

COVER STORY

# AMERICAN



Cord Jefferson  
writes (and directs)  
his next chapter

By Danny Munso

# FIC TION





Cord Jefferson

Cord Jefferson's path to *American Fiction*—his directorial debut that is garnering massive critical acclaim and deserved awards-season buzz—began with a career setback. Before he became an Emmy-winning and in-demand television writer for series such as *Watchmen*, *Succession*, *The Good Place*, to name a few, he was a journalist for the now defunct website Gawker. Over the pandemic, he sold what would have been his first series as a showrunner, based on his and editor in chief/series co-creator Max Read's time at the website. Unfortunately, Apple killed the show before it ever really got off the ground. Jefferson was crushed...and then in December 2020, he found solace in Percival Everett's 2001 novel *Erasure*. Just 20 pages into the book, he decided to adapt it. Another 30 pages in, and he knew he also had to direct. The resulting film is both a timely satire of the way African American stories are treated by their white audiences and a deep character study of a man whose personal and professional life are in flux. By any measure, it's one of the year's best films.





The film, like the book, follows author and professor Thelonious Ellison, aka Monk (Jeffrey Wright), who becomes frustrated after his publisher rejects his latest book and requests that he write something more “Black.” Monk becomes aware of the success of *We’s Lives in Da Ghetto*, the debut novel by Sintara Golden (Issa Rae) that features what he considers a pandering and stereotypical portrayal of the African American existence but is being fawned over by predominantly white readers. In response, Monk pens his own “Black” novel as a joke: *My Pafology*, authored by the concocted alias of Stagg R. Leigh, a convicted felon and fugitive. That novel, of course, receives immediate interest from the publishing world. Monk is also experiencing turmoil in his family life. His sister Lisa (Tracee Ellis Ross) passes away of a heart attack, leaving him to care for their mother, Agnes (Leslie Uggams), who begins to suffer from dementia. He receives no help from his brother, Cliff (Sterling K. Brown), who is going through a divorce after coming out as gay. To Monk’s surprise and disgust, *My Pafology* not only sells to a publisher but receives inquiries about a film adaptation.







To begin the adaptation process, Jefferson had his assistant and the film's associate producer Hannah Offer read the book along with him. "She was a big help in this process from the beginning," he says. "I asked her to please go through and summarize the entire book in prose form in a Word document. Then I just sort of started to go over it and picking and choosing what felt like it definitely needed to stay in the movie and what stuff could go." Everett's novel contains the same satirical bent as its plot suggests, but it also leans a lot darker than Jefferson's film. For instance, Lisa does die in the book, but rather than a heart attack, she is murdered at Planned Parenthood by an anti-abortion zealot. And though the film discusses Monk's father's cheating, in the novel he discovers his dad had a whole other second family. Not only would those plot points and their fallout have taken up too much screentime, they didn't fit the tone Jefferson wanted to achieve. "It goes on bigger tangents that I knew we couldn't incorporate into the film or that I didn't want to incorporate to the film. I wanted to make it something that sort of felt a little bit lighter and had some more levity and was more inviting to people. So it was basically about stripping away the stuff I felt would dampen the storyline too much while maintaining the spirit of the novel."









While writing, Jefferson was reminded of the advice imparted by *Watchmen* showrunner Damon Lindelof (with whom Jefferson shared an Emmy in 2020), who simultaneously sought to honor the source material he was adapting and not be afraid to take bold risks in his storytelling. “What Damon would say pretty frequently is we didn’t have to maintain this specific text. You don’t have to stay so true to the text of the book,” Jefferson says of *Watchmen*’s DC origins. “But he’d say, ‘What we need to do with our ideas is to maintain the spirit of the book. Does this feel *Watchmen* or not?’ Sometimes with pitches, he would say, ‘That doesn’t feel *Watchmen*,’ or, ‘That doesn’t feel like it exists in the world.’ So that’s something I felt was necessary with this adaptation: What can I strip away in order to streamline it and make it more cinematic or make it a little bit more ebullient? And then when I add to the story, what can I add that still feels like the spirit of *Erasure*? What am I putting in that maintains the essence of what Percival Everett was trying to accomplish? That was how I started sifting through the outline of the novel and decided what to put in the screenplay.”







Theoretically, there could be a version of *American Fiction* that decided to lean completely into the satirical elements of the *My Pafology* storyline while forgoing the insightful look into Monk, his family and their relationships. Jefferson is too strong a writer to be interested in that version. Instead, he used Noah Baumbach's Oscar-nominated 2005 film *The Squid and the Whale* as his tonal North Star for *American Fiction*. "I wanted to make the material lighter [than the novel], but I wanted to make something satirical, never farcical," he says. "I sat down and thought of movies that felt like they had the tone I was aiming for, and *The Squid and the Whale* is my favorite of Noah's movies. It has this really great tone, where it has these sad and dramatic things like divorce, a cheating mother, the father has a heart attack. It has all of these things that are very intense while maintaining this really excellent humor throughout, where you're laughing through the painful moments." The film navigates such heavy topics as race and death with a levity that never undermines the story's emotional component. "I wanted the film to be funny without being slapsticky. I also wanted it to be dramatic without ever being morbid." He had one rule that helped him keep the script balanced. "When I thought a scene was becoming too funny, I always put that in check and pulled back on the humor, then I always tried to put something funny into every meaty scene. If a scene had any type of substance, I always wanted to make sure there was laughter, that you didn't leave on a low moment, because I think that keeps the movie bouncing and moving forward."





The subject matter explored in *American Fiction* has long fascinated Jefferson, even back to his days at Gawker, where he wrote a memorable essay titled “The Racism Beat,” about the expectation he as an African American writer would always want or have to cover the latest instance of racism that made the news, whether it was someone being called the N-word or another unjust death at the hands of police. For this script, he wanted to explore the similar pigeonholing of Black artists. The key for *American Fiction* is it manages the delicate balance of allowing the audience—especially a white one—to laugh at themselves in how they might consume or think about African American art while letting them examine that part of themselves in a deeper way. “I think sometimes when satire gets too silly and too farcical, it starts to alleviate the discomfort satire can sometimes elicit,” Jefferson says. “I think it sort of allows people to think, *Oh, this is just a goofy, silly comedy*. I wanted to make something that didn’t really let people off the hook all the time. It was important to me when I was sitting down to write that I never got too silly, because that would have watered down the satire if I allowed it to get crazy and campy and slapsticky.”

