

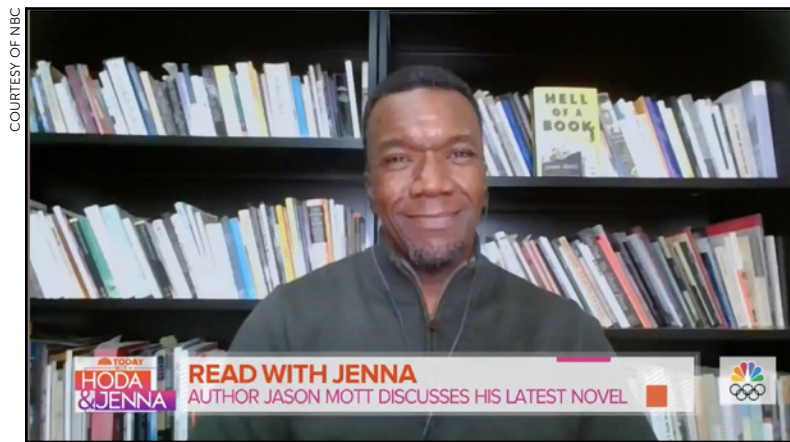
"THE BLACK CONDITION" IN HELL OF A BOOK

a review by Helen Stead

Jason Mott. *Hell of a Book: A Novel*. Dutton, 2021.

HELEN STEAD earned her PhD in creative writing from the University of Tennessee, where she was the Editor of *Grist*, and her MFA in creative writing from the University of Missouri, Kansas City. Her writing has appeared in journals including *Echo Ink Review*, *Blue River Review*, and *Rougarou* and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She previously taught at ECU and served as an Assistant Editor of *NCLR*. She now lives in Colorado.

Read about **JASON MOTT** in the preceding coverage of his National Book Award for this novel.



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Last year millions of Americans watched in horror as they saw George Floyd take his last breath under the knee of a Minneapolis police officer as bystanders cried for mercy. The people erupted into protests and riots, which took over cities across the nation and beyond, demanding justice and answers to systemic racism in our institutions. It is crises like these that North Carolina native Jason Mott explores in *Hell of a Book*, asking whether black authors have a responsibility to provide commentary in their fiction on what it means to be Black.

The book is told mostly through two perspectives: an author on a book tour with a vacillating mental state, and a young boy, who watched police kill his father. The unnamed author bursts into the book naked, running down a hotel hallway to evade an angry husband of a quick lover, and as things unfold, it becomes apparent that this author has more than a drinking and affair problem; he has a condition that sparks conversations with peo-

ple no one else can see. He can't tell whether the person he is speaking to is real or not, which calls into question every interaction throughout the novel. The Kid, also unnamed but called "Soot" because of his skin color, hangs out in the author's chapters, which adds a layer of unknown to The Kid's sections, prompting the reader to ask, who is this kid? Why is he important to the author? And why do we see him in the author's sections and not vice versa?

The author's book is also titled *Hell of a Book*, and so the entire novel works in layers of metafiction, which delightfully complicates the question Mott must wrestle with: how much of himself has he written into the book? Is the book about him? Or is it about something larger than himself? The book draws the reader through these moments of the unknown by giving us just enough to figure out what situation is real and what isn't, which is a little more than the narrator knows. This is done expertly.

There is this moment that seems to be the exigence of

why Mott wrote the book: Renny, a limo driver/escort for the author, makes a comment about the author's blackness, how he's "supposed to be a voice" and how his book didn't have "anything about the Black condition in it" (77). Perhaps this is the author's inner self responding to being told that writing about the black condition isn't going to get him anywhere. The Kid is told by his grandfather, Daddy Henry: "You gotta tell the right stories. You gotta tell them the right way. No n[***]r stories, okay?" (55). And the author is told by his PR guru Jack: "don't write about race. Specifically, don't write about being Black. You can write about Black characters, but just don't write about being Black" (106). *Hell of a Book* pushes back in an intricate way. The author's response to Renny's comment is initial shock at his own skin: "I'm still processing my sudden blackness. . . . Was I born that way? If so, why don't I remember it? Or maybe this is all just another part of my condition" (76).

For the most part, there are some well-done insertions of humor in the novel, but in this case, he is talking directly to the reader and the tone comes off as serious. But then he is clearly facetious to Renny, so his reaction is inconsistent in a critical moment when the reader needs to see him process this honestly. Later, the author comes to his own conclusion that he does not need to address the Black condition: "Renny tries to tell me that I've got a responsibility as a

Black author to say something about the world? No. Not at all. . . . I'm a good person with pain all of my own. Why do I have to fix the world?" (276). What is delicious about this is that Mott clearly disagrees – hence why the real *Hell of a Book* is immersed in the current climate – but it also seems to be saying that readers shouldn't trust fiction writers to impart reality, as they are unreliable and can only present certain truths about the human condition.

However, the novel's examination of the implications of skin color and how that should or shouldn't impact the writer's work is fascinating. The author's agent brings this up when PR Jack says, "You didn't tell me he was Black" and the author's agent responds, "I wanted to see if you could tell from his writing" (89). This comes back to the initial probing of how much of the book is really about the writer of the book and how much of it is about something larger. And does it matter how much is steeped in reality if the message or the characters impart the thing the writer wants?

Just as in *The Crossing* and Mott's other works, his fiction style is well informed by poetry at the sentence level: the writing is imagistic and poetic without being indulgent. This, along with the attempt to iron out the author's reality and the intrinsic humor of these situations, drives the narrative forward. However, because some of the characters are imaginary, they can come across as far too all-knowing so that there ends up being a

plethora of guide-like characters, leading the author to his truth, which feels like we're being told more than shown. In addition to this, there is a *Field of Dreams* scene where people just disappear into the cornstalks. I wanted to draw meaning from this, but in the end, I couldn't get past this scene. The most disappointing element of the novel is that the last several chapters undo what Mott has expertly crafted by telling the reader how to interpret the parallels between the author and The Kid and what this all means when it comes to writing about the Black condition. Ultimately, if Mott trusted his readers to see what is already there and cut out some of the end material, the novel would leave a much stronger flavor. As is, however, this exploration into reality and race is worth savoring in light of what fiction should do and how it should inform and shape our perspectives. ■



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