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As "Debbie Doesn't Do It Anymore," the new novel by the prolific Walter Mosley, who is best known for the Easy Rawlins mysteries, begins, Debbie Dare, a Black porn queen, is in trouble. Her husband, Theon Pinkney, has been electrocuted while "auditioning" a 16-year-old girl in his bathtub. Loan sharks are threatening to maim or murder Debbie if she doesn't make good on Theon's debts. And, as she struggles to extricate herself from her sordid life, Mr. Suicide has begun to appear at her side, "all silence and smiles."

Throughout the novel, Mosley captures the "nothing to grab on" feeling of Los Angeles and, more importantly, African-American family and religious values in a context of closed doors, limited options, and failed dreams.

X-rated protagonist

In "Debbie Dare" (also known as Sandra Peel Pinkney), Mosley has created a complex, compelling, X-rated protagonist. Debbie likes to read; one of her favorite books is "The Autumn of the Patriarch."

Although she enjoys discussing the work of D.H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf, she (and presumably, Mosley) has no patience with literary critics and professors who look for "structure and underlying intention" instead of arresting phrases and human feelings.

Just about everyone likes (or loves) her, including, Theon's gay friend, Theon's girlfriend, Theon's racist mother, and, of course, the son of a 1980s porn star who died of pancreatic cancer who Debbie put through college and medical school.

Troubling past

Unlike most people, who do not look a person in the eye or "say anything that means something," everything Debbie says "is on the ground floor," a police officer, who falls for her, points out. "You're right there in front of me like nothing I ever saw."
Debbie keeps telling herself that a willingness to die inoculates a person against the allures of wealth, sex, and domination by powerful, charismatic men, but every time she imagines ending her life the wish for death turns into a need for sex.

Once she realizes she can no longer live on the path she has already traveled, Debbie tries to move backward in time (with the help of her psychiatrist), “from the smelly john’s car, down La Cienaga Boulevard,” to the home of her mother, brothers and step-sister, where the smells, sounds, and air on her skin remind her of an existence “I once loved, then hated, and finally forgot for a while in a haze of drugs, sex, and glitter.”

Mysteries remain
The plot of “Debbie Doesn’t Do It Anymore” and, alas, the motivations of the characters, are not always convincing or coherent.

Mosley doesn’t adequately explain why Debbie withholds important information from the police, why she turned to porn following the murder of her father, or why she has become so obsessed with suicide.

And some readers may second-guess, as I did, Mosley’s decision to withhold revelations about Theon’s virtues until the very end of the book.

That said, no one, I suspect, will quibble with Mosley’s decision to end with Sandy Peel’s moving, simple, and, yes, a bit simplistic, eulogy for Theon – and for Debbie Dare.

“Save yourself. Know that you can do anything. Don’t look down on anyone. Don’t forgive them or condemn them. And when they tell you to get down on your knees, you tell them to get down there with you. Tell them you can take the pain if they will too.”

And most readers will suspend disbelief, at least for a moment, as I did, when beneath a lovely California sunset, the former porn star announces that she has “arrived at a place where no one could bring me down on my knees.”

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