

## American Fiction [15]

2023 USA 117 mins

UK released	<b>2 February 2024</b>
Director	<b>Cord Jefferson</b>
Screenplay	<b>Cord Jefferson; Percival Everett (novel)</b>
Cinematography	<b>Cristina Dunlap</b>
Music	<b>Laura Karpman</b>
Cast	<b>Jeffrey Wright</b> (Dr. Thelonious "Monk" Ellison); <b>Tracee Ellis Ross</b> (Dr. Lisa Ellison) ; <b>Issa Rae</b> (Sintara Golden); <b>Sterling K. Brown</b> (Dr. Clifford "Cliff" Ellison); <b>John Ortiz</b> (Arthur); <b>Erika Alexander</b> (Coraline); <b>Leslie Uggams</b> (Agnes Ellison) <b>Adam Brody</b> (Wiley)

Thelonious "Monk" Ellison is a middle-aged black humanities professor in Los Angeles, roundly disliked by students and faculty colleagues, who is the author of many intellectually demanding and commercially disastrous novels based on classical myth. Depressed by his career and by money worries – including an elderly mother needing residential care for dementia – Monk is finally triggered by the bestselling triumph of a new novel by black author Sintara Golden, entitled *We's Lives in da Ghetto*, which apparently panders to all the illiterate black-victimhood clichés beloved of white cultural gatekeepers. Enraged, Monk writes a spoof hood-violence novel, *My Pafology*, by the supposed convicted felon Stagg R Leigh, and sends it to his agent, assuming the obvious crassness will signal its satirical intent. But then ... well, those acquainted with the Broadway career of Max Bialystock and Leo Bloom might guess what happens next.

*American Fiction* is the highly entertaining new literary comedy from filmmaker Cord Jefferson, a TV writer making his feature directing debut with his own emollient adaptation of the metafictional masterpiece *Erasure* by Percival Everett, published in 2001. Jeffrey Wright is an excellent Monk: sensitive, morose, prickly and idealistic in a gloomily self-harming way. Tracee Ross Ellis is his shrewd physician sister Lisa; Sterling K Brown is his

cosmetic surgeon brother Cliff, who has just come out as gay; Leslie Uggams is affectingly dignified as Monk's mother Agnes; Issa Rae is Monk's nemesis, Sintara Golden. It all works very enjoyably, despite Jefferson sugaring the original a little, including changing the specific kind of medical practice that Lisa has.

This is an amusing and absorbing fantasy of how class and race and literary taste collide, and a parable of career defeat ironically redeemed by society's hypocrisy and absurdity. It is also a mordant study of literary envy: Monk's angry imitation of *We's Lives in da Ghetto* reminded me a little of Kingsley Amis's description of being rattled by the superior success of a despised rival, and his fleeting fear that he should simply swallow his pride and imitate this person's style.

At one point Jefferson invents a confrontation between Monk and Sintara in which Sintara stands up for her novel, and this is perhaps a loss of satirical nerve. Wright and Rae play the scene with conviction, however, and make us see a kind of snobbery in Monk's reaction to her success, and maybe something gendered too. Then there is something a bit farcical when Monk has to pose in public as the slouching imaginary badass Stagg R Leigh – but perhaps no more farcical than the real-life case of the author Laura Albert, exposed in 2006 for inventing phoney abuse survivor JT LeRoy, who had written thrillingly authentic fictions about her supposedly troubled life, and got her sister-in-law to put on a wig and sunglasses to be this reclusive literary genius. (Erasure in fact predates this case.)

Broad-brush American Fiction might be, but its approach to race and racism is oblique and unexpected, and it's very funny about publishing's literary ghetto.

**Peter Bradshaw**, *The Guardian*, 31 January 2024 (abridged)

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Monday 18 March: *Driving Mum* (12A)

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