



Pleasantville

Attica Locke

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In this sophisticated thriller, lawyer Jay Porter, hero of Locke's bestseller *Black Water Rising*, returns to fight one last case, only to become embroiled once again in a dangerous game of shadowy politics and a witness to how far those in power are willing to go to win

Fifteen years after the events of *Black Water Rising*, Jay Porter is struggling to cope with catastrophic changes in his personal life and the disintegration of his environmental law practice. His victory against Cole Oil is still the crown jewel of his career, even if he hasn't yet seen a dime thanks to appeals. But time has taken its toll. Tired and restless, he's ready to quit.

When a girl goes missing on Election Night, 1996, in the neighborhood of Pleasantville—a hamlet for upwardly-mobile blacks on the north side of Houston—Jay, a single father, is deeply disturbed. He's been representing Pleasantville in the wake of a chemical fire, and the case is dragging on, raising doubts about his ability.

The missing girl was a volunteer for one of the local mayoral candidates, and her disappearance complicates an already heated campaign. When the nephew of one of the candidates, a Pleasantville local, is arrested, Jay reluctantly finds himself serving as a defense attorney. With a man's life and his own reputation on the line, Jay is about to try his first murder in a case that will also put an electoral process on trial, exposing the dark side of power and those determined to keep it.

Pleasantville Details

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From Reader Review Pleasantville for online ebook

Sarah says

I'd been wishing for a sequel to "Black Water Rising" for the past 6 years (has it been that long?) and when "The Cutting Season" came out in 2012, I figured Locke was done with socially conscious attorney, Jay Porter. So when I finally got my hands on a copy of "Pleasantville," I was giddy with excitement and couldn't wait to find out what Jay was up to.

The story takes place in 1996, fifteen years later, and yes, the Houston attorney is back, but he's not doing as well as I'd hoped. He's struggling to raise his two children alone after the death of his wife, and he has yet to see any money after winning a big case against Cole Oil. When Neal Hathorne, the nephew of a prominent mayoral candidate, is arrested for the murder of a local girl, Jay begrudgingly agrees to represent him as a favor to the powerful family despite having little criminal defense experience. As a result, he becomes entangled in a web of political corruption and dark family secrets that puts a target on his back, but more importantly, his family's as well.

Locke's ability to weave politics and social commentary into a gripping sophisticated thriller illustrates what a masterful and intelligent storyteller she is. It's not a problem to read "Pleasantville" before "Black Water Rising," although purists like me will appreciate starting from the beginning.

Michelle Lancaster says

Fiction

Attica Locke

Pleasantville: A Novel

New York: Harper

Hardcover, 978-0-06-225940-0

432 pages, \$26.99

April 21, 2015

Pleasantville is a historical neighborhood in Houston, Texas, "a planned community...built specifically for Negro families of means and class" in the wake of World War II, and one of its favorite sons, Axel Hathorne, has just entered a runoff election for mayor of Houston. The same night, someone is watching Alicia Nowell, a teenage girl who had been handing out leaflets door-to-door for the election as she stands on a street corner waiting for her ride, "still wanting to believe a way out was possible, but already knowing, with a creeping certainty, that this night had turned on her, that her disappearing had already begun." How's that for a hook?

Pleasantville is Attica Locke's sequel to the many-award-nominated Black Water Rising is back -- with environmental plaintiff's attorney Jay Porter, this time dealing with the death of his wife, single fatherhood, inertia, and a break-in at his law office that occurs the same night as the election, the same night the girl goes missing. When Hathorne's campaign manager is arrested and charged with the murder of Alicia Nowell, Locke's compelling setup for this complex, character-driven legal and political thriller is complete.

Pleasantville has a complicated plot with lots of moving parts. There is a large cast of disparate, intriguing characters, liberally peppered with predators of all stripes. The pacing never lags, goosed along by artfully placed plot twists. The story is a highly entertaining brew of political and personal ambition garnished with journalistic, legal, and corporate corruption. All of which Locke handles beautifully.

The cynicism of the political horse-trading is breathtaking and will confirm all of your conspiracy theories. A good number of the cast are politicians and their consultants, including the reincarnation of Lee Atwater, a city council member who can “hear the whir of a video camera from a block over” and a mayoral candidate who began wearing glasses when she entered the race because “talk of her pale green eyes and the height of her stiletto heels starting getting too much play in the press.”

Porter’s floundering without his wife is touchingly conveyed. “There are things she knew about her family, not secrets so much as hard-earned intimacies, that she inadvertently took with her, leaving the rest of them to fend for themselves in this new, foreign land, daily meeting at the kitchen table, or passing in the hallway, without their shared interpreter.”

There is humor here, as well, spiced with sassy one-liners. At one point Porter concedes that “the breadth of his investigation is an ex-con skulking around Hollis’s [a suspect] place in a rusty El Camino.” Hollis’s place is one of those giant, generic apartment complexes with pretentious names. “This one has the nerve to call itself Beechwood Estates.”

Full of family secrets and political secrets, Pleasantville gives new meaning to the truism that the political is personal. For lovers of intrigue and suspense, this is the total package.

Originally published in Lone Star Literary Life.

Marina Sofia says

The most thrilling account of local election politics and hustling for power that I’ve ever come across. This succeeds as courtroom drama, political thriller, showing how the real human/family suffering is used for point-scoring. As a murder mystery, it is perhaps not entirely successful (gets wrapped up a bit too quickly and unexpectedly at the end), but it’s a very intelligent, well-written book.

Toni says

Lawyer Jay Porter is back after his introduction in Locke’s first book, *Black Water Rising*, where he tackled a murder case that found him embroiled in environmental politics and changed his life. Pleasantville picks up a few years later and Jay has become somewhat of a go-to lawyer for citizens in their fight against the dumping of chemicals in their neighborhoods.

Pleasantville, a predominately African-American neighborhood in Houston, Texas (in real life and in the book), is currently being represented in a lawsuit against a company that caused a chemical fire near their homes. On the eve of a mayoral election, a campaign volunteer goes missing Jay finds himself reluctantly involved in finding out what happened to her.

Attica Locke writes super-layered novels, so it's almost impossible to cover everything in this review. Grief, greed, politics, environmental racism...it's all here. What I love best about Pleasantville, and her other books, is that I never have a clue about who's behind the mystery until she reveals it to me. The last pages of the book move at a lightning speed that will have your heart racing and tuning out everything else around you.

Jennifer says

given the electoral mayhem going on in the US right now, it was an interesting time for me to read this book and it felt like a good complement to the US's current election cycle. shenanigans, i tell you. shenanigans!

as happened with Locke's first book in the series (Black Water Rising), i enjoyed this story but found it to have a few wobbles that took away from things for me while i read. Locke is great at character - i quite like when authors write convincingly the opposite gender to their own, and Locke does this well. and her supporting cast are interesting as well. again, the setting (Houston) and time (1996) are vividly portrayed. as a mystery, though, this did feel a bit clunky. while the level of manipulations going on were (sadly) believable, some of the incompetencies and conspiracies felt just a little bit too unreal. and also as in the first book, some of the plot threads just hung there.

Pleasantville was recently longlisted for the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction, so i was reading through that lens. and perhaps i have been tougher on the book because of that. overall, i did enjoy it - the book is a quick near page-turner, and a good bit of escapist reading which succeeds in pointing out the failings and vulnerabilities of American democracy.

Donna Davis says

Jay Porter has a full plate, and so his legal career has been set on cruise control. Money is the least of his worries; he is successful, and has won a very large case, though it hasn't paid yet. No, his issues have to do with family, and with grieving. And with grieving. And with grieving. His wife Bernie died young and fast due to an illness that she knew she had, but had chosen not to share. She pushed him to follow through on his enormous case against the oil company that had sickened, even killed people in their own close-knit, middle class African-American suburb outside Houston, Texas. It was important to everyone that the families affected experienced justice. But now he wishes he had spent more time by his wife's bedside and less in the courtroom. His self-hatred for the time spent away from his wife and two children during that final crisis has left him determined not to set foot in another court room. Not ever.

And so this sequel to Black Water Rising, the red-hot hit by this author, starts out ominously, as a vulnerable teen waiting at a bus stop wonders whether she should run from the car that is watching her, even though she is so far from home that she doesn't know how to get back, or wait for that bus. Next thing we know, she's been murdered.

But Jay Porter is still too caught up in his own personal situation to pay much attention at first. Bernie's sister Evelyn helped him get Bernie's clothes packed up and moved out, but he can't look at her car. Can't

look. And the holidays coming around the corner, all the gut-punching emotion with which they are fraught, that stinks too.

At this point, I should let you know that you can't read this yet. It won't come out till April, but I got my ARC from edelweiss books a week ago, and I've been reading it obsessively, so now is the time to review it. I will post this again when the book comes out, but for now, you can pre-order it, or put it on your Christmas list. After the holidays have come, gone, been cleaned up and winter survived, wouldn't it be nice to come home and find this heart-pounding thriller waiting in the mailbox to make your weekend better? And what a story it is!

And so, back to Jay Porter. Porter is holding Cole Oil to the award the courts granted to the many citizens he represented. His fee, 20 million dollars, will be enough for him to retire on. He can send his secretary into the retirement she longs for, and he can put his feet up and be a father to his kids. But oh, how he wishes Bernie could be there.

Meanwhile, his friends and neighbors are growing agitated about Alicia Nowell's disappearance. She is the third girl from the community to go missing in the past few years. The first two were kept alive for a few days; their bodies were found on day 6, and the coroner ruled they had been dead for only 24 hours or less. So they figure that girl is out there, alive, somewhere. Volunteer crews are searching fields after the cops have been there, squaring off grids in professional fashion while others knock on doors, try to get information that the local cop shop hasn't found. And in the midst of a mayoral race, hay is being made by the opponent of the traditional Black candidate. Because the neighborhood has been slowly, insidiously (to some) changing since the death of Jim Crow. Now young Black kids from strong families don't have to live in Pleasantville to find a good house. They can move wherever they want. That's good, right? But Latino families looking for good schools and good housing find reception that is sometimes tense as they ease into town, and the old guard realizes they may no longer be a unified force politically.

Disbelief and horror take hold when the grandson of the community's most venerated elder is arrested for the murder of Alicia Nowell. Assuming that an error has been made and without a second thought, Jay, who by coincidence happens to be at the police station while Neal Hathorne is being questioned, strides into the interrogation room and announces that he is Neal's attorney. He has no idea what a firestorm he has unleashed upon himself, and upon his family.

I am retired, and have the luxury of several hours of designated reading time every evening. It's pretty sweet. But this book caught me by the hair and made me stay with it, modifying my schedule so I could see just what the hell is happening here. My e-reader followed me down to the kitchen. It followed me into the laundry room. I was cranky when the phone rang and interrupted my time with Jay. Because after all, we had to get him out of this mess, and what the hell is going on with his daughter Ellie? Good thing he is being a careful father so that we won't have to deal with that old, hackneyed now-they're-after-his-own-kid plot line. Jay is smart enough to realize his daughter fits the profile of the kidnapped and murdered girls, and he is looking out for his girl. We respect him for it, and I nodded with approval at the e-reader as I fed the dog, went out to get the mail. I broke or spilled things four times because I wasn't looking at what I was doing; I was reading this book, because the book couldn't wait.

If Locke's fingernail-biter of a tale reminds me of the style of any other writer, it is of James Lee Burke, now an octogenarian who is unlikely to write much more. And although only Locke knows whether it is intended as a nod to that bayou living legend, she names the bereaved parents Robicheaux. I rather liked the touch, if that's what it was.

So whether you order this book, request it as a gift, or buy it when it comes out, consider it a must read. This book is already creating a buzz six months prior to publication, and it is going to be a monster. Don't let yourself be left out!

Cathrine ?? says

DNF

I loved Locke's first two novels. She is a talented author as well as one of the writers and producers of the TV series Empire (which I've never seen). In Pleasantville, we catch up with attorney Jay Porter fifteen years down the line in his hometown where politics, murder, money, and family secrets abound. Based on most reviews I should really be liking this one but I don't. Perhaps it's a timing issue, or there is just too much going on with so many characters. I keep getting distracted and finding other things I want to do. It's so spread out and I keep losing interest, so two thirds in I am giving up because other library holds are waiting and there are no book police.

jo says

i have serious love for attica locke. i think she can do no wrong. i think she's basically perfect.

this is a genre/gender bending noir set in an enclave for well-to-do african americans originally set up in the 1940s in houston. the premise under which the city of plesantville was created is a bit iffy. there is nothing wrong of course and everything right for embattled jim-crow-era black people to want to have a safe haven for themselves. but then you have the pesky question of class, and you know that it's going to blow up in their faces at some point.

the bendingness comes from the fact that the story is seriously hard-bitten, with a male protagonist who gets attacked and beaten right left and center but still upholds the right and the good and doesn't give up. since i listened to this in audiobook and the voice artist is a dude, it was hard to remember that the book is written by a woman. also, not a whole lot of hard-bitten noir out there with black protagonists (Chester Himes, Walter Mosley, others?), yes?

the story is about a homicide, and the narrative is riveting and beautifully paced. but then the book turns out to be about the deterioration of civil rights and voting rights, and the role african americans themselves may have played in this deterioration. meaningfully, it is set during the last term of the clinton administration and at the eve of the first g. w. bush administration.

it's also about the erosion of american democracy and the tremendous lure of corporate power, to which people succumb at the expense of values they hold dear -- which certainly requires a certain amount of ethical pretzling. the picture of america that emerges is nothing to laugh about.

i liked so much that locke adopted this beleaguered-and-unwilling-male-detective tone; that she appropriated a very male genre and rendered it flawlessly (and why why why did the press decide that it was better to have the novel read by a male actor? why not stick with the bendingness and have a woman read it?).

i loved that jay, the protagonist, loves his family and his kids so fiercely, and i love his rapport with his teenage daughter, which has, as it should, central place in the book. i recently read Mat Johnson's Loving Day, at the center of which also lies a tender father-teenage-daughter relationship, and it's oh-so-nice to see black men portrayed as awesome fathers.

i loved that he owns a gun but the gun is never where he needs it when he needs it. well, except for once. but then no one dies.

Taryn Pierson says

This is hands down the best thriller I've read this year, and I read *The Girl on the Train*.

I cannot stop reading Attica Locke. I tore through her two previous books, *Black Water Rising* and *The Cutting Season*, earlier this year. I was first in line at my library to read *Pleasantville* when it was released last month. Now I guess I'll just have to find a way to live my life until she publishes another—which could be a while, I'm guessing, since she also has a gig writing for the TV show *Empire*. Isn't it annoying when people are multi-talented?

In *Pleasantville*, Locke returns to Houston, Texas and lovable but conflicted attorney Jay Porter of *Black Water Rising*. Fifteen years after the events of that book, Jay is a single father of two and his law practice hasn't exactly taken off. He's busy enough, but he still hasn't made any money on the big Cole Oil case he won years ago. The aimlessness Jay felt in the first book still hangs over him like a fog. He can't decide how involved he wants to get in the political controversies and local crises that surround him. People in the community look to him for guidance and approval, but Jay never knows how much of himself to offer. After all, now he is the only parent his kids have, and he is once again torn between responsibility to his family and to the larger social sphere around him.

And the latest local problem threatening to pull Jay under is one that hits close to home: a girl not much older than his daughter Ellie has been abducted from a street corner on Election Night, after circulating political flyers for one of the mayoral candidates. When the campaign manager is arrested and charged in her disappearance, Jay finds himself, as he often does, embroiled in the case against his will. He's definitely in over his head trying his first murder case, but just like in *Black Water Rising*, the corruption and malfeasance go up a lot higher than he ever suspected. Jay is going to have to do a lot more than find the person responsible for the girl's disappearance—he'll have to dig deep into election politics, the elite world of wealthy donors and corporate players, to make sure justice is served.

Locke's books remind me a bit of the TV show *Scandal*, in that they make politics heart-poundingly intense. In summary they can sound like a big snoozefest—who cares if someone is rigging a local mayoral race? Who cares whose money is filling which politicians' pockets? Who cares if someone looks the other way in order to gain power and clout? Locke will make you care about all of those things. She will make you care about them so much you won't be able to turn pages fast enough. Here's hoping she plans to write many more installments in the Jay Porter story.

More book recommendations by me at www.readingwithhippos.com

Jennifer (aka EM) says

WOW. Attica Locke. What a find (thanks, Jo!)

This is a seriously fantastic book in all the most important ways, and weirdly perfect for the times. The gross mendacity and political corruption at the heart of the plot - unpeeled layer by layer by our hero, Jay Porter, a grief-stricken and world-weary civil rights activist turned environmental-then-criminal lawyer - feels almost *prescient* in Locke's hands (although the novel was published in early 2015, it takes place in 1996).

Locke puts together a complex plot that is part murder mystery, part political thriller, and part family drama, and then drops it in the race-and-class stewpot of post-Jim-Crow, Bush-governed Texas (and, btw, the Clinton-governed U.S.). She makes it clear that the kernels of political disruption based on class and race divides, which we've just seen rock the free world in ways that feel both completely unexpected yet completely predictable, took root long ago, exactly like this: nurtured to life in a corrupt pool dominated by money, oil, greed, lobbyists, lies, PACs, shifting racial demographics, and a love of power that makes for strange bedfellows in venues both small and local, as well as, by implication and exposition, large and national.

Pleasantville ends on Election Day, 2000 - an election that the novel declares as the closest ever in history, which the pundits, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, Locke tells us, are unable to call. The reader, of course, knows that Bush wins by a hair - proving one of Locke's central points - but we also know, and Locke *knows* we know, that Obama follows.

Reading this on November 20, 2016, however, we also know that what follows Obama is the other shoe dropping, the political pendulum swinging yet again, with race and class feeding into our political - and personal - lives in an even more extreme, more traumatizing, way.

Listen: this novel was brilliant, and gripping, and fantastic, before November 8, 2016. But after it, whoa. If it wasn't a story so well-told, with its various plot points tied together in a way that, almost miraculously, sidesteps cynicism, the theme "the personal is political" sounding a bluesy background note throughout, (view spoiler) it would have been almost unbearable to read right now.

I'm so glad I did. And I'm now going to read all that Ms. Locke has written. She's just that good.

Roy says

Attica Locke's prose goes down nice and easy, and her well etched characters draw you into the mysteries they inhabit. This is the second one of Locke's novels that I've read. I look forward to the third and beyond, regardless of whether she brings us back to the same cast of main characters or introduces us to brand new ones.

Andre says

It was a long wait between episodes, but the wait was well worth it. Jay Porter, the likeable conscious lawyer is back and representing the Black community of Pleasantville, a section of Houston, TX. I am impressed with how well Attica Locke nails down the landscape of Houston, helps move the story when one is familiar with the surroundings and environment. Her prose is fast and easy with Jay being a great character to build a story around. Her pacing in this book was right on, with no superfluous activity and all action fitting in the mystery like a solid puzzle. For readers who like mystery, I would enthusiastically suggest this one.

Tom Swift says

Excellent. A follow up to Black Water Rising, a young attorney fights for justice in Houston. I have read all four of Locke's books in the last two weeks. Her latest, Bluebird, Bluebird, won the Edgar Award this year.

Bibliophile says

A smart, well-written thriller, starring lawyer Jay Porter From Black Water Rising. When a murder occurs during a mayoral election, Jay gets involved defending the accused. Locke seems more interested in the politics than the murder, which is fine by me, but the ending becomes a little hurried when the crime has to be solved. It's a great read in a genre where it's difficult to find quality writing. I'd love to see what happens with Jay.

Tooter says

4.5 stars
