



Driving the King

Ravi Howard

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A daring and brilliant new novel that explores race and class in 1950s America, witnessed through the experiences of Nat King Cole and his driver, Nat Weary

“Howard is a talent to watch.” —Washington Post Book World

The war is over, the soldiers are returning, and Nat King Cole is back in his hometown of Montgomery, Alabama, for a rare performance. His childhood friend, Nat Weary, plans to propose to his sweetheart, and the singer will honor their moment with a special song. But while the world has changed, segregated Jim Crow Montgomery remains the same. When a white man attacks Cole with a pipe, Weary leaps from the audience to defend him—an act that will lead to a 10-year prison sentence.

But the singer will not forget his friend and the sacrifice he made. Six months before Weary is released, he receives a remarkable offer: will he be Nat King Cole’s driver and bodyguard in L.A.. It is the promise of a new life removed from the terror, violence, and degradation of Jim Crow Alabama.

Weary discovers that, while Los Angeles is far different from the deep South, it a place of discrimination, mistrust, and intolerance where a black man—even one as talented and popular as Nat King Cole—is not wholly welcome.

An indelible portrait of prejudice and promise, friendship and loyalty, Driving the King is a daring look at race and class in pre-Civil Rights America, played out in the lives of two remarkable men.

Driving the King Details

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From Reader Review Driving the King for online ebook

Suzy says

This is a very personal account of the Jim Crow south and movement toward civil rights for all citizens. Told by Nat Weary, a childhood friend in of Nat "King" Cole, the story is book-ended by two Nat Cole concerts in Montgomery, Alabama, their hometown. The first concert in the 1940's had tragic consequences for our storyteller, Nat Weary, and for Nat Cole. Cole was attacked by a white mob and Weary stepped in, fighting off the attacker and saving Cole's life. The second concert takes place about 12 years after and is a triumph, symbolic of the new found strength for blacks to take control of their own lives and destinies and to tell their own story.

In-between Weary endures 10 years of hard labor in a local jail, estranged from his family and the love of his life. Nat Cole returns to California, but does not forget Weary. He offers him a job of driver/bodyguard when he gets out of prison. In the background, momentum is building in the civil rights movement and the Montgomery bus boycott is prominent in the second half of the book. Out in California, Nat Cole tries unsuccessfully to find a sponsor for his 15-minute tv show that he pays for for himself. He leaves television in frustration, but he is not defeated.

A key theme in this book is "don't dwell", something Weary's family tells him regularly. This idea is how people found the where-with-all to move forward from tragic and unfair experiences and not get stuck in them. At times, I was crushed and distraught about the unfairness of it all, but Howard's great insight into how people kept going, and ultimately thrived, was inspiring. I love how the author uses real life events and builds a fictional story around them. I learned from another review that the attack in first concert was based on an actual event in Birmingham, Alabama and I remember watching the Nat King Cole tv show as a kid.

The narrator of the audio book, Adam Lazarre-White, was just about pitch-perfect to me. He captured the lyricism and musicality of Howard's writing. At times I wished I had a print copy of the book, as my one minor complaint is that it jumped around in time with no warning! I thought this might be easier to deal with in a print book.

Goodreads rant:

I can't believe the typos in the book description on GR! This is not a darling and brilliant book - where did that "l" come from in daring! And this is not a portrait of friendshit and loyalty. Geez!!! This should have been an easy copy and paste from either Amazon or Audible or any other number of sources.

Rant update:

Typos fixed blazingly fast by GR after giving feedback! Thanks Goodreads

Nelda Brangwin says

Fiction about the 1960's is always enlightening for me. I grew up in the 60's, sheltered in northern small town. With only three tv stations and poor reception, we were bystanders to what was happening in the south. Montgomery Alabama, Martin Luther King, the Bus Boycott had nothing to do with my life. It takes a novel 40 years later to show me that those were important to me. I've always loved Nat King Cole's music, but I'm going to be listening to it differently from now own, grateful for those people who were strong enough and courageous enough to stand up for what their rights. It also helps me understand the PBS

program on how black parents have to talk to their kids about an encounter with the police. We've still got a long way to go and there's plenty of fodder now about equal rights for historical novels 40 years from now dealing with the same subject.

Glencoe Public Library says

In 1956, Nat King Cole was assaulted on stage during a concert in Birmingham, Alabama by three members of the North Alabama White Citizens Council. The three male attackers ran down the aisles of the auditorium towards Cole and his band. Although local law enforcement quickly ended the invasion of the stage, the ensuing melee toppled Cole from his piano bench and injured his back. Cole did not finish the concert and never again performed in the South.

This description of the assault at a concert which is the focus of Driving the King is quoted directly from the website: http://www.myblackhistory.net/Nat_Kin...

Driving the King is a fictional memoir told by Nathaniel Weary. The fictional Weary was born in Montgomery, Alabama and grew up with Nat King Cole, who actually was born in and lived in Montgomery as a young boy. In the novel, Weary saves Cole from an assault at a concert in Montgomery and spends 10 years in prison for his actions. Following his release from prison, at Cole's request, Weary moves to Los Angeles, at the time of Cole's TV show, to be chauffeur and bodyguard for Cole. Weary rebuilds his personal life, including new friendships and love. He is also at the center of civil rights history - bus boycotts, bombings, and the entertainment industry's treatment of Nat King Cole. Weary and Cole return to Montgomery for a second concert, despite the tension and fears for their safety.

Again, some facts from http://www.myblackhistory.net/Nat_Kin...

In October 1956, Nat started his own TV show. Cole's popularity allowed him to become the first African American to host a network variety program, The Nat King Cole Show, which debuted on NBC television in 1956. The show fell victim to the bigotry of the times, however, and was canceled after one season; few sponsors were willing to be associated with a black entertainer. Cole fought racism all his life and refused to perform in segregated venues. In 1948, Cole purchased a house in the all-white Hancock Park neighborhood of Los Angeles. The Ku Klux Klan, still active in Los Angeles well into the 1950s, responded by placing a burning cross on his front lawn. Members of the property-owners association told Cole they did not want any undesirables moving in. Cole retorted, "Neither do I. And if I see anybody undesirable coming in here, I'll be the first to complain."

Driving the King is a fictionalized account that details some historical facts and interprets others. Details of time and place and characters are excellently done. Driving the King allows the reader to live through historic moments with someone who is there. It is a story of history and of courage.

- Gail

JoAnne Pulcino says

DRIVING THE KING; A NOVEL

Ravi Howard

A stunning novel with an interesting premise of two childhood friends whose ties try to overcome the insurmountable obstacles that deals with race in the 50's in America. Nat King Cole returns to his home town, Montgomery, Alabama to present a rare performance. While watching the show, Mr. Cole's childhood friend, Nat Weary recognizes the immediate threat of a white man with a steel pipe ready to attack the singer. Weary jumps from the second floor Jim Crowe black balcony and proceeds to attack the attacker. For a white man attacking a black man, Weary gets a ten year sentence in prison. Of course, the white attacker only gets three years in custody.

Six months before his release Weary receives a fantastic offer to be Nat King Coles driver and body guard in Los Angeles. This tribute to Mr. Cole's friendship and loyalty is the hope and dream of a brand new life for Weary away from the terror and degradation of the south.

Despite Los Angeles's differences from the south even a talented artist and lovely man like Nat King Cole is met with discrimination and intolerance.

These two remarkable characters portray an indelible picture of pre Civil Rights in America. This novel presents a look at friendship and loyalty that over shadows prejudice and ignorance when race is involved.

Cosima says

This book has an interesting setup. At the start of the novel, Nat King Cole has come back to Alabama for the first time since being attacked by a mob while performing there years ago. On the heels of losing his show, Cole links up with the other Nathaniel, his driver and our fictional narrator. Nathaniel Weary is trying to bounce back after his recent release from prison, a harsh punishment brought about by his defending a childhood friend.

Told from Weary's perspective as he recalls Jim Crow injustices and Nat's friendship, the book spins a convincing behind-the-scenes tale about loyalty, the period, and people who lived through it all.

The story is more about Nathaniel Weary's life and his early history with Nat King Cole in the Jim Crow era than it is about the Nat King Cole himself. It took a little while for me to get into the story because the narrator's voice is unusual, and plus the narrative is nonlinear. It's a different kind of flow. Besides that snag, this book is an engaging read. 3.5 stars.

Kristina Marie says

2 stars. This one is just okay. I enjoyed the main character, Nat Weary, but only when he was away from Nat Cole. That's when I felt the most connection to him. There was just a lot I didn't like about Nat Cole, he just

rubbed me the wrong way. I also loved the time period the book is set in, especially how it starts a decade before things start shaking up in Montgomery. It allows us to see how Nat Weary's family become the activists there are. It also makes the city of Montgomery a unique and integral character to the story. Of course, the MLK, Jr. scene was super cheesy but I understood why the author included it.

While this is a fictional story built out of real people and real experiences, the author did change quite a bit. I think readers who lack a knowledge and understanding of the time period and its key players may not understand where the line between fiction and fact was blurred. The story also flip-flops between the main character's past and present/future which is not only annoying but confusing since much of it revolves around two concerts in the same town with the same people. The worst thing though is how often the story repeats itself- especially the main character saying the same things/same sentiments over and over.

I didn't enjoy the narration in this one very much. The narrator's voice is very gravely and hard to hear at times. I did like the different voices he used for different characters, but I don't think I'll listen to anything else he narrates.

I received my copy of this audiobook free through Goodreads' First Reads program and am thankful for the opportunity to listen to it.

Linda says

I loved Ravi Howard's story of the driver of Nat Cole in the mid-1950s. Nat Weary is a childhood friend of Nat King Cole's. Nat Cole moves to California, Nat Weary stays on in Montgomery, AL. Nat Cole plays a concert in his hometown and Weary plans to propose to his girlfriend during the concert. All is going well until a man rushes the stage intent on killing Nat Cole. Weary intercedes and spends 10 years in prison for allegedly starting a riot. When he gets out, he becomes Nat King Cole's chauffeur and body guard. Meanwhile change has come to Montgomery by way of a bus boycott. The civil rights issues faced by blacks during the Jim Crow era are front and center in this wonderful story.

The dialogue, especially between Weary and his dad, reminds me so much of how spare my own father (85 and white) talks. My dad grew up poor in the country and he speaks just as to the point and with as few words as Weary and his dad do.

It's a great read. Written in 1st person, the dialogue is sparse and to the point. Words aren't wasted but savored by the reader. The descriptions are vivid enough to place the reader where Howard wants them to be. Can't wait to see what he writes next.

"She got herself a boyfriend she wants us to meet. He's studying chemistry. A senior. She said that 3 or 4 times on the phone. Senior. Like it's supposed to mean something to me, as long as I been grown. Senior ain't nothing but a year. Young man's distinction."

Lawyer says

Full review to follow.

Mmars says

Having just finished Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption I was caught up in the beginning of this book, with Nat Weary, the narrator, telling what it was like to be black and on the inside of prisons in mid-century American South. He was convicted of nearly killing someone defending Nat King Cole who was attacked by a white man rushing the stage. Weary becomes Cole's driver after he is released from prison.

I have loved, loved, loved Nat King Cole's voice since childhood. His "Unforgettable" was one of the few albums in my family home. Beyond that, I admit to being oblivious to who he was, where he came from, and how challenging his career was. Even though other reviewers point out the historical inaccuracies of some of the facts that play a large part of this book, I still felt that I learned more about Nat Cole and would now like to learn more.

Unfortunately, this book ended up being a rather flat read for me. The switching back and forth between the day of a return concert to Montgomery, Alabama and Weary's life as a driver for Cole in Los Angeles didn't work for me. This large part of the book, for me, lacked compulsion.

Howard gives readers a realistic look of what black life was like under Jim Crow. He proves a subtle knowingness of the peoples and the times through small details. His writing is direct but the turn of phrase took a bit of getting used to, perhaps because I'm not from that part of the country. Ravi Howard shows much promise and I would like to read Like Trees, Walking and am interested in what he comes up with next.

Diane S ? says

3.5 Though Cole lived in Montgomery until the age of four, his parents moved to Chicago where he was exposed to Chicago's burgeoning Jazz scene. Returning with his group to Montgomery to perform in a non segregated show, he was attacked. This is the story of Weary, a young man at the show, hoping to propose to his girlfriend and instead jumps down from the balcony and beats Cole's attacker with a microphone. Cole will perform one song and then, apologize to his audience and leave. In typical justice of the time, the white man who attacked Cole gets three years but Weary gets ten.

A story that has the definite flavor of that time period in the South. The bus boycott, the pressure put on the blacks to keep them in their place, along with a heartfelt story of King, who never forgets a friend, and a young man who did more than just stand by.

There is not author's note but I did look up and much of the information in this book is accurate. King did get attack but there was no weary to come to his aid, his TV show did get cancelled in Los Angeles after one year due to lack of sponsors.

Good book with much worthy information and the invention of Weary was a good way to portray this changing time period in the South.

ARC from publisher

Sarah Beth says

I received an uncorrected proof copy of this book from HarperCollins.

This novel is told from the perspective of Nat Weary, a contemporary of Nat King Cole, who faces tragedy when he goes to see his former schoolmate perform. Weary witnesses a man attempting to attack Nat King Cole and rushes to his defense. In the era before the Civil Rights Movement, it was unfathomable that a black man who raise a hand to a white man, even in self-defense. Weary serves ten years in prison. However, when his sentence has been served, he finds that Nat King Cole has not forgotten him and gives him a job as his driver.

This novel does a great job depicting the hardship of life in the 1940s before the Civil Rights Movement, while at the same time highlighting the significance of a famous black singer for the African American community. "She had taken a picture of the marquee as we made the turn from Dexter Avenue. NAT COLE TRIO. He was the most famous man, black or white, ever to be born in my hometown, but that sign was a first for us back then. A Negro name with that much light behind it" (20).

It was both devastating and infuriating to see Weary's future ripped away, all because he stepped in to save Nat King Cole's life. Weary has returned home from the war to his girlfriend and has a budding career, but all that disappears when he is sentenced to ten years in jail. It's hard to fathom what ten years feels like. "Since the place had no mirrors, it would be years until I saw my face again. I saw what the future looked like on the faces of the men all around" (59).

Howard's writing is lyrical and moving. "Bone's hair had turned the same color mine had, gray twisted with black like the herringbone in his blazer. We were equal parts young and old, with our heads keeping tally of the days, the ones gone and the ones we had left" (239).

My greatest issue with this novel is the movement of the narrative, which was hard to keep track of. The narrative is centered around Weary's triumphant return to his hometown as the driver of Nat King Cole when Cole returns for a surprise performance. The novel is broken into chapters of Weary readying for the performance, interspersed with chapters that detail his past, his time in prison, and everything he lost while he was incarcerated. Time moves rather fluidly and at times it was difficult to place where the characters were. Additionally, I thought the narrative would have functioned better as one solid flashback telling Weary's story, rather than continually moving forward and backward in time.

After Weary is finally out of jail, many people that he meets have heard rumors of his courageous act. "They used to talk about a soldier that jumped a stage" (261). The details are confused, the true story never publicized, but in his own way, Weary is famous for protecting the symbol that was/is Nat King Cole.

Jim says

When Nat Weary leaps onto a stage in postwar Montgomery, Alabama, to save the life of childhood friend Nat King Cole from a vicious attack by a white man, he loses not only the chance to propose marriage that evening with Cole's help but nearly ten years of his life to prison. But when he is six months away from

release, an offer is made to be both bodyguard and driver for the now famous Cole in Los Angeles. Weary accepts. But Weary discovers that life in LA also has its trials and tribulations as well as racial divides.

Ravi Howard brings to life a real life singing legend and a man who represented many African American men seeking a better life in 1940's and 1950's America with his novel *Driving the King* (Harper, 2015).

Driving the King is a well developed novel with credible characters and strong attention to detail of Montgomery of the mid-20th century. With a narrative that moves back and forth between the day of a concert in which Cole returns to sing without incident, the decade earlier attack and imprisonment to the recent move to LA and life out west, a very meaningful story about friendship, resolve, community, and hope is woven together.

Tension – racial and personal – is apparent throughout the story and weaves in and out of the background as Weary, and Cole, navigate failure, then success, and then failure (the cancellation of Cole's fifteen minute television show) both personally and professionally. And along the way some of the key people of that time, including Dr. King, make an appearance in the novel.

I liked *Driving the King* for both strong characters and a wonderful story of grace, love, and second chances. It is well-written and inspirational.

I rate it an "outstanding" read.

Note: I received an advanced reader copy of this book from the Amazon Vine program in exchange for a review. I was not required to write a positive review.

Diane Barnes says

This novel did an excellent job of putting the reader right in the middle of both entertainment and Civil Rights history. Both Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King got small mentions, but the real heroes of the story were the black people of Montgomery, Alabama willing to do what it took to make the bus boycotts a success. Mixing in the story of Nat King Cole's television show, which he had to pay for himself because he couldn't get a national sponsor willing to back a black man, and that of his driver, who went to prison for 10 years for protecting Cole from an on-stage attack at his first Montgomery concert, this story puts you right into the action. 1950's Los Angeles and the deep south were two very different places in America, but prejudice is prejudice wherever it occurs.

"It was just tiresome thinking about folks having to fight for the least little thing. I loved my people for fighting, but hated the reason why, and that left me with that crosscut notion of pride and anger pulling in different directions, two kinds of muscle fighting for the same piece of bone."

Ravi Howard is quite a talent, and this is a book worth reading.

Andre says

An interesting mix of fiction and real life. Takes a real person, Nat King Cole and fictionalizes events in his

life to flush out the story of driver Nat Weary, a citizen of Montgomery, AL around the time of the bus boycott. It's a quick read and gives insight to the lives of African-americans around that time, both in Alabama and Los Angeles, CA.

Meredith says

This review is based on the audiobook received through the ER program.

This novel focuses on a fictional childhood friend of Nat King Cole, Nathaniel Weary, who stood between Cole and a white attacker during a show in their hometown of Montgomery, Alabama (a fictional event based on the attack on Cole in Birmingham in 1956). After beating the man Weary served ten years in prison. The book goes back and forth in time, from the night of the first show, to Weary's post-prison job of driving Cole in Los Angeles, to a second try at the Montgomery show.

The changes in time were a little confusing at first, as years aren't stated, and it took me a little while to get Weary's timeline straight in my head. Otherwise, I thought the book was well done. It does a good job conveying the times, and the difficulty being a black musician in the United States, even when Cole's popularity was at its height. It also contrasts the bus strike in Montgomery with Cole's relative lack of politics (he continued to play to segregated audiences until negative comments caused him to join other entertainers boycotting segregated venues, the attack in Birmingham may also have forced him to face the fact that following the rules laid down by whites did not lessen their bigotry toward him).

It's an evenly paced, but short book, about individual lives, choices, and consequences, without much plot. A solidly good read, though not in the 5-star realm for me. I do look forward to reading Howard's future novels. If you require happy endings or to have everything wrapped up at the end, this may not be the book for you.
