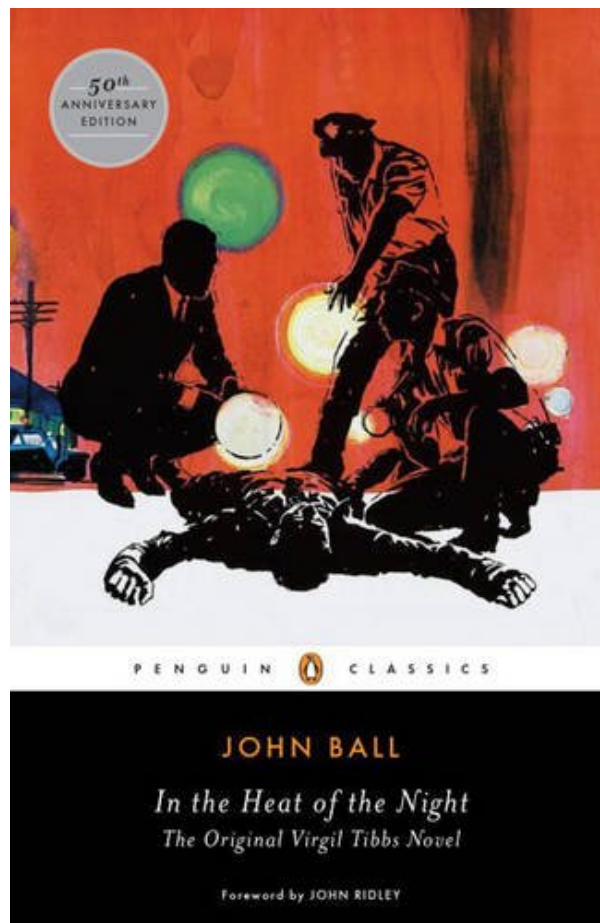
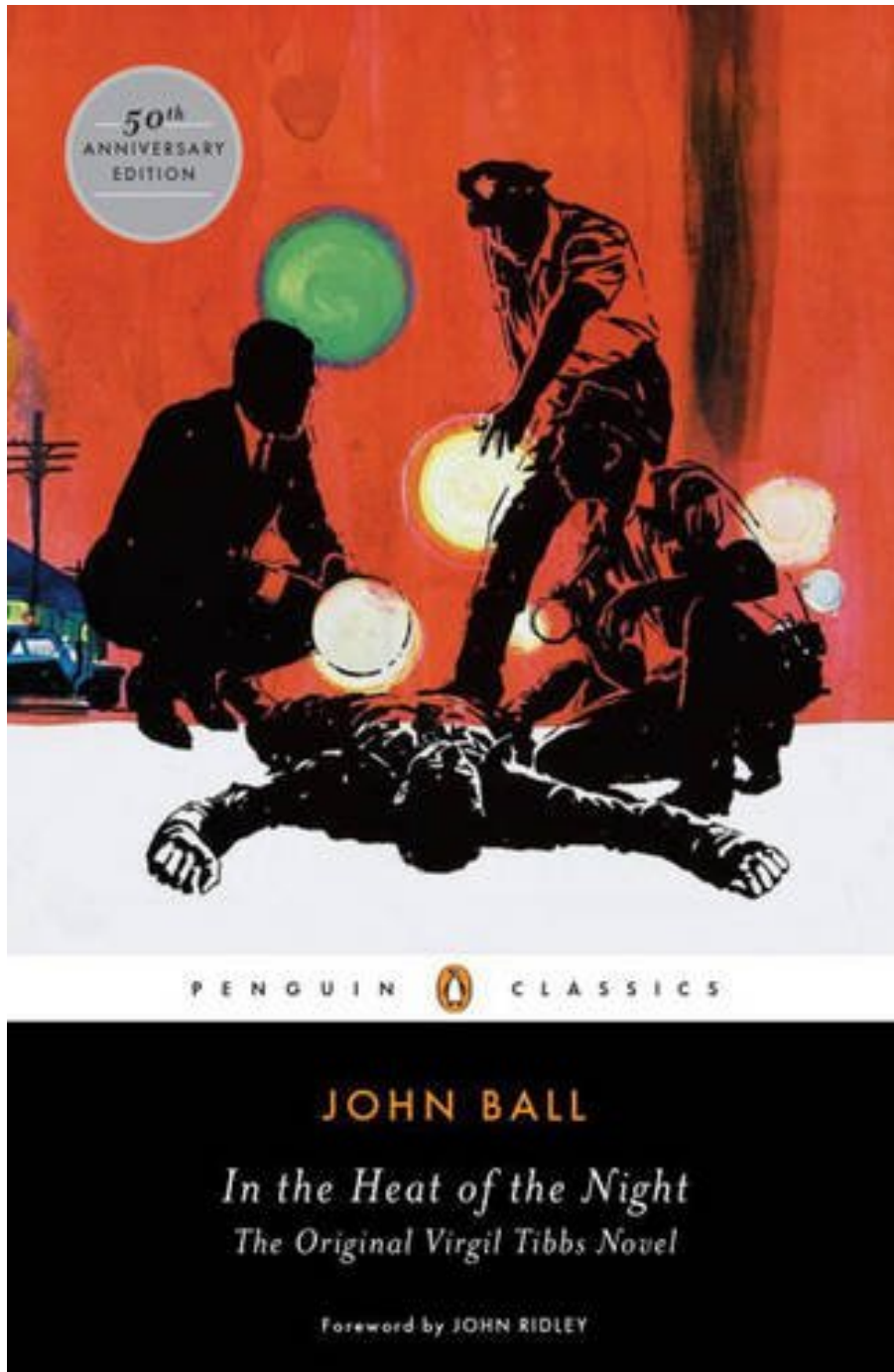


IN THE HEAT OF THE NIGHT: THE ORIGINAL VIRGIL TIBBS NOVEL (PENGUIN CLASSICS) BY JOHN BALL



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Review

“A landmark among expressions of racial justice that retains its power today . . . A resonant take on southern justice . . . that has had more lasting impact than works many times its size.” —John Ridley, from the Foreword

“[Virgil Tibbs is] a remarkable individual who may well end up in the great detective category.” —The New York Times

About the Author

John Ball (1911–1988) wrote more than thirty novels across numerous genres; his Virgil Tibbs series remains his best-known work. Born in Schenectady, New York, he grew up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and worked briefly as a part-time police officer in Los Angeles.

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In The Heat Of The Night: The Original Virgil Tibbs Novel (Penguin Classics) By John Ball.

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IN THE HEAT OF THE NIGHT: THE ORIGINAL VIRGIL TIBBS NOVEL (PENGUIN CLASSICS) BY JOHN BALL PDF

A 50th-anniversary edition of the pioneering novel featuring African American police detective Virgil Tibbs—with a foreword by John Ridley, creator of the TV series *American Crime* and Oscar-winning screenwriter of *12 Years a Slave*

“They call me Mr. Tibbs” was the line immortalized by Sidney Poitier in the 1967 Oscar-winning movie adaptation of *In the Heat of the Night*, which won the Edgar Award for Best First Novel and the Crime Writers’ Association Gold Dagger Award and was named one of the 100 Favorite Mysteries of the 20th Century by the Independent Mystery Booksellers Association. Now fans of classic crime can rediscover this suspense-filled novel whose hero paved the way for James Patterson’s Alex Cross, George Pelecanos’s Derek Strange, and other African American detectives.

A small southern town in the 1960s. A musician found dead on the highway. It’s no surprise when white detectives arrest a black man for the murder. What is a surprise is that the black man—Virgil Tibbs—is not the killer but a skilled homicide detective, passing through racially tense Wells, South Carolina, on his way back to California. Even more surprising, Wells’s new police chief recruits Tibbs to help with the investigation. But Tibbs’s presence in town rubs some of the locals the wrong way, and it won’t be long before the martial arts-trained detective has to fight not just for justice, but also for his own safety.

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Character-driven examination of Social Issues Disguised as a Mystery

By Ian Fowler

When Sam Wood, an officer with the Wells police department discovers the body of a famous Italian conductor lying in the road, it spells trouble for the small Carolina town. For the conductor was in town to perform at a musical festival designed to lift the town's sagging economy. The chief of police, Bill Gillespie, is no detective. But salvation inadvertently arrives when Wood arrests a black man with a wallet full of money in the train station. That man, Virgil Tibbs, a detective from Pasadena, quickly becomes Gillespie's out card. But as the tenacious Tibbs begins to hunt down the killer, there are plenty of people in town who prefer that their racial hierarchy remain intact, regardless of the truth.

For those who have seen the film "In the Heat of the Night" (and if you haven't, your loss), reading the original novel by John Ball will be something of a revelation. Not because the film changed the plot. While many details are altered in the plot (the victim in the film was a Northern industrialist, the town's name was Sparta), the film kept the same killer and motive. The revelation for fans of the film is the huge difference in how Ball wrote his characters and how they were portrayed in the film.

Tibbs is uber-competent, much as portrayed in the film. He knows how to investigate murders, and brings a veteran's confidence to the proceedings. However, unlike Sidney Poitier's simmering portrayal, Ball's Tibbs rarely displays impatience with the racial situation in Wells (contrast Poitier's angry delivery of the famous line "They call me MR. TIBBS" with the line as Ball wrote it, which suggests perfect calm). He understands that raging at every white man in sight is not going to change anything. He simply wants to do the job assigned to him, and not get killed for his skin color.

Gillespie in the book is not as competent as Rod Steiger's portrayal in the film. While the film didn't reveal much about the character's past, it did create the impression that Gillespie, while not the brightest bulb, has at least a rudimentary understanding of police work. In the book, Gillespie is a former prison guard who gets the job of police chief precisely because he will uphold the ingrained racial system of Wells. Throughout the book, much like the film, he is hostile to Tibbs, but gradually coming to respect him.

Finally, there's Sam Wood. In the film, Sam is basically a plot device. First he arrests Virgil, then he gets to be a murder suspect. In the book, Sam is fully fleshed-out character. He's earnest, dependable, and in the end, quite respectable. Initially expressing his fair share of racist attitudes, Wood develops legitimate respect for Tibbs' abilities as a detective, particularly as he realizes that Gillespie is no role model, and that Tibbs is more than simply the color of his skin.

While Ball is interested in examining race relations, he seems far more interested in telling a murder mystery. Plot-twists and blind alleys abound, as Tibbs and Gillespie zero-in on various suspects, only to have them fizzle-out. Nonetheless, he does an excellent job of following his characters as they struggle with the

irrational prejudices that have shaped their lives, and the arrival of a man that makes lies of those prejudices. While the final solution of the mystery isn't particularly gratifying, the ride is, especially the character development and examination of social issues.

15 of 17 people found the following review helpful.

better on race than its more serious rivals

By Orrin C. Judd

Winner of the Edgar Award for Best First Mystery and subsequently made into an Academy Award winning movie and successful TV series, *In the Heat of the Night* is only a decent mystery, but it's a great book about race. Though the book is different in many respects from the better known film, at its core it is still about the dilemmas faced by a proud black detective who is forced to help with a murder investigation in the Deep South, and by the white police officers who are forced to confront the disparity between their prejudices and the reality of this competent, likable fellow officer.

Though the main clash of characters occurs between Virgil Tibbs and Chief Gillespie--particularly in the movie where Poitier and Steiger were the stars--in many ways the key character in the novel is Sam Wood, the conscientious patrolman, later a suspect in the crime, who is young enough, open-minded enough, and resentful enough of Gillespie to give Tibbs a fair shake. More than anything, Sam is enamored with his own role as a law enforcement officer. He's clearly looking for a role model and it's fascinating to watch him struggle with the idea that Virgil, though black, may be the ideal person to emulate.

The racial and moral questions that animate the story help to overcome some rather stilted dialogue and a too frequent recourse to ending scenes with a shocking cliffhanger revelation from Virgil--for instance : "You see, sir, I know it for a fact that you've got the wrong man." Then again this was Ball's maiden effort, and some lapses into formula are to be expected. The book deserves to be read and remembered for its groundbreaking presentation of an unreservedly heroic black and its salutary message : that men should be judged by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin. The online magazine Salon ran a column several years ago suggesting that the film version of *In the Heat of the Night* might be one of the most profound movies ever made about race in America. The book too can stand its own ground alongside other, more "literary," texts like *Invisible Man* and *Native Son*; and it's message of hope and the possibility of progress has proven it more prophetic than its more revered rivals.

GRADE : A-

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

Enjoyable mystery

By Wanda Tillman

This is a good book, almost an excellent book, but for once in my life I have to say that I liked the movie better. As a book, it is a good who-dun-it mystery and I recommend it to anyone who likes mysteries. As social commentary, it isn't, and it doesn't have to be, but in comparing the book to the movie, the movie is absolutely social commentary, powerfully so, and the book just goes along its quiet way and tells a story about a little town with some problems and how they resolve. A good story, a good book, I like it a lot.

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