



★ **Knucklehead**

Adam Smyer

Akashic Books (Feb 13, 2018)

Softcover \$15.95 (340pp)

978-1-61775-587-3

There is a wide-eyed sweetness that lurks underneath the hostility of this novel, told in journal style. As with an actual knucklehead, with time and patience, the rewards well exceed the effort.

Young, black law student Marcus Hayes narrates his own fast-moving story. His first-person account of self-determination in 1980s New York is a pearl necklace of chance encounters, momentous occasions, and powerful conflicts, all of which shape him, but only after he's disabused of his notions of himself.

After a violently tense beginning, Marcus hits his stride. Soon he crafts a cocky ploy to form his own study group of racial outsiders. All are brilliant, quirky, and going places—or at least they will be, under Marcus's savvy direction. This leads to a bold encounter with group member Amalia, a preppy classmate from Berkeley whose love—and own black middle-class mores—provides impetus to calm the rage within.

One moment, he has a violent date-night encounter in Alphabet City. Months later, he's antiquing in California. Meeting Amalia's parents goes well until truths are told and contrasts are drawn. All the while, the knucklehead within lurks. The tension is delicious, and the heartache palpable. Smyer gets how swiftly change can occur on the heels of confrontations borne of conditioning that we feel powerless to avoid.

This book is bold in how it treats the reader as an insider to the reality of American blackness. It can be, in turns, lyrically poignant, cynical, hilarious, and infuriating. Some readers may have to push through the dim spots to advance forward. Know there is light around every corner, you just have to hustle past some poorly-lit areas to get there. Just like New York City in the eighties, when it was wonderful.

DANNY GARDNER (January/February 2018)

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