths to a bare lamp bulb, so many waifs and strays turn up on the battered hero’s doorstep. Endlessly, too, Lew encounters the companions who brighten his life and rescue him from the abyss, finding salvation both ‘between the legs of a woman’ and in the mental stimulation of conversation. In such human interaction does the detective finally discover himself, breaking through the mists of self-deception, letting slip those masks – echoes here of Deborah’s play in *Cricket* – he employs to negotiate an inhospitable and threatening society. His heroic descent into a personal Nighttown in *Cricket* takes on greater significance in this sense: his grail will be self-knowledge and companionship. The integrated hero returns home to a full house and instant family, the days of solitude and alienation behind him.

Gide’s description of the detective story as a form in which “every character is trying to deceive all the others and in which truth slowly becomes visible through the haze of deception” seems to me still the finest description both of the appeal these stories have at their deepest level and of the way, confused by sense and memory, confounded by our own and others’ notions of things, we actually live our lives.

— *James Sallis, Difficult Lives*

Before this, however, there is much ground to travel. Moreover, because of the pattern of the books, looping through time, foreshadowing and flashing back, there are periods to be revisited; not for long is the hero allowed to stay integrated and whole, fragmented as he is through this playful time travel, his physical scars and his self-destructive tendencies. In fact, like his contemporary investigative brothers, Milo Milodragovitch, C. W. Sughrue and Matt Scudder, Lew begins his literary life as a cynical and deromanticised detective. He drinks. He is detached. He carries within him the burden of a past transgression. He also dissembles, and not just because he is a detective who mistrusts his clients, but because he has learned that that is how a black man gets by in a white man’s world. Moreover, like the protagonists of Himes’s novels, he is angry. Black rage simmers below the surface, hidden behind the social masks he presents to the world and, when the heat is on, manifests itself in the occasional violence of his actions. Indeed, Himes looms large over all the Griffin books, frequently referenced (his Harlem Cycle novels and his 1955 masterpiece *The End of the Primitive* hold a special place in

Sallis's affections), honoured in the dedication to *Moth* and briefly appearing as a character in *Black Hornet*. Himes's life story itself also serves as something of a model for Lew Griffin: both have a criminal past, both have an enduring fascination for white women, both are Francophiles and both find fulfilment of sorts in their literary endeavours.

I want to keep it in the reader's mind that this is a game we're playing, that it's artifice, that Lew's stories and the reversals that occur in the books are just fun.

— *James Sallis interviewed by Paul Duncan*

These fragments, echoes and mirrors of Himes and his work, are all part of a broader literary game Sallis plays throughout the Griffin books. Reference and allusion abound; part of the reader's pleasure derived from recognition and association. Quotations, faint echoes, samplings of other texts are caught up and modulated, hinted at in book titles, overtly discussed in Lew's lectures, meditated upon as he reads other's work or writes his own novels. Himes in person, Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*, Queneau, Camus's *The Outsider*, Yeats's poetry and – always – music, among so many other cultural references, are key threads in the overall tapestry of the books. As with all else in these amazingly literate novels, these references are recycled and varied, becoming motifs whose repetition adds rhythm to Sallis's overarching narrative. Constantly they reaffirm the concept that underpins all the books, indeed, that informs our understanding of Sallis's oeuvre as a whole: that all is artifice, dreamers are dreamt, writers written, the boundary between reality and illusion – harking back to that cornerstone of Western thought and literature, Cervantes's *Don Quixote* – becomes imperceptible.

I wonder how one ever learns to sort through and make sense of the messages, signs, signals, meanings coming down all the time on our heads, weighing on us, piling up about us. While we go on trying to guide these frail crafts, our lives, into harbors we never see yet fiercely believe, have to believe, are there.

— *James Sallis, Death Will Have Your Eyes*

This self-reflexive network of quotations and allusions, which, as in Borges, establishes the idea of one universal text of which these novels form but a fraction, is echoed on another level by the cross-references within and between the Griffin books themselves. Again, this contributes to their playfulness. No sooner do we readers feel that we have

some sort of grasp on narrative events and the life of Lew Griffin, than the rug is pulled out from under our feet. Too often we depend on the narrator's far from reliable memories, only to find at the end of *Fly* that we don't really know who the narrator is anyway. We mourn the deaths of beloved friends like LaVerne in *Moth*, only to become reacquainted with her in *Black Hornet*. We hurtle back and forth through time, experiencing recurrent events from varying perspectives, finding, in *Bluebottle* that there's a black hole in Lew's life, hinted at but briefly in *Cricket*, that needs plugging. These many echoes and repetitions add substance to the books, individually and collectively. They are one of many motifs that recur throughout Sallis's literary output, reinforcing the notion of unity in his work.

I like to believe the fiction and poetry, in its way, is of a piece. I'm fairly certain the criticism is.

— James Sallis interviewed by Charles L. P. Silet

It may well be, then, that *Renderings* is his most important book to date. It is, in every sense, a repository for all the concepts and ideas that have circulated in his novels, short stories, poems, essays and book reviews for the past thirty years. Together with *Death Will Have Your Eyes*, his other *hors série* novel, it offers a summary of and meditation on the literary world of James Sallis, a counterpart of sorts to Umberto Eco's *Reflections on The Name of the Rose* (1984), providing us with a key to understanding the Griffin books. Images of nostalgia, loss, violence, mutilation, artistic creation (literature, theatre, poetry, music, painting) and solitude, proliferate in his work and all appear here. At once euphoric and melancholic, *Renderings*, *Death Will Have Your Eyes* and the Griffin books, each serve up haunting images of isolation and alienation – as indebted to Giorgio de Chirico's surreal painting *Nostalgia of the Infinite* (1911) as to Edward Hopper's noirish *Nighthawks* (1942) – and offer meditations on memory, the passage and spiralling of time, communication, the breakdown of human interaction, the slippery nature of identity (performance, masks, names, skin colour), personal fragmentation (ageing, alcoholism, drug addiction, self-mutilation) and the physical debasement of love. Even as he continues the traditions of avant-garde, modernist fiction, then, Sallis has succeeded in expanding the horizons of the hardboiled novel, respecting the genre while simultaneously overhauling and revitalising it. Like his literary heroes – among them Borges, Cervantes, Queneau, Cortázar, Pynchon, Vian, Chandler and Himes – James Sallis has established himself as a unique and challenging voice in contemporary culture.

The disjunctures of film-time became their own, past, present and future running together in a kind of temporal plaid. Events were prefigured; memories eclipsed into fanciful flashbacks. Everything was design and converging lines. The last few minutes would explain it all.

— *James Sallis, Renderings*

About the author

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