



The Africana Profile: Novelist Jake Lamar

Paris' African American literary tradition lives on in novelist Jake Lamar.

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By Monique Y. Wells

Jake Lamar, former *Time* magazine editor and award winning author, is steadily gaining recognition in the world of fiction with his astute and entertaining assessments of how race affects relationships in the United States today. His latest book, *Rendezvous Eighteenth*, is perhaps the most successful of his endeavors to explore such matters while captivating his readers with plots involving a cast of predominately African American characters.

Lamar is currently living the 11th year of a fantasy — he is a working novelist living in Paris, France.

The realization of this dream was a long time in coming. Lamar showed promise as a writer as early as the 7th grade, and was sixteen years old when teacher Joan Whitehead of the Fieldston school in the north Bronx advised him to choose writing as a profession. But his desire to move to Paris was born in the Bronx in 1974, the year in which he first read James Baldwin's novel, *Go Tell It On The Mountain*. Lamar states that when his eighth grade teacher told him that Baldwin lived in Paris, "...the seed of an idea had been planted."

Lamar began writing in earnest as a student at Harvard, where he was a film and theater critic for the student paper *The Harvard*

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Crimson. Not six weeks after graduation, he was hired by *Time* magazine, where he first wrote the Milestones section. He then moved on to the more prestigious “Nation” section of the magazine, producing more than 300 articles, including six cover stories, on U.S. affairs. Lamar found this assignment to be difficult, not only because he was an African American liberal in an Anglo conservative environment, but also because he found that the writing itself was not fulfilling.

In 1989, Lamar left *Time* to complete his first published work, a memoir entitled *Bourgeois Blues*. This book represents both a brilliant entry into the publishing world and a personal catharsis for Lamar. In it, he explores the complex relationship that he had with his father, an exceptionally bright and ambitious man who strove to instill those same ambitions in Lamar. He examines his family’s poverty, his parents’ marital problems, and issues of racial identity intertwined with the search for self-knowledge and the foundation of self-respect — sometimes joyfully, sometimes painfully, but always with honesty. Lamar describes it as a classic coming of age story.

Without the benefit of a regular salary, New York quickly proved to be too expensive for Lamar, and he moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan to live with his girlfriend and to begin writing the first of his four novels, *The Last Integrationist*. It was during this time that he received a phone call informing him that he had been awarded the Lyndhurst Prize, a three-year grant given to artists, journalists, and people in community service. The grant allowed him to pay off his debts and move to Paris in 1993.

The City of Light captivated Lamar immediately, and what he thought would be a one-year stay has turned into a permanent move for him. He finished *The Last Integrationist* and wrote *Close to the Bone* and *If 6 Were 9* there. He not only wrote his most recent novel, the murder mystery *Rendezvous Eighteenth* in Paris, but also used the city as the setting for the story. Lamar is now working on a fifth novel that will feature some of the secondary characters in *Rendezvous Eighteenth* and will also be set in Paris. The French publishing house Rivages/Noir, which specializes in thrillers and crime novels, has published a French translation of *If 6 Were 9*, entitled *Le Chaméleon Noir*. The company has also committed to publish *The Last Integrationist* and *Rendezvous Eighteenth* in French.

Lamar deals adeptly and creatively with the sociopolitical issues of the times in his novels. He is particularly keen on evaluating race relations, including those surrounding interracial couples; there is at least one interracial relationship in each of his works of fiction. In *Close to the Bone*, Lamar focuses extensively on interracial couples and skillfully uses the backdrop of the O.J. Simpson trial to confront head-on the sensitive issues that American society still avoids so studiously and skittishly. He also explores the attitudes that Europeans have about race through a half-black, half-white character named Walker du Pree, who flees a failed relationship



with a black woman by moving to Amsterdam. Lamar cleverly presents many viewpoints on these issues through his characters, giving the open-minded reader considerable food for thought.

Those who have read Lamar's works and know his history will notice that references to his own life in Paris and to the city's culture and lifestyle are woven into his novels. In *The Last Integrationist*, a minor character wins a writing grant and moves to Europe to pursue his career. In *Close to the Bone*, character Sadie Broom (the other half of Walker du Pree's failed relationship) moves to Paris on a temporary assignment, and the narrative and dialogue that convey her observations and opinions on life in the city reflect those of Lamar as he was getting to know Paris himself. In *Rendezvous Eighteenth*, Lamar boldly and faithfully characterizes Paris and its contemporary African-American community as he weaves a story around protagonist Ricky Jenks — an African American man who comes to Paris to put a painful past behind him, only to find himself embroiled in murder and intrigue that brings his past rushing back.

One might easily be tempted to compare Lamar's career to that of Chester Himes, another African American expat. Himes was a novelist who moved to Paris during the post-World War II era. He was selected to be a Yaddo Foundation resident in 1948, where he could write without concern for paying room and board. He had already been published in the U.S. when he moved to France, but found his niche as a writer in Paris. Fraternizing with the likes of Richard Wright and Ollie Harrington, he made a name for himself by writing a series of thrillers that were set in Harlem and published in French. Many of these novels featured his famous protagonists, Gravedigger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson. Himes' novel, *A Case of Rape*, was a crime story in which he portrayed African American expatriate life in Paris.

Both Lamar and Himes received financial support from non-profit foundations because of their writing skills; both deal extensively with race issues in their books and found the thriller to be an effective genre in which to explore these issues; both found love and encouragement for their writing in Paris...the parallels are surprisingly numerous. When asked about the similarities between Himes' career and his, and about any influence that Himes might have had on his literary path, Lamar says that he didn't discover Himes until after he moved to Paris. He thinks that he may end up like Himes, with his books being more popular in France than in the U.S.

Some reviewers have labeled Lamar's books "ethnic" fare. For Lamar, this represents a double-edged sword. He states, "I feel that my books are for anybody who likes novels. If the 'ethnic' tag or the 'mystery' tag bring more readers my way, I can't complain." But he also bemoans the segregation that rules the American publishing industry. He continues, "When a book like *Close to the Bone* first appears, it will be shelved in the New Fiction section of a

bookstore. A month later, when it's no longer 'new,' it will be shelved exclusively in the Afro-American literature section — which is usually in some inconvenient corner of the store. And white readers feel they have no business going to that section...I know from experience that plenty of white readers love my work but the ethnic label does prevent a lot of white readers from ever discovering my books. This is one reason why I'm happy to publish thrillers. My books can now be shelved in two sections of the store, 'Afro-American Lit' and 'Mysteries'."

Lamar says that he would love to be a best selling author. But though he hasn't reached that point in his career, he feels more relaxed about it in Paris than he would in the United States. He says that in Paris, he finds that writers are appreciated just for being writers, and that writing in and of itself is respected. "In France," he says, "everybody from the baker to the literary critic respects people who write books and care about literature." He has found that the literary environment is much more nurturing than that of the States, and has developed an extensive network of writers and booksellers who support and encourage each other's efforts. He has also found love and support in his wife, a Swiss-Dutch singer and actress who he met in Paris. In short, Lamar has found both personal and professional fulfillment in Paris. He hopes someday to attain that elusive, yet coveted status — best selling author — there as well.

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About the Author

Monique Y. Wells is a freelance writer and editor, and co-owner of the travel planning service **Discover Paris!** Wells is responsible for the company's afro-centric travel planning, including self-guided literary and historical walks through Black Paris.

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