Dodgers Teacher's Guide – Penguin Random House

BY BILL BEVERLY

ABOUT THE BOOK

Every once in a while, the publication of a novel seems to come at the perfect time. Bill Beverly's Dodgers is one of those novels: a coming-of-age narrative that navigates contemporary urban and rural landscapes with the same mythic gravitas that Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy brought to the mid-century American Southwest. After a drug raid throws their underground organization into chaos, the young protagonist, East, is sent with his volatile half-brother and two other young men to travel across the country on a mission to kill a judge. Their journey away from Los Angeles and into a blighted rural American landscape forces East to come to terms with the choices he has made, ultimately revealing the man he will choose to become.

With Dodgers, Bill Beverly has written a novel that is immediate, accessible, and poetic in its depictions of both brutality and grace.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BILL BEVERLY grew up in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and studied at Oberlin College and the University of Florida. His research on criminal fugitives and the stories surrounding them became the book On the Lam: Narratives of Flight in J. Edgar Hoover's America. He teaches American literature and writing at Trinity University in Washington, DC.

NOTE TO THE TEACHER

Dodgers is a literary and accessible coming-of-age novel featuring an African American protagonist. While race and identity play a role in the narrative, there's also much more: family, loyalty, self-determination, and personal responsibility. These themes help to connect the book with canonical texts as diverse as Hamlet, East of Eden, and In Cold Blood.

Beverly's protagonist, East, is a character that inspires empathy and challenges stereotypes. As a result, Dodgers is a novel that provides material for rich discussions and writing opportunities on contemporary issues and controversies.

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

In reviews, Dodgers has been compared to The Catcher in the Rye. In both narratives, the reader is invited to view the world through the perspective of a young male protagonist trying to navigate a path to adulthood. While it is easy to recognize heroism in traditional epic narratives or works of fantasy or science fiction, it can be harder to recognize heroism in contemporary realistic works. This is especially true if the protagonist's identity is different from one's own. Before you read, use a film like Maria Full

of Grace (2004) to begin a discussion of ways that characteristics of a hero's journey can apply to narratives with a contemporary realistic setting. How does viewing a non-traditional figure—in the case of Maria, a young Hispanic woman—as a hero challenge our assumptions about what constitutes heroism? What unique challenges does she face based on her gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status?

As you read Dodgers, consider the ways that East's gender, race, and socioeconomic status impact the way he interacts with the world. What challenges does he face simply because he is an African American male from an impoverished area of Los Angeles? In what ways is he heroic? In what ways isn't he? How does East's journey challenge your assumptions about heroism?

CHARACTERS

East (Antoine)

Ty

Walter

Michael Wilson

Fin

Perry

Mother

Part I: The Boxes

1. What is your first impression of East? What qualities set him apart from the other boys that work in the yard?

2. Examine Beverly's use of language on pages 9-10. How does the description of the drug raid contrast with the language used to describe the Jackson girl's death?

3. Find details suggesting that Fin holds a great deal of power. Describe the relationship between Fin and East. Why does East feel like he did not have a choice about whether or not to be part of Fin's crew?

4. What does Beverly reveal about East through the juxtaposition of East's visit to his mother and the description of the basement where he lives?

5. Describe your first impressions of Michael Wilson and Walter. Why do you think they were each selected to be a part of the team?

6. Explain the details of the job that Fin assigns to the boys. Why are they told to pay cash, wear Dodgers shirts, and drive a minivan? How will they get the guns they need?

7. What message do you think Fin is sending when he pulls the gun on East? Did East's response surprise you?

Part II: The Van

1. How does East demonstrate that he follows rules? How is he different from the other boys?

2. What does East do while they drive? What does Ty do? What impression does the changing landscape make on East? Contrast his response to the journey with Ty's response.

3. Describe the trouble that the boys get into in Las Vegas. Who do you think is the most responsible for the situation? What does East realize about his brother after the altercation in Vegas?

4. How does Michael Wilson try to justify his decision to stop in Las Vegas? Why doesn't East trust him? Why do the other boys consider him their leader?

5. Why did Michael Wilson get involved in Fin's drug business? How do his reasons differ from East's?

6. What makes East decide to drive the van? How does driving make him feel?

7. Contrast the response that East has at the scenic overlook to the response of the little kids in the white Navigator (81-2). What does East see that the kids seem to miss? What do the children experience that East seems to miss? Why do you think Beverly juxtaposes the two responses?

8. On page 85, East refers to Ty as "an unknowable child." What do you think "made Ty what he'd become"? Why does East feel responsible for losing Ty? Is he responsible?

9. How does East respond when Maggie touches him (89)? What does his response reveal about his character?

10. Why does Maggie remind East of the Jackson girl? Why do you think he responds to her the way he does?

11. What causes Ty to turn against Michael Wilson? Why is East surprised by Ty's actions?

12. What does East's memory of being beaten up in the third grade reveal about his relationships with his mother, his brother, and Fin?

13. What does East learn about the role that Walter plays in Fin's organization?

14. How does Beverly use description and setting to create mood and build suspense in the scenes involving the boys' attempts to acquire guns?

15. Describe the physical reaction East has to the events that occur at the barn. What does his reaction reveal about him?

16. Explain the reasons for East's visceral dislike of Matt and Philip (128).

17. How does the flashback on page 133 develop the relationship between East and Ty? Why do you think Beverly includes it at this point in the narrative?

18. Why is East upset about Ty's intervention after the gun transaction (136)?

19. How does Walter know that the judge is still in town?

20. What do the boys learn when they call Abraham Lincoln for final instructions? Who makes the decision to go ahead with the plan to kill the judge? Why do you think he makes this decision?

21. What suggests the judge recognizes Ty?

22. After shooting the judge, the boys disagree about the next steps they should take. What causes East to realize, "Nothing he said or did meant anything in Ty's mad story of the world"?

23. In chapter 14, Beverly switches his narration to refer to Ty and East as "the younger boy" and "the older boy" rather than by their names. How does his choice impact the unfolding of this chapter's narrative?

24. Contrast Walter and East's response to the shooting of Ty. Why do you think each boy responds the way he does?

25. What purpose does the flashback on pages 184-5 serve in the narrative?

26. What causes Walter and East to abandon the van?

27. What upsets East about the way that Martha Jefferson and Walter interact with each other? Why is he incapable of playing the role that Walter plays?

28. How does East respond to Walter's farewell? Why do you think he responds this way?

29. What does East's decision to retrieve the guns from the trash reveal about the way that he has changed?

Part III: Ohio

1. This section begins with a simile: "When he awoke, it was coming out of him like magma, like a volcano, punching a hole through the rock, spilling down his face" (211). How does this use of figurative language help develop East's character?

2. How does Beverly develop East's growing isolation and alienation? How does East rid himself of Martha Jefferson's car? Why doesn't he set it on fire the way his brother would have?

3. How can East tell that he frightens the girl making sandwiches in the gas station? What is it about him that frightens her?

4. What does East find on the outskirts of the town?

5. What purpose does the college that East visits serve in the narrative? Will college ever be an option for East? Explain your answer.

6. After showering at the college gymnasium, what is symbolically significant about the clothes East chooses to wear? What does he notice about his shoes?

7. Who are the Christian Wolves?

8. Why is the job at Slaughterrange attractive to East? What does it have in common with the work he used to do for Fin?

9. Examine specific ways that East demonstrates leadership during his time working for Perry. What does the way he manages his job reveal about his character? What does it suggest about his potential?

10. Why does East decide to contact Walter? What does Walter do for him?

11. What is Ty insinuating when he tells East, "Bet it wasn't no white lady's car you stole" (283)?

12. Why does East think that Ty is going to kill him? What reason does Ty give for not killing his brother? What does Ty tell East about his identity and his destiny?

13. At the end of the novel, what does East decide to do? Do you think he did the right thing?

1. The treatment of African Americans by law enforcement is an issue that has become a subject of our national dialogue. How does Beverly address this issue in Dodgers? How aware are the boys that they are potential police targets? (See pages 83, 102, 214). Do all lives in the novel matter equally? What is significant about the way the police respond to Ty's shooting? Would the response have been different if Ty had carjacked the white man at the gas station?

2. After the boys leave Los Angeles, Beverly is careful to suggest that crime and gangs are present in rural areas across America. Find specific examples that suggest the presence of organized crime outside of Los Angeles. How do these reminders of the presence of gangs impact the narrative?

3. Watch the following TED talk by Steven Levitt, author of Freakanomics: tiny.cc/levittvid. Based on this, how realistic is Beverly's depiction of the way the business aspect of the drug trade works?

4. Based on the description of Fin's houses, the behavior of the users, and the drug paraphernalia that East finds on the outskirts of town, what drug (or drugs) are involved? Research the growing epidemic of drug abuse in rural areas of America and propose a solution to help combat the crisis.

5. As East travels across America, he discovers a blighted landscape of small rural towns. In Ohio, Perry Slaughter comments on the way the landscape has changed: "All these boys . . . their daddies, fifty years ago, they worked foundry jobs, or machinists, or they were white collar: sales, teacher, bank. Everything. Drove to Cleveland, drove to Youngstown, had a pension, second house. Ohio exported more steel than Japan" (245). How has the loss of industry impacted the communities in Dodgers? What social problems are created when industries move overseas? What should be done about the communities that they leave behind? Focus your research on a specific community, like Detroit, that has been hit especially hard by globalization.

1. Beverly begins his novel with an epigraph from an 1849 slave narrative: The Fugitive Blacksmith. Examine the significance of starting Dodgers with a quote from a slave narrative. How does this epigraph help frame the novel? What does East's story have to do with slavery and freedom? (Note: The Fugitive Blacksmith is available through Project Guttenberg at tiny.cc/fugitiveblacksmith)

2. On page 74, Michael Wilson quotes "The boy stood on the burning deck," referencing East. This quote can be found in two poems: the 1826 poem "Casabianca" by Felicia Dorothea Hemans (tiny.cc/casabiancapoem1) and Elizabeth Bishop's allegorical 1965 poem by the same name (tiny.cc/casabiancapoem2). How does this allusion help develop character and theme?

3. The term Shakespearean is used to describe a text that evokes a sense of the theme of a work by William Shakespeare. On pages 280-1 East contemplates his understanding of the world: "Injury called for injury. No need for organization. The rules of living were inside out." Examine the ways that East's internal conflict over his obligation to the rules of revenge and loyalty to Fin evoke themes and characters from Hamlet or another Shakespearean tragedy.

4. Analyze Dodgers as a modern interpretation of the Biblical story of Cain and Abel.

5. Truman Capote's nonfiction masterpiece In Cold Blood examines the rural 1959 murders of the Clutter family. Evaluate the similarities between the way Beverly and Capote use language to establish setting, depict violence, and develop character.

1. Dodgers ends ambiguously, with the protagonist adopting a new name and heading east. Beverly's final observation is simple and haunting: "Alone, the first few stars in the unswept sky behind him. Then he was gone" (290). What do you think happens to East after the novel ends?

2. Research the differences between a hero and an antihero. Is East a hero or an antihero? Explain your answer using evidence from the text.

3. Examine the relationship between Perry Slaughter and East, a relationship that causes East some ambivalence. "Perry trusted him. But maybe trust was a trick. Maybe trust was the act that not trusting put on when there was no better alternative. Maybe trust was the trick that kept him working twelve,

thirteen, fourteen hours a day" (243). Is Perry taking advantage of East, or does he genuinely care for him? Does East genuinely care about Perry?

4. Beverly writes: "East could rally a gang of boys his age, shepherd junkies in and out safely" (98). Over the course of the novel, how does East demonstrate leadership characteristics? Support your answer with relevant and specific evidence from the text.

5. On page 207, after Walter leaves and East retrieves the guns they had thrown away, there is the observation, "He was a bad man now" (207). This is the only time the terms "bad" and "man" are used to refer to East. Why does Beverly include this observation at this point? Whose perspective does it reflect? Do you agree with this judgment?

6. How big of a role does race play in Beverly's novel? How would the story be different if East was a white kid?

7. Realistically, at the end of the novel, what options does East have? What external factors limit his options? In an ideal world, what should happen to him? What do you think would actually happen? Support your answer with logical evidence.

1. The novel begins with an observation: "The Boxes was all the boys knew; it was the only place." Consider the motif of boxes in the novel. What is the significance of naming the boys' LA neighborhood the Boxes? Why does East seem attracted to the inside of boxes?

2. The second epigraph is a quote from the song "Death or Glory" by The Clash. How does this song relate to the themes of Dodgers? Consider the quote as it relates to the four boys in the novel. What does it mean to strike a bargain with the world? What bargain does each of the boys in the novel strike? Are their bargains worth the price they pay?

3. Examine East's relationships with girls and women: "The old lady's face returned to him, her pointed voice, and he heard her talking to Walter as he walked in the cold. He saw her looking at him. Or sometimes it was the face of the Jackson girl, leaking blood and going to sleep on the street, or the screaming mouth of the girl in Wisconsin" (218). Why do you think East has difficulty interacting with females? Why do memories of the Jackson girl haunt him?

4. There is a great deal of meaning associated with both the East and the West. For example, there is an American tradition of heading west to seek prosperity or a new beginning. Beverly, however, chooses to center his narrative around a migration east. Analyze the symbolic significance of this choice.

5. The tension between East and his half-brother Ty is one of the central conflicts in the narrative. Although the two boys are close in age, they have little in common. Beverly writes: "His brother, his blood, had different bones" (116). Analyze the relationship between East and Ty, paying particular attention to the way that the author uses flashback to develop character.

6. At one point, Walter tells East "You and I are the same type. We're watchers. We manage" (155-6). Walter is the one character who remains loyal to East, and he's the only character that expresses love for East. Analyze the development of the relationship between Walter and East.

7. Consider the passage on page 211: "He sobbed until it gave out. But he knew as it did that it changed nothing. No words, no pictures, no thought. It was just a trick of the muscles, a release of the glands." What purpose does this scene serve in the narrative? How does it complicate or clarify your understanding of East's character? Why do you think he finds it so difficult to process emotions?

8. Consider the attraction of Slaughterrange. How is East's job at Slaughterrange similar to his job in the Boxes? Are there similarities between the clientele of Slaughterrange and the U's in the Boxes? What purpose does this comparison serve in the narrative?

1. East thinks of himself as a watchman. Ty refers to himself as a contractor. Perry Slaughter describes himself as person who makes deals. If you had to describe yourself using a single word, what would you say?

2. Midway through the narrative, East finds out that Fin's organization is in disarray; East is forced to make a decision about whether to abandon the mission or continue. Compose a narrative essay about a time when you had to make a significant decision on your own. How did you determine which action to take? Do you think you made the right decision?

3. While families can be a source of comfort and support, family relationships can also be challenging. This is especially true for East, who must navigate challenges in his relationships with his mother, father,

and younger brother. Compose a personal essay about a family conflict. How was the conflict resolved? What did it teach you about yourself?

4. In Dodgers, East forms a bond with Perry Slaughter that serves, to some extent, as a surrogate parent/child relationship for both of them. Compose a personal narrative about your relationship with a significant mentor.

1. Examine Beverly's use of figurative language, especially his use of personification and the imagery he uses to describe natural vs. urban landscapes. How is East's perception of the natural world different from romantic views of nature? Why do you think the mountains

make him physically ill? How does his perception of nature differ from his perception of urban areas?

2. What are the connotations of the names in the novel? For example, why is Michael Wilson called by both his first and last name? What about Perry Slaughter and Fin? How is East's name symbolic? How does this symbolism relate to his journey? Are any of the names ironic?

3. Throughout the novel, Beverly develops the motif of a "dark string" inside of East (consider passages on pages 80, 90, 128, 151, and 201). What might this motif symbolize? How does it help develop character and theme?

4. Beverly's prose is image-laden and lyrical: a style that may seem at odds with the genre of crime fiction. How does Dodgers both reflect and subvert conventions of the crime novel? How does Beverly's style impact the reader's understanding and experience of the narrative?

Bill Beverly's *Dodgers* was a finalist for an Edgar Award for Best First Novel in 2017.
I heard Bill talk about his book during a panel the day before the awards were given out last April in New York City.

I could tell there was something different about this story and I liked the way Bill talked about writing. *Dodgers* sounded different. I put it on my to-be-read list.
And so glad I did. *Dodgers* is one of the most original, unusual, haunting-in-its-own-way stories I've read in a long time.
That's in part because it's not straight crime fiction, though I completely agree with the Edgar Award nomination from Mystery Writers of America. (It didn't win Best First last year, but it has won a slew of other awards; check out the header on Bill's Twitter feed: https://twitter.com/BillBeverly.)
Bill was kind enough to answer a few questions by e-mail about *Dodgers*(below). His wry, insightful answers give you a flavor for his direct style. Then a more complete review follows.
In addition to *Dodgers,* Bill is also the author of *On The Lam: Narratives of Flight in J. Edgar Hoover's America.* He teachers at Trinity University in Washington, D.C.

Question: I'm wondering if you started out thinking *Dodgers* would be a 'crime novel' or a 'mystery' or just a 'novel'? And, by the way, what's the difference in your mind? Okay, sorry to pile on a bunch of questions here but did you ever think about putting a heavier police presence in the story, to make East and the others sweat a bit more as in a 'traditional' piece of crime fiction?

Bill Beverly: Really just a novel. I had just stopped trying to write a novel about a football coach, an overlong novel. I promised that if I ever tried again, I'd write something short. Short, bloody, and saleable.
But I think there are all kinds of sweat. All sorts of law. And East feels it himself. He needs no more police; he's not sweating over being arrested. He's sweating over what he's seen and done.

Question: Any struggles or issues (or doubts) about writing about gang kids from L.A.?

Bill Beverly: Sure. I woke up one night and thought, son, what do you think you're doing? I considered changing particulars, shifting the characters or setting, but decided to stick it out. I'd rather tell the story as it made most sense, and face questions later about my credibility and motivations. Ultimately the work defends itself, or fails to. Artists' statements can be likable and amusing, but they should be read suspiciously, if at all. They are extrinsic.

Question: Did you have this linear, wandering Odyssey-esque approach in mind when you started writing *Dodgers?* What was the specific point of inspiration?

Bill Beverly: It was and is a simple story. Yes. I had read a lot of fugitive stories. And *Huckleberry Finn.* And *Clockers.* And *Native Son.*

Question: Without giving too much away, did you know East would be your main focus at the outset? Did you know the fates of his mates in The Van when you put them on the road?

Bill Beverly: Yes. I changed Ty's return. My first thought was to have Ty show up wounded, on the brink of death. But the brothers' relationship helped me conceive a different end by the time I was drafting it. Fortunately, I was open to it when it came.

Question: East is haunted by a killing in L.A. but not so much by some other "events" as their travels progress. Do you agree? And ... why?

Bill Beverly: I think East is haunted by all of it. I think his own violence, and the sparseness and asceticism of his journey, show his horror. But, yes, the Jackson girl's face is the face that keeps swimming up, that he can't outrun.

Question: The American West & Midwest. Did you hit the road to write about these landscapes and cities and towns? Or have you driven it enough to know what you wanted to describe and what you wanted the boys in The Van to see and experience?

Bill Beverly: I have spent my life on these roads, trying to find words.

Question: I noticed in another online interview that you are a member of the James M. Cain fan club. Care to share a few thoughts? Do you revise and polish as much as he did (particularly with *Double indemnity)*? Most overlooked James M. Cain title?

Bill Beverly: Am a huge fan. Mr. Cain's house is on the other end of my zip code, a mile or so away. I drive by it now and then. I am typing this now over in his neighborhood, which used to feature a big dark woods, but now features a parking lot with this coffee shop behind it. I am in that shop with a cup of coffee. Mr. Cain would have had something elegantly bitter to say about the leveling of this woods. He would have made a young, earnest thug out of the developer. The developer would have gotten the girl, at least at first. I don't know what people overlook. I am an academic. In that world, all Cain is grievously overlooked. I look forward to reading *The Cocktail Waitress* this spring.
I revise like I'm cleaning the jail cell I'll die in. Like it's the only task in the world.

Question: From what I'm gathering online, *Dodgers* has been brewing for quite some time. What elements changed the most as it marinated in your mind?

Bill Beverly: I am lucky to have caught it. But clearly it brewed a long time before it was done. The end changed, as I've said, and Walter's character evolved steadily. I didn't have a good feeling for Walter for a long time, but I used him to solve problems.

Question: Favorite writers and current inspirations—fiction and non-fiction?

Bill Beverly: I grew up on Roald Dahl, and happily, that diet suited my child, so I have revisited him these last years, and discovered more. The writers whom I have most consciously learned from are Denis Johnson and James Baldwin. And in the last few years, I have grown fascinated with Gwendolyn Brooks, whose career is larger and richer than most people credit it being.

Question: And, what's next?

Bill Beverly: I'm in the middle of writing a little story right now. I hope someone will publish it. I'm grateful to *Dodgers* – it changed my life, it's not hyperbole to say that. To follow it is not simple, and I'm taking pains to get it right.

Don't Need A Diagram

Book reviews by Mark Stevens. Mostly mysteries. Some other fiction and non-fiction, too.

When American author Bill Beverly's debut novel Dodgers came out last year, straight away it received a five-star review here on Crime Fiction Lover. It went on to win the Gold Dagger at the 2016 CWA awards. Telling the story of a gang of black youths from LA who are sent on a mission to kill a man in all the way over in Wisconsin, it's a book that combines a road trip, fish-out-of-water elements, a coming of age story, and a fair bit of violence. It has been optioned for cinema, and with all the accolades that have come his way, we decided to meet up with Bill Beverly and find out more about his approach to writing, and what he's up to next...

What led you to writing a crime novel?
I wrote a crime novel because I grew up loving crime stories, whether they were filmed, whether they were on television, whether they were fictional or true. I tended to follow crime stories in the news, like the abduction of Patty Hearst, which happened in 1974. She was out there with the SLA for a year and robbing banks. There have been movies made of it but not really a brilliant one yet.

I always enjoyed stories about crime much more than policing stories. I wasn't really interested in the manhunt side of the story, I was much more interested in the fugitive and how she or he made their run and tried to get away, and the pressures of that sort of existence on a person who previously was at home with a family, had roots, and now is trying to either become someone else or stay themselves even though they have pulled out all those plugs.

I discovered Jim Thompson fairly early, and James M Cain who is the best writer who ever lived in my ZIP code in America. He lived on the other side of my postal code. He lived the last 40 years of his life at 6707 44th Avenue. I live on 34th in Hyattsville, Maryland, which is a little town rapidly growing fond of itself.

It always seemed to me that if Lolita, In Cold Blood and The Stranger could be considered literary, why couldn't Double Indemnity?

What is it that you think crime fiction lovers are loving about Dodgers and its main character, East?
As the book opens East is hard, other people don't like him, he is even arguably cruel in the first chapter. And it takes a while before he even takes centre stage. There are signs that he might be a sympathetic character that come in the second or third chapter, but it takes a while for him even to assume the mantle of being a protagonist. That's not really the way you're supposed to do it. Perhaps doing that makes a sort of journey of empathy that goes along with the road trip in the book. It may be that Dodgers asks readers to do a little more of the math of, 'Oh, okay, this is a sympathetic character and I figured that out myself,' rather than having it manifest from the beginning.

What do you make of the reception the book has received?
All I wanted was to finish a book and maybe somebody publish it and if I got a reader that would be a bonus, so it has done far better than we might have imagined, particularly in Britain, and as we say in the US, we're playing with house money.

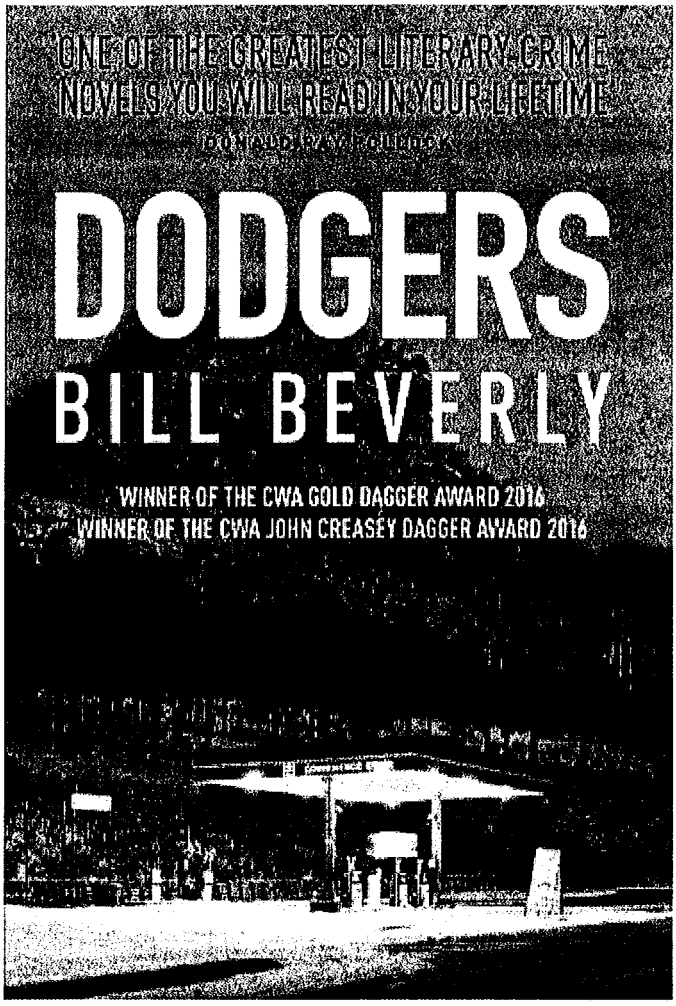
You grew up in the Michigan and now you teach in Washington, DC, but the story's home base is LA before it heads across the country. Why did you choose a setting that maybe you aren't so familiar with?
American history and literature are already full of western movements. Everything tends towards the Pacific Ocean, and that landscape of the West is this incredibly rich, symbolic bounty of our appropriating it from the people who lived on it. We erased them physically and historically from its face, and we imagine it like, 'Wow, it just dropped into our hands, it was given to us by God.' Until our current president, we imagined we would keep it looking as it is forever and it would be a symbol forever of our greatness and our toughness and the vastness of our resources.

That is something that I wanted East, as a kid who has never been outside Los Angeles and hasn't really thought outside Los Angeles, to encounter but I wanted him to go in a different direction. I wanted him to have that encounter with that landscape, which African Americans have experienced differently, I would suggest, to white Americans. My parents drove me through it several times when I was a kid and I have a different relationship to that sense of communal national ownership that has always been only tenuously offered in the symbolic world of black Americans. I wanted him to transit through that.

What are your thoughts on race as a theme or issue in Dodgers?
I think that issues kind of spring out of the rock of people. As a graduate student I had studied black characters' relationship to the landscape dating back to fugitive slave narratives. Their experience of the landscape, especially the vast in-between landscapes of the United States – it differs. That's one of the things that I discuss in On the Lam, which is the book that my dissertation became. I don't think thematically, in terms of intent. The theme is a product of character and of conflict and it arranges itself hopefully coherently once all the other diners have sat themselves at the table.

For you, what role do crime writers play as social commentators?
Writers like Laura Lipmann, Vu Tran and James Sallis are writing amazing stories about the state of the nation. Crime fiction is always about law on some level and the justice what we've decided holds us together, and whether it's being administered well or poorly, whom it's benefiting and whom it's penalising. I see crime fiction as actually much more intimately linked with social commentary than that which we usually lift up as capital-L literature. I think writers are intensely politically engaged, actually.

The road trip is a tradition in



American writing and movies, and in Dodgers we follow a van full of black youths from Los Angeles to an environment where people don't respond well to them. How did you get inside their heads?
Well, I only really had to be inside East's, and I lived with East for years and years, since 2003, when I first thought of the story, so I had a lot of time to acclimate or maybe to grow into the way East saw things. As far as the characters being black, I live a life in which, when I'm teaching, I talk to more black Americans than white Americans every day and I have more talk to me. I've been in that job for 14 years and it's not that different from my life before. I have read and studied black American lit since college and so while I appreciate the ways in which 400 years have driven my life and experience apart from black Americans, I do believe that we're more alike than different. What I really needed East to be able to do was to be credible first and foremost as a 15-year-old kid. An exteremly watchful, quietly very intelligent, fear-driven, very strategic, very rules-focused 15-year-old kid.

How does he change during the story?
It takes a while for East to even be able to see beyond the street where he's standing. Going to the grand vistas of the American West he gets first to see a long way and as he grows physically farther and farther away from the family and the organisation and the neighbourhood that has always been his focus. He mainly thinks about keeping it together here and now as solidly as possible, protecting himself, investing very little in anything beyond the necessities. Subsisting. It is slow and subtle perhaps, his beginning to consider other possibilities, and it is driven by aversion and fear and terror and the need to get away, but as that consciousness grows, it grows in part because he's crossing the country and in part because there are things to drive him away – through guilt, through shame, through fear – from where he's been.

What other things are you reading right now?
I just read a Mick Herron book and have another on my table upstairs. I have recently read You Will Know Me by Megan Abbott, Dragonfish by Vu Tran, I just put my hands on the new Viet Thanh Nguyen book, The Refugees, but I've only just opened it. I'm reading Todd Goldberg's Gangsterland, and I just read and loved Ian McGuire's The North Water. That book is stunning. I admired it enormously.

What's next for you?
The second book will be called Sophomore Effort as a way of deflating expectations from the very beginning.

No… I'm working on something and it involves at least one character from Dodgers and what's really nice is I don't have a deal, I don't have a deadline other than the deadlines I impose, and the story is kind of cutting across country into thickets I didn't imagine it would reach and finding bodies that I didn't even imagine were dead and because I don't have to hand it to anybody next month or the month after. I'm kind of letting it go and wander and stray and at the end there will have to be the reattachment of the leash and cutting and trimming and the usual butchery of where to begin and where to end. But, letting the dog wander and find what it needs is actually quite emancipating, so I'm not really talking much about it.