



## An eye for character

Filmmaker John Sayles tackles American imperialism on the page

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BOOK REVIEW:  
"A Moment in the Sun" By John Sayles, McSweeney's, 2010, Hardcover, 968 pages, \$29

The end of the 19th century was a busy time in American history: We fought a war with the Spanish and another to suppress the independence movement in the Philippines; Jim Crow scored a critical victory in the South; the Alaska Gold Rush got into full swing; and a president was assassinated.

John Sayles, a filmmaker as well as a fiction writer, ties these events together in "A Moment in the Sun," using close to a dozen major characters — black, white, Native American, Filipino, and Chinese — whose lives intersect. One thread follows a trio of African-American soldiers from Wilmington, N.C., who help liberate Cuba. They are then sent to defeat freedom fighters in the Philippines, even as the mixed-race city council in their hometown is overthrown by a white racist insurrection.

Sayles delineates his characters well; even though the narrative moves back and forth among their stories, it's never confusing. And he is a master of back story. A major theme running through the novel is the unimaginable complexity of people's lives in this first period of globalization, epitomized by his saga of a North China peasant who marries a white American farm boy and ends up running a hamburger stand in the Philippines.

Another recurrent theme is that "the fix is in." In the early scenes, a white miner in Alaska is conned out of his grubstake and then winds up in a prize fight, substituting for a man who just froze to death. He soon learns that he's not expected to knock his opponent out, but survive just enough rounds so that his promoters can collect on their bets. As the Americans invade the Philippines, the islands' Spanish defenders make a deal to put up just enough resistance so they won't get into trouble at home; in return, the Americans will protect them from being massacred by the Filipinos. As a crucial election comes up in Wilmington, nobody blinks an eye when the

votes for the white Democratic candidate exceed the number of registered voters. Even the upright African-American doctor marries his daughter off to a man she's never been intimate with, rather than shame his family with the "low-class" soldier who has fathered her child. And the nascent movie industry is doing all it can to make the brutal suppression of freedom abroad seem like a mission of liberation.

There are periods of history when all people can do is survive; this sounds like one of them. The characters are less the creators of historical events than subject to them, victims of a machine of domination and empire that proceeds under its own momentum. Sayles acknowledges the many ways that people resist, but he's chosen a period when resistance movements were mostly on the losing end — the Populists defeated, Jim Crow having its final victories and the Filipino independistas surrendering. He finds human dignity in the ways that people care for and find love for each other in the most extreme circumstances and in the lives they make for themselves in spite of their losses.

The novel ends with a real historical event, the electrocution of an elephant on Coney Island. You can never ignore an elephant. The same is true about the ramped-up colonialism and racism that ushered in the 20th century in America. No matter how much the media tried to make it look like something else, eventually people were going to notice.

**Mike Wold:** What was the starting point for "A Moment in the Sun"?

**John Sayles:** I stumbled across this story doing research on my last novel about the Spanish-American War. I kept running into "the Philippine insurrection" and I thought: "How come I'm 37 years old and never heard of this?" Doing some research about the same period I came across this racial coup in Wilmington, N.C. The two events are connected by race, but also by

the way the United States was thinking about itself.

So I figured, what if I had some African-American characters from Wilmington who have gone off to fight for the flag while their rights are being taken away? Other major characters are a working class white guy and a guy up from the South involved in the beginning of the movie industry because it's not just what happened, it's how the media treated what happened. What the media said is what people thought the war was.

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**M.W.:** One of your Filipino characters talks about American soldiers as cruel but also innocent like children. Can you talk about that a little?

**J.S.:** Americans want everybody to like them — American soldiers want to get down and smoke dope and shack up with women and feed kids candy bars and be liked. There's this sense of hurt when local people are angry at them for bombing their huts or killing their livestock. Whereas the Spanish knew they were there to

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