

## ‘American Fiction’: Racial parody rooted in wincingly familiar honesty

Director Cord Jefferson makes his feature debut with a dramedy that’s both sweet-natured and scathing



Review by [Ann Hornaday](#)

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★★★★ (4 stars)

At one point in the alternately sweet-natured and scathing “American Fiction,” a new novel is described as a “heartbreaking and visceral debut.” The book in question, by an emerging writer played by Issa Rae, becomes an instant literary sensation, its street bona fides guaranteed by the liberal use of Black slang and the catchy title “We’s Lives in Da Ghetto.” The White publishing world is agog, tossing out terms like “urgent,” “raw” and “painfully real,” even though the author graduated from Oberlin and left a job at a tony New York book company to try her hand at penning a bestseller.

Sell the book does, a phenomenon observed with exhausted outrage by Thelonious “Monk” Ellison, a college professor living in Los Angeles whose own books are chronically put in the African American studies section of the bookstore even though his work is firmly rooted in the classics. “The blackest thing about this one is the ink,” he tells a young clerk as he tries to move his oeuvre to another shelf. It doesn’t matter. No one’s buying Monk’s stuff anyway.

“American Fiction,” adapted by writer-director Cord Jefferson from the novel “Erasure” by Percival Everett, begins as Monk is being removed from his teaching position after confronting his students with a toxic racial epithet in one of Flannery O’Connor’s short stories. When a young White woman objects on the grounds of being offended, he retorts, “I got over it, Brittany, I’m pretty sure you can too.” His colleagues suggest he attend a literary conference in Boston; while there, he explains to his agent that he doesn’t believe in race, even as a White guy snags a taxi out from under him. “The problem is that everyone else does,” the agent replies.

Crushed by financial worries and, it seems, maybe a little curious about what having a hit book might feel like, Monk — played with prickly alertness by Jeffrey Wright — decides to write what the market demands: a novel playing on the most hoary stereotypes of modern Black life, from crime and crack to rappers and meeting one's inevitable end in police violence. He assumes the alias Stagg R. Leigh and writes "My Pafology," a barbed meta-critique of the pandering narratives that pass for "authentic" African American literature that of course becomes the Next Big Thing after "We's Lives in Da Ghetto."

It's no surprise that Jefferson, who sharpened his chops writing for such outstanding television shows as "Watchmen" and "Succession," would know his way around the most parodic elements of "American Fiction," which applies a giddily broad brush to White liberals' most cherished pieties. If those clichés sometimes feel too easy, that doesn't mean they're not rooted in wincingly familiar honesty. (Of course, Monk/Stagg's editor — who's been "reading up" on the prison abolition movement — has a poster of Ruth Bader Ginsburg in her office.) "White people think they want the truth, but they don't," says Monk's agent, played by John Ortiz. "They just want to feel absolved."

"American Fiction" would be an enormously entertaining and observant comedy even if it just stuck to the hilarious, if cringey, lengths to which the White establishment will go in the name of psychic safety and self-protection. But Jefferson overlays the story's most biting wit with layers of warmth, sadness and discovery that make this movie far more than the sum of its parts. It turns out that Boston is Monk's hometown; while there, he reconnects with his sister Lisa (Tracee Ellis Ross), who followed their father's footsteps in becoming an OB/GYN, as well as his mother Agnes (Leslie Uggams) and the family's longtime housekeeper Lorraine (Myra Lucretia Taylor). Eventually, Monk's brother Cliff (Sterling K. Brown) shows up, his arrival bringing a plethora of unspoken issues to the fore. One wedding and a funeral later, "American Fiction" has become something far deeper and more meaningful than a glib indictment of racism and benign condescension. It becomes a portrait of joy and pain, prosperity and, yes, oppression, that feels like Black life lived in full, rather than the reductive data points that Monk is railing against.

If that sentence sounds like one of the more saccharinely self-righteous punchlines in "American Fiction," that's okay: Jefferson approaches all of his characters with an expansive, if occasionally jaundiced, sense of cockeyed compassion. That goes for Monk himself, who it turns out is battling expectations at their most insultingly low and impossibly high. When he meets an attractive public defender played by Erika Alexander, he just might find equilibrium if he can get out of the way of the resentments, unresolved traumas and rivalries that lie beneath his tautly controlled anger.

Filmed in Boston and featuring an exceptionally handsome beach home in Scituate, "American Fiction" looks terrific and moves with easeful confidence, striking its tricky tonal balance with the help of Hilda Rasula's smooth editing and a sensitive, piano-forward score by Laura Karpman. Jefferson demonstrates a straightforward, unfussy approach to material that feels intimately familiar, whether it has to do with the eye-rolling absurdities of race and racism in 21st-century America or the devastation of sudden, irretrievable loss. As adroitly as Jefferson directs "American Fiction," he might deserve the most credit for giving Wright — an actor who's virtually always the best thing in every movie he's in — the starring role he's so long deserved. Even as a self-defeating curmudgeon, Wright exudes a virtually irresistible appeal. Watching him code-switch between Monk and Stagg is like a master class, not just in acting but in what it takes to navigate a culture that's both outright hostile and earnestly uncomprehending.

Publishing isn't the only industry that's mercilessly sent up in "American Fiction": Hollywood takes its lumps, too, in the form of a pseudo-hip filmmaker (Adam Brody) who ostentatiously addresses Monk as "brother" and whose latest film is the horror picture "Plantation Annihilation," about a White couple who get married on a former plantation, only to be avenged by the ghosts of its enslaved laborers. (In one of the film's most personally pointed references, the star of that American fiction is Ryan Reynolds.) "American Fiction" ends on an antic note, but also one of gimlet-eyed pessimism, at least when it comes to how movies like to tie up their loose ends. To paraphrase Leonard Cohen, the same people are still picking cotton for those ribbons and bows. In making that message simultaneously palatable and unmistakable, Jefferson has made his own remarkable debut one that's less heartbreaking and visceral than heartwarming and vibrant.

**R.** At area theaters. Contains strong language throughout, some drug use, sexual references and brief violence. 117 minutes.