



Divine Days

Leon Forrest

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As the unanimous critical praise that greeted this novel attests, *Divine Days* is one of the most significant works of African American fiction since Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. This huge oratorio of a novel unfolds over seven days in the life of Joubert Jones, an aspiring playwright making ends meet tending bar at his Aunt Eloise's Night Lounge. A Rabelaisian cast of characters and a Shakespearean range of voices crowd the pages of this book, an infinitely rich and suggestive tapestry of Black-American life and identity.

Divine Days Details

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Jonathan says

At one point, late in our conversation, Sugar-Groove said: "Look Joubert, there is a river of time, more ancient than Eden, where every form of waste and wonder has been discarded, past all parchments of recorded time. You enter, or I should say you're tossed adrift or hurled into those turbulent waters to make a way out of no way even out of nothingness. Tossed off. Told to swim. Sail even. Get lost. Or Die. You have to teach yourself to swim through all this ahistorical garbage, to remake yourself against the temperament of the wrinkled, rowdy river. Occasionally you happen upon a divine spring of renewal, but don't count on many of 'em. You didn't ask for any of this, but you get all of it — more waste than wonder. Always another agony bed in the river to brook."

And

"Oh, conflicted me...

*Not Du Bois simple-formula of double-consciousness, but rather one of a hundred hog-headed cheese voices of madness from my literary genesis. I am contorted between the voice in *Finnegan's Wake*: "You were bred, fed, fostered from holy childhood up in this two easter island...and now, forsooth, a nogger among the blankards of this dastard century, you have become a twosome twiminds forenenst gods, hidden and discovered, nay, condemned fool, anarch, egoarch, hiresiaarch, you have reared you disunited kingdom on the vacuum of your own most intensely doubtful soul." Despising the parts, and fondly horrible home to parts of the sum...the nightmare of my history...and nowhere finding help in *Cinderella*...And on the other hand... "Deep in the festering hold thy father lies/of his bones New England pews are made/those are altar lights that were his eyes." Oh those tempest-like haunting words echo in Hayden's *Middle Passage*."*

To be reading this in the time of #blacklivesmatter and all the pain that that movement expresses, was a deeply moving experience.

You will have difficulty with this novel if you read it with the assumption that there is a narrative thread in it buried under a mound of digressions.

The tales told are not digressions. They are the Things Themselves. The Oral, the mythical, the "wild-tale", are the words the subaltern speaks.

To only follow one voice is to do injustice to the others, is to limit, shut out, dismiss, curtail, ignore.

If you read another wild tale of bar-room antics as just another wild tale of bar-room antics, you may well find this book a slog.

This is not to say that the tale of Sugar-Groove and Ford and the Bloodworth clan fails to unfold throughout in wonderful twists and turns and reveals of mythical, soap-style brilliance.

Eden was wild, free-form Jazz, Orphans and Wings brought an element of self-control, Divine holds that song steady, then (like Roland Kirk playing multiple instruments at once) brings in the Blues and R&B.

Leon Forrest is one of the great writers of 20th America, and this extraordinary book is one of those that certainly benefits from being worked-up-to. Yes it can, at times, be almost as hard going as *Miss Mac*, but if ya made it thru that 'un, ya 'aint gonna have no problems here.

Forrest's solution to the problem of racism - one that focuses on the shared, the conjoined, the mixed, the human - is powerful and persuasive.

A playlist comprised of songs mentioned and quoted in the novel (and what a fantastic playlist it is!):

Nature Boy - Nat King Cole - <https://youtu.be/Iq0XJCJ1Srw>
On a Monday - Leadbelly - <https://youtu.be/CVivEeORtuc>
Potato Head Blues - Louis Armstrong - https://youtu.be/udWB3OKV9_k
Outskirts of Town - Ray Charles - <https://youtu.be/4cdP99R2tQE>
Gloomy Sunday - Billie Holiday - <https://youtu.be/KUCyjDOlnPU>
Sugar foot stomp - Louis Armstrong - <https://youtu.be/OpmcanGouw4>
Meeting at the building - Leadbelly - <https://youtu.be/LTEeZWnxDf8>
My Man - Billie Holiday - <https://youtu.be/IQlehVpcAes> (what a performance in this vid!)
How I got over - Mahalia Jackson - <https://youtu.be/l49N8U3d0Bw>
Reckless Blues - Bessie Smith - <https://youtu.be/GNfgW5cIWT8>
I'm so proud - The Impressions - <https://youtu.be/4a26b580Z3k>
I know I Got religion - The Staple Singers - <https://youtu.be/VZPh7U5IB14>
God Bless the Child - Billie Holiday - https://youtu.be/Z_1LfT1MvzI

LEON FORREST: Sure. I was out to write the great American novel. Not the great black American novel.

MILLS: But is built into that a desire or a need to appeal to a literary establishment that is overwhelmingly white? In other words, this isn't a book for the folk.

FORREST: Well, no, but it's about the folk all over the place. I write, I must say, for serious readers. And those serious readers might be in black Baptist churches, they might be in synagogues. I don't have any problem, because I'm a blackAmerican, so I would expect that I would appeal to a broad range of people. I certainly never have been Afrocentric in that sense.

I am always searching for ways in which I can take the richness of the black experience, the folk material, and project it to the highest levels of thought, of sensibility and creativity. I like to think that I try to do more with the ranges of black voices – as much as any writer.

But I also must remind myself that I'm a novelist. So I go and hear a sermon by a black preacher, I don't wanna simply turn on the tape recorder and imitate what he's doing. I wanna take it to another level. And it's in taking this to another level that we are enriched by literature, by art.

Don't forget, the slaves and the blacks after slavery mingled their experiences with the stories of the Jews and their struggle in the Old Testament, and the story of the New Testament. This is how we got Negro spirituals. Nobody ever puts down Negro spirituals because they're talkin' 'bout "Go down, Moses... Let my people go."

MILLS: Here again, I'm not an Afrocentrist, I've just been thinking a lot about that line of thought. If we talk about Shakespeare, whom you allude to often, definitely with love – Does Shakespeare belong to you?

FORREST: Oh sure. All those people belong to me. That's our Western library. I would say that it's in Shakespeare where you find the greatest, probably, psychological and spiritual development of characters. Therefore I must read him. That certainly would be true with the great Russian writers.

Also, with the Russian writers, you have so many of the problems we face. The whole idea of the relationship of Europe to the Russian sensibility. Russians were fighting like hell in the 19th century about "How much are we Westernized?" and "How much are we Slavicized?" Certainly the idea of an oppressed people, the idea of a Russian soul struggle, which was an argument over "Who am I spiritually, intellectually and emotionally?" That's very much like our battle.

Young people are very much caught up with Malcolm X. My God, that's his story – a soul struggle, who he was spiritually, intellectually, racially. This was thought out not only in this country but in the Slavic countries. So you can be enriched by the experience of other people's battles, and you can find the techniques to help you with your own struggle.

Obviously the issue of racism is a particular one for we of African descent. So I may not look to European letters for that; I know about that. (laughs) But I wanna know about other things. ...

And the whites don't have any problem [with this]. I mean, they're expropriating our stuff all over the place. Some of my white friends that have a large jazz collection, larger than many blacks, I can't say, "That's not your music, that's mine." It came out of a culture that I came out of, but jazz now belongs to everybody.

And as we're seeing now, blues belongs to everybody. And that's black as you can get. But you go in these clubs in Chicago, 75 percent or more of the people in there are whites, young whites.

MILLS: And there are people who resent that, too.

FORREST: Yeah. A lot of people say, "Well, do they appreciate it?" Well, I don't know, but they're paying their money, they're sitting there listening to it. And I'm sure the black blues musicians are glad to have anybody."

"I want to look at the work. I don't care if it's white or black. I don't agree that "If you're white, you can't write". I want to see what they can do. I also don't believe that because I am a man, I can't write about women. I had better quit writing, if I can't write about women. Why can't women write about men? It's talent that's important."

"I had been reading Ulysses quite closely, and I was influenced by jazz, of course, and the two seemed to be working together to open me up, to free me to try even more imaginative romps," he said, describing the years dedicated to writing *Divine Days*. "I was on this horse, and I dared not get off." He stayed on the horse for seven years, until the manuscript weighed in at 1,829 pages. When Marianne read it, she told her husband he should split it into three books. Forrest did not agree. He wanted this work to land with a mighty thump."

Byerman: I want to ask you about the idea of the voices in Divine Days. One of the things that struck me in reading through the book is that, while the characters are very different and their stories are very different, their voices seem to have a lot in common; that is, there seems to be this piling on of language and the playing with language (all the puns and other types of word play). Many of the significant voices in the text have this in common. Is there some sense in which they're all simply your voice?

Forrest : Oh, no, not at all. I mean, I hope that each has his/her own coinage, but I obviously am attracted to certain kinds of characters who evolve in my artistic imagination who are great talkers, and there is a kind of tradition of an orchestrated oral tradition, in which you start off with A, move to C, move to E, and then come back and pick up B and D. That has to do with the way jazz moves, and the folk sermon and just general storytelling. ...

So, yeah - one of those big brainy books that belongs on your shelf with those of Gass and Gaddis and WTV and all the rest. And, like JR, the relevance of this to our contemporary society has, if anything, increased since its writing.

Put simply, you should be reading Forrest. He deserves your time.

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

“Simply put, Leon Forrest's massive masterpiece Divine Days is the War and Peace of the African-American novel.” -- Henry Louis Gates

Naw, more the Ulysses thereof. I'm fond of naming stuff the Ulysses of stuff. It is big though. 1135 by page count ; which brings it in a little under those other behemoths, Miss MacIntosh, W&M, etc. Like them two and much unlike the LJs and AtDs of the world, no one's heard of it. Or him. Listen, this novel even burned. Yep, that true first edition from Another Chicago Press burned up nearly the whole run in a warehouse fire. This the Norton first ed I got here is inscribed. Pretty slick, no?

At any rate, the going wisdom makes this brick even just a little more intimidating in terms of occupying your reading schedule. See, there's an introductory trilogy you'll want to have read first (forgone conclusion you'll want to read these Divine Days) :: There Is a Tree More Ancient Than Eden (the prose pyrotechnics will likely scorch the rest of your library) ;; Two Wings to Veil My Face ;;; The Bloodworth Orphans. Of course you needn't ; but they all get themselves connected together (primarily set in Forrest County) like what I hear ole Faulkner did with his unpronounceable county. As for DD, it takes some commitment certainly. Not as much pyro=sparks flying around (except when a few select characters get themselves rolling you see a few of those sparks teasingly start to singe your shoelaces) ; but there are voices, many voices, and a whole lot of story and a lot of jawing a lot of barbershop chat and basically just a lot of human beings doing what humans being do in Forrest County.

Well then so just to wrap this thing up (DD deserves a dissertation not my little thumbs=up) you should know that if you like to just sort of hang out in a novel without any pressure to get somewhere or sharpen your point or whatever but just want to relax and roll with the riffs and don't mind that someone's mind might be wandering a hair well then just you pull up your favorite reading chair and just turn off the rest of the

world a while and see what all's going on up there in ole Forrest County.

Aiden Heavilin says

Abandoned at page 260.

Ronald Morton says

(There's a pretty big caveat that makes up the end of this review, if you're just looking at the star rating)

But my problem was more complex; my is hounded by the voices of oral tradition, literary tradition.

From the opening pages, *Divine Days* is embroiled with voices. To begin, the voices are only by reference; the narrator, an aspiring playwright, makes repeated claims to being afflicted by (composed of) voices (the claims are made in reference to both his youthful acting and his more recent attempts at writing). But, as the narration in the opening pages unfurl, the prose itself is overrun by myriad voices; giving proof to the voice-visited claims of the narrator, as the book is first person (journalistic really) throughout, and yet manages to pack a legion of voices into its pages. It is overwhelming - at least I found it so - to begin, as the narrative is pulled down multiple paths, through frame-tale-nestled digressions, where past and present share space with little regard to chronological progression. It is a lot like Forrest's earlier trilogy, but with a more stripped down prose. Essentially it pares away the more symbolic poetry of the earlier books, while retaining the fierce intelligence, and unrelenting complexity and difficulty of those works. And it's huge, and it earns its hugeness.

So, to specifics, not just initial impressions.

That opening chapter finds the narrator, Joubert Antoine Jones, back home in Forest County after a two year army stint. The opening paragraph directly states: "I've even mentally mapped out my schedule for the first seven days. If I can hold to my plan, generate a regular journal, and then use it as a springboard for my dramatic ventures, I'll be on my way to fulfilling my quest." - the reference to the scheduled seven days are significant, as the entirety of this book - historic digressions aside - takes place over the course of those seven days. And while the narrative threads appear to be nothing more than a tangle in the opening pages, Forrest masterly gathers the threads as the book progresses into one cohesive whole; a whole that was on display all along, merely obscured in the telling.

Also.

The terms legend/legendary and myth/mythic repeatedly show up in the text, which will be familiar (at least thematically) with readers of the first three Forrest books. Forrest's prose is informed by - and *enveloped* by - tall tales, myths, parables, and the oral tradition. The last in particular drives his focus on voices, and the importance of the chorus, of the voice of a group of the whole, to make up the fabric of the tale. He's not just attempting to regurgitate myths and legends though, he's attempting to highlight the myth and developing legend of the day-to-day, and he accelerates this process by populating his book (populated mostly by reference and absence, but still ever present) with characters like Ford and Sugar-Groove.

But. BUT.

This is my conflict over how I feel about this book.

There were large stretches of this book where I did not enjoy reading it. That's not a content thing - there are no stand out chapters that put me off - it's more that this book is exhausting, and there were moments where I just wanted to give it up. Here, at the end, I find myself exhilarated, but I think that's more from the closing arc than the book as a whole. This is a book that I can see being totally off putting to some, and a paragon of form and beauty to others. Forrest is huge - his authorial voice and presence - but he's so damn huge here that he overwhelms; his scope and ambition are daunting, and in turn so is the book.

I guess what I'm saying is that I had to dedicate a great deal of time and energy into forcing myself to read large swathes of this book, and kind of resented having to do it. On the back side I'm awed and impressed by the scale of the work and what Forrest accomplished, but I'm glad to be done, and this will likely never be revisited by me.

I'm also likely judging this work based on its place with Forrest's oeuvre: he continues to return to themes and ideas (myth, music, literary impact on culture/society, the inescapability of the impact of religion; particularly in southern culture) and moves a great number of these themes forward through this work. I'm not sure if I'd rate this book as highly (or even have found the energy or patience to push through it) if it hadn't been for what all came before it.

So. This is a great book; an important book. But I hated it a bit. I loved it as well. But. But. I'm not sure which is the more valid.

Geoff says

Purchased. Perhaps an early autumn read. "The War & Peace of the African-American novel"? Yes please thank you ..

Torry says

This is a long book...

Thomas says

some smart guy called this book 'the war and peace of the african american novel' but it's really more of a big modernist thing like your joyce or musil or whoever. the style is much less prose poetic and biblical overall than his first novel, probably because this book is so long, but there are sections where that style breaks through again. there's not really a single overarching plot, but more a series of digressive stories that interact and move in and around each other, with the protagonist as a focal point. the book is so large and has so much in it that it's not really possible for it to be as consistently well crafted as his first book, and i get the impression that it wasn't edited much, but the high points are so high and the book so underread given how ambitious it is that i'm giving it 5 stars.

