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**Edward Margolies and Michel Fabre. *The Several Lives of Chester Himes*.
(Greenwood Press, 1997)**

**James Sallis. *Chester Himes: A Life*.
(Edinburgh: Payback Press, 2000)**

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It has been over fifty years since Chester Himes published his first novel *If He Hollers Let Him Go* in 1945. That it has taken this long to witness the beginnings of a major reappraisal of his work is something that will, no doubt, mystify future commentators. In comparison, Himes' contemporary Ralph Ellison, who only wrote one novel (*Invisible Man*) in his entire lifetime, has had countless books, journals and dissertations dedicated to mining his pages for yet more and more elusive readings.

Himes was born in 1909 in Missouri and led a sporadic life that took him all over America before he eventually became an expatriate in Europe. He grew up with the contradictory values of 'uncle Tomming' and defiant pride embodied in each of his parents. Himes' mother, herself a very light skinned African-American woman, constantly denigrated blackness, preventing the young Himes from playing with other black children. Her constant privileging of whiteness, combined with his father's coal black skin and sometimes obsequious manner toward white people, instilled in Himes an ambiguity about black-white relations that pervades all of his fiction. Whilst noting the autobiographical nature of Himes' novels, very few commentators actually go on to assess the ways in which this structurally and thematically influences his writing style. Too easily dismissed as a militant writer or the writer of popular detective fare, the complexities of Himes' fiction are made more manifest through an understanding of the man behind the words.

Himes wrote his two-volume autobiography, *The Quality of Hurt* (1972) and *My Life of Absurdity* (1976), when he was well into his sixties. The adage that memory is a fragile instrument is certainly held to be true in regards to these books. Himes not only glosses over the most interesting aspects of his life, notably his imprisonment in Ohio State Penitentiary for armed burglary and the process behind the writing of detective series that finally made him famous, but also spends a surprising amount of time detailing the trials and tribulations of his car and his cat. In this respect, his biographers cannot help to provide a more lucid and informative account of Himes' life. The last three years have witnessed the production of two major biographies on Chester Himes: Edward Margolies and Michel Fabre's *The Several Lives of Chester Himes* (1997) and James Sallis' *Chester Himes: A Life* (2000).

Edward Margolies and Michel Fabre's biography is best described as competent fare. There is nothing seriously wrong with their account of Himes' life - the facts are all certainly there - but a certain prescriptive tone makes for a flat read. There are substantial chapters detailing the circumstances surrounding the earlier fiction of Himes' life, but as with most critical work on Himes, the biography glosses over the detective

series. While Margolies and Fabre comment on the inconsistencies (and at times blatant untruths) in Himes' own autobiographies, they steer clear of any truly contentious issues, such as whether Himes was ever physically violent towards his last wife Lesley Himes. Perhaps it is because they do not want to make their scholarly text sensationalistic. Unfortunately the danger is that in trying to maintain their scholarly approach, the book becomes a little dull and fails to capture the exuberance and vitality that mark Himes' life and novels. While there is nothing wrong with *The Several Lives of Chester Himes*, there is very little that is exciting about it either.

However, this is definitely a criticism one could not make of James Sallis' *Chester Himes: A Life*. Sallis is himself the noted writer of five Lew Griffin detective stories as well as countless articles, reviews and translations. Sallis notes that with his biography he wanted to capture Himes' spirit in his own evocation of the writer's life. Sallis attempts do this by marrying the larger social and cultural context unfolding concomitantly in Himes' life with a critical analysis of the major novels and detective series. This ambitious and innovative approach largely works but at times, especially when Sallis tries to connect all these different ideas together, the result is confusing. It also has the effect, at times, of making the text abrupt and hard to follow. Moreover, Sallis' use of long quotes to exemplify Himes' writing prowess begins to tire once it becomes a recurring structural motif. While Sallis incorporates some of his scholarly insights in the body of the text, his habit of quoting long passages from the novels tends to disrupt the flow of the narrative. However, Sallis' admiration for Himes does not temper his critical awareness, and he is not afraid to comment on Himes' self-destructive tendencies and his, at times, violent nature. Once the reader attunes him/herself to this very different style of writing a biography, it makes for a lively and engaging read and is highly recommended.