

## Praise for *Pleasantville*

“To say that Locke’s debut, *Black Water Rising*—ambitious, socially committed and beautifully written—created a stir is almost to understate the case, and one wonders if it weighed heavily on her shoulders that she would be obliged to deliver something equally impressive as a follow-up. She did just that with *The Cutting Season* and now we have *Pleasantville* . . . *Pleasantville* is every inch as impressive as its predecessors, with a new nuance and complexity burnishing the narrative . . . the next time you find yourself in the company of a crime reviewer, don’t bother asking who you should be reading. You know the answer: Attica Locke” *Independent*

“*Pleasantville* is another superb example of Locke’s personalised genre of African-American political thrillers, as a murderous mayoral race in Houston in 1996 exposes an attempt at social engineering in the 1940s. In a crowded field in which even stars follow traditions, Locke has the feel of a true original” Mark Lawson, *Guardian*

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“In *Pleasantville*, Attica Locke returns to Jay Porter, the black lawyer hero of her magnificent first novel, *Black Water Rising*. This one is just as good” Marcel Berlins, *The Times*

“Locke’s novel offers a beautifully detailed character in ‘Jay Edgar Porter’, a bereaved father struggling to cope with his loss. The story also has a fascinating political angle in the dirty-tricks campaign, aimed at disrupting the power of the black voting bloc and prefigures the Rove-Bush strategy in the 2000 presidential election. All told, it’s a gripping blend of the personal and the political” Declan Burke, *Irish Times*

“It’s a fascinatingly complex setting and Locke maps it with great skill, charting the struggles of her characters as the crime remains unsolved . . . a smart legal thriller about how far people will go to gain power, and keep it” Jeff Noon, *Spectator*

“Outstanding . . . Locke just gets better and better as a writer. This is a grown-up, politically engaged novel as well as a moving portrait of a family upended by grief” Jake Kerridge, *Sunday Express Magazine*

“This is a cinematic, panoramic view of African-American life, but it is also a sharp, tender account of Jay Porter’s inner struggle . . . brilliant” Isabel Berwick, *FT*

### Praise for *Black Water Rising*

“Started reading *Black Water Rising* with my morning coffee and barely set it aside until I’d finished it that evening—that’s the kind of grip it has. Attica Locke serves up a rich stew of venal politicians and legal chicanery in which staying alive is hard enough and hanging on to your integrity harder still. Longshoremen, Civil Rights and Big Oil—John Grisham meets *Chinatown* in 1980s Texas” John Harvey

“*Black Water Rising* is a terrifying reminder of how recently America was a very bad place to be young, gifted and black. This is an authentic, atmospheric debut that burns with an entirely reasonable anger” Val McDermid

“What a ride! *Black Water Rising* is a superlative debut; a wonderful treatise on the Texas of the 1980s—the best bad town novel in some time. Attica Locke is a stand-out in every imperative young-writer way” James Ellroy

“*Black Water Rising* is a stylish, involving literary thriller with a strong emphasis on human politics and character. An auspicious debut from Attica Locke” George Pelecanos

“The most impressive crime debut I’ve read this year” Marcel Berlins, *The Times*

“[An] atmospheric, richly convoluted debut novel . . . she is able to write about Jay’s urgent need to behave manfully and become a decent father with a serious, stirring moral urgency akin to that of George Pelecanos or Dennis Lehane . . . subtle and compelling”  
Janet Maslin, *The New York Times*

### **Praise for *The Cutting Season***

“I was first struck by Attica Locke’s prose, then by the ingenuity of her narrative and finally and most deeply by the depth of her humanity. She writes with equal amounts grace and passion. I’d probably read the phone book if her name was on the spine”  
Dennis Lehane

“An intelligent and beguiling mystery that examines how our past haunts our present, told by a unique voice in contemporary crime fiction” Stuart Neville

“Beautifully conveys the atmosphere of a sad past haunting a benighted present” *The Times*

Virtual adventures

# BLUEBIRD, BLUEBIRD

*A Novel*  
Virtualventures

ATTICA LOCKE



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I told him, “No, Mr. Moore.”

—Lightnin’ Hopkins, “Tom Moore Blues”

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Shelby County

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## ***Texas, 2016***

GENEVA SWEET ran an orange extension cord past Mayva Greenwood, Beloved Wife and Mother, May She Rest with Her Heavenly Father. Late morning sunlight pinpricked through the trees, dotting a constellation of light on the blanket of pine needles at Geneva's feet as she snaked the cord between Mayva's sister and her husband, Leland, Father and Brother in Christ. She gave the cord a good tug, making her way up the modest hill, careful not to step on the graves themselves, only the well-worn grooves between the headstones, which were spaced at haphazard and odd angles, like the teeth of a pauper.

She was lugging a paper shopping bag from the Brookshire Brothers in Timpson along with a small radio from which a Muddy Waters record, one of Joe's favorites, whistled through the speakers—*Have you ever been walking, walking down that ol' lonesome road*. When she arrived at the final resting place of Joe "Petey Pie" Sweet, Husband and Father and, Forgive Him, Lord, a Devil on the Guitar, she set the radio carefully on top of the polished chunk of granite, snapping the power cord into its hiding place behind the head-

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stone. The one next to it was identical in shape and size. It belonged to another Joe Sweet, younger by forty years and just as dead. Geneva opened the shopping bag and pulled out a paper plate covered in tinfoil, an offering for her only son. Two fried pies, perfect half-moons of hand-rolled dough filled with brown sugar and fruit and baptized in grease—Geneva’s specialty and Lil’ Joe’s favorite. She could feel their warmth through the bottom of the plate, their buttery scent softening the sharp sting of pine in the air. She balanced the plate on the headstone, then bent down to brush fallen needles from the graves, keeping a hand on a slab of granite at all times, ever mindful of her arthritic knees. Below her, an eighteen-wheeler tore down Highway 59, sending up a gust of hot, gassy air through the trees. It was a warm one for October, but nowadays they all were. Near eighty today, she’d heard, and here she was thinking it was about time to pull the holiday decorations from the trailer out back of her place. *Climate change, they call it. This keep up and I’ll live long enough to see hell on earth, I guess.* She told all this to two men in her life. Told them about the new fabric store in Timpson. The fact that Faith was bugging her for a car. The ugly shade of yellow Wally painted the icehouse. *Look like someone coughed up a big mess of phlegm and threw it on the walls.*

She didn’t mention the killings, though, or the trouble bubbling in town.

She gave them that little bit of peace.

She kissed the tips of her fingers, laying them on the first headstone, then the second. She let her touch linger on her son’s grave, giving out a weary sigh. Seemed like death had a mind to follow her around in this lifetime. It was a sly shadow at her back, as single-minded as a dog on a hunt; as faithful, too.

She heard a crunch of pine needles behind her, a rustling in the

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leaves blown from the nearby cottonwoods, and turned to see Mitty, the colored cemetery's unofficial groundskeeper. "They got batteries for them things," he said, nodding at the small radio while steadying himself by leaning on the concrete stone for Beth Anne Solomon, Daughter and Sister Gone Too Soon.

"You send me the propane bill time you get it," Geneva said.

Mitty was older than Geneva, nearing eighty, probably. He was a dark-skinned man and small, with two legs thin as twigs and ashy as chalk. He spent his afternoons in the small shed on the property, shooing off stray dogs and vermin. Five days a week he was out here with a racing magazine and a cheroot, watching over the gathering of souls, keeping an eye on his future home. He tolerated Geneva's particular way of caring for the dead—the quilts in the wintertime, the lights strung at Christmas, the pies, and the constant hum of the blues. He was eyeing the sweets, reaching a finger to lift the foil for a better look. "They peach," Geneva said, "and they ain't got your name nowhere on 'em."

The walk down the hill was always harder on her knees than the way up, and today was no different. She winced as she started toward her car, peeling off her husband's cardigan, one of the last ones in good-enough shape to wear daily. Her '98 Grand Am was parked on a flat of patchy grass and red dirt abutting the four-lane highway. She didn't even get her keys out of her purse before she could see Mitty eating one of the pies. Geneva rolled her eyes. The man couldn't even show her the common courtesy of waiting till she was gone.

She climbed into her Pontiac and eased slowly out of the makeshift parking lot, keeping an eye out for semis and speeding cars before pulling onto 59 and heading north to Lark. She rode the

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three-quarters of a mile to her place in silence, running through inventory in her head. She was down two twenty-ounce cans of fruit cocktail, eight heads of lettuce, syrup for the soda machine, the Dr Pepper she could never keep in stock, plus a bottle or two of Ezra Brooks whiskey, which she kept under the register for her regulars. She wondered if the sheriff had arrived yet, if the mess that had washed up in her backyard this morning was still there, that girl lying out there all alone. She had a vague worry about what all this might do to her business, but mostly she tried to comprehend what in God's name was happening to the town in which she'd spent all her sixty-nine years.

Two bodies inside a week.

What in the devil was going on?

She eased off the highway, pulling in front of Geneva Sweet's Sweets, a low-slung flat-roofed cafe painted red and white. It had cinched curtains in the windows and a sign out front with a lit-up arrow pointing to the front door. Black-and-red letters advertised BBQ PORK SANDWICH \$4.99 and BEST FRIED PIES IN SHELBY COUNTY. She parked in her usual spot, a Pontiac-size groove in the dirt along the side of the cafe, between the building's wooden siding and the weeds in the open lot on the other side. She'd been in this location for decades, back when it was just Geneva's, a one-room shack that had been built by hand. The paved parking spots by the gas pump were for paying customers. And Wendy, of course, Geneva's sometime business associate. Her ancient green Mercury was stationed right in front of the door. The rusting twenty-year-old car looked like a piñata beaten past its breaking point, overflowing with old license plates, iron skillet, two wig stands, old clothes, and a small TV whose antenna was sticking out the left rear window.

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The tiny brass bell on the cafe's door rang softly as Geneva let herself in.

Two of her regulars looked up from their seats at the counter: Huxley, a local retiree, and Tim, a long-haul trucker who stayed on a Houston–Chicago route week in and week out. “Sheriff’s here,” Huxley said as Geneva passed behind him. At the end of the counter, she opened the gate that led to her “main office,” the space between the kitchen and her customers. “Rolled in ’bout thirty minutes after you left,” he said, both he and Tim craning their necks to gauge her reaction.

“Must have made ninety miles an hour the whole way,” Tim said.

Geneva kept her lips pressed together, swallowing a pill of rage.

She lifted an apron from a hook by the door that led to the kitchen. It was an old one, yellow, with two faded roses for pockets.

“It was a whole day with the other one—ain’t that what you said?” Tim was halfway through a ham sandwich and talking with his mouth full. He swallowed and washed it down with a swig of Coke. “Van Horn took his sweet time then.”

“Sheriff?” Wendy said from her perch at the other end of the counter. She was sitting in front of a collection of mason jars, each filled with the very best of her garden. Plump red peppers, chopped green tomatoes threaded with cabbage and onion, whole stalks of okra soaked in vinegar. Geneva lifted each jar one by one, holding it up to the light and double-checking the seal.

“I got some other stuff outside,” Wendy said as Geneva pulled a marker from the pocket of her apron and started writing a price on the lid of each jar.

“You can leave the chow chow and the pickled okra,” Geneva said, “but I got to draw the line on all that other junk you trying to sell.” She nodded out the front window to Wendy’s car. Wendy and

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Geneva were the same age, though Wendy had a tendency to adjust her age from year to year depending on her audience or mood. She was a short woman, with mannish shoulders and an affected disregard for her appearance. Her hair was gray and pomaded into a tight bun. At least it *had* been tight last she combed it, which could have been anywhere from three to seven days ago. She was wearing the bottom half of a yellow pantsuit, a faded Houston Rockets T-shirt, and men's brogues on her feet.

"Geneva, people like to buy old shit off the highway. Makes them feel good about how well they living now. They call it antiques."

"I call it rust," Geneva said. "And the answer is no."

Wendy looked around the cafe—from Geneva to Tim and Huxley to the two other customers sitting in one of the vinyl booths—all the way to the other end of the shop, where food service ended and Isaac Snow rented fifty square feet that housed a mirror and a pea-green barber's chair. Isaac was a slender man in his late fifties, light-skinned, with coppery freckles. He spoke as little as he had to get by, but for a ten-spot he'd cut the hair of anyone who asked. Otherwise Geneva let him sweep up a bit to earn the three meals a day he ate out of her kitchen.

The Lord hadn't made a soul Geneva wouldn't feed.

Her place had been born of an idea that colored folks who couldn't stop anywhere else in this county, well, they could stop here. Get a good meal, a little bite off a bottle of whiskey, if you could keep quiet about it; get your hair cleaned up before you made it to family up north or to the job you hoped would still be there by the time you got on the other side of Arkansas, 'cause there was no point in going if you didn't get way the hell past Arkansas. Forty-some-odd years after the death of Jim Crow, not much had changed;

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Geneva's was as preserved in time as the yellowing calendars on the cafe's walls. She was a constant along a highway that was forever carrying people past her.

Wendy looked at the black faces in the room, trying to figure some reason for the grim mood, the tension running plain. Behind her, the jukebox flipped to another of the fifty tunes it played around the clock, this one a Charley Pride ballad with a gospel hurt on it, a plaintive plea for grace.

For a moment, no one spoke.

To Geneva, Wendy said, "What in hell's got you so testy this morning?"

"Sheriff Van Horn is out back," Huxley said, nodding toward the cafe's rear wall, papered with curling wall calendars—advertising everything from malt liquor to a local funeral home to Jimmie Clark's failed bid for county commissioner—going back fifteen years. Behind the rear wall was the kitchen, where Dennis was working on a pot of oxtails. Geneva could smell bay leaves soaking in beef fat and garlic, onion and liquid smoke. Beyond the kitchen's screen door lay a wide plot of land, red dirt dotted with buttercup weeds and crabgrass, rolling a hundred yards or so to the banks of a rust-colored bayou that was Shelby County's western border. "Brought three deputies, too."

"What's going on?"

Geneva sighed. "They pulled a body out the bayou this morning."

Wendy looked dumbfounded. "Another one?"

"A *white* one."

"Aw, shit."

Huxley nodded, pushing his coffee away. "Y'all remember when that white girl got killed down to Corrigan, they hauled in nearly

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every black man within thirty miles. In and out of every church and juke joint, every black-owned business, hunting for the killer or anybody who fit the bill they had in mind.”

Geneva felt something dislodge in her breast, felt the fear she'd been trying to staunch give way, rising till it liked to choke her from the inside out.

“And ain't nobody done a damn thing about that black man got killed up the road just last week,” Huxley said.

“They ain't thinking about that man,” Tim said, tossing a grease-stained napkin on his plate. “Not when a white girl come up dead.”

“Mark my words,” Huxley said, looking gravely at each and every black face in the cafe. “Somebody is going down for this.”

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