



WHAT BLACKS THINK WHITES THINK ABOUT BLACKS - AMERICAN RENAISSANCE

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***American Fiction*, Orion Amazon MGM Studios, 2023, written and directed by Cord Jefferson, based on the 2001 novel *Erasure* by Percival Everett**

Movies written and directed by blacks are now thoroughly mainstream, and it would be hard to think of one that does not insult whites, either openly or slyly. *American Fiction*, no exception, is based on the 2001 novel [Erasure](#) by Percival Everett. This mediocre satire probably would have come and gone quietly had it not been released after the 2016 [#OscarsSoWhite](#) controversy, and during the first year the Academy's "[Representation and Inclusion Standards](#)" were in effect. It got an Oscar nomination for Best Picture and writer/director Cord Jefferson took home the statuette for Best Adapted Screenplay.

Cord Jefferson poses backstage with the Oscar for Adapted Screenplay during the 96th Oscars on March 10, 2024. (Credit Image: © AMPAS/ZUMA Press Wire)

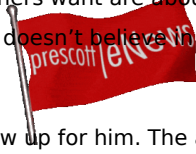
Mr. Jefferson has been a television writer since 2014, when he started on *Survivor's Remorse*, a comedy/drama with an all-black cast about wealthy, elite blacks — the same people *American Fiction* is about. Mr. Jefferson then wrote for a black late-night talk show host and wrote for TV shows with multiracial casts.

American Fiction is the story of Thelonius "Monk" Ellison, a novelist and literature professor. The film opens with a class on "Literature of the American South." A blue-haired white girl student objects when Monk writes the title of a short story (*The Artificial Nigger* by Flannery O'Connor) on the board. She complains, "We shouldn't have to stare at the N-word all day."

Monk tells her, "We're going to encounter some archaic thoughts, coarse language, but we're all adults here and I think we can understand it in the context in which it's written." The girl leaves the class in tears.

Three white university administrators tell Monk that he has been receiving unspecified complaints from students. They give him "mandatory time off," so he decides to go to Boston to see his family. Monk also calls on his Hispanic literary agent, Arthur, to check on the progress of a potential book deal. Arthur tells him that the publisher rejected the book. It was "finely crafted with fully developed characters and rich language, but one is lost to understand what this reworking of Aeschylus' *The Persians* has to do with the African-American experience."

Monk is frustrated because the only “black books” publishers want are about poor, single mothers raising five children or black teenagers being murdered by white cops. He tells his agent that he doesn’t believe in race, but Arthur says, “The problem is that everyone else does.”



Monk appears at a Boston book festival, but few fans show up for him. The author drawing crowds is Sintara Golden, a black woman whose best-selling debut novel is called *We’s Lives In Da Ghetto*. Sintara went to Oberlin, then moved to New York and became an assistant at a publishing house, where she learned what gets published. She tells her audience what stands out to editors: “No matter how good the books were, most every submission was from some white dude from New York going through a divorce and too few of them were about my people. Where are our stories? Where is our representation?”

Sintara, who speaks proper English, reads an excerpt from her book, which is written in ghetto slang. Monk cringes and dismisses Sintara as a hack writer.

Sintara reading from her book

Monk’s divorced sister, Lisa, a doctor at Planned Parenthood, gives him a ride to their mother’s house. Their mother, Agnes lives in the big house Monk and Lisa grew up in. She calls her son by his nickname, “Monkie.” Agnes was just diagnosed with Alzheimer’s and her maid Lorraine, a fat black woman, looks after her.

Lisa tells Monk that she found old letters that show their father was cheating on their mother. She also tells him she once saw him kissing a white woman. “She had thin lips. She looked like a bad kisser.” Monk is upset, more about the cheating than the white woman; he once had a white girlfriend.

Monk suggests to Lisa that they sell the family beach house to pay for the Alzheimer’s care. Lisa agrees, but tells him they will need that money to pay off the reverse mortgage Agnes took on the house she lives in. They need more money to pay for their mother’s care. They have a brother, Cliff, who is a rich plastic surgeon, but Lisa is reluctant to ask him for help because he’s “not in a good place.” Cliff’s wife caught him in bed with a man and divorced him, taking half his assets. Cliff’s children hate him and he is bitter because he lives in a city where it’s hard to be openly homosexual.

Sister Lisa dies suddenly, and the brothers attend her memorial service at the beach house. As Monk scatters their sister’s ashes in the ocean, a white man comes up and says, “Are those human remains? Do you guys have a permit for that?” Cliff curses him.

Monk asks Cliff if he knew their father cheated on their mother, and Cliff says yes. When Monk asks Cliff for money to help their mother, Cliff says he can’t afford it and suggests that they fire Lorraine. Monk says no. “Lorraine is family.”

A black woman named Coraline lives across the street from the beach house. When she and Monk meet by chance, she tells Monk she heard a rumor that his house is haunted because a man “blew his brains out” there. Monk tells her that was his father. Coraline apologizes for her faux pas and invites Monk over for a glass of wine. It turns out she read one of Monk’s obscure books and enjoyed it. Their romance begins.

After reading a glowing magazine article about Sintara Golden, Monk expresses his frustration with that kind of black fiction by writing a book that parodies hers. He fills his book with degenerate black characters who talk in ghetto slang. He deliberately misspells the title, *My Pafology*, and uses the pseudonym “Stagg R. Leigh.”

Monk asks his agent Arthur to send *My Pafology* to publishers but doesn’t expect them to buy it. “Look at what they expect us to write. I’m sick of it. . . . I just want to rub their noses in the horseshit they solicit.”

Monk insists that blacks “are so much more” than inner city chaos. He gets angry when a bookstore puts one of his literary novels in the African American Studies section rather than fiction. “The blackest thing about this one is the ink!” he complains.

Publishers love *My Pafology* and one offers Monk a \$750,000 advance. On principal, Monk doesn’t want to sell the book, but he needs the money. Arthur reassures him that there’s nothing wrong with writing both high-brow and low-brow novels.

Paula, a white editor at the publishing house, talks to Monk and Arthur on the phone, and is surprised that Monk speaks properly, so he starts cursing and using black slang. She says the book is “raw and real,” and asks if Stagg R. Leigh is a pseudonym. Arthur tells her he needed a pseudonym because he’s wanted and on the lam. Paula is even more excited and predicts the book will be a best-seller.

“I’m sure white people in the Hamptons will delight in it,” Monk says.

“We will,” says Paula. “I love it.”

Monk is embarrassed that he sold a book he doesn’t believe in, so he keeps it a secret from his family and his new love Coraline. When he invites Coraline to meet his mother, Agnes smiles and says, “I’m happy you’re not white.” “Me, too,” says Coraline.

Monk with Coraline (Credit Image: © MGM/Entertainment Pictures/ZUMAPRESS.com)TVS

Agnes goes missing from under Lorraine’s watch. Monk and Coraline find her wandering on the beach, confused. Lorraine was clearly not doing her job, but Monk never considers firing her as his brother suggested.

The president of a prestigious literary award contacts Monk, asking if he would like to join the judging panel, which needs more diversity. In a snarky tone, Monk says, “I’m honored I was called so you don’t have to feel racist.”

The president says, “You’re very welcome,” offers Monk a stipend, and says Sintara Golden will also be a judge.

Arthur sets up a meeting between Monk and Wiley, a film director who “specializes in Oscar-baity issue movies.” Lorraine is on a date and someone else has to look after Agnes, so Monk leaves her with his agent’s assistant while he attends the meeting at a restaurant across the street. The film director is expecting to meet a criminal, so Monk tries to act the part. He takes off his glasses, walks with a swagger, and uses street talk. Wiley apologizes for the “bougie restaurant” and offers to go someplace else if “Stagg” is uncomfortable. Monk orders a dry Chenin Blanc, and Wiley giggles. “It’s a strange order for a guy like you.”

Monk at the restaurant

Wiley tries to bond with “Stagg” and tells him about his latest movie, *Plantation Annihilation*, which is about a white couple that gets married on an old plantation in Louisiana. Ghosts of slaves murder everyone. Wiley brags, “Ryan Reynolds gets decapitated with an afro pick in the opening scene.”

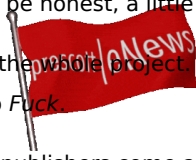
Monk hears a siren and looks out the window. An ambulance pulls up in front of his agent’s office. Worried it’s for his mother, Monk runs out, giving Wiley the impression that “Stagg” is running from the police. He believes Monk is “the real deal,” and offers him \$4 million for movie rights.

The ambulance was not for Agnes, and Monk tells Arthur, “The dumber I act, the richer I get.” Arthur says that that’s why he left Puerto Rico and moved to Boston.

Monk has a conference call with Paula, his editor, and the publisher’s marketing head, John Bosco, a white man who sounds gay. They say [Michael Jordan](#) may want to play the lead in the movie version of *My Pafology*, and John wants to put a picture of the actor on the cover of Monk’s book wearing a [do-rag](#). John wants to rush the release date so the book is out in time for Juneteenth, when black people

will be celebrating and “white people will be feeling, let’s be honest, a little conscience-stricken.”

Sickened by all the stereotyping, Monk tries to sabotage the whole project. As “Stagg,” he tells John and Paula that he won’t make the deal at all unless the title is changed from *My Pafology* to *Fuck*.



John suggests *Phuck*, but Monk won’t accept that, so the publishers come around. Paula concedes, “It’s in-your-face in the best way possible. . . It’s so brave, actually.”

The book gets a lot of publicity because the author is a fugitive. Monk is interviewed on a TV talk show with his face obscured. Arthur tells Monk that the FBI is trying to find Stagg R. Leigh’s real identity. Monk isn’t worried because he has committed no crimes.

Coraline is suspicious about his sudden wealth. After *Fuck* is published, Monk finds out that Coraline is reading it, and he asks her if she was offended by it. She says no, and Monk gets angry: “Too many white people and people like you devour this stuff like pigs in a dumpster to stay current at fucking cocktail parties!” Coraline throws him out.

Monk moves his mother into assisted living, and the maid Lorraine conveniently gets married and quits. Monk hosts her wedding at the beach house, and Cliff shows up with two boyfriends, one black and one white. At the wedding reception, there is ballroom dancing, not rap music.

Monk finds out that his book was submitted for the literary award he is judging. He tries to get the book disqualified, but the three white judges insist. They are excited that the book is selling so well and that the author is a fugitive. “I am thrilled to read a BIPOC man harmed by our carceral state,” a white woman judge says. The other white judges say the book is “gutsy” and “necessary for the times.”

Sintara surprises Monk by saying she did not like *Fuck* because it was “pandering.” When the judging panel takes a break, Monk talks to her privately. She is upper-middle class, and she says she did a lot of research to come up with the characters in her book, and some of the dialogue is from real interviews. She tells Monk he has been in his ivory tower for so long, he has forgotten that some people’s lives are hard.

Monk accuses her of writing “what interests white publishers fiending black trauma porn.” Sintara says that she gives the market what it wants.

When the white judges return, Sintara tells them *Fuck* is “soulless,” and is the kind of book that critics say is “important and necessary, but not well written.” The three white judges outvote Monk and Sintara and give the award to *Fuck*. One says, “I just think it’s essential to listen to black voices right now,” but apparently not theirs.

At the award ceremony, a white host congratulates the “incredibly diverse” judges and announces that *Fuck* is the winner. Monk goes on stage and takes the award, saying “I have a confession to make.” He explains that he is Stagg R. Leigh and walks out.

Monk meets director Wiley on the set of *Plantation Annihilation* to pitch a new screenplay about his adventures pretending to be Stagg. Wiley likes the idea, but he wants to fictionalize the ending. In real life, Coraline won’t return Monk’s calls, but Wiley wants a romantic ending with them getting back together. He also wants the awards ceremony to end with white FBI agents storming in and shooting Monk, leaving him dead in a pool of blood.

Monk mutters “fuck” to himself but decides to give the market what it wants. The movie ends as he leaves the movie set. He nods to a black actor in a slave costume, the one who will presumably murder the white characters.

American Fiction ticks nearly every box on the Academy’s DEI list, but its assumptions are all wrong. Monk claims that “black trauma porn” makes whites believe there are no intelligent, upper-class blacks. Of course, whites know there are competent blacks.

I've never read a black novel but let us assume that it is correct to claim that books about depraved, criminal blacks were popular enough to inspire the book, *Erasure*, on which *American Fiction* is based. In the decade before *Erasure* was published in 2001, films such as [Boyz in the Hood](#) (1991) and [Menace II Society](#) (1993) were acclaimed for honestly portraying black poverty and crime, but they were made mainly for blacks. John Singleton, who directed *Boyz in the Hood* [was explicit](#) about that. Blacks were more likely than whites to watch these movies.

Upper-middle class blacks are everywhere on film, and were the stars of popular sitcoms such as [The Cosby Show](#) (1984-1992) and [Fresh Prince of Bel-Air](#) (1990-1996). More than 20 years ago, people [were noticing](#) that TV and movie judges were all black. Films that elevate blacks, such as [Hidden Figures](#) and [Chevalier](#), win awards. Hollywood blacks are invariably richer, more sophisticated, and law-abiding than real-life blacks. If all whites knew about blacks is what they saw on the screen, they would think blacks are model citizens.

The problem this film is worrying about is imaginary. The real message of *American Fiction* is that blacks turn out rubbish that whites are foolish enough to honor.