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In 1956, a black boy named Emmett Till was murdered for wolf-whistling at a white woman. The two white men responsible were tried— and acquitted— in a Mississippi town near Lewis Nordan's boyhood home. These events changed him forever. In this extraordinary novel, Nordan transforms one of America's most notorious racial killings into a magical mystery ride of hilarity and horror that you will never forget.

“An immense and wall-shattering display of talent. *Wolf Whistle* will help usher Lewis Nordan into the Hall of Fame of American Letters.” —Randall Kenan, *The Nation*

Wolf Whistle Details

Date : Published October 5th 2003 by Algonquin Books (first published January 10th 1993)

ISBN : 9781565121102

Author : Lewis Nordan

Format : Paperback 312 pages

Genre : Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, American, Southern, Magical Realism

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From Reader Review Wolf Whistle for online ebook

Stephen says

Really glad to have been made aware of what happened to Emmett Till which I'd never heard about before. However, found this fictionalised account of it pretty frustrating as it diverged quite a lot from what actually happened and Emmett Till was a very periphery character rather than the focus of the book which was more about the effect that the murder had on the local community. Keen to read a more factual non-fiction book on this subject though.

Mary says

A great book. Raw truth about the disparities between class and race in the American South. On the surface, Nordan brings out the historical racial segregation and injustice towards blacks many readers are aware of. Yet, this book also deals with the injustice towards poor whites, or the "white trash." In a small town in Mississippi, society is so suppressed and oppressed in such a segregated state altogether, that it is hard to notice how disadvantaged many groups in the USA, including whites, can and are MADE to be. Indeed, society makes these groups (blacks and poor whites) ignorant and segregated, and Nordan does a beautiful job at exposing this. Hence why Bobo was murdered, hence why white families are so dysfunctional, hence why Alice has such a yearning for leaving that small town to other places. To other places indeed, where even black people are dressed better than the white families in this Mississippi town. This is a beautiful and non-discriminating book in the sense that it exposes reality as it is, and perhaps aims at raising awareness in American society that there is injustice not only towards the historically oppressed, but towards Whites as well and that it is getting harder and harder to cover this issue by placing more attention on black segregation.

I highly recommend this book if you want to read revealing and "real" literature.

Grace says

Wow. This is truly one of the most amazing books I have ever read in my life. The combination of magical realism, history, and (yes, eventually) some humor reminded me of City of Thieves, if it could remind me of anything. And of course the trial scene briefly brings to mind To Kill a Mockingbird, only because it is a racially-based crime in the South. But this book is absolutely one-of-a-kind.

First of all, the writing is just out of this world. The images are gorgeous and magical and very evocative. Even when the action is disturbing the rhythm of the writing is still somehow soothing - as if it is seeing beyond the immediate violence into a greater, more peaceful picture.

Nordan tells everyone's story - no matter who they are in the book. He is able to see his characters as all equally human - which brings me to the most wonderful thing about this book: the writing style itself - that is, the constant reminders that we are all human together, all the same, all one - is the only way to stop the violence and racism he describes in the book. When one is honestly present to the fact that we are all equally human, can one commit such acts of violence? I really don't know, but I think not.

The blurb about this book mentions hilarity - personally, I don't think so. There is some humor, but it is the humor that is an alternative to fear and grief; and the absurd humor in acknowledging that we humans manage to be ridiculous, heartbreaking, and brutal all at once. By the way, my book cover was a little less perky. It looked like this.

Jeffrey Keeten says

4.5 stars out of 5

“The Mississippi Delta is not always dark with rain. Some autumn mornings, the sun rises over Moon Lake, or Eagle, or Choctaw, or Blue, or Roebuck, all the wide, deep waters of the state, and when it does, its dawn is as rosy with promise and hope as any other.”

Scene of the original Wolf Whistle that inspired this novel.

It is sometimes hard to comprehend such racism, such hate existing in a place capable of so much beauty. I would like to think that the allure of the natural world would dissolve the barbed wire from around the hearts of those so intent on holding onto archaic intolerance. This story is set in 1955, and maybe we are now in the present day closer to realizing Dr. Martin King's fervent hope: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the **color of their skin**, but by the **content of their character**."

North Carolina and Virginia, two states that seceded from the Union, actually cast their ballots and their electoral college votes to Barack Obama. Heartening for sure, but it was still disheartening for me as I travel through the red states to hear most of the jokes told about Obama still revolve around the color of his skin. Words are used that hit my eardrums like the sound of a whip splitting flesh. But then we can not worry about those people; unfortunately, they are lost, but we have a chance with the young, agile minds of the children who have not been tainted by centuries of old prejudices.

Is there anything more sad than a child throwing a punch and an insult that originated from the fist and tongue of an ancestor long dead?

Lewis Nordan carried around the events of 1955 in his heart for the rest of his life. When Emmett Till, a young black man was murdered in the Mississippi Delta, Nordan was fifteen years old. Certainly fifteen is one of those pivotal years in any man's life when you are caught between seeing the man you hope to be, but are still snagged by the childish enthusiasms of a boy. As he watched two white men be convicted for the murder, he couldn't shake off the fact that the reasons for killing another human being could be so insignificant.

As insignificant as wolf whistling at a pretty, white woman may be, this awakens every primal fear in the hearts of men who can't understand that a boy that is black or a boy that is white are simply just boys learning how to be men. A white boy who wolf whistles at a pretty married woman might get a cuff to the back of the head, but a black boy...well...he has to die. Festering hate blossoms out of misconceived notions and are handed off from generation to generation, like a baton that keeps the holder circling around back to the past. Racism is a ball of despair, rage, and self doubt that is passed from father to son. It may begin as a

BB in the belly of a boy, but by the time he is a man and weighed down with his own insecurities, that BB has grown to the size of a basketball, scorching his guts and putting a blaze in his eyes that sees someone else as the cause of all his problems.

Solon is poor white trash, but he sees himself as higher on the evolutionary ladder than a black boy like Bobo. When Solon overhears the catcall that Bobo makes towards Sally Anne, wife of the local aristocratic (such as it is) Lord Montclair, he decides he is affronted and that Lord Montclair should know about this. He also sees that Bobo has a picture of a white woman in his wallet, and he makes an epic jump in logic to believe that the picture is of Sally Anne.

The photo is of Hedy Lamarr, but then Solon has already shown that he sees the world slightly blurred, in soft focus, where all black men look alike and all attractive white women have the same face.

On the polar opposite side of the scale is Alice Conroy, the local school teacher, who is trying to make a difference in Arrow Catcher, Mississippi. She is trying to expand the minds of her students so they don't feel trapped or small, so that they can make their own decisions and be a source of change. Alice is trying to move a boulder uphill; still she feels the stone move ever so slightly from time to time. The problem of course is that she is fighting a lonely battle, and soon she will find it easier to teach somewhere else. She can produce a mound of evidence to prove that racism has no true basis to continue to exist; unfortunately, people insist on nursing the flames of their own prejudices.

She sees a drowned black child floating in a raindrop.

Lord Montclair may have some money, but his wife is too young and too pretty for him. He knows he ain't worth a damn except for what the sturdiness of the walls of his ancestral home convey and the reputations of those ancestors that have preceded him give him. He has some education, but whatever benefits he has from that higher learning have been drowned in the amber of alcohol. It doesn't take much for Solon to convince Montclair that his honor has been sullied.

It doesn't go well.

Bobo, while dying from a gunshot wound that dislocates his eye, can still see events unfolding.

"Through the demon eye he saw Solon, tense behind the steering wheel, holding the truck on its true course until he reached the safety of the other side, rain still falling like pennies from heaven, dirty copper, the headlights, demon eyes themselves, laying beams like gangplanks on a pirate ship."

It must be disappointing for Bobo to die so ineptly, by the hands of men unworthy of the task and incapable of understanding the true significance of what they do.

Lewis Nordan R.I.P.

Mike Sullivan has been advocating that I read Lewis Nordan for a long time. He is quite possibly Nordan's greatest fan among a legion of readers who have sought out Nordan's books. I was surprised to see that Mike has not written a review of this book, but then sometimes books are too dear to even attempt to review. Nordan has put together a heady mix of cultural heritage, unexpected humor, and more than a drop of magic. We can only hope that Alice has left enough pieces of herself in the minds of her fourth grade class to influence their futures. We can only hope that men like Solon and Montclair are slowly becoming extinct

with each passing generation. What has been bred in has to be bred out.

If you wish to see more of my most recent book and movie reviews, visit <http://www.jeffreykeeten.com>
I also have a Facebook blogger page at: <https://www.facebook.com/JeffreyKeeten>

Jas says

You must read this book, just as you must read Jujitsu for Christ.

I hardly knew Buddy Nordan when we shared a college, but I feel honored to have met him, as I do to know Jack Butler, another Mississippi writer, better. It is uncanny how Nordan manages to draw humor out of horror (and vice-versa) and pity for atrocious characters. I'm sure he does the humor for the same reason Butler has told me parts of his novel are humorous: in order to defeat these monstrous things, we have to be able to laugh at them.

The novel takes some liberties with the characters around the central fact of Till's murder and even of how he died, but they are no matter. The idea is to present something just askew of the real that is so incomprehensible as to be unreal (yes, I mean that both ways). However, I remember that unbelievable reality, and I see that it still exists. By coincidence, I happened to read this during the recent murder of a black man and its aftermath. By further coincidence, blues legend Robert Johnson comes up frequently in this novel. It so happens that as a teenager, my father barged in on me as I listened to a British rock band play the Johnson song about his supposedly trading his soul to the devil for musical ability ("Crossroads"). Neither of us understood the song at the time, but my father recounted a black man who, at a crossroads near my home town, made the mistake of trying to flag a ride with a white woman. My father, traveling home from college, saw his body hanging from a lamp pole at 10th and Main a day or so later.

I don't hate the south. I don't hate the south. I don't hate the south.

Rita Reinhardt says

Sometimes, I am reminded of my own unawareness. Guess what? I am not the only person in the world...no literally; sometimes I have to be reminded about the world not revolving around me. Did you know that other people actually live here, with me? Breathing the same air. Making the same assumptions. Living the same life. On Earth. With me. And they have an opinion about the horrid events that take place, and sometimes...on rare occasions...their opinions may or may not influence my empathy levels...and this guy...Lewis something or another, does a great job of letting me - if only for a moment, experience a very Black event through the eyes of a Caucasian community. Realizing that, poverty doesn't fall too far from the tree.

Just for a second, a brief second of forever's time, I am able to understand how things on the surface often get dirty and need to be polished down...real good...the kind of polishing only Big Momma can manage, and just when you think the polishing is as good as it can get, and Madea has started sweating through her head scarf, you find a scuff mark...the size of a tip of an ink pen, and in this dusty, dirty, vague scuff mark you

might find a small speck of insanity. And that insanity, for some, bares a resemblance of a forgotten historical story. Story? or reality? I own know. But...

For Emmitt Till to still remain so forgotten and under exploited baffles me, but my perplexion just like my complexion should not matter...his death impacted America, regardless of race, gender or humanity...this man...No, this child...NO! This martyr. Mattered. And, this writer showcased the revolution, from the other side.

Diane Barnes says

Horrible, haunting and hilarious, those three adjectives are not usually used together to describe a book, but *Wolf Whistle* is certainly all of those, and more. To say this is a fictionalized version of the death of Emmet Till in Mississippi does not come close to conveying the truth. When the facts of the murder are carried around in the mind and heart of Lewis Nordan for many years and then brought forth again in a novel, the result is mind-blowing. The fourth grade field trips led by Miss Alice are certainly one of a kind, the inhabitants of *Arrow Catcher* are made unbelievably real, and the speech patterns of the blacks and whites of the rural south are captured perfectly.

I may come back to this review later to add more, since I just finished reading the last page and wanted to get some thoughts down while it's still fresh in my mind. But I have to wonder how in the world this author managed to convey that racism has it's roots in ignorance and stupidity so clearly in just 190 pages. This was an unforgettable read.

Randall Luce says

What do you do when you come from a place that's beautiful, friendly, and magical, and evil to its core?

What do you do when you can't winnow the bad from the good? What do you do when the place that made you is the best and worst place you can imagine?

You write that murdered boys are redemptive mermaids, that love roams without a rhyme or reason, and that all your dreams and hopes profit you nothing against the reality of who you are. You write absurdity into tragedy.

You write about how much you love the Delta, and how badly you want to leave it. If you're Lewis Nordan you write books like "*Wolf Whistle*."

The book is based on the murder of Emmett Till in the Mississippi Delta in 1955, and event that helped increase the momentum for civil rights activism in that decade. Nordan transfers that tragic event to his fictional postage-stamp town of *Arrow-Catcher*, Mississippi. You have his usual fictional elements: fantastical animals and O'Connor-like satire, and some of his sweetness and tom-foolery -- but "*Wolf Whistle*" also has its moments of true anger.

The proof is in the language. If you like this (on a flock of buzzards that were older than the Civil War)

you'll like "Wolf Whistle":

...

Some of the birds on the light posts ... were as ancient as the historical battle itself, old, ninety, a hundred years old, a few of them, so historians and ornithologists reported, and so, as part of this same flock, those birds ... had actually fed on the flesh and eyes and tongues and nutritious organ meat of Confederate troops, fallen, hungry, frightened boys before they were made buzzard bait by a mini-ball or cannon shot....

The buzzards were named Vardaman and Bilbo and Hugh White and J.P. Coleman and Ross Barnett and other names of past and future governors and senators of the sovereign state of Mississippi.

Other birds on the light posts, youthful by comparison, possessed only blood-memories of the ancient feast, genetic egg-yolk longings for distant, unremembered culinary ecstasy and freedom from deprivation, and sat with hope in their bird hearts and nothing at all in their bird brains, for many years, decades really, a human lifetime and longer, above the homes of damaged rednecks and maniacs with pistols, on smelly light posts planted in stinking mud, whiling away all of their valuable, irretrievable daylight hours and years in the sad innocence of poultry-patience during this lean century since the glorious Festival of the Dead Rebels long ago, and they were content for now with roadkill.

...

A little historical context: When Emmett Till's beaten body was pulled out of the river, still tied with barbed wire by its neck to a hundred-pound gin fan, his murder was widely criticized throughout Mississippi. Till had supposedly whistled at a white woman in a country store. Her husband and his half-brother kidnapped Till and killed him. The sheriffs of Tallahatchie County (where Till was murdered, and where his body was found) and Leflore County (where he was taken from his Uncle's house) both said the body found was Till. As the days passed that all changed, and white Mississippians began to complain of the bad publicity (the case gained national attention), and that the actions of a few hot-heads shouldn't rain judgment down on the state and its "traditions." The Tallahatchie sheriff soon reversed himself and said he didn't know if the body found was Till, and the boy was probably alive, hidden in comfort somewhere in his home town of Chicago. To his credit, the Leflore County sheriff continued to insist that the body was Till's.

The husband and half-brother were tried for the murder in Tallahatchie County, but not for the kidnapping of the boy from his uncle's house, which happened in Leflore. At trial the men admitted under oath that they took Till from his uncle's house. But they denied they killed him. The jury found them not guilty. After the trial the two men were held before the grand jury in Leflore County for the kidnapping charge, which they had admitted to under oath at their trial. Despite that, the Leflore County grand jury refused to charge them with the crime.

Casey says

If I were to choose three words to describe Nordan's work, it would be haunting, hilarious, and tragic. Usually such elements are a recipe for disaster, or at the very least a digressive narrative train wreck, but Nordan seamlessly weaves together elements of humor and tragedy, the grotesque and absurd with verdant

beauty. *Wolf Whistle* is a novel whose images will linger with you long after the reading has ended.

Wolf Whistle is based on the 1955 murder of Emmett Till, whose life was taken because he allegedly "wolf whistled" a white woman. This event would ultimately catalyze momentum for civil rights activism in the decade. Jordan sublimates this memory of the tragic event, which impacted his own childhood, into a collective meditation on the nature of Southern culture in the 1950s. Set in the fictional one horse town of Arrow Cather, Mississippi, no facet of society remains unexamined. Irony, satire and caricature are applied to all of his characters, except to Bobo, the murdered boy, who remains the pure and moral center of the novel. It is around Bobo's murder that the complex racial and cultural relations of this novel pivot. The murder reverberates through each character, no matter how major or minor. Each chapter oscillates from a different character's perspective/ reaction to the tragedy. In result, the reader is able to experience the true ethos of the era: the struggle of the white working class, intense racial segregation, the failings of the justice system, and of course, the cathartic power of the Blues.

In an interview with the author, Nordan states that his novel is ultimately "a serious story about death and grief and broken hearts" but that it exists on "a plane, sometimes comic, even burlesque, just askew of the real historical universe." And it is in his sensuous, evocative prose that we are taken into the surreal setting of the Delta, where elements of magical realism are melded with historical fact. By mythologizing this event, I believe the reader experiences the tragedy all the more profoundly. Nordan will truly be remembered by this haunting and remarkable piece.

Kenneth says

Wanted to like it but it was hard going.

The caricature and satire is obvious and, given the positive reception this book has garnered, most people must feel it works really well. It didn't for me; it was mostly wearisome. The dashes of magical realism were no more successful.

Jeri Massi says

Whew! What a book! I've never read anything like this before. Loosely based on the lynching of 14 year old Emmet Till in 1955 (for whistling at a white woman), Nordan's novel is as far away from a crime novel as you can get. A grim and bizarre comedy of callous, drunk, and stupid people, the telling of this tale took me to new destinations in odd but often hilarious ways of telling a story. From the fourth grade teacher who takes her students on a field trip to a mortuary to watch an embalming, to the drunk, befuddled, savvy, vicious, and remorseful Gregg who decides to murder his family except for his eldest daughter (lest she miss her wedding), the residents of Arrow Catcher, Mississippi abound in eccentric, twisted, and macabre individuals (most of them drunk most of the time).

The hard realities of racial segregation and deep poverty and ignorance keep one foot of the novel in reality. The murder of fourteen year old Bobo is just barely made tragic. It's striking and believable, in spite of a certain bizarre style of narrative.

Overall the narrative holds the reader tightly to itself, but there were a couple rare places where a savvy

editor could have lopped off an entire page and spared the reader from an authorial excess.

There's no mystery here: you know who commits the crime. There's no forensic story at all. This is a novel of who did it and what they were thinking and how the different residents of the small community were effected by the impact of the tragedy.

Laura says

I ended up really really liking this book. However, in the first part of the book I kind of lost focus and got a little bored with characters and story. I'm so glad I snapped out of it because it really was worth the read. Funny and heartbreaking with glimpses of hope.

Jamie says

Nothing about this should work, nothing, but God Almighty, so help me, it does. The white-trash telling of Emmett Till's murder. The fantastical, twisty what-if of 1950's Mississippi. It's a lightning storm in the swamp. It's electricity and madness and hilarity/horror and the boiled-down heart and soul of love and hate. It's fiction, but it's fact, and it's history, and it's history and fact and the heart of the matter in the way that takes fiction to get there. Larger than life. Magic even when you don't believe a thing such as magic exists.

In my favorite review of it, the review that made me pick this book up, Jimmy says "It's your own heart, idiot." It's all our hearts. It's Mississippi.

Connie says

Lewis Nordan shows us a 1955 rural Mississippi Delta town, and how its inhabitants have been impacted by the lynching of Bobo, a 14-year-old black boy from Chicago. The real murder of Emmett Till, who allegedly wolf whistled or flirted with a white woman, was the inspiration for this book.

The book weaves a story about the people living in Arrow Catcher, mostly poor whites and even poorer blacks. There is a culture of racism, violence, and alcoholism. A bit of the Southern Gothic comes through with mentions of the grotesque. Satirical humor is present in the interactions between people, and a talking parrot adds some comic elements. (The murder itself was treated as the tragic event that it was.)

Black men singing the blues set a sad musical tone in the first half of the book. A group of ancient black buzzards, who had feasted on the corpses during the Civil War, adds to the ominous feeling. Alice, a young schoolteacher, has a vision of a dead child in a raindrop.

After Bobo is murdered, with a bullet knocking an eye from its socket, he watches the coverup through the dislodged eye. "Through the demon eye he saw Solon, tense behind the steering wheel, holding the truck on its true course until he reached the safety of the other side, rain still falling like pennies from heaven, dirty copper, the headlights, demon eyes themselves, laying beams like gangplanks on a pirate ship."

Alice takes her fourth grade students on a field trip to the courthouse to watch the trial of the two men

arrested for the murder. What will the next generation learn about justice? Will the idealistic teacher be a vehicle for change?

Lewis Nordan tells this story with a combination of history, ethics, magical realism, humor, and just good storytelling. It's a creative combination that works!

Information about Emmett Till:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emmett_Till

The was a March group read for the "On the Southern Literary Trail" group.

Larry Bassett says

This book is not for me!

I have just today found a book that I don't want to put down. It is not this one! Many people have enjoyed reading this book even to the extent of giving it five stars. But this book is not for me. I am going to try to stop reading books where I think "maybe it will be better in the next chapter"! There are too many books on my shelf to be spending time with ones that aren't grabbing me in some way! Why should I feel bad that I don't like this book? I just don't get it. And that will have to do for the moment.
