

Shetani's Sister

By Iceberg Slim

Introduction

By Justin Gifford

In the canon of African-American crime literature, there is not a more important writer than Robert Beck, better known as Iceberg Slim. The author of an autobiography, five published novels, a short-story anthology, an essay collection, and a spoken-word album, Beck was the dominant black popular writer of the post-Civil Rights Era. In 1967, he released his masterwork, *Pimp: The Story of My Life*, a memoir of his twenty-five year career as a pimp on the streets of Milwaukee, Chicago, Cleveland, and Detroit. The book was written in such specialized street vernacular that Beck's white editors insisted he include a glossary to translate terms like "bottom woman" (pimp's main woman), "stable" (a group of prostitutes belonging to one pimp), and "circus love" (to run the gamut of sexual perversions). Even though *Pimp* was released as a mass-market paperback and was ignored by the mainstream literary establishment and the white public, it sold millions of copies at newspaper stands and black bookstores, in barbershops and liquor stores. *Pimp* became a classic on military bases, in prison libraries, and in black neighborhoods from Harlem to South Central Los Angeles. According to Beck's publisher—Holloway House Publishing Company—*Pimp*'s popularity helped make him the best-selling black American author of all time.

Beck has arguably had greater influence on contemporary black literature than any writer of the twentieth century. In the 1970s, he inspired many black authors—including Donald Goines, Odie Hawkins, Joe Nazel, and Omar Fletcher—to write their own stories of pimps, hustlers, and ghetto revolutionaries and publish them with Holloway House. Although a third-tier press on the margins of the legitimate publishing industry, Holloway House became the center of an underground literary renaissance of black crime fiction. Over four decades, the company published hundreds of "black experience" novels by dozens of novelists who emulated Beck. In the twenty-first century, such black female novelists as Sister Souljah, Vickie Stringer, Nikki Turner, and Wahida Clark have reimagined his pimp literature for an expanding female audience, giving rise to the genre of "street fiction." Often self-published and sold online and on street corner tables, street fiction is now one of the driving forces of the African-American literary market, with hundreds—if not thousands—of titles composing the genre.

Beck has also had a tremendous impact on modern black music and popular culture. *Willie Dynamite*, *The Mack*, and many other blaxploitation films of the 1970s owe their slick style and streetwise protagonists to his literature. Comedians Dave Chappell and Chris Rock each cite *Pimp* as a cornerstone of their work. The first gangster rappers Ice-T and Ice Cube chose their monikers in honor of Iceberg Slim, and

they modeled their ultra-cool personas after him. Hip-hop legends Snoop Doggy Dogg, the Notorious B.I.G., and Mos Def have all cited Beck as a key influence. Jay-Z, the most successful rap mogul of all time, used to refer to himself as Iceberg Slim when he was getting his start as an artist. The Shakespeare of urban lingo, Beck gave literary expression to the secret world of pimps, streetwalkers, con artists, and players who occupied America's ghettos and prisons. For nearly fifty years, black writers and entertainers have looked to his works as the principal source of uncompromising black creativity.

Beck's life itself spanned black America's development from the Great Migration during World War I to the so-called urban crisis of the late twentieth century. He was born on August 4, 1918 in Chicago near the time of the deadly Chicago Race Riot and the infamous Red Summer, and he died in Los Angeles on April 30, 1992 [stet], the second day of the Rodney King Riots. Beck's parents—migrants from Nashville, Tennessee—divorced when he was young, and his mother, Mary, married a man who owned a cleaning shop in Rockford, Illinois. Beck had a happy childhood. He was a good student and member of the boy scouts, and he attended church regularly. At thirteen, he encountered his first pimps, men who frequented the beauty shop his mother owned. Mary fell in love with one of the hustlers that hung out in her establishment, and in the early 1930s, she moved with her son to Milwaukee's Bronzeville to follow him. The hustler eventually disappeared from their lives, but for Beck it was too late. The loss of his stable life in Rockford "street poisoned" [stet] him, as he called it. He refused to go back to school, and he started hanging out along Bronzeville's famous Walnut Street. During the Depression, he was arrested half a dozen times for everything from larceny to immoral conduct to suspicion of rape. He attended some schools, including a semester at Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute, but by eighteen, he was on the pathway to pimping. His first efforts were utter failures. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, he was arrested for advising a felony and carnal knowledge and abuse, and he served lengthy sentences at both the Wisconsin State Reformatory and Wisconsin State Prison. It was at these institutions that he got his first real education in the game from cliques of older pimps and smooth-talking players. When he was released from prison in 1942, he headed to Chicago, where he hoped to make it on the "fast track."

In Chicago, Beck met Albert "Baby" Bell, a notorious Chicago pimp and enforcer for the Jones Brothers. They controlled the illegal gambling racket in the city targeted at working-class African Americans, known as policy, and they were among the richest black men in the world. From Bell, Beck painstakingly learned the "book," that informal list of rules, regulations, and rundowns that pimps used to turn out young women. Over a few years, he slowly built up a reputation as one of the South Side's rising stars. In 1944, he was arrested for violation of the Mann Act, when two of his women turned him over to the police. He was sentenced to Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary, the largest prison in the United States. Beck had always been voracious reader of fiction; during his previous prison terms, he had developed a passion for Oscar Wilde, George du Maurier, and Henry Miller. At Leavenworth, he became interested in psychoanalysis, after his psychiatrist tried to convince him that all pimps had an unconscious hatred of their mothers. He read the works of the popular psychologist Karl Menninger, Sigmund Freud, and Karl Jung, not so he could resolve his issues with his own mother or to go straight, but rather to deepen his understanding of how to pimp more effectively. Many of the pimps and

prostitutes Beck had encountered in his life had been abused or abandoned by their parents from a young age, and after his time at Leavenworth, he employed psychoanalysis as a weapon to gain the upper hand in his dealings with men and women in the sex trade. After he was released from Leavenworth in 1946, Beck spent the next fifteen years pimping his way through cities across America. In 1961, he was arrested for the last time and incarcerated in a seven-by-three-foot cell in the Chicago House of Corrections, an ancient, decaying institution built in the nineteenth century. After spending nearly a year in solitary confinement, and with his mother dying in Los Angeles, Beck vowed to give up the pimp game forever.

In Los Angeles, Beck began his new life as an author. After working for a number of years as an exterminator, he wrote *Pimp: The Story of my Life* in collaboration with his wife, a white woman named Betty Shew [stet]. From 1967 to their breakup in 1978, Beck and Shew created some of the most significant crime literature of the era. With titles such as *Trick Baby* (1967), *Mama Black Widow* (1969), *The Naked Soul of Iceberg Slim* (1971), and *Airtight Willie & Me* (1979), Beck established himself as the definitive voice of black America's urban underworld. He enjoyed minor celebrity status when *Trick Baby* was made into a blaxploitation film in 1972, and he appeared on talk shows and in newspaper and magazine interviews, condemning the glorified pimp image. He famously walked six miles a day, haranguing aspiring pimps and prostitutes on the street, hoping to steer them away from the profession. After his split with Shew, Beck disappeared from public view almost altogether. In 1982, he remarried, a woman named Diane Millman, with whom he shared the last decade of his life. However, he lived alone in a studio apartment on Crenshaw Avenue. He was visited by his daughters from his first marriage, as well as admirers such as Mike Tyson, but he wrote a lot in solitude during these final years. Despite his failing health and struggles with diabetes, he composed two final novels, *Night Train to Sugar Hill* and *Shetani's Sister*. He decided not to publish them with Holloway House. Over the years, the company had gained a reputation for not paying its authors their proper royalties, and Beck chose to hide the books away in a drawer rather than allow the company to make one more dime off of his work. In 1992, he died broke and virtually forgotten by the public.

How could an author who has sold millions of books and had such a profound effect on black literature and culture pass away in obscurity? The answers to this question are complicated. First, Beck never quite fit in with his literary contemporaries. He lived on the South Side during the Chicago Renaissance at the same time as Richard Wright, but he was not considered part of that movement. He attended Tuskegee almost at the same moment as Ralph Ellison (they missed each other by months), but Beck could not really be called a modernist. He admired both James Baldwin and Malcolm X, and he tried to imitate their works in his own writings, though his sensational criminal past kept him from becoming a member of the radical literati. As a former pimp, Beck had views on women that were out of step with the feminist writers of the 1970s, such as Toni Morrison and the newly rediscovered Zora Neale Hurston. He was a mess of contradictions; though he dismantled the glamorous image of the pimp in his works, he often did so by representing women as the victims of graphic and disturbing violence. Beck also never quite got the recognition he deserved, because he never escaped from the third tier press Holloway House. Unlike crime writers Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Chester Himes—who moved from the world of pulp magazines and

paperback originals to more literary imprints—Beck remained stuck in the ghetto of cheap paperback publishing his whole life. He was probably paid only a fraction of the money he deserved, and his works were advertised as disposable pornography.

With *Shetani's Sister* we have an opportunity to appreciate Beck from a new perspective. It is in many ways his most mature fictional work, a cross between a detective novel and the pimp literature that made him famous. It provides a powerful glimpse into Los Angeles's criminal underworld, that "sidewalk parade" of the "half-naked hookers, square pushovers and sissies [that] clogged the streets and bars. Sex, crime, booze, and dope ruled the treacherous night. The melded odors of bargain colognes and steamy armpits rode the sweltering air like a sour aphrodisiac for gawking male bangers." Beck's prose in *Shetani's Sister* is as good as any of his earlier works—taut, evocative, and layered with vernacular torn straight from the street corner. At the center of the story are two antiheroes. One is Sergeant Russell Rucker, a city vice detective who struggles with alcoholism and a fierce temper, but who attempts to clean up prostitution and police corruption. There is also Shetani, a twenty-five-year veteran pimp from Harlem, who controls a stable of sixteen prostitutes with violence and daily doses of heroin. Much like the masterpiece *The Wire*, *Shetani's Sister* is a story told through the alternating perspectives of both the criminals and the cops. Both groups are as courageous as they are deeply flawed, and as the novel unfolds, their competing worldviews careen toward a spectacular and devastating collision. Beck inspired a literary genre and a cultural movement with his singular vision of America's mean streets. Read his last novel and you will know precisely why.