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Charles Willeford, Elmore Leonard (Introduction)

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After a brutal day investigating a quadruple homicide, Detective Hoke Moseley settles into his room at the un-illustrious El Dorado Hotel and nurses a glass of brandy. With his guard down, he doesn't think twice when he hears a knock on the door. The next day, he finds himself in the hospital, badly bruised and with his jaw wired shut. He thinks back over ten years of cases wondering who would want to beat him into unconsciousness, steal his gun and badge, and most importantly, make off with his prized dentures. But the pieces never quite add up to revenge, and the few clues he has keep connecting to a dimwitted hooker, and her ex-con boyfriend and the bizarre murder of a Hare Krishna pimp.

Chronically depressed, constantly strapped for money, always willing to bend the rules a bit, Hoke Moseley is hardly what you think of as the perfect cop, but he is one of the the greatest detective creations of all time.

Miami Blues Details

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From Reader Review Miami Blues for online ebook

Martyn Halm says

I loved this book. The quirky characters, the weird situations, the interaction. Junior Frenger, a freeloading sociopath recently released from prison, arrives in Miami, where he uses his skills at deception and violence to twist situations into his advantage.

Weary police detective Hoke Moseley investigates the carnage in Frenger's wake and falls victim himself, which leads to hilarious situations.

Strongly recommended to fans of Elmore Leonard and noir crime novels.

Algernon says

I just want to go back to Okeechobee. All I've had is trouble of some kind or other ever since I came down here. What I'd say, if you asked me about Miami, I'd say it's not a good place for a single girl to be.

Susan Waggoner has reasons aplenty to complain. She's barely in her twenties, and she's already a runaway from her small town in the Glades, has been abused by her own brother, had an abortion followed by a budding career in prostitution. And that's all before she gets caught in a deadly game between Miami Police Sergeant Hoke Moseley and a ruthless criminal just landed from California:

Frederick J Frenger, who preferred to be called Junior instead of Freddy, was twenty-eight years old. He looked older because his life had been a hard one; the lines at the corners of his mouth seemed too deep for a man in his late twenties. His eyes were a dark shade of blue, and his untrimmed blond eyebrows were almost white. His nose had been broken and reset poorly, but some women considered him attractive. His skin was unblemished and deeply tanned from long afternoons spent in the yard at San Quentin. At five-nine, he should have had a slighter build, but prolonged sessions with weights, pumping iron in the yard, as well as playing handball, had built up his chest, shoulders, and arms to almost grotesque proportions. He had developed his stomach muscles to the point that he could stand, arms akimbo, and roll them in waves.

I have chosen this long passage for two reasons : first, the novel spends much more time inside the insane head of Freddy than in the company of Hoke Moseley (this is not a spoiler, and no mystery actually, since we are following the events as they develop and not investigating them after the murder); and secondly, I really like the style of presentation, hard edged but with the occasional flash of black humour, eminently readable (that's why the term page turner was invented). Willeford knows best how to fade in the background and let his characters determine the dialogue and the style of presentation.

Freddy is also the reason I didn't add the final star to my review: he is well constructed, for a psychopath, but I disliked him intensely right from the start, with his casual attitude towards violence and total disregard for other people's property. He feels entitled to grab everything he can, seeing himself as a wolf among sheep. He is completely self-absorbed and ready to use his new girlfriend (Susan) both as a sex toy ("platonic marriage" means something else than what I learned in school for Freddy) and as his criminal accomplice.

“You use that word a lot.”

“What word?”

“ ‘Fair’. Now that you’re twenty years old – “

“Only by one month – “

“- you’d better forget about things like ‘fair’ and ‘unfair’. Even when people talk about the weather, ‘fair’ doesn’t mean anything.”

In the opposite corner sits Hoke Moseley, an experienced criminal investigator cut from the same cloth as the classic hard-boiled gumshoes: divorced, alcoholic, cynical, heavy fisted. He’s got the blues big time, justifying the title of this first installment in the series dedicated to him.

Any way he looked at it, it was a rotten business. may refer both to the current affair and to his life in general, who is not satisfied to kick him in the teeth, but goes on to stamp on them, throw them out windows and steal them (it’s a sort of running joke in the book with his false dentures)

The third main actor in the drama is the city of Miami, called in one of the opening scenes “the original Sin City”, where shop owners are not satisfied with safe boxes and secure windows,(view spoiler), pimps and drug dealers rule the streets and the police feel naked without their guns. Hoke exclaims at one point:

It really feels funny as hell driving and walking around Miami without a weapon.

By the end, there is too thin a line between the cops and the robbers, with Freddy getting in trouble for finally trying to help a shop owner, and Hoke turning vigilante in his quest to catch up and exact revenge on him. And this amalgam of dark grey tones instead of black and white sharp contrast is probably one more reason why the novel stands above the usual fare in crime thrillers. My last quote is a bitter reminder that the people we trust to keep order and peace are much to often ready to tamper with the evidence in order to ‘help’ a colleague in trouble:

You’re in some jurisdictional trouble if you don’t get your story straight. And here’s the way you tell it, and this is the way we’ll write it up...

I am planning to read more from Charles Willeford, hoping he is as skillful in his prose and convincing in his characters as in here.

Marc Gerstein says

A fun read. I’m not a big fan of the crime genre and don’t remember what I read or heard that caused me to put this on my to-read list (or rather to-listen since I did this on Audible) list. But I’m glad to have done so. Moseley is definitely an engaging cop protagonist and I may listen to other novels in the series. Compared to other works I encountered in the genre, this was just plain fun and completely unselfconscious (I’m not into heavy noir.)

It was also fun to revisit a time before cell phones, before we could even take for granted that everybody would even have a landline, and before Miami Beach became hip.

Karl says

Don't Watch the movie, read the book, in fact read all the books by Mr. Willeford. Sadly he is not creating any new books. Published in 1984 and this is the second time I have read this book.

High rating for enjoy-ability if you like a bit of a hard boiled edge, and a great place to be introduced to this author.

Anthony Vacca says

Miami Blues is a bacon-decked, cheese-drenched, all-beef burger with a side of crisp, greasy, cayenne-peppered fries and a combo-size (Xtra-large) plastic cup full of more whiskey than cola. In other words it's an off-beat, breezy crime novel that I swallowed more than chewed over the course of one evening of reading and drinking alone. One star is a burp, the next a congratulatory pat on my tummy, then a satisfied knick at my teeth with a toothpick, and the fourth the pleasant surprise of a few patches of cheese stuck to the empty burger wrapper, which I enthusiastically pried free with tongue and tooth.

A charming psychopath and his ditzy babe, casually corrupt and begrudgingly decent cops; meandering conversations built upon cool, punchy dialogue; a few unexpected scenes of brutal violence; gallows humor and false teeth: what more is there for me to say in this review?

For dessert: vinegar pie.

Benoit Lelièvre says

Fantastic novel.

It starts off ultra-strong. Perhaps with a stronger personality than any other third person-narrated detective novels and kind of meanders after a while, but it went above and beyond of what I expected. Charles Willeford writes like Elmore Leonard meets Quentin Tarantino meets Dashiell Hammett. He has a keen sense of observation, tremendous humor and originality. If you're going to read one detective novel this summer, read this one.

Lou says

Check out the movie trailer and review @<http://more2read.com/review/miami-blues-hoke-moseley-1-by-charles-willeford/>

This story is reminiscent of the novel *the killer inside me* by Jim Thompson, in that it features an anti-hero Freddy Frenger jr AkA Ramon Mendez a mean psychopath who is a compulsive liar and thief similar to Thompsons creation of Sheriff Lou Ford. You'd love to have these two mean specimens on the same page. The whole story plays out into one brutal and bloody series of events taking place in the sunshine state of Miami.

Freddy teams up with a naive young woman and makes her believe he wants to be married and have a family.

While he tries to play family man he's running around town robbing and killing and she's quite oblivious to this dark side. Time will tell though and she will soon taste the end of his whip and as some dark harrowing truths come to light she have to do some mighty quick intelligent thinking.

You are put through the eyes of Freddy more than the first appearance of homicide detective Hoke Moseley. Hoke can be brutal when needed but looks to be an interesting detective to read more of in the other novels where Charles Willeford features him as a main protagonist.

The dialogue and writing is sharp, the story cuts to the chase there is some deadpan dark humour in the mix and all these blends of style provides entertaining reading through one dark side of Miami with ex-con Freddy 'Junior.'

"Perhaps Freddy has been too pessimistic about his life. He had figured, for as long as he could remember, that someday he would end up in prison for life, wandering around the yard as an old lag, muttering into a white beard and sniping cigarette butts.

But that didn't have to be - not if he could plan and execute one big job. Just one big haul...

But nothing came to him. He had no concrete ideas except for germ, and the germ was that he had Sergeant Hoke Moseley's badge and ID. The badge was an automatic pass to free food and public transportation; it could also be used to bluff someone out of considerable sum of cash. But who?"

Jordan says

This book by Charles Willeford (along with *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* by George V. Higgins) is the basis of the great crime fiction of Elmore Leonard. He was heavily influenced by these two authors and it shows.

This is not to say that Leonard copied the style – instead he has improved upon the approach to writing that these authors have themselves mastered.

In *Miami Blues*, the reader spends just as much time with the bad guy as the good guy (maybe even more time..) and he seems like a real person, not just a criminal to be arrested by the police. We spend time with this antagonist, Freddy the psychopathic ex-con, and learn about his motivations, his likes, dislikes, worries, etc. You'll see the roots of Leonard when you read this book.

The "good guy" cop Hoke a unique denture-wearing guy who is sympathetic yet slightly stand-offish. You don't learn to love him but you like him as well as feel bad for him. He's not overly macho and therefore he seems all the more real for that.

Some of the language and references are dated and there some racist/homophobic/sexist language that may turn off some readers. However, that language is put there to show the attitudes of people you'd meet everyday. It's a frank and honest portrayal of real people.

The plot relies on a far-fetched coincidence but it's not too distracting. There's some pretty brutal scenes in here, too, so fans of violent crime fiction will love it.

Even though the roots of Elmore Leonard lie in the fiction of Willeford and Higgins, I think Leonard has improved upon that style, tightening up the writing and making it more laid-back (and more fast-paced, if that makes sense).

There is also some humor in Miami Blues, some of it quite funny (the “Crisco” part is pretty hilarious).

So, if you like good crime fiction that isn’t a “whodunit”, read this book. If you like Elmore Leonard, read this book. And for Tarantino fans, QT has also name-dropped Willeford as an influence so if that gets you excited, read this book.

Fred Forbes says

Note sure I appreciate a vicious psychopath carrying the name Freddy, but he does and, as the girl he never got around to killing notes "He does have his good points." Book is an interesting time warp, seeing Miami in the 80s with reference on one page to Woolworths, Burdines, and Eckerd Drugs which no longer grace the Florida retail scene, constant smoking anywhere and everywhere by most of the characters, police officers needing to borrow a phone on scene to report in, etc. The story is interesting, if unusual. Short and not so sweet with a most unusual "hero", a cop living in a broken down flophouse style hotel, deeply in debt due to a divorce and unable to make much headway as the daughters need braces, and he needing to get his dentures replaced,etc. (Note those dentures play an interesting role in the narrative.) Not sure why the author needed to keep mentioning prices unless it was to tie it to the time period. Still, one of my more interesting reads lately.

Michael says

After landing in Miami, Freddy Frenger Jr. (or Junior as he prefers to be called) steals three wallets and begins to plan his new life. While leaving the airport he snatches a suitcase and leaves a corpse of a Hare Krishna behind. Detective Hoke Moseley is on the case; chasing Junior and his new hooker girlfriend through luxury hotels and the suburban streets of Miami.

If this sounds really familiar then you’ve probably seen the 1990 movie of the same name starring Alec Baldwin and Jennifer Jason Leigh. While there are some major differences to the two, the majority of the book is exactly the same. I’m a little disappointed when I found out this was the first in the Hoke Moseley series, because I always thought of the detective as a supporting role. In the movie Junior steals Moseley’s badge and starts pretending to be a cop to con people; this was the best part of the movie. Sadly in the book there isn’t much of that going on.

Charles Williford is an author of fiction, poetry, an autobiography, and literary criticism but he is best known for his hard-boiled writing. I think it is weird that he was a poet and literary critic as well as pulp writer, but then again I really shouldn’t be. It’s just an interesting fact about the author. When you think 1980’s hard-boiled novels, Miami Blues is probably going to be one of the top nominations on that list. Charles Williford was such a prolific writer, with over forty novels published, it is kind of sad that he is best known for the Hoke Moseley series that he wrote very late in his life. I wonder what some of his other books were like, there seems to be a whole lot of hard-boiled novels in the 1950’s and 1960’s that look interesting.

This book is an example of the noir sub-genre Florida glare which is basically a crime novel set in Florida where the heat and the culture play a role in the story as well. Noir is typically associated to LA and there have been some writers out there that wanted to depict Florida as the perfect location for crime stories as

well. Some examples of this include the Travis McGee (by John D. MacDonald), Jack Ryan (by Elmore Leonard), and Dexter Morgan (by Jeff Lindsay) series and I'm sure many more. It is an interesting concept though do we really need another genre? I like how the heat of Florida plays a part in the book and the environment is almost like a supporting character.

This was a quick read and one of the rare cases where I think I prefer the movie over the book. I wonder if there are any more noir novels where a character pretends to be a cop in order to con people; I'm sure there are plenty out there, I like the concept and would like to read more of them. I think I'll have to try another Charlies Williford, maybe something earlier. Does anyone want to recommend me a good Charlies Williford novel?

This review originally appeared on my blog; <http://literary-exploration.com/2013/...>

Kemper says

Treasure of the Rubbermaids 10: Good Cop - Bad Cop

The on-going discoveries of priceless books and comics found in a stack of Rubbermaid containers previously stored and forgotten at my parent's house and untouched for almost 20 years. Thanks to my father dumping them back on me, I now spend my spare time unearthing lost treasures from their plastic depths.

Junior Frenger has just gotten out of prison in California, and he promptly heads to Miami with a pocket full of stolen cash and credit cards. No sooner does he arrive at the airport than a Hare Krishna annoys him so Junior breaks his finger before leaving to embark on a one-man crime wave. Freakishly, the Krishna dies from the shock of the broken digit, and homicide detective Hoke Mosley gets the case.

Junior goes on to meet part-time call girl Susan, and then unlikely coincidence brings Hoke into contact with both of them. Hoke doesn't realize that Junior is the guy who inadvertently killed the Krishna, but he picks up on Junior being an ex-con and starts nosing around him and Susan. This annoys Junior who goes on the offensive and ends up in a position to impersonate a police officer while complicating Hoke's life.

This is a slick and original crime thriller with off-beat characters. Junior is described as a 'blithe psychopath', and he lives up to that billing. Since he's sure that he'll end up in jail eventually no matter what he does, Junior is only interested in instant gratification and fast cash with no real concern about long term consequences. Susan is so grateful to have someone to take care of her that she quickly begins complying with Junior's instructions.

Hoke isn't your typical hero cop, either. Just over 40 with a failed marriage and a mouthful of false teeth as well as a taste for bourbon, Hoke's personal life is a mess. With every spare dime going towards alimony and child support, he has to live in a shabby hotel and can't even keep up with his bar tab. Hoke's also losing most of his friends on the police force as an increasingly dangerous Miami of the late '80s is causing most of them to flee to safer jobs.

Anyone looking for an fast paced crime novel with a dark sense of humor would enjoy this book. The movie version from 1990 with Alec Baldwin and Fred Ward is a good adaptation of this also.

James Thane says

With *Miami Blues*, veteran crime fiction writer Charles Willeford introduces Miami Homicide detective Hoke Moseley who has to rank as one of the most unique and interesting fictional homicide cops ever to work a case. He's middle-aged, divorced, poverty-stricken (because of the divorce) and living in a crappy hotel room. He's not particularly attractive and has little luck with women. (Did I mention that he wears dentures which he seems to be losing all too often?) Still, for all that, he's a very sympathetic character and you can't help rooting for the guy.

As the book opens, an ex-con named Junior Frenger arrives at Miami International. Junior is a psychopath with big ambitions and as he's walking through the airport, he accidentally kills a Hare Krishna who has annoyed him. Junior steals some luggage, checks into a hotel and makes a date with a hooker. The hooker turns out to be a fairly spacey community college student named Suzie Waggoner who immediately falls for Junior's line of B.S. and moves in with him.

Hoke Moseley is assigned the murder case and manages to track down Suzie and Junior whom he suspects of the crime. Proving it will be another matter altogether, and the dynamics among the three principal characters are very interesting and entertaining.

This is an off-beat crime novel with moments both serious and hilariously funny, and fans of crime fiction who haven't yet discovered Willeford might want to search out this book. Fortunately, the entire Hoke Moseley series has recently been released in brand-new editions which are easy to find.

As a final note, an excellent movie was made from this novel, starring Alec Baldwin as Junior and Jennifer Jason Leigh as Suzie. Fred Ward plays Hoke and is perfectly cast in the role. This is one of those rare cases when the movie really does do justice to the book.

Paul says

Well written & an entertaining read. Just not AMAZING!

I'll likely read the other 4 books in this series, but I'm in no hurry to do so.

Not being a fan of series, i can't help but think this book would have been better if the effort put into writing all 5 books in the series, were condensed into one outstanding novel rather than diluted into 5.

Tfitoby says

Charles Willeford's Hoke Moseley series starts off with a bang, it's a strange and twisted and outrageously funny at times bang too. His protagonist is a strange beast of a detective with all kinds of odd quirks and is a supporting character to the newly released criminal who spends the entire novel compulsively lying and cheating and making some of the craziest decisions you might expect to find in an Elmore Leonard criminal

farce.

Willeford packs out the cast with some wonderfully drawn characters who feel completely authentic to the time and place (whether they are or not I will obviously never know having not lived in Miami in the early 80s) and despite the existential nature of the two leads the supporting cast are used to great comic effect. My personal favourite being the jaded college tutor who abuses his pathetic students to their face and readily admits to preparing for his lectures in a nearby bar.

With Miami Blues I have discovered has a unique voice in the noir field, different even to Willeford's earlier pulp novels, from the first page he had me grinning and despite some lag in pacing towards the middle this is clearly the work of an author with a lifetime of experience under his belt.

Johnny says

I don't why it took me so long to get to the Hoke Moseley books. I've read and enjoyed a lot of Willeford, but somehow these books just remained on my ever-growing stack.

A spare, quick read. There is no fat on this one. Great characters and an original approach. I highly recommend this one (Made into a good, underrated movie, too).

If I had any gripe, it is that some of the story hinges on a pretty big coincidence. But if you're willing to suspend a tad of disbelief, then you're in for a great ride.
