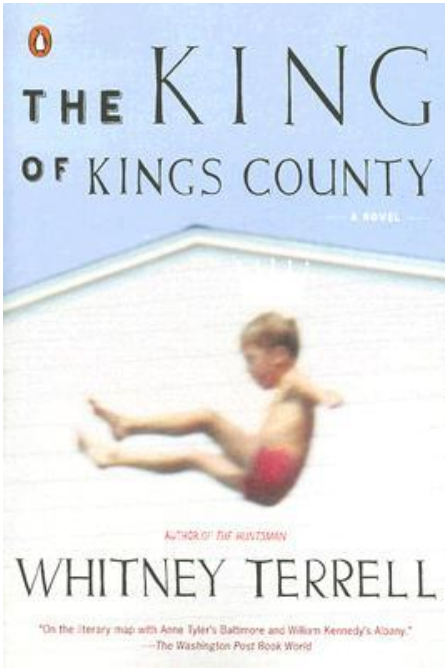

The King of Kings County

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A sweeping novel of our "suburban nation"

In *The Huntsman*, a first novel hailed by *Esquire* as "ambitious, rousing and entirely spectacular," Whitney Terrell introduced us to the streets and neighborhoods of Kansas City. Now he offers us the story of their creation. A stunning, intensely private portrait of one man's life and his city, *The King of Kings County* presents a dazzling fifty-year arc through the heart of the American dream.

The King of Kings County Details

Date	:	Published August 29th 2006 by Penguin Books (first published August 18th 2005)
ISBN	:	9780143037699
Author	:	Whitney Terrell
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Genre	:	Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Race

From Reader Review The King of Kings County for online ebook

Jacob Williams says

An engaging story about a shady-but-charismatic businessman; an interesting coming-of-age tale; and a fascinating look at part of my city’s ugly history.

Helen says

Starting at a young age, Jack Acheson observes first-hand the development of Kings County, a fictionalized Johnson County, KS. Jack’s father, Alton Acheson, capitalized on the plans to build I-35 by buying property along the future highway, mostly through manipulation and by unscrupulous means. His father’s involvement with the principle players in Kansas City’s history positions Jack firmly in a circle of friends with influential parents. Alton is not above using unfortunate events to his advantage and is a driving force in the instigation of white-flight that turned Troost Avenue into a very distinct color line and motivating whites to move to the suburbs. As Jack matures he begins to understand, not only his personal family history, but the mostly unsavory role his family has played in Kansas City history. Jack’s coming-of-age is compellingly juxtaposed with the story of Kansas City, making The King of King’s County an engaging tale.

Clif Hostetler says

This is a novel that features the development history of the Kansas City metro area during the second half of the twentieth century serving as background to a story of family, business, and racial divides. For those familiar with the metro area let me mention that it focuses on the cross state border movement of "white flight" from Kansas City, Missouri into Kings County, Kansas (*nom de littéraire* for Johnson County, Kansas).

The story is narrated in first person by the son of a land developer who aspires to transcend the established Bowen Company (J.C. Nichols Co), developer of the Champanile (the Plaza). But he has no capital to work with and ends up contractually tied to the big company. Frustrated by this relationship he seeks investment funds from the KC Mafia sources (another KC reality of that era). These and other back door financing sources end up providing residential mortgages to African Americans to buy houses in white areas which motivates the white neighbors to move into the new housing developments being constructed by Bowen Co. and others in Kings County. I hadn't previously realized this "block busting" practice was used as a deliberate means to promote sales of newly constructed suburban homes. Racial restrictive covenants written into property titles are another historical vestige of that era that are plainly described in his book.

Overlaid on this business scene is the coming of age story of the young narrator as he attends private Pemberton school (Pembroke) and meets and develops friends. He ends up being friends with son and daughter of a family with underworld connections and with daughter/granddaughter of the wealthy Bowen family. These young relationships coincidentally parallel the business relationships of their parents in fascinating ways. The personal narrative of these relationships could perhaps place this book in the romance genre, except in my opinion the story isn't very romantic.

There are some symbols and actions in this novel that can be construed to carry a meaning beyond that of their surface reality. An abandoned saw in the partly cut branch of a dead tree associated with a fake Civil War story has to mean something. Also, hitting golf balls at midnight on Main Street of downtown clearly illustrates how abandoned that area had become during that era. Also, an abandoned quarry (with an unpleasant history) ultimately buried beneath fill for the transformation into suburban development is a graphic symbol of this book's story.

In the end both the business story and romantic relationship story come full circle for an ending that is bittersweet. This isn't a feel good story, nor is it a sad or tragic story. Nor should it be if it's to be a commentary on the relationship of racial divides and housing developments. Economic development is normally considered a good thing, but when it happens to be at the cost of racial diversity one can't help but wish that things could have turned out differently.

I liked this book, but a large part of my enjoyment is a product of my familiarity with Kansas City metro area history and geography. I live in Wyandotte County which is the blue collar area on the Kansas side of the state line and north of Johnson County. My sociological sympathies lie with the urban areas of Kansas City, MO, but I feel kinship with the Johnson County side as fellow Kansans. Also, the narrator of this story is my approximate age so his life story has some chronological similarities to my own.

The following are some quotations from the book:

In the following quotation the book’s narrator is talking to his wealthy girl friend (scion of wealthy land developer family) who is working on a doctoral dissertation about Soweto, South Africa. The comment is about Kansas City but shows ironic similarity to Soweto:

> “It’s apartheid, isn’t it? You’ve got one nice, wealthy, all-white part of the city—which also happens to be where all the jobs and shops are, not to mention the place where banks are interested in giving people mortgages. And then you’ve got the east side, where all the black people are forced to stay.” (p305)

The following is a conversation between the narrator and his mother about their deceased father/husband. The reference to "always being right" is a reference to the fact that the son had always considered his father's business dealings as being less than ethical:

> “He cheated,” my mother said complacently. “But he never demagogued.”
> “That’s kind of a big word,” I said. “You got a definition for me?”
> “It means trying to hurt people by always being right,” my mother said.
> I had no doubt that my mother believed I had hurt my father on several occasions in just this way, ... (p337)

The following is a thought of the narrator about the combination of African Americans and whites that came to his father’s memorial party:

> None of them seemed particularly aware of what I’d seen as my father’s attempts to divide the city—though I couldn’t help but wonder what would have happened if they’d compared the sales pitches he’s given them. (p338)

Here's a comment about how long it took for the Supreme Court ruling regarding racial covenants to be enforced:

> Though the old racial covenants are now “a thing of the past” (they were outlawed by the Supreme Court in 1948, a fact that prosecutors in the area waited until the mid-eighties to begin noticing) ... (p347)

A general description of Kansas City racial history:

> It’s part of Kansas City life ...the desire *not* to know that you have missed something—*not* to ask why all the people left downtown. Or how, exactly, the Troost Avenue became the city’s color line, why the school system failed, ... For years people in this city have known how Prudential and Henry Bowen made their money and no one, myself included, has ever publicly contradicted their official history—or written down a chronicle of the entire process, which this manuscript describes only in part. (p350-351)

Leroy Seat says

[To be added.]

Bookmarks Magazine says

Terrell's debut novel, 2001's *The Huntsman*, earned him comparisons with William Faulkner and Herman Melville. This second novel, which falls into the same "real estate" camp as Richard Ford's *Independence Day*, Steven Millhauser's *Martin Dressler*, and Jane Smiley's *Good Faith*, continues to chart Kansas City on the literary map. Terrell successfully renders the drama of Americana, with its capitalistic aspirations, racial complexity, and familial rites amid the bunting and rolling stage of Kings County. Although his female characters are little more than passing scenery, and the story's pace can be occasionally plodding, Terrell has still managed to delve into familiar lands and procure our own unfamiliar, throbbing soul, that meshwork of grand visions, petty cons, sons, fathers, and cheap land.

This is an excerpt from a review published in Bookmarks magazine.

Makini says

This was good. The writing was well done. I hate that I cannot figure out exactly how much of my enjoyment was enhanced because I am from Kansas City. I think as a stand-alone it is pretty well done though; a reader from elsewhere will also enjoy it. The themes on race, segregation, and relationships are relevant in every city in America. It's nice that Terrell, a white man, did not mince his words in regard to our own fair city.

Jim says

This novel is set in Kansas City and its environs. Most of the story rings true and adds to my appreciation of this city and its history. I enjoyed the read. I'm not sure what I would have added or taken away. Humor and pathos. Life.

Andrew Higgins says

What Terrell captures so well through the life-long observations of his first-person protagonist, Jack Acheson, is the progression of attitude of the white middle-class Kansas Citians in his story—the sense of entitlement assumed by those largely immunized from socio-economic obstacles, or, at least, those for whom most opportunities are available. More importantly, Terrell uses characters like Prudential and Henry Bowen (and even the up-and-comer, Alton Acheson) to show how certain levels of wealth (or mere ideas about wealth, as in the case of Alton) have the potential to influence one's judgment concerning the leverage of economic power: down-and-out farmers and rural residents are strong-armed into selling their properties so the developers can capitalize on the new highway system, sowing the first seeds of then-nascent exurban sprawl. There is almost no concern for the short-term or long-term welfare of either the city being debauched of its population and tax base, let alone the physical landscape of Kings County, the once-rural farmland quickly turning to highway-convenience sprawl. But Terrell, demonstrating a first-hand comprehension of the specific mindset of Midwesterners along various socioeconomic levels, shows how counterintuitive the worldviews of characters can be: Royce MacVess, a farmer whose property is ideally situated for exploitation by Alton Acheson's fledgling real estate company before construction of the interstate highway system begins, pontificates briefly (he's described so well as having "…a bit of the Christ-touch in him…") on the virtues of large numbers of white people moving from the city into the county—the very thing that will take the land he owns from beneath him. Rather than seeing what for me is the obvious (even if it's accidental) solidarity with others swept away by mafia-backed real estate titans, MacVess offers up the typical racist convictions that others reserve for the privacy of their homes. Race is—and has been, all along—a deciding factor for the weaponization of real estate and property. But what I most appreciated about his characters is that Terrell doesn't set up neat and one-sided little ideological shells, pre-loaded with predictably racist/capitalist/exploitative monologues (nor predictably sentimental/victimizing), accommodating the ambiguity of human choice, and how those choices can change in one person's life. Geanie is sympathetic because she is aware of and ambivalent towards the way her family's business affects the lives of others; Jack recognizes that he has the circumstantial luxury of being "uninterested" in his father's real estate feats; Elmore, aware of how he's being subtly manipulated by his friend Alton, nonetheless wants climb the social ladder. People are complicated, Terrell says through his characters, and their motivations are note pre-determined entirely by their demographics.

Terrell also manages to take potentially-boring subject matter—the legal and financial ins-and-outs of residential and commercial real estate—and making it not only comprehensible, but interesting. Understanding the technical implications of these deals are crucial to appreciation the stakes for each of the characters, and Terrell puts those aspects into the mouths of the characters, and thereby, giving them human inflections. Not only do they become easier to understand, but it opens space for Terrell to amplify all of the messy little human emotions involved here, rather than appealing to reason as he would be limited to do, in the case of an essay.

This is a fantastic book that speaks truth about our times.

Mitch Mitchell says

Interesting if you're a Kansas City history nerd, especially J.D. Nichols et al. Less so if you're not.

Larry says

I really enjoyed this novel. The relationships were interesting, but also got to see the history of the growth of Kansas City and the impact of the creation of the interstate highway system.

Wendy says

This book was a novel about the development of Johnson County, Kansas (suburb of Kansas City, MO). As a resident of Johnson County I found the book interesting. The story used to drive the story was enjoyable and the character development was decent. I enjoyed the book because I live in the area where the book is set, so the things I was reading about were familiar. I'm not sure if I would have felt the same way had I not been living in the Kansas City area.

Jack says

Whitney Terrell’s The King of Kings County sticks to the ribs like a Plaza III porterhouse and potatoes dinner. The story doesn’t dazzle. Nothing much happens: a son struggles with his father’s foibles, with a love above his class, and with the evolution of a city from centric to suburban sprawl propelled by subtle racism. It’s the story’s seasoning, the way Terrell tells his story, that provides nourishment far beyond the tale itself.

Although short on action and suspense, Terrell does weave a credible tale that takes on racism and relationships, love and longing. Jack Acheson, growing up on the fringes of Kansas City privilege in the 1950s, serves as the book’s narrator and flawed moral compass. Jack’s father Alton lives a life of schemes and dreams. Alton longs to emulate his hero Tom Durant, a railroad robber baron from the 1800’s. He possesses the brains and a plan (“the biggest land grab since Tom Durant stole half of Iowa for the Union Pacific” Alton calls it) but not the means to pull it off. Alton must seek financial aid from Prudential Bowen, the most powerful man in Kansas City: a man who demands and receives his pound-of-flesh in every local deal. Alton is a good man who cheats, a moral man who makes immoral choices. He uses race as a wedge, yet Elmore Haywood, the man who becomes his closest friend, is an African American. Alton walks and breathes contradictions.
Ultimately, the father/son relationship, Alton and Jack’s, provides the thematic flavoring for Terrell’s story. Alton frequently embarrasses his son, who is obligated to actively participate in his father’s real estate cons. The son is alternately amazed and abhorred by his father’s audacious dealings. Of Alton’s scheme that initiates Kansas City’s steamrolling white-flight, Jack recalls: “my father’s effort to sell these people homes in white neighborhoods of the city’s east side was simultaneously the best and the worst thing he ever did for the Alomar Company”. Alton soon learns he can neither best, nor even match the demagogue, Prudential Bowen. At the same time, high school aged Jack falls for Bowen’s granddaughter Geanie, occasioning an on-again, mostly off-again love that will haunt him for the rest of his life.

Whitney Terrell’s genius, his rich characters and dialogue, sustain long after the last bite of King’s feast of words.

Rick Harsch says

It's difficult to summarize this book about highways and big shots in Kansas City and make it sound like something you'd want to read in your book club, but it was riveting throughout, the writing superb, and as good a dissection of the growth of an American city as you will ever read in a novel. Highly recommended.

Roberta says

I'm not a native Kansas Citian so I wasn't familiar with the city's history and found the book interesting in that respect. I gave this book three stars because I thought it was a bit choppy and hard to follow at times. Also, to me the character development wasn't the best. And as others mentioned I guess the private entities were given similar but fictional names while streets and parks weren't.

Kathy jenkins says

My second book by this author who uses my hometown as a backdrop for an intriguing story of white flight into Johnson County KS as the interstate highways came to be built in and around the area. It's easy to speculate how much of this story is based on fact. The story drags on too long, my only complaint about this coming-of-age tale.
