

In *Driven*, Sallis takes us to a new place

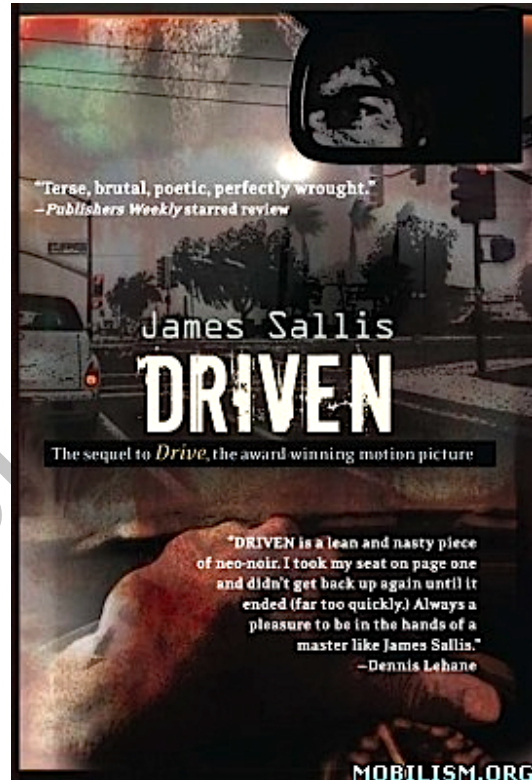
by Jim Napier

THE MULTIFACETED author James Sallis shames aspiring writers everywhere by managing to be a poet and musician with the band Three-Legged Dog, somehow still finding time to turn out a scholarly study of crime writer Chester Himes, several books on musicology, and a translation of Raymond Queneau's novel *Saint Glinglin*. Not content with these achievements he's also penned six of his own crime novels in the *Lew Griffin* series, as many volumes of short stories and poetry, and three standalones—and lest it be thought that Sallis is a mere writing machine turning out work of no particular quality, I should mention that his novels have been short-listed for the Anthony, Nebula, Edgar, Shamus, and Gold Dagger awards.

Somehow it doesn't seem fair.

Sallis has a well-deserved reputation for producing action-packed, atmospheric crime fiction, and right out of the gate his latest work lives up to expectations. Following on the heels of his earlier novel (and award-winning film) *Drive*, *Driven* is the second in his trilogy featuring an enigmatic but resourceful loner who frequently finds himself in the eye of the storm, but answers only to his own conscience. This time the loner has a name: Paul West. Seven years on, trying to escape his troubled past, West has reinvented himself, morph-

ing from his earlier career as a stunt man and getaway driver to become the owner of a small car-repair business, in the process of carving out



for himself a new life in Phoenix. But old habits die hard, and in the confines of his garage he tinkers with an old Ford Fairlane, tweaking it into a thing of mechanical beauty, capable, with him at the wheel, of holding its own with anything out there.

BUT WEST SOON LEARNS that you can only shake your past if others are willing to let you do so. Walking down the street one day he and his fiancée Elsa Jorgenson are suddenly attacked by a pair of armed thugs. He

manages to kill both men, but not before Elsa is murdered. West goes to ground with the aid of his friend Felix, an ex-Desert Storm vet and gang-banger, vowing to find out who is behind the apparently meaningless attack. But he can't shake the nagging thought that the assassins killed Elsa before taking him on. As the more formidable of the pair, it doesn't make sense. The only thing West knows for certain is that running will not help; he must turn and confront the person who is targeting him, trying to understand a world that, he increasingly realizes, is not governed by reason.

No white-knight here, West is a loner and antihero, not out to right the wrongs of the world, or even come to the aid of the vulnerable; he's just trying to stay alive and learn who's behind the attacks on him, and why. And of course, being the centerpiece of a trilogy, Sallis toys with his readers in an ending that is not at all the end.

DRIVE KICKED UP A LOT OF DUST before it was made into an award-winning motion picture, and *Driven* seems headed for the same fate. The plot recalls the relentless action of an earlier era, one populated by lawless predators, muscle cars, and open

roads. Sallis draws on his own knowledge as a resident of Phoenix to paint a vivid portrait of the city's desiccated, seamy underbelly. The dialogue is spare and confrontational, the exchanges of people not far removed from the jungle, adversaries constantly jockeying for position, sounding each other out, calculating who will strike first. And the rhythm is relentless: even in a quiet moment the reader senses that things are about to break loose.

Lean, spare, yet packed with philosophical musings, at less than 150 pages *Driven* is far too short; it could easily be double that without having a sense of being padded. On the plus side, the reader lingers over every sentence, savours every bit of narrative, aware that the book is like a Japanese brush painting, as important for what it leaves out as much as for what it includes.

ONE OF THE MOST ASSURED WRITERS AROUND, James Sallis has given readers a compelling, literate, and stylish action-thriller in the neo-noir mold. If you crave fast-paced action but find the novels of Lee Child wanting, *Driven* might be just the ticket.

Originally published on <http://www.reviewingtheevidence.com> , May 2012.

Since 2005 Jim Napier's reviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and on such websites as *Spinetinger*, *The Rap Sheet*, *Shots Magazine*, *Crime Time*, *Reviewing The Evidence*, *January* magazine, and *Type M for Murder*, as well as on his own award-winning site, *Deadly Diversions*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com