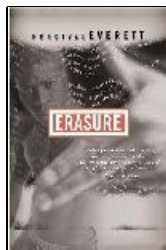


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Book Review

Erasure

by [Percival L. Everett](#)

Reviewer: [Geoff Wisner](#), Staff Reviewer

Posted: December 10, 2007

I found out about *Erasure* from a reading list that accompanied the article [Writers Like Me](#) by Martha Southgate, about the obstacles that face black writers in America. The list included David Bradley and Reginald McKnight, two of my favorite authors, so I figured it was worth digging deeper.

Erasure is so good that I was embarrassed not to know about it already. It was doubly embarrassing to find that the author has published thirteen previous books that I also knew nothing about. My ignorance seemed to underline Southgate's point about the difficulty black writers face in getting attention for their work. The subject of the novel makes the same point in another way.

Thelonious Monk Ellison, the protagonist of *Erasure*, is the author of four novels and one collection of stories: serious literary work that has gone largely ignored by the public, especially when it deals with subjects (like the ancient Persians) that don't fit publishers' and the public's idea of what black writers should write about.

Ellison has other problems. His sister, a doctor who works in an inner-city clinic, is being threatened by anti-abortion fanatics. His mother is showing signs of Alzheimer's. And his brother, who has discovered he's gay after marrying and raising a family, is not much help in any of this.

Then a black woman named Juanita Mae Jenkins publishes a novel called *We Lives in Da Ghetto*, a saga of inner-city life told in dialogue that would not be out of place in a minstrel show. The book is a major hit, and the author appears on the Book Club segment of a TV show whose popular talk show host will remind you of someone.

Angry and offended, Ellison sets out to write a satire of this kind of faux-ghetto trash so extreme that no one could miss the point that these books degrade and caricature the lives of black people. *Erasure* includes the full text: 67 pages of low-down behavior related in gutter language. I admit I could not make myself read it all. But I got the idea.

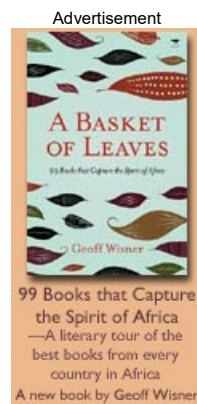
Anyone who has seen Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (released not long before this book appeared) can guess what happens next: Ellison's novel, published under an obvious pseudonym, is hailed as a literary masterpiece.

In *Erasure*, Ellison and the author wrestle with some difficult questions. Why is so much serious literature, Ellison's included, so small and cautious and academic? Why does Ellison find it so hard to write about his own most urgent concerns? And why are both whites and blacks so quick to embrace the worst aspects of black life as real and authentic and powerful?

Bitter, touching, uncomfortable, and very funny, *Erasure* is one of the most surprising and compelling novels I've read in a long time.

About the Reviewer

[Geoff Wisner](#) is a freelance writer and staff member of Indigocafe.com. He is the author of [A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books That Capture the Spirit of Africa](#). Visit his website at www.geoffwisner.com.



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Martha

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