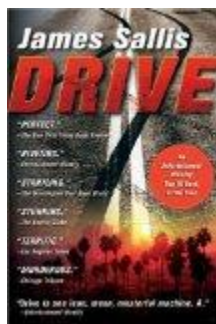


## DRIVE BY JAMES SALLIS



Some novels stalk you. Whether you're in your local book chain or the back stacks of an independent used bookstore, certain novels pop up again and again. For me lately it's been *Drive*, a skinny little novella roughly the size that the scribblers currently participating in National Novel Writing Month are shooting for. They may make the page count, but they won't match the quality.

*Drive* is a noir thriller. Clever liberal arts major that you are, you might pick that up from the first line:

"Much later, as he sat with his back against an inside wall of a Motel 6 just north of Phoenix, watching the pool of blood lap toward him, Driver would wonder whether he had made a terrible mistake."

(Gee, ya think?)

Now the first thought to cross your mind if you're not too genteel to immediately put it back is that this is going to be your standard caper-gone-wrong suspense novel. You'd be half right. Further clues might be the woman in the bathroom, Blanche, her peroxide blonde head blown spilt pomegranate crimson and whose blood pool Driver slipped on a few moments ago, sending him crashing through the glass shower door and savaging his arm. Squeezed halfway through the bathroom window is a fat man pooling blood from the angry red grin Driver's drawn on his throat with a straight razor; ten feet across the floor from where our boy is currently sitting is the sprawled body of an albino, face down nose to the abyss courtesy of the sawed-off shotgun the fat man brought to the party.

Needless to say, this isn't Rita Mae Brown and her fucking cat. Nor is it a simple tale of revenge. In fact, from the reviews spackled on the cover of the newly issued paperback, I'm not the first to figure this out, clever dick that I am. Yet I'm always a bit suspicious of the permission note occasionally slipped under the door allowing that a genre novel has by some miracle been deemed worthy of the "literate" reader. "...Once in a great while, there's *literature* that just happens to be crime fiction," exults one critic, as if there aren't enough literary novels in the world that weren't worth the paper they were printed on. The question becomes: is it because the prose lacks the haphazard quality that muddies so much of the genre, or because it has abandoned the conventions and pace of suspense fiction and become a more cumbersome,

navel-gazing beast?

(The first sentence of the Poison Pen Press author bio doesn't help. It starts with "James Sallis is a prolific man of letters," as if the credits that follow don't counteract the presumed sewer he's swimming in. Strikes me like "The Reverend Ted Haggard is a devoted Christian and family man." But I digress...)

The best noir writing is pared down like good poetry: deceptively plain prose, surface details substituting for interior monologue; character revealed through action and subtext. (Only one Chandleresque metaphor, as Driver flips through an Irish novel: "Its author peered out squinting from the photograph on the inside back cover like some life form newly dredged into sunlight," which has a beat and you can dance to it.) Sallis has the confidence in the spine of his story to hold the reader as he strolls through Driver's past (we only know him through his *raison d'être*: "I drive. That's all I do"). We move from the screenwriter too good for the business who could use a one-way lift out of town; the father, quick with his hands and his mom, bughouse crazy and quicker with a butcher knife; the girl Irina with the four-year-old who offers stability, and the father of her kid, fresh out of stir and offering hotter thrills behind the wheel than turning gags on a movie set. Nobody can get out of his or her own way; everyone a tragedy of his own making.

Any qualms? Sure. A little flashback of dialogue between Driver and Blanche between the botched job and the moment that shot gun blast kicks her to hell would have been nice, and a character catches a bullet a bit too conveniently about midway through, but these are small points. (And wait: what the hell is it about albinos anyway? The thug in *Drive* is only around long enough to eat hot death and soil the carpet, but still, if my pigmentation matched my iPod, I'd be pissed.)

*Drive* is a sweet, tight read. Roll around in the mud a while. You'll be glad you did. Highly recommended.

*Drive* by James Sallis

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