

Charles Willeford

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Charles Willeford



Born	January 2, 1919 Little Rock, Arkansas
Died	March 27, 1988 Miami, Florida
Occupation	Writer, college professor, magazine editor, boxer, actor, horse trainer, radio announcer, U.S. Air Force master sergeant

Charles Ray Willeford III (January 2, 1919 – March 27, 1988) was an American writer. An author of fiction, poetry, autobiography, and

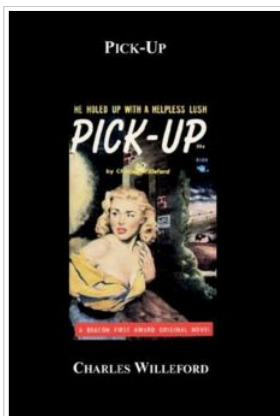
literary criticism, Willeford is best known for his series of novels featuring hardboiled detective Hoke Moseley. The first Hoke Moseley book, *Miami Blues* (1984), is considered one of its era's most influential works of crime fiction. Film adaptations have been made of three of Willeford's novels: *Cockfighter*, *Miami Blues*, and *The Woman Chaser*.

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Biography

Early life and military career



Reprint edition of Willeford's second published novel, *Pick-Up* (1955), showing the original cover.

Willeford was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1919. Both his parents died of

tuberculosis while he was a child—his father in 1922 and his mother in 1927. He grew up in the

Los Angeles area, living with his grandmother Mattie Lowey on Figueroa Street near Exposition Park until 1932. At the age of thirteen, in the midst of the Great Depression, he boarded a freight train in Los Angeles, assumed a false identity, and—passing as a seventeen-year-old—traveled by rail along the Mexican border for a year.^[1]

In March 1935, he signed up with the California National Guard; a few months later, he enlisted in the regular U.S. Army. He spent two years stationed in the Philippines serving as a fire truck driver, a gas truck driver, and briefly as a cook. At the end of 1938, he was discharged from the Army, though he re-enlisted in March 1939, joining the U.S. Cavalry stationed at the Presidio of Monterey, California. In the Cavalry, he learned to ride and care for horses and spent several months learning the art of horseshoeing. He also served as a "horseholder" in a machine gun troop and earned a marksman qualification.^[2]

In 1942, Willeford married Lara Bell Fridley before being stationed at Fort Benning, Georgia, for infantry school. He was assigned to the Third Army, Company C, 11th Tank Battalion, 10th Armored Division and sent to Europe as a tank commander. He fought in the Battle of the Bulge

and earned the Silver Star, the Bronze Star for outstanding bravery, the Purple Heart with one oak leaf cluster, and the Luxembourg War Cross. After V-E day, he studied at Biarritz American University until he was shipped back to the United States. He again enlisted in 1945 for a term of three years and was stationed in Kyūshū, Japan, from 1947 to 1949, where he ran the Army radio station WLKH and was promoted to master sergeant.

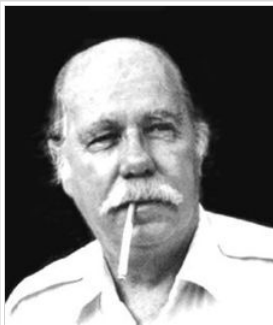
His first book of poetry, *Proletarian Laughter*, was published in 1948. In May 1949, he and his wife, Lara, divorced. In July of the same year, he left the Army, leaving a mailing address of General Delivery, Dallas, Texas. He enrolled in the Universitarias de Belles Artes in Lima, Peru, studying art and art history in the graduate program. He was dismissed from the university when officials learned that he had neither an undergraduate degree nor a high school diploma. He lived in New York City for a month at the end of 1949 before re-enlisting in the Army.

Willeford was stationed at Hamilton Air Force Base in California through April 1952. He married Mary Jo Norton in July of that year, and lived for a while in Birmingham, Alabama. In 1953,

Willeford's first novel, *High Priest of California*, was published. In January 1954, he re-enlisted once again; he was stationed this time at Palm Beach Air Force Base, while living in West Palm Beach. In 1955, he was reassigned to Harmon Air Force Base in Newfoundland. Willeford finally left active duty in November 1956.

Later years

After he left the Army, Willeford held jobs as a



Willeford in the 1980s

professional boxer, actor, horse trainer, and radio announcer. He studied painting in France for a time, returning to the United States to attend Palm Beach Junior College. After receiving an associate's degree in 1960, he studied English literature at the University of Miami, attaining a bachelor's degree in 1962 and a master's in 1964. During this period he also worked as a book reviewer for the *Miami Herald* and as an associate editor with *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. Upon receiving his M.A., Willeford taught humanities classes at the University of Miami through 1967, then moved to Miami-Dade Community College where he became an associate professor, teaching English and philosophy through 1985. In 1976, he and his second wife were divorced. He married his third wife, Betsy Poller, in 1981.

Willeford had continued to be productive as a novelist after leaving the Army, but after 1962's *Cockfighter*, Willeford did not publish another novel for nine years. In 1971, *The Burnt Orange Heresy* and *The Hombre from Sonora* appeared (the latter under a pseudonym); though Willeford would continue to write fiction, it would be thirteen years before another novel of his was published. That book was *Miami Blues*, the first of

the Hoke Moseley novels and their twisted take on the hardboiled tradition for which he would become best known. The popularity of *Miami Blues* and its first two sequels led to the largest financial windfall of the author's life: a \$225,000 advance for the fourth Hoke Moseley book, *The Way We Die Now*.^[3] Published in early 1988, it would be his last novel.

Charles Willeford died of a heart attack in Miami, Florida, on March 27, 1988, and is buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

Literary style

Marshall Jon Fisher describes the "true earmark" of Willeford's writing, particularly his early paperbacks, as "humor—a distinctively crotchety, sometimes, raunchy, often genre-satirizing humor."^[4] His wide-ranging interests were reflected in his work: *High Priest of California* references T. S. Eliot, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and composer Béla Bartók. *The Burnt Orange Heresy* cracks jokes about Samuel Beckett amidst contemplations of the sources of Dada and Surrealist painting. Willeford turned on occasion to more serious topics: *The Black Mass of Brother*

Springer (1958) includes a subplot that provides "an early depiction of the civil-rights revolution in the South."^[5] According to his wife, Betsy, Willeford had a credo that also served as a caution for aspiring writers: "Just tell the truth, and they'll accuse you of writing black humor."^[6]

Notability and influence

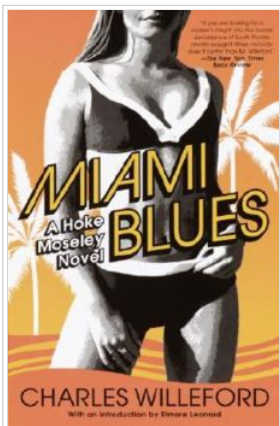
According to bookseller Mitch Kaplan, an expert on the South Florida literary scene, "*Miami Blues* launched the modern era of Miami crime fiction. There's a direct line from [Willeford] through just about everyone writing crime fiction in Miami today."^[7] His characteristic juxtaposition of humor and violence was apparently one of director Quentin Tarantino's inspirations. Discussing *Pulp Fiction*, Tarantino has said that the film "is not noir. I don't do neo-noir. I see *Pulp Fiction* as closer to modern-day crime fiction, a little closer to Charles Willeford."^[8]

Three of Willeford's books have been adapted for the screen: *Cockfighter* (1974; starring Warren Oates and directed by Monte Hellman), *Miami Blues* (1990; starring Alec Baldwin and directed by George Armitage), and *The Woman Chaser* (1999;

starring Patrick Warburton and directed by Robinson Devor).

Bibliography

Hoke Moseley series



Reprint edition of the first Hoke

Moseley novel, *Miami Blues* (1984),
Willeford's best known work.

Miami Blues. New York: St. Martin's Press,
1984.

Hardcover. The first of the crime
novels featuring Hoke Moseley.
Willeford's original title was *Kiss Your
Ass Good-Bye*.

Miami Blues. New York:
Vintage Crime/Black Lizard,
2004.

Trade paperback reprint.
Includes an introduction
by Elmore Leonard.

New Hope for the Dead. New York: St.
Martin's Press, 1985.

Hardcover. The second Hoke Moseley
novel.

New Hope for the Dead. New
York: Vintage Crime/Black
Lizard, 2004.

Trade paperback reprint.
Includes an introduction
by James Lee Burke.

Sideswipe. New York: St. Martin's Press,
1987.

Hardcover. The third Hoke Moseley
novel.

Sideswipe. New York: Vintage
Crime/Black Lizard, 2005.

Trade paperback reprint.
Includes an introduction
by Lawrence Block.

The Way We Die Now. New York: Random
House, 1988.

Hardcover. The fourth Hoke Moseley
novel.

The Way We Die Now. New
York: Vintage Crime/Black
Lizard, 2005.

Trade paperback reprint.
Includes an introduction
by Donald E. Westlake.

Grimhaven (unpublished).

Photocopy of typescript maintained in
the Charles Willeford Archive at the
Broward County Library, Florida; 212
leaves, no date: "NOTE: as per Betsy
Willeford [widow of the author]: 'Ms.
of the "black Hoke Mosely" [*sic*],
never published, sold to a small but
ruthless group of collectors in the form
of Xerox copies. May not be copied in
the library by patrons who'll wholesale
it on the Internet.'"> Originally
intended as the second Hoke Moseley
novel.^[9]

Other novels

High Priest of California/[*Full Moon*]. New York: Royal Books, 1953.

Paperback original. Willeford's first published novel. The cover blurbs for *High Priest*—"A roaring saga of the male animal on the prowl"/"The world was his oyster—and women his pearls!"—neatly sum up the adventures of Russell Haxby, used car salesman. Bound with novel by Talbot Mundy. 151,000-copy press run.

Pick-Up. New York: Beacon Books, 1955.

Paperback original. His second published novel. Willeford's original title was *Until I Am Dead*. Cover blurb: "He holed up with a helpless lush."

High Priest of California/*Wild Wives*. New York: Beacon Books, 1956.

Paperback original. Willeford's original title for *Wild Wives* was *Until I Am Dead*. Bound with his earlier novel, *High Priest*, which is blessed with another turgid blurb: "No woman could resist his strange cult of lechery!"

High Priest of California/Wild Wives. San Francisco:

Re/Search Publications, 1987.

Trade paperback reprint.

Includes an introduction

by Lou Stathis, an

afterword by V. Vale and

Andrea Juno, biographical
notes, and a bibliography.

Honey Gal. New York: Beacon Books,
1958.

Paperback original. Willeford's
original title was *The Black Mass of
Brother Springer*. The publisher
rejected it and asked for another;
Willeford proposed *Nigger Lover*,
which was also rejected. The cover
blurbs indicate Beacon's high
intentions: "He was white, she was
beautiful—and bad"/"A starkly naked
novel of sin and segregation."

*The Black Mass of Brother
Springer*. Berkeley, California:
Black Lizard Books, 1989.

Paperback reprint, with

Willeford's title restored.

*The Black Mass of Brother
Springer*. New Albany, Indiana:
Wit's End Publishing, 2004.

Trade paperback reprint,
with Willeford's title
restored. Includes a
foreword by James Sallis.
Lust Is a Woman. New York: Beacon Books,
1958.

Paperback original. Willeford's
original title was *Made in Miami*.
Cover blurbs: "She was a pawn in an
evil game"/"The story of Maria who
wanted—desperately—to become a
movie star!"

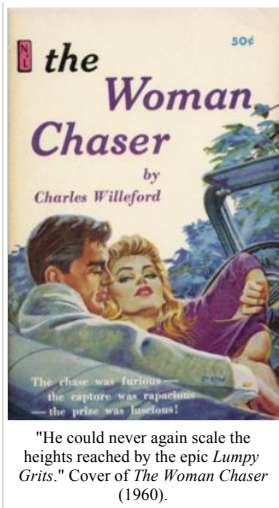
The

Woman Chaser. Chicago: Newsstand
Library, 1960.

Paperback original. Willeford's
original title was *The Director*. The
title of the protagonist's would-be
cinematic magnum opus is *The Man
Who Got Away*.

The Whip Hand. Greenwich, Connecticut:
Fawcett Publications, 1961.

Paperback original. Published under
the sole byline of W. Franklin
Sanders, though documentary
evidence and stylistic analysis indicate
it is largely, perhaps almost
completely, the work of Willeford. A



manuscript of the novel, written around 1952, found in his files indicates that Willeford's original title was *Deliver Me from Dallas!*

Deliver Me from Dallas!

Tucson, Arizona: Dennis

McMillan Publications, 2001.

Hardcover of Willeford's

original manuscript

version, with his name

and title restored. Includes

an introduction by Jesse

Sublett.

Understudy for Love. Chicago: Newsstand Library, 1961.

Paperback original. Willeford's

original title was *The Understudy: A*

Novel of Men and Women. Cover

blurb: "When it came to love he was

just an understudy...but he was

learning in a hurry!" Newsstand's

covers advised that both this and

Willeford's next novel were "Adult

Reading."

No Experience Necessary. Chicago:

Newsstand Library, 1962.

Paperback original. Willeford's

original title was *Nothing Under the*

Sun. Cover blurb: "'You like it?' she

whispered. 'I like it,' he clenched his

teeth, 'I like it, I like it!'" The in-house

editor rewrote parts of this novel in a

more conventional "pulp erotica" style

without Willeford's advance knowledge or subsequent approval. Willeford disclaimed this book. He salvaged the work later by using it, with only slight rewriting, as the Pop Sinkiewicz half of *Sideswipe*.

Cockfighter. Chicago: Chicago Paperback House, 1962.

Paperback original. Cover blurb: "The dedicated obsession of a fanatical sport. As in the bullring—to the death. Legal in Florida—illegal in the forty-nine other states. The iron will of a man, whose entire life was channeled into one supreme ambition!"

Cockfighter. New York: Crown Publishers, 1972.

Hardcover. A slightly rewritten second edition of the novel.

The Burnt Orange Heresy. New York: Crown Publishers, 1971.

Willeford's first hardcover original.

The Hombre from Sonora. New York: Lenox Hill Press, 1971.

His second hardcover original.

Published under the pseudonym "Will Charles." Willeford's original title was *The Difference*.

The Difference. Tucson,
Arizona: Dennis McMillan
Publications, 1999.

Hardcover reprint, with
Willeford's original title
restored.

Kiss Your Ass Good-Bye. Miami Beach,
Florida: Dennis McMillan Publications,
1987.

Hardcover. A self-contained fragment
from Willeford's novel *The Shark-
Infested Custard*, finished by early
1975, but rejected by everyone who
saw it as "too depressing" to publish.
Four hundred-copy press run.

A Charles Willeford Omnibus. London:
MacDonald and Co, 1991.

Hardcover. Collects *Pick-Up*, *The
Burnt Orange Heresy*, and
Cockfighter.

The Shark-Infested Custard. Novato,
California: Underwood-Miller Books, 1993.

Hardcover. The novel deemed "too
depressing" to publish when offered
around in the mid-seventies, in print at
last. As an in-joke, the novel's four
protagonists discuss Monte Hellman's
Two-Lane Blacktop and its star,
Warren Oates, in the first chapter.

Oates collaborated with Hellman on the film adaptation of *Cockfighter*.

The Shark-Infested Custard.

New York: Dell, 1996.

Paperback reprint.

Includes an introduction by Lawrence Block.

Poetry

The Outcast Poets. Yonkers, New York: Alicat Bookshop Press, 1947.

No. 8 in the Alicat Bookshop Press "Outcast" chapbook series. Collects poems by Willeford and four other writers.

Proletarian Laughter. Yonkers, New York: Alicat Bookshop Press, 1948.

No. 12 in the "Outcast" chapbook series. Contains a preface by the author and seven prose "Schematics" interlaced with the poems. One thousand-copy press run.

Poontang and Other Poems. Crescent City, Florida: New Athenaeum Press, 1967.

Self-published saddle-stapled chapbook of poetry. Five hundred-copy press run.

Short stories and nonfiction

The Machine in Ward Eleven. New York: Belmont Books, 1963.

Paperback original. Short story collection. Willeford stated, "I had a hunch that madness was a predominant theme and a normal condition for Americans living in the second half of this century. The publication of *The Machine in Ward Eleven* (1963) and its reception by readers confirmed what I had only heretofore suspected."

A Guide for the Undehemorrhoided.

Kendall, Florida: self-published, 1977.

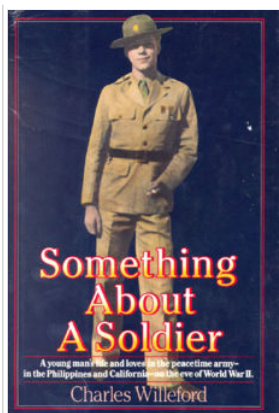
Hardcover. A short account of Willeford's hemorrhoid operation. One thousand-copy press run.

Off the Wall. Montclair, New Jersey:

Pegasus Rex Press, 1980.

Hardcover. Nonfiction. An account of the Son of Sam case, telling the story of Craig Glassman, the deputy sheriff who captured David Berkowitz.

Something About a Soldier. New York:



"Those are eating dogs.... Did you ever eat any dog?" Cover of *Something About a Soldier* (1986).

Random House, 1986.

Hardcover. Autobiography, covering Willeford's first hitches in the peacetime Army and Air Force in the Philippines and California, from age

sixteen to age twenty.

New Forms of Ugly: The Immobilized Hero in Modern Fiction. Miami Beach, Florida: Dennis McMillan Publications, 1987.

Hardcover. Subtitle per online McMillan bibliography; Willeford's *New York Times* obituary, "Charles Willeford, 69, Author of Crime Novels", gives it as *The Immobilized Man in Modern Literature*. A revised version of "The Immobilized Man: A New Hero In Modern Fiction," Willeford's University of Miami master's thesis. A survey of the literature of angst, covering writers from Fyodor Dostoevsky, through Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett, to Chester Himes and Saul Bellow. 350-copy press run.

Everybody's Metamorphosis. Missoula, Montana: Dennis McMillan Publications, 1988.

Hardcover and limited-edition goatskin. Collection of short stories and essays. Includes annotated bibliography by Don Herron. 374-copy hardcover and 26-copy goatskin press run.

I Was Looking for a Street. Woodstock,

Vermont: Countryman Press, 1988.

Hardcover. Autobiography, covering Willeford's childhood and the period when he went on the road as a teenager during the Depression, before joining the Army.

Collected Memoirs of Charles Willeford.

Sarasota, Florida: Disc-Us Books, 1988.

Paperback. Collects *Something About a Soldier* and *I Was Looking for a Street*.

Cockfighter Journal: The Story of a

Shooting. Santa Barbara, California: Neville Publishing, 1989.

Hardcover. Autobiography, covering the filming of the Roger Corman production of *Cockfighter* (for which Willeford both wrote the screenplay and acted the role of Ed Middleton), taken from a diary he kept during the shoot.

Writing and Other Blood Sports. Tucson, Arizona: Dennis McMillan Publications, 2000.

Hardcover. Collection of essays on writing, writers, and related facts of life. Includes *New Forms of Ugly*. One thousand-copy press run.

The Second Half of the Double Feature.

New Albany, Indiana: Wit's End Publishing,
2003.

Hardcover and trade paperback.
Collection of short stories, vignettes,
and autobiographical sketches. The
hardcover also includes Willeford's
complete poetry.

This bibliography is adapted from Don Herron's
Willeford (1997), courtesy of Dennis McMillan
Publications.

Notes

1. ^ This period of Willeford's life is documented in his memoir *I Was Looking for a Street*.
2. ^ This period is covered in his memoir *Something About a Soldier*.
3. ^ Fisher (2000), p. 121.
4. ^ Fisher (2000), p. 118.
5. ^ Fisher (2000), p. 118.
6. ^ Quoted in Fisher (2000), p. 121.
7. ^ Quoted in Fisher (2000), p. 117.
8. ^ Quoted in Fisher (2000), p. 118.
9. ^ See Fisher (2000), pp. 120–121.

Sources

- Fisher, Marshall Jon (2000). "The Unlikely

Father of Miami Crime Fiction," *The Atlantic Monthly*, May (available online).

- Willeford, Charles (1986). *Something About a Soldier* (New York: Random House).
- Willeford, Charles (1988). *I Was Looking for a Street* (Woodstock, Vt.: Countryman Press).

External links

- Charles Ray Willeford—Sergeant, U.S. Air Force & U.S. Army biographical notes; part of the Arlington National Cemetery website
- Charles Willeford site devoted to the author; part of the Dennis McMillan Publications website
- Charles Willeford Bio Page biographical chronology (note that a few of the dates and descriptions given conflict with those in published sources); part of the Disc-Us Books website
- Charles Willeford Omnibus page in dedicated section of No Exit Press website—see "Related Links" on the right-hand side for several essays on the author
- Charles Willeford Paperback Covers part of the *Vintage Paperbacks* website
- "Collecting Charles Willeford" article by Willeford biographer Don Herron; originally

published in *Firsts, the Book Collector's Magazine*, June 1998

- "Madness in the 20th Century" article on Willeford by Mike White; part of *Cashiers du Cinemart* website
- "One of the Great Ones" article on Willeford by Jesse Sublett; originally published in *Austin Chronicle*, November 9, 1998
- *The Shark-Infested Custard* excerpt from the novel: chapter 1 and part of chapter 2; part of the Random House website
- Willeford Archive inventory of archive at the Broward County Library—Bienes Center for the Literary Arts, Fort Lauderdale, Florida

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Categories: 1919 births | 1988 deaths | American literary critics | American mystery writers | American crime fiction writers | American novelists | American poets | Arkansas writers | Florida writers | American military personnel of World War II | Burials at Arlington National Cemetery | Deaths by myocardial infarction | People from Little Rock, Arkansas | People from Miami | Recipients of the Purple Heart medal | United States Army soldiers | People from

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