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Andrea Lee , Valerie Smith

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This novel, in the words of its title character, is set in "the hermetic world of the old-fashioned black bourgeoisie--a group largely unknown to other Americans, which has carried on with cautious pomp for years in eastern cities and suburbs, using its considerable funds to attempt poignant imitations of high society, acting with genuine gallantry in the struggle for civil rights, and finally producing a generation of children educated in newly integrated schools and impatient to escape the outworn rituals of their parents."

Sarah Phillips Details

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Author : Andrea Lee , Valerie Smith

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From Reader Review Sarah Phillips for online ebook

Ellen says

As recommended by Curtis Sittenfeld.

Danielle says

2.5 stars. I really like the idea of this book--a middle-class black girl graduates from Harvard in the 1970s and goes to Paris. That's how the book opens. What follows is a series of vignettes of her growing-up years, an almost obligatory one about her preacher father, one about her mother, one about her brother and his Jewish girlfriend, one about black cooks and janitors at the boarding school. It felt like the stories almost ceased to be about Sarah, and became only commentary. Of course each story illuminated how Sarah grew up and her worldview. But--I would have rather read about Sarah, the Harvard graduate, in Paris and beyond, with just enough references to her childhood, without it being the focus of the story, the past she can never leave behind and all that.

Ciana says

I'm not quite sure what to make of this book. Readers are introduced to the aimless Sarah Phillips who is wondering around Europe, specifically France, with three men. All of which she has has some quasi friendship/relationship. After two chapters we learn she is considering coming back to the states. Then readers are transported to the past and follow her through her childhood, and all the way to college. The Sarah we meet in the past, has a life that is mapped out and determined. In these chapters Lee gives us a look into the Philadelphia's upper-middle class black community, and the expectations of their children. I suppose readers are to assume Sarah abandons the expectations of her life after college, but then the book just ends abruptly, leaving all loose ends untied.

Zanna says

At the start of the chapter on her father's funeral, Sarah describes how the information of his stroke was hampered on its journey to her by the phone that was only 'half-working', and thus her mother's voice was 'embroidered with static', a situation that evokes the effects of a stroke on the body (as well as stereotypes of female anxiety and solicitude). Sarah elaborates to explain how a jealous Scandinavian boyfriend damaged her phone along with other comforts of her shared apartment, such as her chair (though she enjoys the sight of the 'new' broken wood in contrast with the old, worn finish, a subtle intimation of a fresh start, echoed, perhaps, by her mental equation of her father's imagined fall and the smooth, gentle motion he used to sweep his baptismal volunteers back into the waters) and the poster of a black male dancer in a Paris club, which hangs inverted, another suggestive image that speaks to her ambiguous relationship with ideas of blackness, perhaps even hinting at the future pattern of her own racialisation in France.

This level of care and subtlety is employed consistently in Andrea Lee's fictional memoir of a daughter of the

black bourgeoisie of Philadelphia growing up in the '60s and '70s, so that every idea she offers is part of a constellation of sense data, memory and reflection delicately linked by a shifting sea of symbols and signs. As in her memoir *Russian Journal*, Lee writes with a feather-light descriptive touch, never straying far from the concrete, yet somehow evoking a world not only palpable and immediate, present in sight and taste, but richly emotional, with the rhythm and pitch of a ceremony.

Sarah is a low-key character and her voice is often so limpid and matter of fact that it can seem uninvolved, yet she describes sensations of thrilled terror and obscure relief vividly, and the equanimity and recklessness with which she steers her life reflect and comment on her thoughtfully acknowledged, but conditional and limited privilege, as well as the particular abrasions of her parents' mainly tender and easy discipline.

The book has an episodic structure that Lee rigorously works to make each chapter speak an individual strand of Sarah's truth. They have none of the triumphant moral simplicity of parable - rather they dispell pat conclusions about the intersections of race, class and gender that Sarah lives - but they are thematically distinct like colours on a palate, or days of weather in different seasons, and bring clarity like morning light to the issues they touch.

For instance, in the chapter 'Gypsies' Sarah opens a reflection on her sheltered childhood world and dramatisation of an encounter that ushers the hard currencies of racialisation and the thrill of difference into her young imaginary with a characteristically casual yet suggestive scene-setting:

For as long as I could remember, the civil rights movement had been unrolling like a dim frieze behind the small pleasures and defeats of my childhood; it seemed dull, a necessary burden on my conscience, like good grades or hungry people in India

Developing the theme, the later chapter 'Marching' reflects on the sometimes fraught ambivalence around the involvement of the black middle class in the civil rights movement. While in some ways Sarah's parents' generational milieu is at the forefront of the struggle, yet in others they exist at a remove, having already achieved sufficient comforts to feel themselves embraced by the American Dream, and being racist and colorist themselves. The chapter ends with Sarah arguing with her older brother about the significance of a march, confessing "I didn't know what I really thought". This forced ambiguity about movement toward liberation seems to be a kind of racial violence in itself, part of the divide & conquer strategy of white supremacist capitalism

Together, the episodes of Sarah's memoir carry the elements of a symphony, progressing and gathering sophistication through their comments on each other as each takes up a melody heard earlier. The decision to place the chronologically latest chapter at the start is the crucial movement that strings the beads of the narrative together. Ostensibly the recollections are quite jumbled, but Lee has placed and fashioned them with such skill that the effect is tight and tidy as a perfectly-crafted oration.

Every book is ethnographic but some are so with a sensitive veracity that makes them precious, and this is one of those.

Abby says

It was interesting; but ultimately, the author returns to the same images and tropes.

Chris says

Extremely well written.

Emma Deplores Goodreads Censorship says

3.5 stars

This is a very well-written book, clear and evocative, and I particularly liked the early chapters, which evoke suburban childhood summers and follow the young protagonist through her first encounters with race. Sadly, the later part of the book didn't jive as well for me, though the writing is equally good. The chapters are episodic to the point that it resembles a short story collection more than a novel (some of them appear to have been published independently), which I wasn't expecting. It was also odd, given that this is presented as a semi-autobiographical work and people who meet the narrator identify her as black, to see a picture of the author – she looks vaguely southern European, perhaps Hispanic, and I struggled to reconcile that with a book about coming of age as an upper-middle-class African-American woman. (I realize that a portion of the author's heritage is African-American and she identifies as such, but that seems to me a vastly different experience from actually looking black.) At any rate, though it didn't all quite come together for me in the way I expected, this is an elegantly-written and complex work with realistic, nuanced characters, certainly worth the relatively short time it takes to read.

christine says

This is one of the best books i've ever read. A collection of short stories about Sarah Phillips- a Black woman who grew up in a well-to-do family. The stories are not in chronological order, which adds to the complexity of the main character. This book deals with race, class and privilege.

Loretta says

Wonderfully written book that is hard to put down, even though it is episodic in nature, essentially a collection of related short stories. I would like to know more about what happens to Sarah Phillips in later life and how she copes with it all.

Janice says

Excellent book; a story that I am very happy was told. This provides another perspective about an African-American woman's life. I would like to see a movie made based on this story.

Keith Miller says

Sarah Phillips by Andrea Lee (1985)

Jane says

I loved this book. What an interesting glimpse into a world that white folks such as I didn't even know existed. Fascinating and heart-warming.

Annie says

For a memoir told by a character whose defining trait is unresolved sentiments, the narration is crystal clear. It is not the typical, impassioned minority speaker whose bildungsroman reaches a cathartic vision or understanding of his or her identity. The narration deals with loss and being lost, minus the saturated descriptions either leaning toward a self-righteous message or an aimless series of self-deprecating humor. The conciseness of the text is astoundingly efficient in its delivery of minimum tangibility and maximum lasting impact.

Melissa says

This book was short but felt long and was incredibly snotty. This is the 2nd book I've read by the author although this is the author's first book. I'm guessing this is mostly autobiographical and basically consists of short stories all coming of age about a young black woman growing up in the upper middle class Philadelphia suburbs, attending private schools and summer camps and the daughter of a baptist pastor. There were some funny moments and some really emotional ones. It wasn't a complete waste of time, but I'm glad to be moving on to something else.

Noël says

hardcover

Josh says

I read *Sarah Phillips* for a class. Luckily it is a short book; as I did not particularly enjoy it.

Shereese Maynard says

I re-read this story this weekend and it deserves a second look.

Aubrey says

In table of contents order, we have:

In France: 5/5
New African: 4/5
Mother: 4.5/5
G[*]psies: 3/5
Marching: 3.5/5
Servant Problems: 4.5/5
Matthew and Martha: 4/5
The Days of the Thunderbirds: 4.5/5
An Old Woman: 5/5
Negatives: 4/5
Fine Points: 3/5
A Funeral at New African: 4/5

I wish short story collections would stop putting their finest piece first. On the other hand, maybe I should be wishing that I stop expending more offered on the first course than the rest of the stories combined, thereby semi-cementing expectations in a manner far more suited to a novel or multivolume series than a form that will inevitably be a disparate whole rather than a whole in and of itself. Whatever the case, I liked the semi-Grand Tour the most, as much judgment of warp and weave and cohesiveness of beginning middle and end as for memories of Baldwin and Giovanni's Room. Although, 'An Old Woman' came close to matching it in terms of brutal truth complicated by present and past. One good way of wringing out the short form is to do away with beating around the bush, and in many admirable places, Andrea Lee did just that.

There's this New Yorker/East Coast/neo Euro dressing up as Americana and vice versa tone that a lot of writers apparently aspire to. Throw in race as more than just a stock photo and you get *Dear White People* done three decades previous that is less overt about not caring for the white gaze. You could slap 'politically incorrect' on some of these, but only if you know who created the term in the first place and can parse the difference between text that deconstructs a hegemony and text that reinforces. In my view, a good short story has some gristle showing, the remnant of being yanked out of some larger picture and plopped onto a table for purposes of dissection, so these pre and post adolescent musings that sanctify what is customarily passed off as glib and glances off the usual pedestals are quite alright with me. Irreverence is almost a necessary narrative component when the tradition you're inserting your writing into has a century or more disconnect between historical happenings and public consumption, else you'll end up revering the maxims such as people of color didn't exist before the 20th century and some of them not even before the 1960's, or thereabouts. That works if you're arguing people as created terminology (again, if you don't know who made it, find out so you can give credit where credit is due), not so much if you consider reality to be worthy of serious consideration.

Lee's got a nice turn of phrase, less of the quote dropping variety and more of the quality juxtaposition that

makes you stop and ponder for a while without distancing you from the narrative at hand. It'd be wasted on the apolitical types who can't handle fiction that probes at the dregs spat out by the churnings of power, but for the rest of us, here's an elegant collection with a precise vocabulary and a good set of teeth.
