

In review

"Workin' on the Chain Gang: Shaking Off the Dead Hand of History," by Walter Mosley, Ballantine, 118 pages, \$16.95.

By **MICHAEL GILTZ**

Walter Mosley is the author of more than half a dozen gripping mysteries, including "Devil in a Blue Dress." But here he offers a less-than-compelling, albeit well-intentioned, book-length essay on the economic vise he says is strangling most Americans.

Quietly radical, "Workin' on the Chain Gang" argues that we are all slaves, and that the one true god is the profit margin. A worker is only as valuable as his labor. Nowadays, says Mosley, the ideal worker is a free-lance

worker. That way, argues Mosley, the company gets all the benefits of his labor without having to supply any of those pesky negatives, like subsidized health care, a retirement fund or paid vacations.

But while he rejects socialism or communism, Mosley doesn't have any new ideas either. One of the book's more original passages discusses the history of African-Americans in the United States. Mosley wants everyone to learn that history — not as a lesson in shame or guilt, but as an example of survival and resistance. He suggests we all study our predecessors' first tentative steps toward

In his treatise, Mosley also urges us to turn away from the pablum of television and professional sports. He counsels

telling one new truth a day — not the sort of rude truths that flit across our minds like "You've gained weight!" — but the hard truths that give us dignity. He wants us to think for ourselves, fix on worthy dreams (like a solid education for all children, care for the elderly) and make our voices heard by talking out about such issues and by voting.

Most of this is quite familiar, offered in a prosaic manner that sidesteps stirring rhetoric or complex specifics. (You certainly won't want to storm the barricades after reading it.) As Mosley writes about the millennium, "In order to celebrate a new age, we must create a new creation is the age. And creation is the hardest trick of all."

Unfortunately, this polemic is too tentative in its suggestions to produce much of a stir, let alone inspire a creation.

