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P.O. BOX 12327, BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA 94712

PHONE: (510) 559-8277 • FAX: (510) 559-8279



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Publicity Contact: Allegra Harris

aharris@northatlanticbooks.com

(510) 559-8277, ext. 35

Order Information: (800) 337-2665

www.northatlanticbooks.com

I, Stagolee
A Novel by Cecil Brown

A historical novel based on a true crime story, **I, Stagolee** recreates the tantalizing tale of the 1895 murder of Billy Lyons by St. Louis pimp, Lee Shelton (otherwise known as Stagolee) over a smashed Stetson hat and wounded pride. What makes this petty crime and tragic story unique is how it has endured over the years, evolving from ballad in the late 19th century, to oral poetry, to inner-city toast—a form of boastful narrative in rhyming couplets set to music, with black origins and, some say, the forerunner to rap.

*“I was standin’ on the corner
When I heard my bulldog bark;
He was barkin’ at the two men
Who gamblin’ in the dark.
It was Stagolee and Billy,
Two men who gamble’ late,
Stagolee throw seven,
Billy swore that he throwed eight....”*

New Orleans singer Lloyd Price is credited with popularizing the story in 1959 when he introduced his contagious dance-tune version to mainstream America. Since then, the tune has been recorded as jazz, blues, folk, soul, and rap by Cab Calloway, Jimmy Dorsey, Peggy Lee, Duke Ellington, hundreds of bluesmen, prisoners in the South, James Brown, Neil Diamond, Fats Domino, Wilson Pickett, Huey Lewis, Bob Dylan, the Grateful Dead, the Clash, and Nick Cave, among others. From a cold-hearted murderer of a family man, Stagolee morphs into an unlikely hero respected for standing up for himself and fighting oppression. From rural farms to urban ghettos and from former plantation slaves to Black Panthers, Stagolee has become a metaphor that structures the life of black males. The result of a long and enduring literary tradition, **I, Stagolee** is a fictionalized story that fills in the blanks and answers all the questions that history and the original crime left unanswered.

Cecil Brown is a professor of African-American Literature, Folklore, and the Theory of Narrative. He has published many novels, short stories, screenplays, and journals relating to African-American literature and life. He lives in the Bay Area, California, and is available for interviews.

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