

Cora's Kitchen

Kimberly Garrett Brown

Inanna Publications (Sep 20, 2022)

Softcover \$22.95 (176pp)

978-1-77133-851-6

A Black woman rebels against racism and class, finding her voice, in Kimberly Garrett Brown's novel *Cora's Kitchen*.

In 1928, Cora James is an aspiring writer who works as a librarian in New York. She is aware of the privileged position she holds: many Black women in her era are confined to work as servants. But when her cousin survives an act of domestic violence, Cora is asked to fill in for her as a maid to a rich white woman. Cora is reluctant but agrees. The decision changes the course of her life—and her perception of what is right.

In a series of diary entries, Cora demonstrates a clear, sober understanding of the places that Black women, and women in general, are permitted to occupy in her time. Interspersed with her diary entries are letters to and from Langston Hughes, whom Cora knows through a book group. Hughes encourages Cora to write, offering her advice—and, at times, criticism. Still, he is lavish in his praise of her work, as is Cora's new boss.

Also interspersed throughout the novel are stories, and story fragments, attributed to Cora, opening up her developing skills to the audience's scrutiny, too. Indeed: her diary entries are more honest, and less self-conscious, than her prose ends up being. Nevertheless, Cora's observations about her marriage and her position in society, coupled with her lamentations over her children's futures, make her a transcendent heroine.

In the historical novel *Cora's Kitchen*, a Black woman's desire to write—and to give other women a voice—lifts her above everyday drudgery and prejudices.

RANDI HACKER (September / October 2022)

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