

# Jason Mott's *Hell of a Book*: American reality and racist illusion

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Jason Mott's novel *Hell of a Book* (Dutton, 2021), winner of the prestigious National Book Award, opens with a scene of domestic bliss. A young boy is hiding from his parents, delighted they can't seem to find him. They know where he is, however, and tempt him out of hiding with a meal of his favorite foods. Everyone is happy.

Of course such happiness never lasts, especially in novels, but we soon learn the very cause of the family's pleasure is itself poisoned. The family is African American, and the boy has been encouraged, "taught," to become invisible.

"You really did it?" his mother asked...

"Yep," the boy chirped, almost laughing. "I was in the living room this whole time. Unseen just like you said. It really worked, Mama!"

Then his mother hugged him and the three of them danced and laughed and smiled like they never had before. In that moment, the worries that had always hung over their heads were suddenly gone.

Those worries will hang over the rest of the novel, worries about racially motivated violence, especially the violence of racist police. Two of the novel's characters will be murdered in police stops.

*Hell of a Book* is told by two narrators, with two storylines that constantly threaten to merge and that are finally brought together in the novel's concluding chapter. One is the story of the boy who would be unseen. He goes unnamed throughout the book, a nod to his representing black boys generally, but he is dubbed "Soot" by the lighter-skinned school bullies because of his "impossibly" black skin. This plot is told by a third-person narrator in chapters that alternate with the other storyline. This other narrative, told in the first person, follows an author who gives his name as \_\_\_\_\_ and who is on a book tour to promote his bestselling novel, titled *Hell of a Book*.

The author, who is also African American, is a suddenly successful but hapless fellow. We first see him as he is running naked down a hotel hallway chased by a jealous husband who is "everything a responsible adult should be." The author considers stopping and asking the man how he "managed to do everything I've been unable to do. I want to hear his secret." The writer is able to outrun the husband because he has "better turnover. Being fast is all about turnover." As his track coach told him, "'Pick-'em-up, put-'em-down. Bam-bam-bam-bam! Hustle! Hustle!'"

Perhaps due to some trauma in childhood (his therapist suggests this in every session), the unnamed author has a heightened imagination that sometimes makes it impossible for him to distinguish reality from illusion. This, he thinks, is an advantage for a novelist. Because of his "condition," the author does not know what to make of a young black boy only he can see, who keeps appearing in his life, a boy he calls simply The Kid. In his conversations with the author, The Kid serves as a kind of conscience,

congratulating the author when he decides not to drink alcohol at a dinner and, more importantly, prodding him to feel more compassion and grief over the recent death of a black boy who has been killed by the police, a death the author hears about at every turn. The Kid wants the author to acknowledge the reality of the dead boy.

In *Hell of a Book*, Jason Mott has written a compassionate novel that grapples with the demands of compassion. It is a book that strains to comprehend the incessant occurrence of police murders of black people in the US. A book that struggles to imagine, as he would put it, a satisfactory way to be black in America. In this struggle, Mott's author/narrator covers a good deal of ground but is, ultimately, more earnest than honest.

*Hell of a Book* is Jason Mott's fourth novel. His others are *The Wonder of All Things* (2014), *The Crossing* (2018) and *The Returned* (2013), which was made into a television drama on ABC with the title *Resurrection*. He has also published two books of poetry, *We Call This Thing Between Us Love* (2009) and *...hide behind me...* (2011). Mott has been a nominee for the Pushcart Prize and Carnegie Medals for Excellence.

Mott's writing in *Hell of a Book* is crisp and tense in the third-person narrative and wry, at times self-consciously hard-boiled, in the unnamed author's narrative. The book reads quickly but is written carefully enough, with double meanings ("pick-'em-up and put-'em-down...Hustle! Hustle!") and symbolism (for example, invisibility), that it rewards a second reading.

In his youth, the unnamed author and his father enjoyed the fast-talking tough guy and gal movies of the '30s and '40s. The author is overly influenced by these movies, calling women "dames" and "dollface" for instance, but by assuming a Humphrey Bogart-like persona he is able to distance himself emotionally from the rolling waves of people he encounters on his book tour. More importantly, wisecracks, alcohol and sex also prove effective "distractions," a "lead-based wall of narcissism" shielding him from the horror that the television news wants to remind him of, police murders of black men.

For the unnamed author, and for Mott as well—the two ultimately arrive at the same conclusions—the object of the book's greatest sorrow and pity is the love among black family members. The fear that Soot's mother and father feel for him, the apology they feel they owe him for having brought him into an African American life, the desperation with which they hope for his invisibility, and the tears of the parents on the television news whose son has been killed by a cop, these are the occasions of tragedy at the heart of *Hell of a Book*.

With this theme of a familial love blended with grief, Mott's novel joins a tradition of African American literature. In various ways, Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* and James Baldwin's short story "Sonny's Blues," among other works, focus on the "worry" that hangs over a black family. The most notable piece of literature to take up this theme is probably Nobel laureate Toni Morrison's 1988 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved*. In that book, an escaped slave named Sethe sees a slave-catcher coming up the road and hurriedly tries to murder her children,

only managing to kill her older daughter, rather than see them taken into slavery. Like Sethe, Soot's parents want their son to vanish from existence, to become "unseen and safe."

Such a comparison between *Hell of a Book* and *Beloved* makes sense thematically but not historically. It is a superficial comparison, but one the reader suspects Mott would endorse, given his novel's characterization of police violence against blacks. Certainly Mott's novel links contemporary police murders, such as the 2020 killing of George Floyd, with the history of violence African Americans have suffered in the US. For instance,

Daddy Henry was Soot's grandfather. He lived in a rest home on the far side of Whiteville, a sleepy, small southern town in a sleepy, small southern county with a long history of strawberry production and lynchings.

And again,

That's what the Fear really came down to. That's what all of the other fears were derived from for people of a certain skin color living in a certain place. But it wasn't just a fear, it was a truth. A truth proven time and time again for generations. A truth passed down through both myth and mandate, from lip to lip to legislation. Certain bodies don't belong to their inhabitants. Never have, never will again. A persistent, inescapable, and horrific truth known by millions of unsettled bodies. The Fear.

This is careless thinking on Mott's part and a serious flaw in the novel overall. This personified fear, this "truth" that "certain bodies don't belong to their inhabitants" and "never will again," would attempt to conflate 21st-century America with the slave South. It ignores the historical reality, and significance, of the Civil War and Emancipation. Worse, it projects such an abject condition into all eternity. This is not historical observation on the part of Mott, it is myth-making, and a reprehensible myth-making at that.

That white racism has persisted in backward elements of the population, deliberately whipped up by the powers that be for definite purposes, is not to be denied. But one should seriously and concretely consider these occurrences and not simply toss them onto a pile marked "racist violence throughout time." Mott, and many less circumspect and compassionate practitioners of racialism, attribute all violence historically visited upon blacks to a quasi-organic, almost mystical notion called by the acolytes of identity politics "whiteness." Such a category transcends time and is impervious to any historical analysis. It is dangerous nonsense.

George Floyd was murdered by racist police officers, as are many black men, women and children each year. But the police are an arm of the capitalist state, and in contemporary America they have become a highly militarized, intensely belligerent force who are being prepared to treat the working population in general as the enemy of a crisis-ridden and frightened ruling class. Although blacks are disproportionately murdered by police, numerically more whites lose their lives to police violence than any other racial group. Racism plays a part in US police killings, but it is not at the root of police killings.

Nor were "whiteness" or "whites" responsible for the deaths of 10 black people in Buffalo. The shooting was carried out by a white supremacist and fascist, a product of a specific historical moment in which white supremacist and fascist elements—as yet a tiny portion of the population—are being cultivated, like the police, to divide and subdue the working class. But to Mott and other upper-middle-class purveyors of

identity politics, such historical and political considerations are beside the point. To them the antebellum South and the east side of Buffalo in 2022 are all one. Such a viewpoint is certainly easier to grasp, and given the billions of dollars being thrown at identity politics in academia, popular culture and human resources offices around the country, it is a smart career move as well.

The protests that erupted around the country and the world over the murder of Floyd were notable for their multiracial, multiethnic character, as have been protests against the murder of other black men such as Michael Brown and Eric Garner. In *Hell of a Book*, however, a chronological parade of protesters the unnamed author witnesses, "the weight of generations," is decidedly African American. Historical reality is sacrificed to the myth of whiteness vs. blackness, and once again all history is conflated in "an ocean of protest songs and Rest-in-Power names hanging over our heads like that famous strange fruit borne by southern trees."

Toni Morrison herself engaged in such politics, and it is no accident that the resolutions to *Beloved* and to *Hell of a Book* share a middle-class preoccupation with the self. When your politics turn you away from considerations of class struggle, the only view left is of yourself. At the end of Morrison's novel, Sethe's great triumph is that she comes to love herself. Mott makes the same gesture with his unnamed author:

Laugh all you want, but I think learning to love yourself in a country where you're told that you are a plague on the economy, that you're nothing but a prisoner in the making, that your life can be taken away from you at any moment and there's nothing you can do about it—learning to love yourself in the middle of all that? Hell, that's a goddamn miracle.

How many workers of all races and ethnicities, in the US and around the world, could say the same? The ultimate goal, however, is not love of self. The ultimate goal must be a change to the historical conditions that create misery on such a colossal scale. Such change can only begin with a clear-eyed and honest assessment of historical reality, and unfortunately one will not find such an assessment in *Hell of a Book*.



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