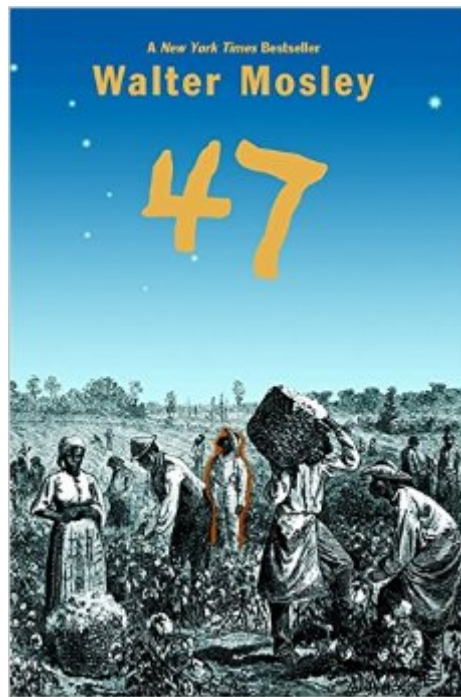


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47



Synopsis

Number 47, a fourteen-year-old slave boy growing up under the watchful eye of a brutal master in 1832, meets the mysterious Tall John, who introduces him to a magical science and also teaches him the meaning of freedom.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Neither master nor nigger be." Powerful words. And a prominent theme running through the remarkable book, 47 by Walter Mosley, an African-American writer best known for his Easy Rawlins series of detective novels-one of which, "Devil in a Blue Dress"-was made into a major motion picture starring Denzel Washington. This is Mosley's first novel for young adults, but there's plenty in 47 for a grown-up to ponder. Set on a cotton plantation in the South in 1832, it is the first person narrative of "47", a 14-year old slave, brand new to the fields, as he's just gotten big enough to work (slaves don't receive names, only numbers). The up-close look at the institution from this particular perspective is a revelation. Using his hero as an instrument, Mosley describes the physical, psychological and emotional effects the "lifestyle" has on those in its clutches, and who have known nothing else. He does it in simple, stark, powerful words. The reader sees the deep and lasting effect of being raised from birth in a society that is convinced you are inferior, is in your face about it, and has engineered an entire society based on the fact. I don't have room for details, but rest assured that 47 is an intelligent, heroic young man, capable of great feats of bravery and compassion, as he proves time and time again in the course of the novel. Yet even though this is the case, halfway through the book he still honestly believes, that "All I knew was how to be lazy

and how to work like a dog." When he has to kill a white man in self-defense, he immediately looks up to the sky "looking for God's retribution". These and other like insights add up to create a powerful indictment of societal conditioning, and illuminate the folly of judging a people as intrinsically inferior. Where Mosley's genius shines through is that these perceptions never seem forced. We don't feel preached at. Instead, he makes such thoughts and feelings an integral part of characters we care for, which makes the attitudes all the more stunning. One of Mosley's main purposes in writing this book is to let young black people hear a voice contrary to society's negative stereotypes regarding their culture and heritage-to assist them in forming pride regarding who they are and where they come from. This includes issues of image and beauty. For example, our hero is absolutely smitten with Eloise, the white slave master's daughter, whom he considers "the most beautiful girl in the world." This is a marked contrast to how he views women of his own race. One in particular, 84, he describes as being "black and ugly with nappy hair and liver lips. She couldn't hold a candle to Miss Eloise." Only after spending time listening to the mysterious russet-colored stranger, Tall John "from beyond Africa" (more on him in a minute) does 47 begin to see the beauty of 84 and other females working the fields. Oh, and it's a science fiction novel, too. Tall John, whom we first meet as a runaway slave with an uncanny ability to heal the sick, turns out to be a visitor from another planet, who is here to liberate 47 and steer him toward his destiny as no less than the savior of the universe. The interstellar enemy here are the Calash, giant albino tentacled things that are right out of a pulp magazine. They're from Tall John's home planet, a planet that we visit by way of 47's visions. It's a colorful landscape-quite literally-as Tall John in his true form is part of an interplanetary race as varied and bright in hue as the rainbow. Turns out the Calash can make themselves look like normal people and are working on planet earth, along with their zombie-like human agents. Part of the exciting climax of the story is how 47 steps up to the challenge of saving the world with the help of Tall John and a handful of slaves. The suspense is doubled because all of our heroes have become runaway slaves in the process, which means that they are in constant danger of being caught by their owners (and Mosley does not flinch in showing the bloody horror that transpires when a slave does get caught and is brought to the master's "killin' shack"). As I am a bit of a genre enthusiast, I was somewhat surprised that I found myself distracted by the more far-out plot points, which surface most prominently in the last third of the book. Mosley explores such substantial themes in the first two-thirds of the story, that the most overt science fiction and fantasy elements seem lightweight and clichéd by comparison. Tall John is a more compelling character when he is the mysterious stranger who shatters 47's perceptions about himself and his people. When he fully reveals himself and recruits 47 to be the point man for a kind of Battle Beyond

the Stars, it feels somewhat trite and anti-climactic, if not a little tacked on. However, if this kind of sub-plot is what it takes for young people to digest this book, then I say more power to the writer. The book has an important message, and it needs to be conveyed to impressionable minds however it can. The book is set up so sequels could easily be written, and it would be interesting to see where Mosley would take the story. "Never say master. Not unless you are looking inward or up beyond the void." It's a message for everyone, especially in this day and age.

I listened to the Unabridged Audio version of "47", narrated by the late, great Ossie Davis. It was a wonderful experience. The story although aimed toward young teen audiences, is not too simple for adults to enjoy. This story is a heartfelt introduction to slavery for today's youth (to whom many this history is forgotten.) Kudos to Mr. Mosley for taking on such a tough subject; and for the foresight to aim it to a young audience. On another note, Ossie Davis did an outstanding job with the narrative; I will always treasure this as one of his great works of art.-- P. Walker-Williams, PageTurner.net

47 is a strange, interesting book. It's part history of slavery in America, and part science fiction with a mysterious ET. What's even stranger is that the odd combination works. 47 is a 14 year old slave back in 1832. He's always out in the cotton fields picking cotton, feeling sorry for himself. Along come a mysterious stranger named Tall John. 47 thinks Tall John is a slave too, until he finds out that the stranger is really an alien from another world, with unusual powers. At first 47 assumes that Tall John is there to free him and the other slaves, but Tall John is really there to help 47 fight against the Calash, enemies of Tall John's race from his home planet. Capable of making themselves look exactly like humans, they are controlling real humans and must be defeated. 47 turns out to be brave and bold (as Tall John knew all along) and he and other slaves rise up against the Calash and save our world. By living up to his potential and full abilities, 47 shows that no matter who you are, adversity can be overcome with courage and conviction. Another book I read with a similar theme is An Audience for Einstein, a story about a 12 year old who is also helped to overcome great odds.

This book has been stolen from me about 5 times over the years. I was so NOT mad every time it went missing. My students love it. I read it to them and discuss how they feel and it's implications for human rights. Mosley needs to do more children's work.

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