



Blacker Than a Thousand Midnights

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Named one of the outstanding novels of 1992 by Publishers Weekly, The New York Times Book Review, and USA Today, *I Been in Sorrow's Kitchen and Licked Out All the Pots* established Susan Straight as one of America's foremost chroniclers of African-American life. In *Blacker Than a Thousand Midnights*, she fulfills the promise of the earlier book, and reintroduces readers to the inhabitants of fictional Rio Seco, California. This is the story of Darnell Tucker, a black firefighter and workingman trying to work the toughest turf of all: the straight and narrow. As his friends disappear around him - victims of the streets, of police dogs, of drugs, of an addiction to cheap thrills and guns - Darnell struggles to establish his own business, facing a thousand midnights before he's home free, with a job that supports his young family. Yet even as he gains a tentative sense of self, Darnell Tucker is drawn to the destructive beauty of fires, and to the wilder, untamed forces beyond the structure of domesticity. This search for balance in a dangerous world propels the quiet heroism of a beautifully evoked and very moving story.

Blacker Than a Thousand Midnights Details

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Author : Susan Straight

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From Reader Review *Blacker Than a Thousand* Midnights for online ebook

Donna Davis says

Susan Straight is one of my favorite authors. I wish she had written more, but I suppose if you want quality, sometimes you have to sacrifice quantity.

As the parent of a young Black man, I recognize the fictional character Darnell's dilemma: how do you play it straight while keeping it real (in other words, without playing the White man's game to where you find yourself betraying some of your family and old loyalties)? How do you keep your friends from the neighborhood where you grew up and went to school, without landing your butt in jail right along with them? Remember that the US "justice" system is far from colorblind.

Darnell is tangible and believable. I came away feeling as if I knew him.

This is made all the more brilliant by the fact that Straight is a Caucasian woman. How dare she write in the first person as a Black man? Yet she carries it off, in my opinion, with grace and dignity. Her bio says that she grew up in an area in Riverside, California that was almost exclusively Black; that would explain a great deal.

Regardless of your political views, though, on race and everything else, this is strong writing, a character portrayed with immediacy and dignity. I like the way this woman writes, every single time.

Leonard Pierce says

After being introduced to Susan Straight, I sought out as much of her stuff as I could. It's a bit shaky in quality, but this is probably one of her best.

Ron says

There's a great deal to enjoy and think about in this richly detailed novel of a young man's emergence into manhood, discovering himself as a father-to-be, and wanting more than anything to become a responsible parent and family man like his own father. These are working class people, living in what I take to be Riverside County, east of Los Angeles, scraping lives together and not giving up on each other.

Darnell, the hero, rides close to the edge of failure as his fortunes rise and fall and rise again, first as a temporary firefighter battling brush fires in the mountains and later running a small gardening business keeping yards in a middle class housing development. Straight paces her narrative slowly and builds plenty of tension as we watch Darnell come into his own, often through trial and error, with so many of the odds stacked against him.

Straight is a fine Southern California writer, and her book was for me a very readable and engaging introduction to a world that is seldom written about so warmly and eloquently.

Marie says

The plot was pretty good, and very well-developed, but it was really difficult to read; the entirety of the book was written in vernacular.

Judy says

There are certain novelists, mostly women but some men as well, whose theme is the power and strength of family. Susan Straight embraces this with the underlying theme of the effect of racism on the American family. In 1995 I read her first novel, *I've Been in Sorrow's Kitchen and Licked Out All the Pots*, published in 1993. Being a musician, I picked the book for its title, which sounded like a blues song, but I knew nothing about the author. I was struck by the intense truths she wove into a story of a single African American mother who raised her two sons with care, giving them the skills and moral character needed to survive the violence and fractured nature of black urban life.

I could not figure out how a white woman from Southern California could write with such insight and authority about Black people. Later of course, I learned that she had married a Black man from her hometown of Riverside, CA. She lived surrounded by Black culture while they had three daughters. Susan and that man later divorced but remained friends. Their daughters have been raised amidst the extended families of both parents.

This author likes numbers (*Blacker Than A Thousand Midnights*, *A Million Nightingales*.) She creates the surroundings of her stories by taking the reader through the same streets, over and over; by following the dawns, mornings, afternoons, sundowns and nights of consecutive days. She has an uncanny ability to put you inside the skin and minds of characters whether they are Black, White, Mexican or Asian, until you finally stop seeing these characters through your own racial, economic and experiential framework but somehow enter each one's consciousness. Her pace is leisurely even when events of great moment are taking place.

Blacker Than A Thousand Midnights begins with Darnell Tucker on the cusp of adulthood. When he returns from a season of fighting fires in the mountains surrounding Rio Seco, he finds his girlfriend pregnant and wants to do right by her, but lacking any prospects he feels deeply insecure about beginning the straight and narrow life of a family man. (Rio Seco is Straight's imaginary town based on Riverside. All of her fiction is anchored there, much like William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County.) It doesn't help Darnell that his future wife is pathologically afraid of the fires he loves to fight or that his friends jeer at his pussywhipped status.

Rio Seco is booming with the gated housing communities mushrooming in the hills surrounding widened freeways and filling up with escapees from Los Angeles. In the Black and Mexican neighborhoods drugs, rap music and shiftless youth live side by side with the gardeners, domestic workers, auto repairmen and shopkeepers. Tensions run high in sprawling webs of interactions between so many racial and economic differences.

Darnell struggles with and weaves through all of it as he develops his sense of self and builds a business caring for the lawns of the new upscale citizens. His parents, relatives and life-long friends are sources of

strength but also of annoyance and temptation while the lure of the fires with their beauty and violence threaten to tear him away.

I was impressed by the way Straight traces Darnell's development as a father and husband. While he is no exemplary model of parenthood, he has plenty of heart and a sense of humor. The story deepens the themes and issues of *I Been in Sorrow's Kitchen*, being the next stage of life for boys raised in the hood of Rio Seco. By the end, Susan Straight had once again put her spell on me.

Rainbowgardener says

A woman writing male characters who are not stereotypes or caricatures. Very vivid portrayal of the traps that keep African American men down. How to get a job when you have no way to get a car and employers don't want to hire black men. How to start your own business when customers hide when they see your black face. How to go to college and better yourself when you have mouths to feed now. How to stay sane and sober when you are constantly threatened by cops for driving while black, walking while black, breathing while black and by gangs for walking in their territory (when you have to, to get from A to B and you have no gang affiliations yourself). Her characters learn and grow and are courageous and mostly save themselves, although there are some casualties along the way.

Patty says

Susan Straight's books keep me reading late at night when I should be asleep. This novel is intense and exciting, while very real. It is not an adventure or a thriller, but the story of an ordinary, "real" life and its challenges.

Hans says

4+ stars. I have definitely enjoyed each visit to the families (and ancestors) that make Susan Straight's fictional Rio Seco, California a real place. This volume centers on the post-coming-of-age journey for Darnell Tucker, but intersects with many other residents. It's worth your while to walk a few miles with Darnell and his friends and family.

Susan Eubank says

"Darnell left the steep, winding road and passed the tiny trees along the development block walls. He knew Trent wouldn't be home now -- he could call and leave a message. When he neared the Westside, he saw the dark mass of old trees hovering like clouds over the neighborhood. Everyone had fig trees, lemons, persimmons. His mother had apricots and nectarines. Marietta Cook had the best plum tree on the Westside. Darnell turned down Picasso Street. Trees did things for you, his father would say, so you gotta do things for them. Rake up their leaves, cut their branches, water them. And then his father would frown and throw in an 'Idle hands are the devil's workshop.' All my life, he thought, in the trees. In the Conservation Corps, we cut down the old ones, the diseased stands that were fire hazards. Burned them sometimes with Fricke. He

parked and closed his eyes for a moment. Two fire seasons gone. I'ma be workin in some domestic, tame forests. now." p. 253

Cynthia Paschen says

Not as gripping as "I Been In Sorrow's Kitchen and Licked Out All the Pots."

Mary says

I keep reading her books hoping for another "I've been in Sorrows Kitchen and Licked Out All the Pots" one of my all-time favorites- I even read it twice. Which is saying a LOT since I've only ever re-read two books! I think I might need to change that, but my book que is far too long!
