



The Collected Stories of Chester Himes

Chester Himes , Calvin Hernton (Foreword by)

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Spanning 40 years and including Himes's first work, written during his imprisonment in the 1940s, this collection uncovers the internal struggles of black individuals caught between resignation and rage, probing the heart of the African-American experience with wit, indignation, and ruthless honesty.

The Collected Stories of Chester Himes Details

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From Reader Review The Collected Stories of Chester Himes for online ebook

Eric Stone says

Some great stories, some not so great, Himes is a fantastic writer no matter what but I like his novels better.

Cynthia says

Himes is wonderfully observant. His writing goes far beyond the mysteries that became his stock and trade. These short stories are incredible.

Darlene says

Awesome writer. His stories pull you in and are very captivating.

Brian says

My problem was not the writing but the length and format. I made the mistake of reading straight through, so it became a bit tedious, particularly given recurrent themes of prison, race, and violence. Still, some of the stories were absolute gems, especially "Life Everlasting," and most were quite good. A great deal of anger with refreshing spritzes of humor.

Chanika says

Most of us know Chester Himes for his detective fiction (who doesn't love Coffin Ed and Grave Digger Jones), but his short stories also deserve attention and appreciation. There's nothing like reading Himes's short stories to see his magic in action. From his earlier prison years to the stories written after emigrating to France and Spain, Himes continually developed his distinctive voice and writing style. Some stories read like soap operas, others read like horror stories, but they all speak to the truth of the human experience, particularly that of Black people in America during the Depression Era all the way until the Civil Rights Movement. A wonderful read for all lovers of literature.

Barry says

In one sense, I could not stop reading any one of the stories because of the clear, terse writing and the masterful build up of suspense and occasional wry humor. In another sense, I could not take too many stories in one sitting because almost every tale was steeped in tragic mistakes and bitter longings with an occasional

splash of rage. It's like playing the blues all day long without let up, except for an occasional brief jazz riff that sneaks in...I have more eclectic tastes myself. Then again nothing quite captures a certain mood than the blues.

Michele Greene says

Loved the short stories, especially the ones relating to Cleveland. They were so descriptive that you could actually visualize clearly places that were referenced.

Dan says

excellent writer--vivid slice of life

Bruce Jackson says

The father of hard-boiled crime struck again. This one was full of some tales that I had never read by Himes. I loved it. Truly, Himes gave it his all by shedding light on the gritty reality that grips one's very soul.

Greg says

BOOK 171 - Mid-20th Century North American Crime Readathon - Round 7

In 1933, Himes published his first six works: five shorts and the novella, "Prison Mass". I've read 3 of Himes' novels and they were especially good in characters and atmosphere, so I chose "Prison Mass" to read first and to review. Besides, Himes probably wrote this while in prison. Does Himes deliver on characters and atmosphere during the first phase of his career?

HOOK - 3 stars: "The convicts shuffled up the worn, wooden stairs, filed through the doorway into the Catholic Chapel, 2 by 2....Just convicts...Some were white, some red, some brown, some black...Some Americans, some Mexicans...Soft-eyed embezzlers, granite-eyed killers, oily-haired politicians...The gamut of crime, the gamut of men." No doubt Himes knew every type of criminal, encountered every type of crime. But who will we meet?

PACE - 3: Right on target: no rush to tell a story, plenty of time for reflections.

PLOT - 4: Earl attends mass to borrow money; Merton is lured there by the 'bright altar lights'; and Willie has come to pray. Willie had taken a murder rap for his brother, who had died during Willie's incarceration. Willie's father had also died, and now his mother is dying of leukemia. These 3 are thrown into deep sadness and reflect upon what everything means.

This is heavy duty stuff: it hurts deep. Although one might argue this is purely character driven, there is a plot, and it's a big one: what happened to my life and now what do I do? Can the 3 men possibly come up with enough money so that Willie can visit his mom, that is IF the governor allows the visit? This could have been a melodramatic mess. It is not, but at points veers in that direction. There is nothing subtle here: Himes doesn't tap us gently with a rubber hammer.

CHARACTERS - 4: Earl Thomas (nicknamed 'Signifier' as a reference to his 'scoffing and jeering' at everything) is in his late 30s, solidly built. He has served 3 of his 7-year sentence for car theft.

Merton Wayne (nicknamed "Brightlights" because of his fascination, for example, on stage spotlights.) He is in the 'cripple' company for a fractured vertebra. Merton has served 4 of his 20-year sentence for robbery. Willie Manners (nicknamed 'Kid' because he entered prison at age 17) is thin and has vivid yellow hair. "His complexion was the peculiar whiteness of swiss cheese in the harsh light of a noon-day sun, but in the sympathetic shadows of the chapel his skin was smooth a cream colored." Kid has had the worst life has to offer, and bad things keep coming and coming. I'm sure Himes is Earl and Merton and Wayne. All 3 think of methods of redemption: Himes certainly did, just look at the body of work he left us. But again, Himes is just this side of melodrama: Kid looks different from everyone and he's the one that life has given the worst treatment.

ATMOSPHERE - 4: "The priest approached the altar...The congregation became suddenly silent...One could hear the laborious breathing of a nearby neighbor suffering from asthma or a severe cold...a crucifix of beaten bronze...Flickering candles...Tussels of silk." Himes' focus is on the chapel and on the possibilities offered by a Prison Mass on Christmas Day: the author rarely takes us into a jail cell. Flashbacks offer sins of youth.

SUMMARY - 3.6. I enjoy this story. Yes, Himes delivers on several levels. But in addition to Himes atmospheric touches, one of the best elements of his novels is the humor, and perhaps only after leaving prison could Himes find his way to ensure his characters laughed at themselves and each other. This is heavy stuff, man. Heavy. Himes, though, is good enough not to take us over the edge into melodrama. But he comes close then ends the story on the right note.

Shawn Cosby says

a dark twisted view of the american dream through the prism of racism. ultimately fatalistic I'm tone but grand in scope

Kit says

Some great stories, but the interest in completism makes this book a real grab bag.

Andy says

I enjoyed this huge compilation of short works by Chester Himes but I didn't love it. The collection can roughly be divided in thirds, with the first-third being my favorite. The first third showcases some great snapshots of Black American life during World War II, descriptive and evocative of early 20th Century Los Angeles.

The second third consists of prison stories, each one longer than the other and I got bored after awhile because of their narrow scope.

The final third displays a free-form style of writing, i.e. one story analyzes a minister's sermon complete with country inflections. Another one probed the inner workings of a drunken black writer's mind. That group was even more boring than the prison tales.

If there was a standalone comp of just the wartime Los Angeles stories I would have given this five stars, and

that's it.

J says

There are some stories in this collection that are among the best stories written in the 20th century American fiction and there are some stories in here that are pretty uneven and dashed off, representative more of Himes' perpetual poverty that kept him writing and selling his books and stories for far less money than he could have gotten, simply to have something. The first third or so of the stories are mostly African-American life in the early-to-mid 20th century, the middle third is a lot of prison stories, and you can tell when Himes gets out of prison himself, as the stories shift to international locations and become a bit more experimental in content and perspective. The first third and the last third are where Himes really shines, but the prison stories are the most uneven of the lot. The story "Friends" about a semi-paralyzed, mentally challenged man in prison whose only friend is, seriously, an alligator that crawls into his bed to snuggle with him, is just wild, but there are others that sort of go nowhere and become repetitive of other stories written. A "best of" collection would really show off Himes' talents in a much better light than this collected edition, but these stories for the most part crackle with the same witty macabre style that run all through his Harlem Detective series of novels.
