

The CULTURE PAGES

CRITICS

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Alison Willmore on *Street Gang: How We Got to Sesame Street*.

Melody Hurd and
Deborah Ayorinde.



TV / ANGELICA JADE BASTIÉN

When Trauma Comes Cheap

A show about racism revels in depictions of Black people's pain.

IN 2018, the artist Lorraine O'Grady said at a Brooklyn Museum book event, "In the future, white supremacy will no longer need white people." After I watched *Them*, Amazon Prime's latest horror anthology series, O'Grady's quote came to mind for its distillation of how people of color can participate in both our own degradation and the systems that cut our lives heartbreakingly short.

Them—created by showrunner Little Marvin and executive-produced by Lena Waithe—isn't just rote, flagrantly biting the aesthetics of other filmmakers. It isn't just morally bankrupt. It isn't just grating in its empty platitudes and kiddie-pool-deep proclamations. I am comfortable calling it one of the most anti-Black pieces of pop culture I have seen in the past few years, one that left me spent after watching it. It is a stunning refutation of Hollywood's belief that representation behind and in front of the camera will fix its inherent racism.

Spanning ten days in 1953, the show follows the Emory family—Henry (Ashley Thomas), an engineer; Lucky (the utterly gorgeous Deborah Ayorinde), the matriarch and the show's primary lens; and their two daughters, teenage Ruby (Shahadi Wright Joseph) and

freshly school-age Gracie (Melody Hurd)—as they move from North Carolina to the lily-white suburban enclave of Compton, Los Angeles. From the jump, it is apparent how tricky it will be for them to ingratiate themselves with their new neighbors as the only Black family on the block. They immediately cause a fury stoked by Betty Wendell (Alison Pill), the picture of the mid-century blonde American housewife, whose prox sense of propriety fails to hide her noxious racism. She is more than proud to argue for her family's "birthright" as white people, those whose "fathers built the world."

Racism is portrayed in a number of ways throughout the series: goliwogs hanging from nooses along the Emorys' porch. Curses. Glares. Redlining. Ostracization. Realty and banking scams. But the Emorys don't have only their viciously racist neighbors to contend with. There's also the matter of a violent haunting that started long before they arrived. Each member of the family deals with a specific specter, such

THEM
AMAZON PRIME.

as a monstrous, tap-dancing blackface figure with pupilless black eyes. But all these spirits turn out to be visages of a single entity, the Black Hat Man (Christopher Heyerdahl). In school halls, in workrooms, and especially in domestic spaces, the family members are beset by these visions and suffer because of them. Ultimately, though, the show's genre-driven storytelling results in just a few fleetingly scary moments. Nothing sticks, nothing scares, and nothing unnerves.

The aesthetic failures of *Them* can't be untangled from its political ones. The directors of the show (only one of whom is Black) often rely on displaying the white gaze in literal fashion; white characters glaring at the Emory family is one of the show's central visual tropes. White people spit epithets like *n-----*, *sove*, *animal*, *coon*, and *ape*, emphasizing *Them*'s obsession with presenting the depravity of racism in extreme terms. The show doesn't consider just how damaging such language and imagery are, not only for the psyche of the characters involved but for the Black viewers who understand it all on a visceral, intimate level. At the same time, it has nothing new to say about whiteness—how it works, how it perpetuates itself, or how entrenched it is in our culture.

Halfway through its run, *Them* turns from a hollow depiction of Blackness in America to one that revels in degrading its Black characters. In episode five, "Covenant 1"—which is, notably, helmed by the show's only Black director, Janicza Bravo—we're made privy to what exactly happened before the Emorys left North Carolina. It is grueling to watch: We find out that Lucky was brutally raped by white men while her baby boy was put in a sack and tossed back and forth until he died. The show only gets worse from there. Throughout the series, Lucky is tortured both within the domestic sphere and outside of it. Nowhere is safe for her. (That there is little joy for Black folks pretty much anywhere in the show, even among one another, is telling.) Ayorinde gives the character her all, but her efforts—like those of the other actors—can't obscure *Them*'s ugly core: It does not truly care about Black people. It knows only how to wring terror from the pain we experience.

In the Los Angeles *Times*, Little Marvin addressed the show's particularly violent scenes, including Lucky's rape. "What I've come to realize is that I wanted a scene that would rip through the screen, grab the viewer by the jugular, and force them to contend with a history of violence against Black bodies in this country," he said. "If I did that in a way that you've seen before—like an act of police brutality or a slave narrative—that in some way creates a distance or a salve for a viewer. I've seen

it before.' But this is so abominable it defies you to see it that way." But what Black viewer would ever feel a sense of distance from the visual representation of police brutality or slavery? The use of the phrase *Black bodies* is galling here. The terminology, which gained popularity in the wake of Ta-Nehisi Coates's work, often feels like a linguistic way to distance Black people from their humanity. Violence doesn't happen "against Black bodies" in America; it happens toward Black people, affecting not just the flesh we live in but our very psychology and those beautiful, complicated relationships we have with other Black

folks and the world around us.

As we are being confronted by news stories like that of the killing of 20-year-old father Daunte Wright by police in Minnesota, watching *Them* feels like compounded trauma. It doesn't induce empathy or the desire for police abolition in white folks; if anything, it lets modern white people off the hook by providing extremes from which they can distance themselves. Little Marvin and Waithe, like far too many Black creators in the industry, are not interested in challenging the status quo. Instead, they are using Black pain to line their pockets. ■

BOOKS / HELEN SHAW

More Than a Feeling

A character skeptic writes one who can't stop explaining herself.



THE NARRATOR of Rachel Cusk's new novel, *Second Place*, lives at the edge of a marsh, a place of apparent peace. She loves to watch the water moving in over the flat land, advancing stealthily in a silver sheet. People have been lost to the tide; those who live on this coast are lulled by its subtle rhythms. Boundaries melt and reform and melt again, each time with danger slightly closer—and we come to realize the narrator's mental place of safety is dissolving too. Though there is an identifiable plot in *Second Place* (something not always true of Cusk's work), the book is an atmospheric, a mood piece, a drug. Fight it, and it drags you down like undertow.

Cusk has written tidally before. Her *Outline* novels, a trilogy published between 2014 and 2018, are beautiful but relentless. Although the books all share the same narrator, a woman named Faye, they are mostly constructed from minor characters' stories. On and on, people monologue at Faye—on planes, in workshops, at restaurants. This flood of detail and observation never reveals Faye's personality. Instead, it nearly washes her away, saturating the reader's brain beyond the

SECOND PLACE
BY RACHEL CUSK,
FARRAR,
STRAUS AND GIROUX.

Rachel Cusk



possibility of absorbing more.

Cusk has often seemed ambivalent about creating identities for her characters. (“I don’t think character exists anymore,” she told *The New Yorker* in 2018.) Faye rarely looks inward; those books exude a kind of chilly spiritual equipoise. The protagonist of *Second Place*, however, whom Cusk calls only M, isn’t a sponge. Instead of passivity, we get velocity; M flings herself desperately into her own drama. The novel is the “Outline” trilogy’s narrative opposite: M binges on moral judgment, wallowing in self-examination, measuring and remeasuring every encounter for authenticity and relevance and value.

Set in the modern day, *Second Place* chronicles M’s relationship with an artist called L—first her encounter with his paintings, then eventually her encounter with the person himself. Cusk draws lightly on the 1932 book *Lorenzo in Taos*, arts patron Mabel Dodge Luhan’s account of her relationship with D. H. Lawrence. There are elements of autobiography stirred in too; M is a writer, and Cusk herself lived in Norfolk, England, where there’s an estuary very much like M’s marsh. Throughout *Second Place*, M addresses her account to someone named Jeffers, who she trusts will want to know the full story. (This echoes Dodge’s book, which includes her letters to the poet Robinson Jeffers.)

The first 16 pages are feverish: M, a young mother, is traveling alone in France. There are mentions of a wretched marriage and her own self-loathing. She sees someone on a train whom she calls “the devil,” a frightening, sweating man with a black tooth and a little girl, whom he fondles. It isn’t clear if he’s real, but for M, his presence, and her decision not to confront him, poses some sort of moral question. “If I’d stood up to him, perhaps all the things that happened afterwards wouldn’t have occurred,” M says. “But for once I thought, let someone else do it! And that is how we lose control over our own destinies.”

On the same trip, wandering disoriented through the streets of Paris, she happens across a gallery showing L’s paintings. Somehow, these portraits restore her to herself: Her “impossible yearnings” are “crystallised in reverse by the aura of absolute freedom his paintings emanate, a freedom elementally and unrepentingly male down to the last brushstroke.” The more M describes her inner landscape, the blurrier it becomes. Both L’s paintings and the devil seem to be agents of change, their assertive, masculine qualities (in M’s mind) essential for demolition and revival alike.

The story picks up a decade and a half later, after M has left her first husband, battered through a period of suicidality, remar-

ried a kind man named Tony, and retired to the coast on modest authorial laurels. Her daughter, Justine, has grown up, and M no longer worries about work or writing or money. But she seems itchy—and she is still yearning to meet L in person. So she contacts him through a mutual acquaintance and invites him to stay in her guesthouse. When L finally shows up, younger girlfriend in tow, the headlong action stops and events begin to creep forward, like water leaching through the fens. Soon, claustrophobia sets in.

Cusk keeps us oppressively close to M’s thinking, and her sentences grow hypnotic. M is preoccupied by L, thinking incessantly about the painter who shies away from her admiration. She is desperate to be part of his vision, overinterpreting everything. Can he see her? Will he *paint* her? In one scene, M stares at him while the group listens to her daughter sing:

L merely sat there with a weary look on his face, as though he were using this as an opportunity to think about all the other tiresome things he had been made to sit through. Sometimes he would look up and meet my eye, and something of his separation would become my own. The strangest feeling of detachment, almost of disloyalty, would come over me: even there, in the midst of the things I loved best, he had the ability to cast me into doubt and to expose

in myself what was otherwise shrouded over. It was as though, in those moments, his terrible objectivity became my own and I saw things the way they really are.

Second Place is an exploration of how dangerous it is to want to see yourself reflected in the artist’s eye. (Cusk, who is as scrupulous an autobiographer as she is a novelist, may have sharp opinions about this.) Spending nearly 200 pages in the company of M’s clammy intelligence can feel quietly horrifying. There’s very little humor in here. Only Justine’s boyfriend, Kurt, a wannabe writer who dares to wear immaculate, non-workman’s pants to a marsh, is a figure of conscious fun. (I reacted unhappily to the way that Cusk, or at least M, ties together worth and “masculinity”; she is merciless toward Kurt, painting him as an effete dandy, while Tony and L are depicted as virile and strong.)

Cusk knows that her portrait of M and L’s stubbornness and stress-without-breaking can be a heavy read. She gives us little pauses, widescreen shots of natural beauty: a blissful scene of night swimming, descriptions of green valleys that open like books out to sea. But for the most part, the novel is deliberately exhausting. Cusk has turned back to character, but she’s clearly still critical of it; *Second Place* indulges in stifling excess. *You wanted personality?* it seems to say. *Drown in this.* ■

MOVIES / ALISON WILLMORE

Shilling for the ABCs

The idealistic creators who set the standard for kids’ TV—with a little adman panache.



IT’S NO SHOCK that *Sesame Street* was born from a mixture of idealism and academic seriousness. Created by TV producer Joan Ganz Cooney and psychologist Lloyd Morrisett, then the vice-president of the Carnegie Foundation, the show aimed to bridge socioeconomic rifts and reach kids who were falling behind in their education before they had even started kindergarten. What does come as a bit of a surprise when watching the documentary *Street Gang: How We Got to Sesame Street* is that the legendary series was thought of as an attempt to harness the addictive powers of an inescapable mass medium for the forces of good. In these days of screens and streaming, battles over the perceived disreputability of the boob tube feel as done with as the term *boob tube* itself. But in 1966, when Cooney and Morrisett first spoke about the subject at a dinner party, plenty of their peers considered television to be the domain of rotting brains and hawked products. In *Street Gang*, Cooney, who is now 91 years old, says, “Every child in America was singing beer commercials,” as the jaunty strains of “When You Say Budweiser,

Oscar the Grouch and puppeteer Caroll Spinney.



You've Said It All" play over images of children looking at screens. Jim Henson, who died in 1990 and whose Muppets got their start in quirky ad spots and in late-night shows, drew a direct line between his advertising background and *Sesame Street* in a vintage clip. As he puts it, "I loved the idea of it—the whole idea of taking commercial techniques and applying them to a show for kids."

Television hasn't stopped selling us things, though the streaming era has added new complications to what is being sold and how. *Street Gang*, a charming watch from director Marilyn Agrelo that is based on a book by Michael Davis, is being released in part by HBO, which by 2016 had effectively moved *Sesame Street* behind a paywall: It had made a deal with PBS, the show's longtime home, that guaranteed HBO (and, later, its streaming arm, HBO Max) a nine-month head start on first-run episodes. There is no mention of this less inclusive development in the doc; *Street Gang* focuses on the heady early days of the show, which premiered on public-television stations on November 10, 1969, with the help of a hefty grant from the federal government. But running through the film is an awareness that while the creatives behind *Sesame Street* saw themselves as repurposing ad techniques for the public good, they were able to create the singular show only because they were liberated from commercial pressures. *Sesame Street* hasn't enjoyed this freedom for the majority of its ongoing, decades-long existence, which gives the otherwise sweet

Street Gang a touch of bitterness.

Agrelo steers clear of the hagiography that plagues so many docs framed as tributes to their subjects. While the film includes interviews with surviving members of the original *Sesame Street* crew—among them Cooney and Morrisett; cast members Emilio Delgado (Luis), Sonia Manzano (Maria), and Roscoe Orman (Gordon); and puppeteers Fran Brill and Caroll Spinney, who died in 2019—some of the other central creative voices are gone. The doc incorporates archival interviews with the likes of Henson, director and producer Jon Stone, and composer Joe Raposo in addition to calling on their family members. It has obvious reverence for *Sesame Street*'s freewheeling production and the dreamers and beatniks who came up with the characters and segments that shaped generations. This is tempered somewhat by the reminiscences of these grown children, who talk about the grueling workload required to put out the show as well as the depression, the on-set tensions, and the way *Sesame Street* could feel like a rival sibling in their households.

Most notably, Holly Robinson Peete, Matt Robinson Jr., and Dolores Robinson talk about Matt Robinson, who played the original Gordon and created a Muppet named Roosevelt Franklin, who was intended to stand out and to be read as Black. As Dolores, his ex-wife, puts it, Robinson "wanted children of color to be recognized as children of color because in real life, those children knew they were

different." But Roosevelt Franklin drew complaints from Black viewers who saw him as perpetuating stereotypes, and he was dropped from the show—an incident that feels as if it could by itself fuel a documentary about how the unspoken utopian multiculturalism of the rest of the show has endured and aged. *Street Gang* isn't that film. Instead, it offers a broader view of the formative years of this television landmark and its immediate resonance with viewers, including a wealth of behind-the-scenes footage that gives a peek into the secret lives of old familiar friends. Seeing Henson and Frank Oz performing Bert and Ernie, or

Spinney wearing Oscar the Grouch while doing the bottom half of his Big Bird costume, doesn't ruin the magic. It enhances it.

Toward its end, *Street Gang* shows some of the one-on-one segments featuring a Muppet and a child about counting or learning directions or running through the alphabet. These were unrehearsed sequences that could work only because the human half of the pairing treated the puppet half as if it were real. And that was the thing about Kermit and Grover and Cookie Monster and so many of the show's creations: They did feel real, right from the start, like complex, indelible personalities that happened to be made of felt. *Street Gang* is a document attesting to their lasting influence—and to why, even though it may seem to have plenty of competition now, a show like *Sesame Street* will never be made again. ■

STREET GANG:
HOW WE GOT TO
SESAME STREET
DIRECTED BY
MARILYN AGRELO.
HBO, PG.