

# The Case of the Missing Interracial Romance: An Ideological Critique of *Kiss the Girls*

by William B. Hart

*The Birth of a Nation* may be the earliest and certainly is one of the most famous films adapted from a novel set in North Carolina. The 1915 film directed by D.W. Griffith is based on novels by North Carolina author Thomas Dixon, Jr., in which Ku Klux Klan members are depicted as heroes. But North Carolinians can also perhaps lay claim to the more progressive *In the Heat of the Night* (1965), the novel by John Ball, which is set in “the heat of the Carolinas in August,” although the 1967 film adaptation is moved to Sparta, Mississippi.<sup>1</sup> In both novel and film, *In the Heat of the Night* is a story of a big-city, black police detective trying to solve a murder in a small, closed, racist, Southern community. *The Birth of a Nation*, *In the Heat of the Night*, and a more recent novel, James Patterson’s *Kiss the Girls* all explore, in different times and ways, the Old North State’s complex racial history.

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ABOVE James Patterson

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<sup>1</sup> John Ball, *In the Heat of the Night* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) 1; *In the Heat of the Night*, adapt. of novel by John Ball, Dir. Norman Jewison, Perf. Sidney Poitier and Rod Steiger (Mirisch, 1967). The 1988–94 television series adaptation also retained the Mississippi setting, instead of the novel’s “Carolina” setting. *The Birth of a Nation*, adapt. of novels by Thomas Dixon, Dir. W.D. Griffith, Prod. David W. Griffith Corp., Perf. Lillian Gish, Mae Marsh, and Henry B. Walthall (Epoch Producing Corporation, 1915).

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## THE CRIME: MISSING AND DISTORTED IMAGES OF BLACKNESS

"There will be no love affair in *Kiss the Girls*. Whatever takes place in that regard will happen after the movie is over – and the audience can take the action wherever they want."—David Brown, *Kiss the Girls* Producer<sup>2</sup>

James Patterson's Alex Cross series consists of seventeen books written over the past twenty years. *Kiss the Girls* (1995) is the second novel in the series, but the first to be adapted to film, with Morgan Freeman as Detective Alex Cross. *Along Came a Spider* (1992), the first novel in the Alex Cross series, was adapted to film in 2001 with Freeman again playing the psychologist/detective. A film based on the twelfth book in the series, *Cross* (2006), has finished production and will be released in 2012. Tyler Perry will replace Morgan Freeman in the lead role.<sup>3</sup>

In the novel *Kiss the Girls*, black detective, Alex Cross, and white kidnap and assault victim, Kate McTiernan, track down a pair of serial killers in the Research Triangle area of North Carolina. Along the way, Cross and Kate develop an intimate relationship. However, in the 1997 film adaptation starring Morgan Freeman and Ashley Judd, the romantic element of this interracial relationship is missing. In response to *Kiss the Girls*, and other similar films, bell hooks notes this absence and suggests a theory for why the romance is missing: "It's fine for black men to kill as many white women as they want, but they can't be seen having sex with them, and they really can't be seen loving them." She then asks: "Who is this a taboo for? There is not a taboo for regular people. It's just a taboo for people in Hollywood who are shaping these images."<sup>4</sup> As a social activist and literary and film critic, hooks examines films that have been labeled progressive in terms of race, sex, and class to determine whether these films are truly progressive – that is, whether they are "encouraging and promoting a counterhegemonic narrative challenging the conventional structures of domination that uphold and maintain white supremacist capitalist patriarchy." She finds that most of these films have progressive elements and notes a "mingling of [ideological] standpoints."<sup>5</sup> For example, the film *Kiss the Girls* has a black actor playing the lead role, but the film has excluded the interracial romance. While bringing black actors to center stage is a step forward, as hooks points out, "merely putting black characters in a film does not assure that the work acts, whether covertly or overtly, to undermine racism.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in "Kiss Girls Goodbye" Script to Paramount," *Reading Eagle* [Reading, PA] 17 May 1995: A14.

<sup>3</sup> James Patterson, *Kiss the Girls* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995); quotations from this novel will be cited parenthetically from this edition. *Kiss The Girls*, adapt. of novel by James Patterson, Dir. Gary Fleder, Perf. Morgan Freeman, Ashley Judd, and Cary Elwes (Paramount Pictures, 1997). *Along Came a Spider*, adapt. of novel by James Patterson, Dir. Lee Tamahori,

Perf. Morgan Freeman, Michael Wincott, and Monica Potter (Paramount Pictures, 2001). *Alex Cross*, adapt. of Cross by James Patterson, Dir. Rob Cohen, Perf. Tyler Perry, Matthew Fox, and Rachel Nichols (to be released in 2012). In addition to his Alex Cross series, Patterson also has the *Women's Murder Club* series, which was adapted as a TV series in 2007–2008 and adapted for a series of video games on PCs and smartphones. Sony even released an Alex Cross Facebook game, *Catch a Killer*, in late 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Su Avasthi, "H'wood to Black Men: Buss Off!" *New York Post* 2 Oct. 1997: 39; subsequently cited parenthetically.

<sup>5</sup> bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Sex and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996) 3; subsequently cited parenthetically.