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Southland



Synopsis

"[A]n absolutely compelling story of family and racial tragedy. Revoyr's novel is honest in detailing southern California's brutal history, and honorable in showing how families survived with love and tenacity and dignity."—Susan Straight, author of *Highwire Moon* *Southland* brings us a fascinating story of race, love, murder and history, against the backdrop of an ever-changing Los Angeles. A young Japanese-American woman, Jackie Ishida, is in her last semester of law school when her grandfather, Frank Sakai, dies unexpectedly. While trying to fulfill a request from his will, Jackie discovers that four African-American boys were killed in the store Frank owned during the Watts Riots of 1965. Along with James Lanier, a cousin of one of the victims, Jackie tries to piece together the story of the boys' deaths. In the process, she unearths the long-held secrets of her family's history. *Southland* depicts a young woman in the process of learning that her own history has bestowed upon her a deep obligation to be engaged in the larger world. And in Frank Sakai and his African-American friends, it presents characters who find significant common ground in their struggles, but who also engage each other across grounds—historical and cultural—that are still very much in dispute. Moving in and out of the past—from the internment camps of World War II, to the barley fields of the Crenshaw District in the 1930s, to the streets of Watts in the 1960s, to the night spots and garment factories of the 1990s—*Southland* weaves a tale of Los Angeles in all of its faces and forms. Nina Revoyr is the author of *The Necessary Hunger* ("Irresistible."—*Time Magazine*). She was born in Japan, raised in Tokyo and Los Angeles, and is of Japanese and Polish-American descent. She lives and works in Los Angeles.

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Customer Reviews

Revoyr's *Southland* was one of those books that as soon as your eyes absorbed the final sentence, you felt a particular sorrow and a small shred of guilt for being voracious in your reading. For the time spent between its covers, the reader is locked in the roller coaster ride of its characters - the ebb and flow of emotions, the tiring yet exhilarating journey of self discovery and awareness of family. Racial tensions, family secrets, the sheer horror that could be trapped within the human soul - all made for the backdrop of this novel, and all manage to draw the reader further into the juxtaposition of Los Angeles in the sixties and early nineties. Each central figure becomes real and vivid, breathing and weaving his or her own story of sorrow and triumph, love and hardship. Each is familiar, and therefore the reader follows the untangling of the central intrigue of *Southland* with intense interest and concern. The L.A. painted within its pages is painfully reproduced, harsh and yet with promises struggling to come to fruition. In sum total, at its end, *Southland* emerges a beautiful story heralding the lives of its beautiful and none-too-fictitious people.

I started reading this the day after I visited the Watts Towers in south central LA. As a rather nervous visitor to the area (not without reason - there was a drive by killing of an 11 year old outside a church the same day) I was absolutely glued to this book. I love the LA noir genre of detective fiction. This is very different, and offers far more insight into WHY LA is as it is. It takes us to other parts of LA - the more middleclass areas of West LA (where I was staying), for example. This book is a riveting story, and it deftly juggles the historical context and so achieves so much 'explanation' and 'history' in a naturalistic way. It also, most importantly of all, offers hope (which, by contrast, noir fiction rarely does)

My wife found a reference to this novel in one of her Japanese language newspapers and suggested that I buy and read it. Am I ever happy that I did! Nina Revoyr has written a wonderful, gripping novel about some very tough times in our country, and has done so with understanding, compassion and feeling. Readers who lived through the era following World War Two will recall the ugly racial tensions of the era with all its denial, and the firestorms that erupted in Watts and other places as a result. Those who didn't live through it will get a harsh dose of reality as the protagonist searches for the killer of four black young men during the Watts riots, and the unexpected outcome

as she discovers who the killer was. I like Nina Revoyr's writing, I do not at all understand those who brush it off with comments like "trite," "mediocre" and "unrealistic." Having lived through that particular period in our history, I found the book very realistic. I hope Nina Revoyr keeps writing so that I can enjoy more of what she does. I couldn't put this book down. George Polley Seattle

It wasn't a great book. But it wasn't terrible either. This book goes back and forth from the past to the present and that was a bit annoying. Also, the main character was a bit annoying too. That's not something you'd like your main character to be. I think I liked the other characters better. However, I was glad by the end of the book that she (main character) finally accepted herself for who she was. Unlike the other reviewer, I don't think living in LA will probably make you care or appreciate this book. I live in LA. I lived in Watts, Compton, South LA, and now I'm in East LA-Alhambra area. I wouldn't recommend this book though, sorry. To be really honest, it was predictable. Some parts were a nice read, but overall, it wasn't worth my time. I wanted to like this book, but it was a disappointment.

I agree with a prior reviewer- perhaps this book speaks most poignantly to those Angelinos who can know and feel the reality of Los Angeles depicted in its pages. I loved this book both for the natural beauty of LA which is sometimes lost in our daily lives - and way that it blended the Watts unrest through today to U.S. history of war and occupation. The characters are not cliché- they are very real and very familiar. As a 2nd gen Korean who grew up here the descriptions of JA characters as well as U.S. military in Korea and complicated Black/Asian relationships all resonated with me. As a community organizer working with low-income women of color and other immigrant workers - I found the same strange familiarity when "meeting" the social workers and non-profit folks in the story. If you care about LA - you'll care about this story - more importantly, you'll see the truth in it. As far as the first reviewer goes - it hardly mattered to the arc of the tale whether or not Jackie was queer or not - but it added a genuine personal dimension (without force or artifice) that I totally appreciated.

Southland by Nina Revoyr is a tour de force that tells a story of racial disharmony within the seemingly gentle confines of Los Angeles. With the accounting of two families, one Japanese, one Black, we learn the story of how four young boys are intentionally frozen to death in a meat locker during the Watts Rebellion of 1965. The Store owner Frank Sakai is a Japanese American who has been living relatively peacefully in the mixed racial neighborhood since acquiring the store. He'd

been interred with his family at Manzanar and subsequently served in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team of the United States Army, a fighting unit composed almost entirely of American soldiers of Japanese descent who turned out to be the most decorated unit in American history. Returning home after the war he was able to purchase a small grocery store in Central LA. Upon Frank's death in 1994 his granddaughter, a law student, and a black man who works with youth in a mid-city community center team up to find out the facts surrounding the death of the young men, why Frank had left \$38,000 to one of them and mostly, who was responsible for the heinous crime. The two initially explore their own family dialogues but find it difficult to pull together the remnants of the story. "No one talked about history" they lament. As the scope of the investigation enlarges and as each piece of the puzzle is moved into place the real story gets more complicated. Soon even they begin to doubt what they find. The accounts of the Japanese Americans starting in 1939 along with the Black family chronicle starting six years later when the family of one of the boys moves from Texas demonstrates brave and stalwart endurance from both factions. I read a review of this book in which the reader said that his book club did not like the book because it was too sad. I feel that the thing that can make history most sad is only if we don't learn from it.

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