



The Long-Legged Fly

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Take a little James Lee Burke, a touch of Ross Macdonald, and a dash of Raymond Chandler, the conventions of the classic American detective story and the fine, thoughtful writing of an original new talent - and you still don't quite have *The Long-Legged Fly*. This is a smart, tough novel teeming with life and always on the verge of igniting from its own energy. In steamy modern-day New Orleans, black private detective Lew Griffin has once again taken on a seemingly hopeless missing persons case. The trail takes him through the underbelly of the French Quarter with its bar girls, pimps, and tourist attractions. As his search leads to one violent dead end, and then another, Griffin is confronted with the prospect that his own life has come to resemble those he is attempting to find; he is becoming as lost as the frail identities he tries to recover. Waking in a hospital after an alcoholic binge, Griffin finds another chance in a nurse who comes to love him, but again he reverts to his old life in the mean streets among the predators and their prey. When his son vanishes, Griffin searches back through the tangles and tatters of his life, knowing that he must solve his personal mysteries before he can venture after the whereabouts of others. *The Long-Legged Fly* is exciting, visceral entertainment that takes the reader into a corner of society where life is fought for as much as it is lived. James Sallis has written a compelling novel that succeeds both as detective fiction and worthy literature.

The Long-Legged Fly Details

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From Reader Review The Long-Legged Fly for online ebook

John Culuris says

Collections of shorter work by authors known for novels have never sold, which make sense when you think about it. If you are known for one thing and you veer off into something else--even if it's related by format or is a different aspect of the same art form--you're going to lose followers. Publishers are aware of this, obviously. Sometimes they'll bury a collection in a list of novels by changing the heading from "Novels by . . ." to "Books by . . ." Or, if the collection leans more towards novellas than short stories, they'll be very nonspecific on the cover, not calling it a novel but neither identifying it as a collection. *The Long-Legged Fly* is what results when this is the plan of the author from the beginning. Four consecutive plots, one story--and very much a novel.

The Long-Legged Fly is essentially a photo album of a private detective named Lew Griffin, though mentioning that he is a private detective is somewhat misleading. There is no traditional detection to be found here. His specialty is finding missing people but his cases go from Point A to Point B to, let's say, Point E. Sometimes only as far as Point C. The finding of the subject of his search is fairly straightforward, almost easy. The reason for this is that his current case, whatever it may be, is not the point. This novel is about how New Orleans eats the people clinging to its underbelly.

It turns out that Lew Griffin is not immune to the world in which he inhabits. One of our earliest exposures to him is in a tradition PI setting: in his office, behind on his bills but ahead of the bill collector. In these snapshots of his life--from 1964, 1970, 1984 and 1990--he will both work his way to a fairly comfortable existence and fall to a level just short of drowning. That Griffin is susceptible to a fall is yet another indictment of his city, but it is equally a consequence of the way he chooses to live. A hulking black man known to be prone to sudden violence and suspected of being a little crazy, the streets themselves offer him very little resistance. But the city has other means of conquering the disenfranchised. Physical force is unnecessary when it can drive a man to self destruction. Particularly as, through his first person narrative, we learn that Griffin's personality belies his appearance. Empathetic, educated, literate, he is likable to the point that it's easy to forget that our first introduction to him involves him killing a man in a dark alley. Not as a detective in pursuit of a criminal or in justifiable self-defense, but as an avenger. He takes a leatherworker's knife to a man who, as part of a drug-crazed group, had done the same to a lost girl.

That's a part of him we will never see again. But there are many influences in Lew Griffin's life that the reader never gets to see. It is similar to how a photo album cannot catalog every significant event of a single life within its pages. Within these pages, the pages of *The Long-Legged Fly*, what's missing isn't really missed. There is no thrill-a-minute narrative, no complex plot, almost none of the trappings of the genre. The only mystery Lew Griffin is trying to solve is Lew Griffin. As with all such quests, he does not completely succeed. Thankfully the book succeeds for him.

Greg says

Lately I've been on a crime fiction jag. I have a giant stack of read but not reviewed books sitting next to my computer, and I better get cracking at reviewing them, most of them are library books and they have to get back soon. I think I might be over-dosing a little on the genre, the stories will soon start blending with one another. I don't know if I can call myself a 'fan' of crime fiction, I certainly enjoy it, but I feel like I have to

be reading it for a lot longer than I have been to say it's something I'm into. I also keep resisting because crime fiction is shelved in the mystery section, and saying I'm a fan of crime fiction means that I consider myself a fan of mystery novels, which I have a difficult relationship with. And while I'm still employed at Barnes and Noble I don't want to say I'm into mystery novels, I don't want to be a person other people turn to when customers need mystery recommendations.

I am a 'fan' of literary fiction, especially of the 'difficult' variety (which I also don't like giving recommendations for, I don't like giving recommendations to strangers, period. That is why I rarely recommend books I really love to people, I've tried to offer up say, *Magnetic Field(s)* to someone, and then they get all, well why would I like it, and they poo-pawh about it and turn their noses up and I want to shout at them to just fucking read the book because it's one of the most perfectly written books in the world, and that is all you need to know, anything else is a giant fucking spoiler, so instead I'll give them *Kavalier and Clay*, one of my goto literary recommendations, which I could care less if you buy or not), and one might think that being on a crime fiction spree and loving literary fiction I'd like for those two things to be mixed up into one great taste.

I didn't know that this was supposed to be literary, and there is nothing overtly capital L literary about, but there are hints dropped here and there. A name on a door bell is for R. Queneau, book titles get dropped in strange places, the Britishness of Henry James is joked about. Actually I feel like more space is given in the book to literary comments than to the actual solving of crimes. Which is fine, because I don't necessarily like or dislike reading about crimes being solved, but the investigations in this book sort of float around in the background, and when they do get solved it's almost like an afterthought, no that isn't the right word, not an afterthought, but almost as very incidental to the story.

On a literary level I guess this would be considered a character driven PI novel. Most of my favorite books are character driven, and before yesterday I'd say that character driven is good for literary fiction, but it doesn't work in the crime fiction world. But if I had written that this past weekend I'd have to admit that I'm wrong, Lawrence Block's *Hit Man* was an amazing display of a character driven crime novel, it's probably the best novel of this genre I've read all year, which means it's better than any of the Parker novels by Richard Stark.

Like *Hit Man*, this novel is a collection of stories all with the same main character. Here we see Lew Griffin in snap shots between 1964 and 1990, we see his life falling apart, his attempts to improve it and the way that life kicks him in the teeth again. There is some deep shit going on, but I only know this deep shit is in the book because the copy on the dust jacket tells me about it. I could see it once it was pointed out to me, but I didn't catch it on my own. This is because I'm a bit stupid and because it's sort of subtle and not exactly the kind of stuff I'm looking for when I'm reading about a drunken PI.

I think the big picture I missed while reading this, that is sort of what I'm trying to say. I'm kind of interested to try the second book in this series, I'm hoping that it's a more traditional novel, instead of vignettes sewn together, I think with the style that Sallis writes in I would find this more satisfying. Or maybe not.

This book was fine, I don't think it's going to be something I will be able to remember much about six months from now, I think it will just be remembered as that book where the author put Queneau's name on a doorbell.

Algernon says

My first James Sallis book, and it qualifies as a 'discovery' of a major talent that goes beyond genre borders to write a detective story that is an existentialist meditation on race and relationships, a prose poem dedicated to the city of New Orleans and its exhilarating mix of beauty and darkness, a blues album coming straight from the soul of a man repeatedly knocked down (*Robert Johnson's hellhound was nipping at my heels*). I've been thinking about the title, and I guess it refers to 'how fragile we are', how innocents are broken to pieces in the big city vice machine, how lovers and friends and happiness is transitory and fly away the moment you try to grasp them.

The structure of the book is unusual for a P.I. noir, as the focus is on character study more than the actual criminal investigations. We follow sleuth Lew Griffin for almost thirty years of his irregular career on the streets of New Orleans, each section of the book dealing with a different investigation:

- 1964 : Lew as a tough guy , a justiciary who takes the law in his own hands, a name to instill fear in the denizens of the underworld. He's the classic lone wolf, hard drinking and hard hitting, with an estranged wife and kid and a talent for wisecracks (*I woke up feeling like the inside of someone's shoe.*) . He gets hired to find a successful and popular black woman who disappeared from the plane coming from New York to New Orleans. You may think it sounds a little like **Devil In a Blue Dress** , but Sallis goes his own way, introspective rather than angry, cerebral and methodical instead of impulsive. He is anchored firmly in the black culture and its human rights struggle, but he makes it personal rather than political.

I wondered then : what was it that started a person sinking? Was that long fall in him (or her) from the start, in us all perhaps; or something he put there himself, creating it over time and unwittingly just as he created his face, his life, the stories he lived by, the ones that let him go on living. It seemed as though I should know. I'd been there more than once and would probably be there again.

Instead of answers, he prefers to raise the questions and provoke the reader to think and to take a stand.

- 1970 : Lew has picked the threads of his life together and got moderately successful. Once again he is put on the trail of a missing girl who ran away from a poor home in the country and got lost in the big city. Again this is mostly a pretext for the author to explore the barriers in communication between generations and the corrupting influence of the big city lifestyle.

I drove slowly along Melpomene thinking about parents and children, how so many homes were war zones these days, how love breaks under the weight of years and words and disillusion, how as we get older, more and more, we see our parents' faces in the mirror.

We also find out more about Lew Griffin, the man who loves reading and listening to Jazz and Blues music, whose best friends are a call girl and a disillusioned cop:

Put on Bessie Smith and bobbed about for a while on the promise of her voice, on her empty bed blues, her nine-day crawl, her haunted house, on her thirst and her hunger. Every note and word was like something pulled with great difficulty from deep within myself.

His internal monologues and conversations are rich in literary references, like a map of his evolution from a youth dreaming of a better world (Thoreau, Gandhi, Twain) to a more cynical and realistic adult who has

seen most of his dreams turn to dust: Tolstoy, Faulkner, Chekhov. I have not marked down, but Lew's reading list includes social and economical tomes (*The more power one had, the more power it took to maintain that power* - Hobbes). Sallis probably put more than a little of his own experiences in this book, so poetry couldn't be absent from duty. My favorite is a quote Lew picks from W H Auden:

*Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good.*

- 1984 : The years have not been kind to Lew, he has not learned detachment from the fate of the victims of the system, and he is now a pennyless alcoholic, closed up to the world in an internal struggle with his own hellhounds. The friendly cop puts him in rehab, where he gets a second chance at love and at making a relationship work. The third case is again a missing person, another innocent who disappeared from the streets. But at least Lew starts to believe in the possibility of redemption of putting Humpty Dumpty together again:

But was she really in control? Or driven?

Finally, I guess, it wasn't much 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.

- 1990 : Lew has climbed back up the social ladder and found some level of comfort. He's become a writer of noir novels and a college professor. He's still lonely, but in a great scene with his on/off call girl we start to understand he is actually the one who drives people off. He believes he's put his investigative years behind, but another missing person brings him back. This time it is personal:

It's never ideas, but simple things, that break our hearts: a falling leaf that plunges us into our own irredeemable past, the memory of a young woman's ankle, a single smile among unknown faces, a madeleine, a piece of toast.

The major qualities of the novel (the elegant, minimalistic prose, the keen observation of human behaviour, the understated but powerful emotional intensity) would justify a five star review, but as a genre noir novel the pacing is rather slow, the actual cases are lacking in suspense and the actual action scenes are scarce. But I look forward to reading the next Sallis novel, I might even appreciate it more, now that I know what to expect.

Lori says

*Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
His mind moves upon silence.*

—William Butler Yeats, W. B. Yeats: *Selected Poetry: 181-182, 1968*

It's more a story about a detective than a detective story. If you need a strong, well-structured plot, then you'll probably be happier someplace else.

Bill Kerwin says

This is an odd book, but I liked it. It is not so much a private-eye novel as a private-eye symphony in four movements, each tied to a particular year (1964, 1970, 1984, 1990), that show us four cases in the life of investigator Lew Griffin and how he—and the city he loves, New Orleans—flow through a quarter century into the fullness of time. Its title comes from a line in a poem of Yeats (“Like a long-legged fly upon the stream/His mind moves upon silence”), and the book is narrated by Griffin, a man much like Yeat’s long-legged fly, who discovers himself both in his love and in his privacies, but particularly in the quiet lonely places of the night.

It is Lew’s narrative voice that is the book’s memorable feature: spare, clear, poetic, allusive, but never pretentious. Here is one of my favorite passages, about a storm:

That night, sudden and unseen in the embracing dark, as though the city, like alice, had tumbled into some primordial hole and through to another world, a storm broke.

I woke, at three or four, to the sound of tree limbs whipping back and forth against the side of the house. Power had summarily failed, and there were no lights, was no light, anywhere. Wind heaved in great tidal waves out there in the dark somewhere, Rain hissed and beat its fists against the roof. Yet looking out I could see nothing of what I sensed.

It went on another hour, perhaps more, the edge, as we learned the next day, of hurricanes that touched down in Galveston, extracting individual buildings like teeth, and blew themselves out on the way up the channel toward Mobile.

The morning we learned this, weather was mild, air exceptionally clear, sun bright and cool in the sky. Worms had come out onto sidewalks and lay there uncurled in the steam rising lazily from them. In every street, cars maneuvered around the fallen limbs of age-old trees. And shipwrecked on the neutral ground, crisscrossing trolley tracks, lay uprooted palms—fully a third of the city’s ancient, timeless crop.

Carol says

In the darkness things always go away from you. Memory holds you down while regret and sorrow kick hell out of you. The only help you'll get is a few hard drinks and morning.

Melki says

If you're a private dick, and potential clients need to track you down in a bar in order to hire you . . . that's probably NOT a GOOD thing.

It seems to work out okay for Lew Griffin, however, because he has a real knack for finding people.

In 1964, he is hired by a black militant group (not the Panthers), to find a missing female activist (not Angela Davis). The book then follows Griffin through the years to 1990 as he searches for the vanished. He's an interesting fellow with little tolerance for the bad guys, and interesting methods for dealing with them. He'd also rather learn to live with his drinking problem than beat it, as evidenced by the fact that he hits a bar on his way home from rehab.

Not a whole lot happens in this book, yet it's strangely absorbing, particularly Griffin's last case which hits very close to home.

Nancy Oakes says

Storylines, etc are detailed at my online reading journal's crime page while in this space I'll just leave my impression.

This is an absolutely super book, and something entirely different. Rather than having an entire series follow a main character's arc, James Sallis manages to put it into one book. There are five books which follow this one in his Lew Griffin series which I haven't read, but *The Long-Legged Fly* covers a span of time from 1964 through 1990.

Set in New Orleans, each section of *The Long-Legged Fly* centers around Griffin's search for someone who is lost. Taken as a whole, one could argue that Griffin is also searching for himself in this book. Who is this Lew Griffin exactly? When we first meet Griffin, he's hell-bent on vengeance and actually kills a man before he goes back to settle into his office, where we discover he's a PI who is friends with a local cop -- pretty much standard pulp-fiction fare. Then another surprise -- he hits the skids and comes back as a collector for a loan outfit, spending time in a halfway house after weeks of detox for his alcohol problem. At some point he becomes interested in writing and changes his life again, becoming the author of a Cajun detective series, until there's a big twist at the end where just who is actually doing the narrating becomes a central question that forces the reader to completely re-evaluate everything he or she has just read.

Clearly, Griffin is no ordinary man and is definitely not the stock PI of pulp fiction. There is a certain richness to this book that makes it unlike any other in this genre. First, there's New Orleans, a city that, like Lew, reinvents itself while keeping its history intact; there's also an abundance of literary references and references to local blues artists and their work sprinkled throughout this novel. Griffin has to work through a lifetime of pain and, as noted on the back-cover blurb, he fears "becoming as lost as the frail identities he is trying to recover." I genuinely appreciate an author who allows his or her characters to discover themselves around a plotline rather than making the plot the central focus of a novel -- and since I prefer understanding people and why they do what they do in a given situation, I've always felt a plot should be secondary with characters coming first. Then again, not everyone reads like I do, so readers looking for a fast-action, pulpy PI novel will definitely not find it here. Readers who also prefer a strictly linear chronology may also not care for this one, but for me, *The Long-Legged Fly* is something completely out of the ordinary. Recommended with absolutely no qualms whatsoever, but mainly to readers who are much more into fullness of character rather than straight-up action.

Anthony Vacca says

Poet and translator of Oulipian lit, James Sallis goes the distance with his debut novel, *The Long-Legged Fly*, a private eye mystery that manages to bring a fresh approach to a well-established and sometimes derivative genre. Narrated by Lew Griffin, an autodidact African American PI operating out of the neon rain-slicked streets of New Orleans, the novel spans over three decades and is divided into four episodic parts that, rather than conforming to one over-arching mystery, instead paint the sweeping broad strokes of Griffin's life. In 1964, we see Griffin gutting an unprosecuted killer, boozing, avoiding the responsibility of dealing with his father's death and searching for a missing Civil Rights activist. 50 pages later it is the 1970's and Griffin finds himself looking for a teenage runaway who may have fallen in with a two-bit pornographer. By the 1980's Griffin's drinking has landed our hero in detox where he falls for a red-headed European nurse. Back on the streets, Griffin tries to make one last attempt at true love while searching for the missing sister of a reformed pedophile. By 1990, old man Griffin has given up PI-ing for a late-blooming career as a mystery novelist, infusing his own experiences into the life of his fictional private eye protagonist. As he finishes his latest novel, Griffin must come to terms with the fragility of his long-running off-and-on relationship with sometimes call-girl LaVerne, as well as coping with the grim implications of the disappearance of his estranged son. Written in sparse, masculine prose, the novel defies its trim page-count by packing its pages with poetical insights that showcase the philosophical nature of Griffin's lifelong melancholy. With the well-behaved metafictional nature of the novel's final portion, *The Long-Legged Fly* resembles something like a career-long retrospective with an emphasis on the highs and lows of Griffin's few loves and many losses. But the novel still feels whole and of itself as it tackles the passage of time and its effects on a city, and how so much and yet so little can change when it comes to what men and women do to one another. And, man, what a hell of a last page.

Toby says

"In the darkness things always go away from you. Memory holds you down while regret and sorrow kick hell out of you. The only help you'll get is a few hard drinks and morning."

This memoir of Lew Griffin, private detective, occasional drunk, crime writer and professional citizen of New Orleans, is the debut novel from James Sallis and no amount of superlative praise can do it justice. Sallis has written introductions for books from Derek Raymond, Charles Willeford and James Lee Burke and he wears his influences on his sleeve, but in a good way. Almost as soul searchingly dark as Raymond's famous first Factory book and yet despite the deep deep existential melancholy that settles over proceedings there's a little bit of joy and hope sprinkled here and there, maybe things aren't as bad as they seem?

Told in four sections, jumping from 1964 to 1970 to 1984 and finishing in 1990, Sallis does himself an injustice by drawing parallels between himself and his fictional creation, calling his work "mere entertainment" but at least he allows a critic to clarify that they are "certainly a bit more than mere entertainment" like the greats of the genre who came before and after James Sallis dug deep in to the dark heart of humanity to craft a genre fiction shell to disguise the literary insights contained within.

"I wondered then: what was it that started a person sinking? Was that long fall in him (or her) from the start, in us all perhaps; or something he put there himself, creating it over time and unwittingly just as he

created his face, his life, the stories he lived by, the ones that let him go on living.”

The novel extends far past it's natural fictional conclusion as if making a statement against the classic Hollywood detective pictures of the 40s he references, films where a drunken, selfish heel will return from the gin within 90 minutes and become a solid citizen. Sallis is showing us that life is so much dirtier than that, it's not all climbing the social and real estate ladders or designer suits, life is a struggle, it doesn't wrap itself up neatly in three act structures and there's never a happy ending because there's as much chance that it will end in the rain at midnight as it will at midday with cocktails on the veranda as the kids play happily on the lawn.

Karl says

“The Long-Legged Fly” by James Sallis the first in the series of Lew Griffin books is like sipping some fine wine. This is my second time reading this book, the first reading was about fifteen years ago, and I must say the book has aged better than I remember it.

What Mr. Sallis gives us in the book are four views of Private Detective Griffin's life through the span of some years. The common thread in the stories is the need for the detective to find a missing person. All the events take place in New Orleans which also becomes a minor character within the book. It's people, music, food and flavor, both attractive and unattractive, and we view the change to the city itself over the years. Much of the action takes place in the underbelly of the city, the French Quarter with it's bar girls, pimps and tourist attractions.

The part one takes place in 1964 and Lew must find the missing political activist Corene Davis. Lew hits dead end after dead end in his search. As the narrative unfolds we see Lew begin to resemble the lost souls he is asked to find.

Moving forward to part two we are in 1970 and Lew has become successful to a degree where he has an office, a nice place to live and some money in the bank. Life is pretty good for him. Lew's recent clients Mr. and Mrs Clayson ask him to fin their young missing daughter Cordelia. They appear to be a good wholesome, yet poor family. Lew involves himself deeply in finding the girl. He discovers she is involved with an amateur film maker and continues the search.

Part three takes us to 1984, and this section is my favorite in the book. Lew's life and drinking have gotten him to the point of having a breakdown. He awakes in a hospital not really knowing what happened to him. He meets an English nurse and his life begins to turn around. With her he finds love and a reason for existence. His route of recovery is brutal and realistic and he slowly re-enters life and the pursuit of his career choice which ultimately leads him to pursue finding another missing young woman.

Part four finds us in 1990. Lew has become a successful writer and part time teacher when he gets a phone call advising him that his son is missing after a flight from Paris to New York. Now the missing person is close to home, he must examine his own life and the choices he has made.

This was a wonderful book and an excellent entry into the world of the detective and the world of literature. I highly recommend this book.

Richard says

"In the darkness things always go away from you. Memory holds you down while regret and sorrow kick the hell out of you.

The only help you'll get is a few hard drinks and morning."

This book is unlike any other detective novel I've read. You know how in all detective stories you get the sense that the case our hero is investigating is a stand-out case for him amongst all of his smaller, regular assignments? That it's a mystery that he'll probably remember forever and is worth dedicating a book to above the others? Well, *The Long-Legged Fly* focuses instead on those OTHER cases: the everyday ones, the day-to-day work. The book can barely be considered a novel; it's more of a series of short stories highlighting key times throughout different decades in Creole private detective (and part-time insurance strong-arm) Lew Griffin's life as an individual instead of just a hard-boiled dick. Even though the mysteries are fairly tame and inconsequential, each decade finds Lew as a different person, a complex man that finds himself and loses himself again, that evolves and transforms throughout the years, as any person would.

"The world doesn't change, and mostly we don't either, we just go on looking into the same mirror, trying on different hats and expressions and new sets of vice, opinion, and prejudice; pretending, as children do, to see and feel things that are not there."

It's also written by James Sallis, who is not only a crime novelist but also a poet, philosopher, and musician. He fills the book with sometimes drunken but always poignant ruminations on life, the blues, and classic literature. Although the book's structure makes it sometimes difficult to be engaged in the superficial story, the character of Lew Griffin is the star of the show, and it's fascinating watching him evolve. I really enjoyed this one. Sallis is a really gifted writer and I'm interesting in seeing where Griffin goes from here.

"Maybe the best parts of our lives are always over. Maybe happiness, contentment, are things we only recollect through the filters of time, elusive ghosts forever behind us."

Josh says

“Maybe the best parts of out lives are always over. Maybe happiness, contentment, are things we only recollect through filters of time, elusive ghosts forever behind us.”

The Long Legged Fly is on par with the great American detective novels which embody and define noir down to its seedy and desperate core (think James Crumley or Ken Bruen with a sprinkle of George Pelecanos). Drowning sorrows, starving the soul of oxygen, Griffin is the true tainted protagonist. Seeking love and ones lost, solace and a time to mean something, Griffin meanders from one case to another slowly evolving into those he is entrusted to guard against. I love the way the cases are fragmented by time yet linked by some deftly placed plot threads.

Spanning four distinct periods, 1964, 1970, 1987, and 1990, PI Lew Griffin is as shady as the streets he stumbles, side stepping blood splatter throughout the underside of New Orleans. The book is as much about Griffin's battle with his personal demons as it is the missing people he's tasked to find – I couldn't read this fast enough, a must read for fans of raw and realistic detective fiction.

Jon says

This is a difficult book to review and rate. The book has some good things to it, but there's also some glaring weaknesses that ultimately made it more than a little frustrating to me. Unfortunately, I had high expectations from the beginning, so the disappointment was particularly acute. The cover blurb quotes several glowing reviews from The Los Angeles Times, Publishers Weekly, and The Washington Post Book World. The Times quote states "An extraordinary first novel....justly compared to James Lee Burke and Raymond Chandler." They had me at Burke and Chandler. I've read all of Burke's Dave Robicheaux novels and have loved them all and Chandler's Phillip Marlowe is THE iconic fictional private investigator. The setting of New Orleans was another selling point. Burke's novels, with his rich and vibrant depiction of the swamps, bayous, and the French Quarter, have put visiting New Orleans on my bucket list . It's a setting that lends itself well to noir and I was looking forward to another writer's depiction of the area.

The main character is an African-American private detective named Lew Griffin and the book consists of 4 separate missing persons cases he investigates and a brief prologue at the start of the novel. Spanning 26 years, the cases occur in 1964, 1970, 1984, and 1990 and each one of them is a standalone story with no connection with each other. I use the word "investigate" loosely and that's one of the weaknesses of the novel. Each case consists of Griffin making a few phone calls, talking to a few people, and getting a magical lead that leads him to the missing person. There's little, if any, plot to the stories and, if anything, they tend to be more anticlimactic than suspenseful. This is more a character study than a mystery or thriller. Character studies are fine, but the cases themselves are perfunctory enough to be almost bare outlines. Plot holes are huge, things end abruptly, and interesting plots and themes are abandoned before they are fully explored. One missing person case involves a female African American activist who disappears and is later found passing as white. This could have been a chance to examine race in the early days of the Civil Rights movement, but there's no in depth analysis of her actions. The only explanation given is that she had a "breakdown" and that's just lazy writing.

The character of Griffin is interesting and initially appears to be following the noir genre convention of the hard drinking and self-destructive PI (like Ken Bruen's Jack Taylor or Burke's early Robicheaux novels) and there's some good, hard boiled scenes and dialogue sprinkled throughout the book:

"There was a half filled glass of bourbon and an almost empty bottle on the desk. A fly floated in what was left in the glass. I thought about it, fished the fly out with a letter-opener, drank, poured in the rest of the bottle"

Griffin's drinking eventually gets so out of control that he ends up being committed to a detox clinic and it becomes apparent that the most important missing person in the book is himself:

"I started out again, then came back and sat at the desk, staring out the window. I felt as though I'd lost something, lost it forever, and I didn't even know what it was, had no name for it. Those are the worst losses we ever sustain"

Griffin is also well read and quotes poetry, literature, and philosophy throughout the book. Salis has made him interesting enough that I do plan to read another book in the series just to see what he does with the character and if he can structure an interesting story next time. Sallis is also a poet and, perfunctory plotting aside, his writing is exceptional. He's able to infuse a dose of poetry into noir conventions:

“I hung up, turned off the light and sat staring out into the darkness. Somewhere in that darkness, sheltered or concealed by it, maybe lost in it, was David; and somewhere too, Vicky, Verne and others I’d loved.

In the darkness things always go away from you. Memory holds you down while regret and sorrow kick hell out of you.

The only help you’ll get is a few hard drinks and morning”

Ammar says

I wish I discovered Jamis Sallis earlier
He is truly an unsung genius of crime writing.

This first book of the Lew Griffin. A black detective who lives in New Orleans. The streets are dark... the walks are fast... the bars are darker. A walk into the Louisiana wild side.

Fine prose with moral struggle. Lew across three different decades.. evolving and looking for some lost souls who some are found and some are tragically lost to the world.

Sallis in my opinion a master of American Noir. He is authentic. And he cuts the crap and gives you the nectar of gods.
