



Take One Candle Light a Room

Susan Straight

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From the author of *A Million Nightingales* (“a writer of exceptional gifts and grace” —Joyce Carol Oates) comes a luminous new novel about the forces that tear families apart and the ties that bind them together.

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Fantine Antoine is a travel writer, a profession that keeps her happily away from her Southern California home. When she returns to mark the fifth anniversary of the murder of her closest childhood friend, Glorette, she finds herself pulled into the tumultuous life of Glorette’s twenty-two-year-old son —and Fantine’s godson —Victor. After getting involved in a shooting, Victor has fled to New Orleans. Together with her father, Fantine follows Victor, determined to help him avoid the criminal future that he suddenly seems destined for.

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Fantine’s own fate will be altered on this journey as well: her father will reveal the wrenching secrets of his past, and she will be compelled to question the most essential choices she’s made in her life. As they cross from California to the heart of Louisiana, all three characters will come face-to-face with the issues of race that beset them: Fantine, whose light skin has allowed her a kind of invisibility; her father, who grew up in the Jim Crow South and has tried to guard his family against that world; and Victor, whose fall into violence mirrors the path of so many other young black men. For Fantine, finding Victor could offer them both a way to face the past and decide between different futures.

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Powerful and moving, *Take One Candle Light a Room* illuminates the intricacies of human connection and the ways in which we find a place for ourselves within our families and the world.

Take One Candle Light a Room Details

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From Reader Review Take One Candle Light a Room for online ebook

Sue S says

This book is the end of a trilogy, so completes the story. It is not my favorite of the three, but it was a good read. Straight's focus on character and place is strong, as always. Places featured in this story are L.A., Riverside (Rio Seco) and New Orleans and vicinity. Her sense of the history of her characters is very strong. Their inter-relationships reveal history in slow, satisfying ways.

Straight is a very visually descriptive writer, poetic in places. The phrasing and description are, in many ways, more satisfying than the story plot.

Shena Ramsay says

Disappointed. I wanted and tried to like it, the first chapter had such promise. The author did not get the second and third generations quite right, and the events that drove Victor's plot line were implausible. FX and Victor being "different" was not compelling and not so odd in this multicultural society. The author relies on staccato, intentionally confusing sentences, then clearing things up with awkward narration or stilted dialogue later on, that got old really quick and did not keep me hanging on as it was likely intended.

D. says

I've enjoyed Susan Straight's essays in Salon for many years and I really liked the first novel of hers that I read- Highwire Moon. I was immediately involved with the characters in this book and cared deeply about their stories. The characters explore many different levels of what family, history and genetic legacies mean to each of us. I believe that The author has tremendous compassion for all of the inhabitants of the novel without creating stereotypical heres or villains. She writes real people having the kind of surreal experiences that occur more often than we would like to think. The drama and turmoil we can see bearing down us but too often we think we can just ride it out or hope will just blow over.

Lisa says

Although she is a local writer (Riverside) I have not read any of her novels (I used to see her reviews in the L.A. Times). Her writing is poetic, gestural, and moody, and takes a bit to get into but I am enjoying this state of mind (2/7/11).

2/25/11: I finished this a couple weeks ago and it has been in my thoughts -- a good thing, since some books are so forgettable. I really enjoyed the local French-tinged dialogue, and most of the relationships. Especially the father-daughter relationship. For a writer, the main character does not talk much (keeps a lot to herself) which seems to run in the family and their subculture. The children have a lot of responsibility (working in

orchards) at a young age. I can't help comparing to "kids today...".

The focus on the main relationship -- between the narrator, who is a travel writer, and her young adult nephew, with whom she seems to have spent limited time -- was a bit strained for me. The narrator is super-motivated to get to her nephew when he's in danger, but the intensity of her feelings for him seems contrived given their limited history together.

Judy says

You may be American, but what would it be like to have multiple cultures running through your blood? What if you did not look like a Black American and every one guessed, incorrectly, about your background? This book centers on my all time favorite theme - building identity when you don't fit in - anywhere. How are you true to your roots when those roots run deep, and are watered across State lines, race and socio-economic culture?

Each character has developed their own reconciliation to skin color, their place in time, and to their disappointments. Besides the complex protagonist Fantine, who has a name for each cultural persona she represents (Fantine, FX etc) , the author brings in several characters, and explores their relationship in detail, aunties, friends, a nephew, a father - I wish there had been more about the mother. Setting is interesting too as it explores Los Angeles and then moves across state lines. If you are from LA, you will experience name recognition, The book takes a bit of reading before it starts to quicken the pace. It reads like a strong, exploratory narrative that unexpectedly turns whodunit thriller. The author develops tangential story lines in a way that may confuse some readers, but if you are a reader who savors a story ticked inside a story, this book will work for you.

Jill Polsby says

Just can't read it. Started. Realized that in the first 20 pages or so, we have been introduced to probably 20 people, all with varied histories and relationships. So I started over this time with the yellow paper pad and a pencil, taking copious notes as to whom, how, who married who, whose child.....and I tuck with it for about 100 pages....never falling in love with a character, never understanding why a relationship was supposed to be, or had to be so complicated.

I read at night and I know that has a lot to do with my liking, or not liking, a book. I just couldn't do this one.

Amy says

The Sarrat families' saga moves to Louisiana, just as Hurricane Katrina approaches.

Here's the story: The narrator is Fantine, a travel writer who's moved to L.A. and only visits Rio Seco (Riverside). Five years after her cousin Glorette's murder, Fantine has a special godmother role to Glorette's college-age son, Victor. Victor and two bad-element friends visit L.A.; Victor asks to stay with Fantine;

Fantine distractedly puts him off to the next day; Victor becomes party to a shooting in Burbank and is kidnapped to Louisiana; Fantine and her father chase after.

Victor is a wonderful character. Incredibly smart and self-reliant, but with a childlike thoughtfulness and emotional vulnerability. I love how he use music to explore racial stereotypes and "cross-pollination." Victor writes about Led Zeppelin doing a version of a Memphis Minnie song: "So that's Soul--to live the shit? And Art is to use the shit?"

By the way, the song "Brown Sugar" has always made me uncomfortable, but I never could understand most of what Jagger was singing--now that I know the exact words, I'm horrified. Another aside: if you use bacon as a poultice over a bullet wound, the "salt pulls out the infection and the foreign body."

This book would be a 3.5. Parts of the story bogged down. A family tree diagram would be helpful, because the characters spent a lot of time picking apart the genealogy of the Picards and the Antoinnes, and it was a little hard to keep track of the four to six generations they were talking about.

On the plus side, the writing is wonderful, especially the descriptions of roasting coffee and heading out into the orange groves in the desert. I loved how the family's oral traditions kept their stories alive from Senegal in the late 18th century to the present day. I also enjoyed Fantine's discussion with her friend Tony, comparing their great-great-grandmothers' journeys (his from Naples, hers through Louisiana). There is a perfect balance of strong women and strong men, with everyone looking out for each other. Brilliant scene at a motel in Texas where Fantine, because of the color of her skin, is assumed to be a prostitute. A drunk white woman claims Fantine is on the phone arranging clients; Fantine snaps back that she's making trades on the Japanese stock market.

Fwiw, I'm reading this family saga in reverse order, and I'm finding that makes it easier to understand what's going on. I'd like to see another book in the series, to find out what happens post-Katrina, and to see if Fantine softens up this rather cynical view:

"I'd realized why everyone I knew in LA made good money and ate good food and lived in great houses or apartments--because we were mostly not in love. Sometimes we fell in love with the idea of love, but it hardly ever worked out. Love was about having things already, trying to share those things or buying more things together, and then arguing about the things."

Lauren says

Bad title, nice little book--not amazing, but a lovely diversion for a few days. I'd give it 2-1/2 stars if I could. I love the sense of community Straight evokes with her Sarat, CA. The characters and connections felt authentic and credible, making me long for the easy sense of belonging that is lost when one leaves her place of origin. That authenticity covers a multitude of sins detailed below. I also loved Fantine's quirk of "writing" in her head, a wickedly accurate little self-deprecating twist that skewers all writers and most readers.

I needed maps and family trees to follow the characters. I found myself constantly going back to find out who so-and-so was, and I got out a road atlas to see exactly where we were, especially on the road trip which culminated (a little clumsily) in southern Louisiana in August, 2005. There were so many characters, too many to fully develop in one novel, and for me that was a problem. I didn't get to know anybody well enough to fully buy their stories. Why does Fantine spend so little time with her family if her roots run deep

enough to provide the plot for the novel? Why does model student and aspiring writer Victor hang out with the drug dealing Jazen and his trusty sidekick Alfonso? Fantine's easy success and well-heeled lifestyle strike me as unrealistic, a little like the "working class" houses and wardrobes we see on tv shows--if your job is X, you aren't wearing Y or living in Z.

I find it hard to swallow the easy attitude toward drugs, prostitution, addiction, homelessness, joblessness. To me, a middle-aged middle-class white woman, the novel seems to promulgate stereotypes about African-Americans. Straight gives us a whole novel full of African-Americans with varying skin tones, yet there are only a few men (mostly minor characters) who seem to actually work, whereas all of the women do. I can't help questioning it.

Despite my misgivings, though, I think this was an ambitious novel that simply fell short of its goal. I have to hand it to Straight for trying to examine race, class, and generational distance. I just think she needed to dig deeper.

Lief says

This is one of those unique books where I can see what other people would enjoy about it, but those things just did not work for me with this novel. My main complaints are that I could not find myself connecting with any of the characters, so I did not really care what happened to them. Also, the flashbacks were jarring and generally did not have a large bearing on the present events of the story. One very positive thing I can say for the novel, though, is that Straight does a very good job of handling the racial aspects of the book in such a way that the reader gets the feeling that this is a novel about a family's trials, not so much a novel about race.

Judy says

Now I have come to the end of reading Susan Straight, at least for now. This is her most recent novel, just released in October, 2010, but I am pretty sure she has not come to the end of her stories yet.

Take One Candle Light A Room is almost a sequel to A Million Nightingales. The main character is known as FX when she is out in the world publishing her pieces in travel magazines. At home in Rio Seco, she is Fantine, named after an ancestor who lived with Moinette in Louisiana. The Antoine family, living amidst the orange groves of southern California, knows their history all the way back to Moinette's mother, especially because many of that slave woman's descendants are of mixed race, due to the history of rape perpetrated on black women by white men.

FX is light-skinned enough herself to pass as Italian or Hawaiian. She is the one, as there often is in Susan Straight's novels, who is different from the rest of her family. She is the one who left and whom her mother and sisters will never forgive for doing so.

When this complicated woman returns home to participate in the fifth anniversary remembrance of the murder of Glorette, the best friend of her childhood, she finds that Glorette's son Victor has disappeared. FX has no children of her own. She doesn't even have a boyfriend but Victor is her godson and means more to

her than anyone else in the world. He'd been riding with two gangsta friends that weekend and involved in a shooting which left one person dead and one wounded.

So begins a desperate hunt for Victor, taking Fantine and her father across the country on Interstate 10 all the way to New Orleans. As Fantine wrestles with her professional aspirations set against her love for Victor, the long history of more than eight generations of this family comes to light.

Over three hundred pages of road trip, tension and suspense was excruciating. The wonder is that the author could sustain it through about nine hours of reading. That level of anxiety and stress is usually only found in two hours of an action/thriller film. A further wonder is her explication of why race, violence and drugs plague so many young Americans.

Susan Straight never preaches, her tone is never strident and she refrains from cheap emotional tricks. Once again she put me into the lives of the characters, their homes and cars and neighborhoods, as well as into their hearts and minds. She just tells the story but reading it is as close as one can come to living someone else's life. And yet, every book is different from the last. What a great reading adventure I have had. I recommend it!

Diane says

At several points along the way, I thought I was going to put this book aside. I didn't, and I'm glad I didn't. While I think it started slow, the book ended beautifully and totally appropriately in Plaquemines Parish during Hurricane Katrina. As someone who lived in New Orleans and experienced the storm first hand, I get tired of authors setting books during that period when to do so is just contrived, but for this story it was totally appropriate. I think I'll have to check out other work by this author.

Dolores says

Wonderful book--a bit hard to get into the first 40 pages, but then I couldn't leave it alone. Main character is dynamic, well-travelled, single, and childless. She has an orphaned godson who stumbles into trouble and she is determined that this young African-American male is not going to be another sad statistic. She ends up on a road trip with her dad and all the relationships are so real. Oh by the way, the story is set just before and after Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, so that makes for an engaging read!

Beesley says

There were things I really liked about this book: Susan Straight writes some beautiful sentences; I greatly enjoyed all of the Louisiana backstory; I also enjoyed the tension in the narrator's position as the person who left a small, tight-knit community in order to travel the world and follow her dreams. I did not enjoy the plot involving the narrator's godson, and the parts of the book where various characters traveled from California to Louisiana right as Hurricane Katrina was bearing down on the Gulf. I thought that part of the story was fairly incoherent, with increasing numbers of characters, locations, and situations being thrown at the reader and making a chaotic mess. While that dovetailed with the chaotic mess of Hurricane Katrina, I found it all wearying, tiresome, and not terribly interesting.

Cheryl Klein says

I always liked the IDEA of Star Wars--the creation of a world and a mythology that unfolded over many generations. But I wasn't that into the intergalactic stuff, so I love that Susan Straight has created the literary fiction equivalent with her many stories from Rio Seco. Specifically, *Take One Candle* is a two-hundred-years-later sequel to her excellent *A Million Nightingales*. Narrator Fantine Antoine is a slight departure from Straight's usual protagonists in that she has transcended her working class background and become a successful travel writer; Straight problematizes the experience of passing (literally and figuratively) and of abandoning one's roots without romanticizing the world of poverty and violence. This is not one of those books where the assimilated protagonist solves all her problems by learning stuff about her grandmother, despite being adjacent to that genre. The novel follows Fantine's sometimes confusing journey (the book could have benefited from a family tree a la *One Hundred Years of Solitude*) to save her wayward godson, a pursuit which takes her through her extended family's migration from Louisiana to Southern California. It lands back in Louisiana on the eve of Hurricane Katrina and glitters with Straight's vivid, meaty prose the whole way.

Hans says

I did what I should have done with *Between Heaven and Here* and created a family tree for the Antoine and Picard families. That helped me track how people were related. I wonder what it would have been like to read the third book in publication order rather than chronological order (like I did) because this second volume would have filled in much of the information that you discover in the third volume. Definitely enjoying Straight's writing and stories and look forward to reading more.
