



John Woman

Walter Mosley

Atlantic Monthly Press (Sep 4, 2018)

Hardcover \$26.00 (320pp)

978-0-8021-2841-6

Walter Mosley's unconventional novel *John Woman* follows a renegade history professor with a dark secret.

Cornelius Jones is the biracial son of a brilliant black man from Mississippi and an Italian-American woman. When his father gets sick, Cornelius takes over his job as projectionist at a silent-film theater in Manhattan's East Village. After being interrupted in the midst of a prurient act by the theater's owner, Cornelius takes a lug-wrench and strikes three decisive blows to the man's head. Hiding the body in a secret closet in the theater, Cornelius later strikes up a sexual relationship with the lead investigator in the missing-persons case. He evades discovery.

When his father dies, Cornelius takes his inheritance and moves to Arizona. There, he reinvents himself as John Woman, a professor of "deconstructionist history," winning over his students while alienating his colleagues. But John's murderous act soon comes back to haunt him; he's eventually forced to reckon with his violent past.

Mosley is the author of more than fifty books; his prose is assured. There's a starkness to the writing that's hard to get used to at first, but once enveloped in Jones's world, sentences flow more smoothly. An irritating trend of introducing each new character by what they're wearing slows the story, though.

John Woman excels as a novel of ideas. Professor Woman engages with some truly unorthodox ways of thinking about history, and it's clear that the book's primary interest is sharing these ideas with the world. The text's verbatim lectures can be tedious, but they also often pique interest. The latter half of the book contains enough mystery and thriller elements to remain engaging.

Walter Mosley's latest book is literary fiction of a different kind—partly a thriller about a man with a checkered past, and partly an allegorical tale about the role that history plays in our lives.

MATT GRANT (September/October 2018)

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