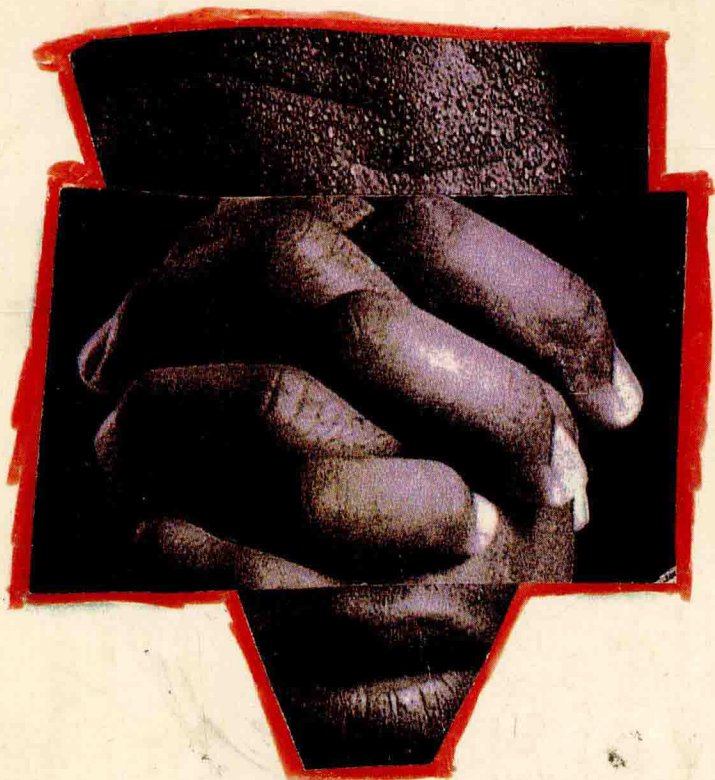


NATIONAL BESTSELLER

WAY PAST COOL



A NOVEL

JESS MOWRY

A STELLAR LITERARY DEBUT THAT SHOULD BE READ BY ALL OF

Way Past Cool

A Novel

by Jess Mowry



Harper Perennial

A Division of HarperCollins Publishers

A hardcover edition of this book was published in 1992 by Farrar, Straus & Giroux. It is here reprinted by arrangement with Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

WAY PAST COOL. Copyright © 1992 by Jess Mowry. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information address HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022.

HarperCollins books may be purchased for educational, business, or sales promotional use. For information please write: Special Markets Department, HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022.

First HarperPerennial edition published 1993.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Mowry, Jess, 1960—

Way past cool : a novel / Jess Mowry. — 1st HarperPerennial ed.
p. cm.

I. Title.

[PS3563.0934W3 1993]

813'.54 — dc20

92-54377

ISBN 0-06-097545-8 (pbk.)

94 95 96 97 RRD 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

Way Past Cool

Also by Jess Mowry

Rats in the Trees

Children of the Night

To Susan Daniel
for taking the chance.

And for Jeremy
just 'cause that's what it is

Way Past Cool

————— “Gordon! GUN!” screamed Curtis, diving off his skateboard onto trash-covered concrete.

Gordon dove from his board too, all 180 pounds rolling and skidding then scrambling warp-seven behind a dumpster as a full-auto fired from a battered black van. Velcro ripped and his backpack burst open. Books and a binder tumbled out. Another gun joined the first, a rhythmic steely stutter of Uzis in chorus. Bullets pocked brick, sending chips whizzing and spattering to a whine of ricochets that sounded just like the movies. The dumpster rang dully as silver dents stitched its rusty sides.

Gordon was a born leader, first to risk his butt, with a natural balance of brains and balls tempered by a healthy helping of fear. As with all good leaders, his decisions came fast under fire; if they happened to be the right ones, so much the better. But there were times when a gang leader had to do stupid things—like jumping to his feet and offering his head and shoulders as an easy target while he

cupped his hands to his mouth and bawled, "DOWN, suckers!"

The warning wasn't needed: the other boys had already scattered among garbage cans, their boards abandoned and darting away as if seeking cover too. Gordon's stupidity would be remembered later as cool, though he never considered that. In another sort of war he might have won a medal.

The auto-fire cut off: thirty-two-round magazines emptied fast at 550 rounds per minute, as most kids in West Oakland knew. It was as if somebody had switched on silence. Gordon jerked the old .22 pistol from the back of his jeans and got off three quick shots in the van's general direction before the worn-out little gun jammed. Its popping sounded weak and wimpy after the 9mm Uzi snarls.

But the van peeled away, rubber screeching and blue smoke blasting from rusty chrome side pipes. Gordon cursed and beat the gun's butt on the dumpster lid. It fired again, once, defiant now in the sudden morning stillness. Brick dust puffed from a building across the street, and a window nearby slammed shut. The van's engine roar faded up the block. Tires squealed as the van got sideways around the corner.

"Motherfuckin piece of SHIT!" raged Gordon. He almost whacked the gun again, but caught himself in time and looked around instead while wiping a skinned and bloody elbow on his jeans. "Yo! Anybody hit?"

Four heads poked up from behind a ragged row of garbage cans: Ric and Rac, the twins, identically flat-topped and wide-eyed, Curtis with his long, ratty dreadlocks, and Lyon's fluffy bush, like an Afro gone wild.

"Hey!" squeaked Curtis, his expression amazed. "I got myself shot in the back!"

Beside him, Lyon lifted Curtis' tattered T-shirt, plain and faded black like the other boys' . . . gang colors. "Yeah? Well, you for sure be takin it cool, man. Let's check it out."

Curtis squirmed, trying to look over his shoulder. "Well, how the fuck I sposed to take it?"

The twins squeezed close too, their mouths open in duplicate wonder and tawny eyes bright with curiosity.

Gordon walked over, carrying the gun muzzle-down.

Lyon glanced at the fat boy over Curtis' head. "That thing gonna go off again, Gordon?"

Gordon spat on the garbage-slimed concrete, holding the pistol like a snapping rat by its tail. "Now how the fuck I know, man? Piece of shit jam up just when you needin it, an then go off when you don't! How many goddamn times I say we gotta save back for some kinda better gun?"

He scowled at the other boys, and pointed. "An how many motherfuckin times I gotta tell you dudes *not* to hide a'hind stupid ole garbage cans in a firefight?" He aimed a finger at one can bleeding yellow goo. "Dumpster steel mostly stop bullets. *Them* don't!" His eyes, obsidian hard in a coffee-colored face, softened slightly and his voice gentled down. "So, how Curtis?"

Lyon dabbed at Curtis' shoulder blade with the tail of his own tee. "Stop that silly wigglin, sucker!" Spitting on his fingers, Lyon wiped more blood. The scent of it was coppery, like new pennies. Finally, he smiled and patted Curtis' arm. "It be only a cut. Like from a chunk of flyin brick or somethin. Nowhere near his heart. That be all what matter."

Curtis tried to reach around to his back, but couldn't. "Well, it for sure *feel* like I been shotted!"

Gordon wedged his bulk between the cans and peered at the wet ruby slice across the smaller boy's honey-bronze

skin. He snorted. "Shit. Don't signify nuthin, man. You ever get yourself shot for real, you fuckin well know it! We all check out how way past cool you handle it, then!"

The twins exchanged identical glances and snickered in stereo. "Best believe, sucker!" said Ric. "Gordy been shot! He give it a name! Word, you, Curtis!"

"Yeah!" giggled Rac. "In the butt, he shot! Yo, Gordy, show us again!"

Lyon had a funny V-shaped smile that looked mostly smart-ass even when it wasn't. "Bein shot sposed to mean you way past bad." He turned his smile on Gordon. "Course, gettin butt-shot just don't tell the same, huh?"

Gordon chewed his lip a moment, then growled. "Pend a lot on whose butt you talkin, don't it?" He jabbed Rac in the chest with a finger. "An stop callin me Gordy, goddamnit!" Squatting with a grunt, he started picking up his garbage-stained papers.

"Well," said Ric, "I get myself shot, I want it be in the arm, Gor-DEN!"

"Word!" agreed Rac. "Wear a tank top all the time. Look way past cool, believe!"

Gordon spat again, barely missing Rac's Nikes. "Yo, raisin-brain! Gettin shot more like to make you way past DEAD! Ever hear of somebody bein actual shot in the arm real-time? That ain't nuthin but TV dogshit, sucker!" He glared at the gun, then looked up at Lyon. "I feel like dustin this goddamn thing, man. Prob'ly end by killin one of us someday stead of doin any good."

"So?" asked Ric. "What you spect for twenty dollars, dude?"

"Word!" added Rac. "K mart blue-light-special kinda gun, all that is! Deek even say."

Gordon's nostrils suddenly flared. "Deek, huh? Listen

up, suckers! Deek talk a fly out shit, he wanna! Only a motherfuckin fool figure he gots somethin to say worth the ghost of a dog! Next time he come by curb-preachin you, tell him to fuck off!"

"Well," said Rac, "spose he get pissed an tell his body-guard to shoot me?"

Lyon grinned. "Then ask him if he do you in the arm."

"Just shut up, Ric," said Gordon. "For once."

"I'm Rac," said Rac. "*He's Ric.*"

Gordon sighed. "Whatever." He stood and shoved the pistol at Lyon. "Here, man, see if you can fix this piece of shit again."

Lyon looked closely at the gun. "Mmm. I see what happen. Rimfire bullets be most like to jam. That cause the primer stuff be in the rim, an with cheapo bullets like these it don't all the time go clear around. Then the firin pin hit a empty spot an you end up with jack."

"Or a dirt nap," growled Gordon. "Shit! I don't wanna hear all that stuff, man! Like we gonna be pop-quizzed on gun fixin in school or somethin! It the onliest goddamn gun we got, an the onliest goddamn gun we 'ford right now, so's just make it shoot again an stop rattlin my goddamn chain, huh!"

Gordon heaved another sigh and stared around the alley mouth at the wreckage; scattered skateboards, books and binders, and more sheets of somebody's homework fluttering in the gentle morning breeze. He scowled when he recognized them as his own. "Shit an goddamnit to hell! Ain't this a motherfuckin BITCH!"

Lyon watched as Gordon snatched up the papers and tried to wipe them clean, then gave up and stuffed them into his pack. "Yo, Gordon, tell the teacher you got em all dirty gettin drive-byed."

“Too fuckin funny, man! Ain’t one of them stupid teachers gotta live around here. Not know from nuthin what is. Shit, this my goddamn English story too . . . how I gonna spend my motherfuckin summer vacation! Been bustin my goddamn ass over it all cocksuckin week, an now ole Crabzilla gonna kill me for sure!” Gordon scowled at the twins’ grins. “You two! Get your asses busy pickin up your own goddamn shit! We gonna be late an get tardies out the wazoo!”

Ric and Rac moved as one. They were wiry, hard-muscled, Hershey-brown boys of thirteen, wearing tight black tees faded to gray, ragged 50ls with ripped knees, and big battered Nikes. Their eager, snub-nosed faces made them look like African imps. Their mother had named them from some old book about kids who made fools out of grown-ups. A desperate teacher had once pleaded with them to dress differently so she could tell them apart. They’d shown up next day with their initials Magic Markered on the front of their shirts.

Curtis was still trying to touch his own back. He was the smallest of the gang, twelve and childlike, with the prominent tummy and smooth-lined body of a little boy. A lot of kids figured him for the mascot. His dad was white, and Curtis could gleam like polished bronze when clean. His parents were trying to save enough money to move to Jamaica someday.

Lyon laid the gun on a dumpster lid and wiped Curtis’ cut a final time, then dangled his long bloody fingers in Curtis’ face. Curtis winced. Lyon grinned. Everything about Lyon was long; narrow, lean-jawed face with high cheekbones, and tall slender body more delicate than skinny. His teeth looked too large for his mouth. His ebony eyes were tilted up at the corners and, like his V smile,

always seemed a little sly. He had a funny loose way of holding or moving his hands that made them look like paws. He read books because he wanted to, and could fascinate or terrify with magic tricks or spooky stories. Lyon appeared fragile but most kids left him be.

Lyon licked his fingers. "Mmm. Way cool blood, homey. Maybe I take me some more. Tonight. When the moon be full."

Curtis went very still. His voice broke. "Not funny! Maaaaan, don't be sayin them kinda things!"

Rac snickered. "Yo! That time of month already, Lyon-o? Hey, what you call a used Kotex?"

"Vampire tea bag!" answered Ric.

Curtis glared. "Eat shit an die, suckers! So there!"

"You two your very own HBO, ain't ya?" said Lyon.

"Everybody just shut the fuck up!" roared Gordon. "Goddamn honky show here!"

"Donkey show," said Lyon.

"Whatever." Gordon tugged at his pack straps, then faced Curtis. "An you stop actin like a goddamn puss! Spose you wanna go to 'mergency, now?"

Curtis considered that.

"Way past fun," Lyon told him. "Get to sit on your butt an wait for hours, aside all kinda cool people what been shot an stabbed, ODin an pukin all over the place. Yo, they prob'ly give you stitches. Leave a hot scar. Like Frankenstein."

"Um . . . naw, I don't wanna," murmured Curtis.

Lyon's eyes lost some of their slyness. "Well, it gonna be bleedin some, open like that. Better take off your shirt so's it don't stick."

Gordon nodded. "Good idea." He peered at the cheap digital watch on his wrist. "Shit! Now we for sure late!" He

studied the watch, frowning and flicking it with a finger. "Shit, I think it busted."

"Yo," said Ric. "Hold it up to your ear, man."

"To check if it still tickin'," added Rac.

Gordon did, and the twins burst into laughter.

Gordon, a month shy of fourteen, was the oldest. He was a big, heavy-breasted boy with a belly that hung over his jeans and bobbed whenever he moved. For all his jiggly softness there was muscle buried beneath the fat, like a small tank wrapped in foam rubber. His T-shirts never covered his middle, and his jeans sagged so low that his bullet scar usually showed. His hair was a natural bush, and his flat-nosed, heavy-lipped face made him look dense unless you paid attention to his eyes. He kicked the squatting Ric in the butt with the toe of his ancient Airwalk, sending both brothers sprawling. "Shove it in *your* ear, asshole! There! Now you know what time it is, fool!"

"Well," said Curtis, coming out from behind the cans and stripping off his shirt. "Don't feel up for sittin in class bleedin all goddamn day. Mom an Dad both at work. Maybe I just bail myself on home an watch TV or somethin."

The twins got up and examined his back again. "Um, yo," asked Rac. "What that shiny white shit way down inside there?"

"Bone!" said Lyon, slapping Rac's hand away. "An keep your goddamn dirty finger outa it!"

"Mondo gross!" said Ric. He shook a finger at his brother. "Can't touch that!"

Curtis turned to Lyon, his eyes widening. "No shit? You mean my skelenton showin?"

Lyon laid a paw on his shoulder. "It be okay, man. Leave a cool scar for later on. *Better'n* just a pussy ole shot in the arm, any day."

Curtis looked thoughtful, then puffed his little chest almost as far out as his tummy and made a face at the twins. He strutted to the alley mouth and peered cautiously up the deserted street. "Wonder if them motherfuckin gang-bangers still motorin round here?"

Lyon glided up beside him and gazed toward the corner where the van had gone. Oily smoke mixed with streamers of gray-white gunpowder still drifted in the cool air. The sun was spilling over the roofline and down the buildings, turning grimy orange brick into gold. The faint breeze was still stirring in from the Bay, as yet untainted by garbage stink and exhaust fumes, smelling of salt and hinting of faraway places. Lyon's long delicate hand clasped Curtis' shoulder again. "I come home with ya, homey. Patch you up good as new. Gots any peroxide at your place?"

"Nuh-uh. Gots Bactine, I think."

"That do. Keep them ole maggots from hatchin." Lyon flipped a finger at the empty street, then glanced at the rusty little .22 he'd brought with him. "Showtimes! There be them big dudes with their full-auto Uzis, an go bailin warp-seven cause Gordy gots the balls to shoot back with *this!*"

Ric moved close to Gordon. "Yo! Gordy gots 'dustrial-strength balls! Word!"

Rac stepped to Gordon's other side. "Believe! That why he lead!"

Gordon shrugged. "Don't call me Gordy." He jerked his jeans up a little and eyed his watch again with a frown. "Well, I don't figure it cool for us to scatter right now. Three blocks back to Curtis' place, or bout the same to school. We better decide which one we goin for, an keep together. Yo, Lyon! Maybe you should oughta fix that gun right now, man. Ain't a good idea to be skatin round with