

WRITER FROM THE STREETS GETS A NEW LOOK

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'Low Road: The Life and Legacy of Donald Goines'

THREE STARS out of 4 stars

By Eddie B. Allen Jr.

St. Martin's Press 200 pages \$23.95

Of all the icons Detroit has launched into popular culture, author Donald Goines has probably waited longest to get his due.

His fans, of course, know the reason. With 16 internationally published novels bearing titles such as "Dopefiend" and "Whoreson," savoring Goines has always been best done in secret, a guilty pleasure for generations craving the raw and real tales of street life.

Goines told it like it was better than anyone because he was writing what he lived and what had landed him in a jail cell. Now "Low Road: The Life and Legacy of Donald Goines" gives the author's fans an engrossing and in-depth look at how Goines came to know the streets so well, how he traded in his middle-class roots for a life of pushing women and shooting heroin, and ultimately a violent death in 1974 at age 35.

Eddie B. Allen Jr. does such a fine job peeling back the layers of Goines' life, the book is bound to bring scores of new readers to Goines' work. Rapper DMX, who starred in a film adaptation of "Never Die Alone," penned the book's foreword. "I was locked up when I first heard of him, when I first read his books," the rapper writes. "He wrote about a lot of things I could relate to. A lot of the characters I knew."

Whatever admiration Allen, also a Detroiter, has for Goines' work, he turns out an even-handed cautionary tale. Allen's book is a better guide to the streets than the hip-hop music that is quick to salute street life but far too silent about its dangers.

Goines was born in Detroit to what looked like a life of privilege and promise. His family sent him to school at Sacred Heart and treated him to horseback riding lessons in Canada, even brought him round to meet their pal boxing great Joe Louis. But problems at home, including abuse by his strict father, forced Goines into the first of a lifetime of bad decisions. At age 15 he joined the Air Force, using a fake ID. By the time he came home from war, he was a drug addict determined to do whatever he needed to keep his high going.

At times, Allen delves into excruciating detail, easily forgiven given the fact Goines' family gave him unprecedented access to the writer's notes and manuscripts. There is as much to learn about Detroit history as there is to discover about Goines' struggle and his transition from pimp to paperback king. "Try and reveal the sickening, the madness, the horror of drug addiction in the ghettos," reads one of many memo Goines wrote to himself about his creative process. "It's a fact that whitey has no idea of just how many young black men are getting dependent on heroin."

The book's only letdown is its failure to offer insight into the mystery of Goines' death. He died in a fashion as grim as his writing: the victim of a shotgun blast to the head during a break-in at his Highland Park apartment.

Friends and family continue to speculate, along with police, that the murder was a payback of some sort.

Whatever the truth, Allen has at least shed some overdue light on his life.

NICHOLE CHRISTIAN is a Free Press editorial writer.

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