

Between Heaven and Here

Susan Straight

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Between Heaven and Here, the seismic new novel by Susan Straight, has received deservedly high praise from readers and reviewers alike since its release this fall by McSweeney's Books.

This haunting story, written in not one but many original voices, opens with a young local of Rio Seco, California, discovering the body of Glorette Picard in a shopping cart. "No one looked like Glorette," Sidney muses of his former schoolmate. Yet the town's great beauty was also an addict and prostitute. She "worked regular rounds near the Launderland because that's where one crew sold rock from a dryer," he remembers.

Glorette's death, and what Sidney does with her body, goes on to touch many lives, in both major and glancing ways, with each fact building to a form of truth. The narrative switches to Glorette's father's voice next, and then that of an uncle, and then a long series of relations young and old, each of whom reveal their own past and present in their own manner of speech.

For Straight's characters, the past seeps up either as a slow killer—as with the dissolution of family and its traditions—or a fast one, as with Glorette's sudden death. While never disappointing, this tense, carefully unrolling story features a certain lack of focus that can be disorienting: at times it is easy to forget which characters are related and where they came from. These details become increasingly important as the book makes its way to its conclusion.

Straight aptly captures the idiom and patois of successive generations, distant regions, and overlapping races. Some characters use the Creole French of the Louisiana Bayou; others speak the rough street talk of violent thugs and drug dealers; others still the language of college prep tests and schools; and a few speak all three. Through their voices, readers witness what it means when language and culture inevitably shift.

Between Heaven and Here is not quickly read, delving as it does into the unpleasant, pleasant, and sometimes simply banal lives of a set of people readers may or may not identify with. But it is a thoroughly engrossing novel, one that operates powerfully in the empty, lonely gaps between people.

Susan Straight has published seven previous novels, including *A Million Nightingales* and *Take One Candle Light a Room*. Her novel *Highwire Noon* was a finalist for the 2001 National Book Award.

LEIA MENLOVE (Winter 2013)

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