



The Blacker the Berry: A Novel of Negro Life (Library of America E-Book Classics)

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The Blacker the Berry: A Novel of Negro Life (Library of America E-Book Classics) Wallace Thurman *The Blacker the Berry* (1929), Wallace Thurman's debut novel, broke new ground as an exploration of issues of "colorism," intra-racial prejudice, and internalized racism in African American life. Its protagonist, the young Emma Lou Morgan, is simply "too dark" for a world in which every kind of advancement seems to require a light complexion. Seeking acceptance and opportunity, she moves—much like the dark-skinned young Thurman had, four years before the novel's publication—from Idaho to California to New York. Harlem, the "city of surprises," is in many ways the novel's true subject, its low-down, licentious streets, glittering cabarets, and variegated cast of characters offering a rich backdrop for Emma Lou's ambivalent, picaresque progress.

The Blacker the Berry: A Novel of Negro Life (Library of America E-Book Classics) Details

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From Reader Review The Blacker the Berry: A Novel of Negro Life (Library of America E-Book Classics) for online ebook

Quan says

Ehhhhh...It's one of those books that is important for its historical impact. And you know everyone wants to get behind it for its positive message, which, don't get me wrong, is a good message. Buuuuuut...

The good thing about the writing is that it makes for a quick, easy read. But the quality of the writing is pretty weak. It's like a corny "message" song that thinks simply having a message is excuse enough to not be very artful about delivering that message. The book tells more than it shows, especially with its use of ironic/sarcastic tone which just comes off as kinda douche-y. The tone makes it hard to care about any of the characters. The main character, Emma Lou, shows no growth until like 10 pages before the end of the novel. And I'd also add that last section of the novel really tried to pour on the cheese and it sucked.

The saving grace was just the info and historical context it revealed about black culture and how cultural attitudes had evolved from survival tactics employed in the slavery era. Interesting stuff.

Meike says

Kendrick Lamar made me read it! His song "The Blacker the Berry" was inspired by this classic Harlem Renaissance novel, and when you know Lamar's lyrics and read Thurman's text, you realize how these two works of art are reinforcing each other, and the effect is truly amazing.

Thurman's book was first published 1929 and is a critique of a topic that has remained controversial until this day: Colorism, meaning the "prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color" (Alice Walker). The protagonist Emma Lou has very dark skin, a physical trait that is perceived as undesirable by her lighter family members and many other people she encounters. The novel talks about her experiences growing up in Idaho, studying in California and later working in Harlem, how people treat her and what it does to her psyche. Emma Lou wants to belong, but due to the society she is living in, she has a hard time finding herself and her place in the world.

Although I am pretty sure the expression didn't exist back then, Thurman takes an intersectional view and also shows how the factors of gender, class, and wealth play into the design of communities and affect Emma Lou's situation. The story seems to be highly influenced by the life of Wallace Thurman himself, who was not only dark-skinned like Emma Lou, but also struggled for acceptance as a homosexual man.

I was surprised that the excellent foreword of the new edition, written by Stanford Professor Allyson Hobbs, also mentions Kendrick Lamar's song. She writes: "Thurman's novel reveals the interracial conflict that results from living in a racist America; almost ninety years later, Lamar's focus is the racist system itself", and dissects some of his lyrics - great stuff.

So thanks, Mr. Lamar, for pointing this book out to me, I will soon go on to read *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* while listening to "King Kunta"!

Donald says

Great book and just as relevant today as it was all those years ago.

The book hits the nail on the head on color coding and prejudice in our community, particularly on how self loathing plays itself out - how we turn on each other both light skinned and dark skinned, and how the need to white-up is presented in ways we may not be conscious of

Although practiced in our black community here in USA, other books suggest that this is not confined to our community here - see the other Book of the Month *The Sabi* that shows how this happens in Africa too.

To some extent I appreciate the frank writing that these books shine on matters that we actually have control over. They deal in uncomfortable truths about us that many of us would not rather talk about

Great book

Leigh J. says

It's pretty tough to get through because the POV is the girl who hates her own skin, but it's an interesting look in shadeism. The intro in my copy (I read it when I was halfway through the book) was very misguided and no actual fact that were correct, sources, or any truths to the origins of shadeism were included. She also excuses colonialism from blame which is entirely incorrect.

Thurman's writing style is mostly pleasing, but there are some parts in the book that begged me to abandon it and pick up something else. The way some events in Emma's life were fleshed out fully with pages describing poetically how she was feeling, and others equally important were given a page maybe and rushed through, confused me at times.

(view spoiler)

It wasn't hard to read, but I will never read it again.

Tracy says

The protagonist was not a likable character. She hated how her family discriminated against dark skinned Blacks, yet she did the exact same thing. She was simple and ignorant and thoroughly pissed me off, yet as she grew and and faced her existence without excuse (they don't like me because of my dark skin versus they don't like me because I'm obnoxious) she became more endurable and maybe, just maybe, someone I would care no know with further exposure.

Seward Park Branch Library, NYPL says

I've taken ill, so my reviewing faculties are a bit dulled... Here goes nothing...

This is the last book in the first volume of the 'Library of America's Harlem Renaissance Novels of the 1920's'. All of the stories contained have some sort of take on black-on-black racism, though none makes this issue its central theme as Thurman does in 'The Blacker The Berry'. Our protagonist, Emma Lou, comes from a family/social circle who is progressively trying to breed whiter and whiter offspring—Emma Lou is therefore, in a round about way, seen merely as a problem child, an extension of a 'mistake', as her mother's tryst with a dark black man was only looked back upon as a mistake. This in turn informs the way she looks upon herself—like her oppressors she prefers the company of men with lighter skin, and detests crudity of behavior, which she ironically and erroneously associates with darker skin.

In a sense similar to Helga Crane in Larsen's 'Quicksand', we want to shake Emma Lou, to force some reason into her. Though Emma Lou is surely an improvement on the surly negative two dimensional character of Helga Crane. Emma Lou's story is certainly less outlandish, and on that level alone I enjoyed 'TBTB' far more than 'Quicksand'. She's a woman with a desire for intelligent company—though she may be her own worst enemy sometimes, I don't believe she ever asks for much! Emma Lou is a woman who is intimate with her simple wants, but is denied time after time despite good intentions. Helga was more of a wanderer, and I tend to have little sympathy with that type of character...

Later in his short career, Thurman writes a satire on the figures of the Harlem Renaissance, 'Infants of the Spring'. Though I haven't yet read it, I'm guessing that the reader gets a glimpse into this in the chapter 'Rent Party', where the reader delights in Emma Lou's offended conservatism. It is certainly the most vibrant chapter. I for one was hoping for a little more of what I found in 'Rent Party'...

On the subject of satire, this is a very, very sad novel. Yet there's definitely a dry sense of humor to it. Negotiating between the two can be great fun. Still, besides 'Rent Party' and the incredibly dark final chapter, 'Pyrrhic Victory', the writing is very point-A-to-point-B. Thurman's brilliant moments, however, are enough to make me interested in the rest of his regrettably short oeuvre.

—AF

Hamisoitil says

J'ai commencé cette lecture en espérant passer un bon moment avec l'héroïne, Emma Lou, jeune fille noire repoussée par sa famille à cause de sa couleur de peau très, très foncée. Nous allons donc la suivre dans les années 20, bien après la traite négrière, mais toujours dans une époque très dure pour les noirs, en Amérique, où il était mieux d'être noir à la peau claire pour être "Accepté" que noir à la peau sombre, en plus d'être une fille.

Je préfère vous le dire tout de suite, j'ai arrêté ma lecture à la moitié du livre. Pourquoi ? Tout simplement parce que j'en ai eu marre de lire à toutes les lignes le complexe de cette fille envers sa couleur de peau. Oui, il est clair, il est beau, il a le nez fin et droit, pas comme moi avec ma peau sombre, mon nez épaté ... A un moment donné, c'était trop pour moi.

Moi, je suis une femme noire et sincèrement, je ne me suis jamais attardée sur la couleur de peau d'autrui et encore moins chez les noirs. Comme si l'autre avait plus de valeur que moi sous prétexte qu'il soit plus clair. Pff ! Absurde ! Alors, j'ai découvert énormément de préjugés, de mépris dans ce livre, beaucoup de honte envers soi-même et j'en passe. Je peux tout à fait comprendre ce complexe d'infériorité qui remonte à très loin, au temps de l'esclavage, quand les maîtres blancs faisaient énormément de préférences par rapport à la couleur des esclaves, surtout chez les femmes ; plus tu étais clair plus tu avais la chance de ne pas travailler dans les champs et sûrement plus de privilèges. Comment leur en vouloir ?? Mais, du coup, cela a suscité

beaucoup de jalousies chez les autres esclaves et, au fil de ma lecture, cela m'a réellement épuisé et fait grogner jusqu'à la moitié du roman de ressentir le mal-être de cette jeune fille.

Je n'ai pas aimé découvrir cela dans ce livre car ce complexe existe réellement chez beaucoup de noirs et même dans mon entourage ; certains sont encore dans cette optique là : mieux vaut être clair voire métisse pour réussir dans la vie. Pour ces gens-là, être noir à la peau foncée, c'est comme traîner une malédiction derrière soi ou avoir le diable dans la peau, et, hélas, c'est exactement ce que beaucoup de familles noires redoutent le plus pour leurs enfants, dans le livre et dans la réalité. Les stigmates identitaires et discriminatoires sont finalement bien trop présents, encore aujourd'hui.

Toutefois, je reconnais qu'un certain message passe à travers la plume de Wallace Thurman : D'où vient les complexes des femmes noires face à leurs cheveux crépus, leur nez épatés et de leur peau ? Tout cela remonte effectivement au temps de l'esclavage. A bon entendeur !

Londa says

*A yellow gal rides in a limousine
A brown-skin rides in a Ford,
A black girl rides an old jackass,
But she gets there, yes, my Lord.*

America 1920's and Emma Lou Morgan is 'color-conscious' She is a dark complexioned young black woman, who has never loved or even appreciated the rich hue of her skin.

She has been verbally abused, discriminated against, and shunned because of it. She can't seem to find her place in the world and it all seems to start with the color of her skin.

It would be easy to assume that all of her suffering must have been caused by whites, but that assumption would be incorrect. Thurman's novel focuses on colorism **within** the Black race.

This book was met with criticism when it was first written. This is not a topic that is comfortable to discuss, then or now. However, the issues it shines light on, are still sadly prevalent 85 years later.

Emma Lou was not an easy character to like. Her mind has been so poisoned by her family and her circumstances, that she ends up practicing the same prejudices that have been played out upon her. She comes across as snobbish and rude. The way the novel is written, the reader will spend a lot of time listening to her thoughts and emotional ponderings. Her flaws, although irritating, serve to make Emma Lou very 'real'. I may not have 'liked' Emma Lou, but I certainly believed in her as a character.

The poem I quoted above was performed by a fair skinned black chorus girl performing in a musical review that Emma Lou attended. The chorus girl was performing in 'black-face'

Reading this novel, I asked myself several times "Are the dark girls still riding on the back of that jackass?" "How far have we come?" Documentaries like Dark Girls are testament to the fact that the answer is "Not far enough."

I recommend this novel to anyone who is interested in colorism. It may have been written over 85 years ago, but the issues are still as relevant and important as they were then.

Pam says

Wallace Thurman was a very brave person to shed light on a little known "dirty little secret" within the African American race. A secret which still exist today even though his book was first published in 1929. To say the less, it's a "doozy". Focusing on Emma Lou's "Crime & Punishment". The Crime of being born to a family of mulattoes who wanted to keep the blue veins DNA for generations to come. She was considered a "blue black" within the family. Her Mother, Grandmother and most all her relatives said her crime was being too black. Her Punishment was to go through life with the idea that she would never amount to anything as a result of her dark skin. Emma Lou in fact was her worst enemy.

Taken from the folk-saying "the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice," its title was ironic, for the novel was an attack on prejudice within the race. When she attends school at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles she again is scorned, so she travels to Harlem, where she believes that she won't be snubbed because of her dark coloring. She uses hair straighteners and skin bleachers, and takes on the appearance and attitudes of the fairer-skinned people who degrade her. Ironically, she in turn snubs darker men, whom she thinks inferior and takes up with a man who is light-skinned but cruel.

A very historical description of that time during "The Harlem Renaissance" is painted by Thurman. In fact, his plight was exactly like Emma Lou's. Some say it was autobiographical. Indeed, I can understand why many people of color criticized this work..it was a secret only known within the race as it is STILL known today. Moving, some slow spots, overall a quick read period piece.

Rachel says

Wallace Thurman is such a striking writer--his style, particularly in this novel, is vivid, near-hypnotic, and this book is a mixture of racial/social critique, sordid melodrama, and a US travel narrative following protagonist Emma Lou's trials in early adulthood. *The Blacker the Berry* analyzes American colorism, particularly within the African American community, especially inside intellectual circles and/or in Harlem of the early 20th century. Emma Lou is admittedly an infuriating character (as her internalized self-hatred and desire for those who would "naturally" shun her leads her to make the same mistakes in different cities), but I found her to be overwhelmingly sympathetic and engaging. Helga Crane of Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* is, in my estimation, an analogous character in terms of a polarizing heroine. The book is worth reading for Part 4 alone ("Rent Party") for Thurman's (clear) inclusion and spoofing of infamous and influential Harlem residents/luminaries like Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Bruce Nugent.

Justin says

This is such a sad story. It was well written and touches on the sensitive subject of racial prejudice within the black community. The main character, Emma, is naive and insecure not solely due to society's views of dark skin, but mainly due to how she was raised and treated by members of her own family, who were of lighter complexion. Seeing an opportunity to escape their oppressive views she takes off to first L.A. and then New York. Instead of finding the color-blind mecca she expected she comes face to face with a difficult reality that is both environmental and of her own making. Although I enjoyed this book and the journey Emma embarks on to find her place in the world, the ending seemed flat and unfinished. It almost seems that there should be another book that picks up where this one leaves off. All in all a good read. An informative and insightful look into black America of the 1920's.

Ina Cawl says

I always wondered why Western authors who happened to visit my country from Richard Burton to Karen Blixen always claimed that Somali were far more superior to other Africans although they didn't give reason for that superiority.

And after reading this book it made me more color conscious than ever, did those authors make their assertion because Somali had less thick lip than other Africans? Or they made their assertion because Somali have smoother hair than the African people? Or maybe Somali skin color is lighter due to inter marriage with Arabs and Europeans than other hinterland Africans and for this they can claim to be special than Africans.

Who does light skin, brown eyes, more pointed nose and more smooth hair make you believe to be superior to people who happened to be more colored and have been blessed with more darker skin?

Reading this novel made me get a glimpse of what it means to be black in a lighter skin society, from the Bantu who live in southern part of my country and who still face prejudice and discrimination because he is more black than the usual Somali in Darfur where Arabized Africans attack other native Africans.

But this book doesn't talk about the supposed superiority of Arabized Africans or mixed race individuals but the focus of the novel is how lighter skin people treat their darker skin people within the same race.

Here comes Wallace Thurman's novel which was published in 1929 which tells the story of Emma Lou who is an African American girl who faced systematic racism from her race just because she was more black than her white family wanted her to be.

What struck me in the novel was from the start you are told what fate waits our narrator.

"More acutely than ever before Emma Lou began to feel that her luscious black complexion was somewhat of a liability, and that her marked color variation from the other people in her environment was a decided curse."

Her first encounter with racism would come from within her family who treated her as a curse because she was more darker than her family was and the family motto was "Whiter and whiter every generation," she deviated from their goal and as a result was treated badly just for being more blacker than family.

Getting tired of her mother and grandmother's racism she tries to run away from home to university where she believes that intra-racial racism is something from provincial and it wouldn't happen in big cities let alone in University but after being shunned from every club meeting her collage had she would run out to Harlem where she develops hypersensitivity and become more aware of her status and develops inferiority superiority complex and starts to treat men with the same racism she used to hate and fight against.

And eventually tired of self-hate and self-pitying she resolves to change but also accept who she is.

"We are all living in a totally white world, where all standards are the standards of the white man, and where

almost invariably what the white man does is right, and what the black man does is wrong, unless it is preceded by something a white man has done.”

“ What she needed to do now was to accept her black skin as being real and unchangeable, to realize that certain things were, had been, and would be, and with this in mind begin life anew, always fighting, not so much for acceptance by other people, but for acceptance of herself by herself .”

Tony says

THE BLACKER THE BERRY. (1929). Wallace Thurman. ****.

This novel was one of the ones included in the Library of America’s collection called “Harlem Renaissance.” It addresses the issue of prejudice among blacks themselves of truly “black” women. Although they admired lighter-skinned blacks, ones who were truly a deep black were shunned and ignored. The heroine of this novel is a woman named Emma Lou. She was raised in Boise by her family who had managed to become mildly successful and achieve a middle-class status. Unfortunately Emma Lou was born black-black, and was resented by her mother, who couldn’t see how she could have had a baby so black. Emma Lou is first presented at her high school graduation, receiving her diploma. She was the only black person in her class, and was musing over her achievement and what it all meant to her. She was essentially a lonely person; nobody in her class had made any effort to become friends with her. She didn’t see any future in Boise, but her family offered to send her to UCLA. When she got there, she did see some other Negro girls, but only one of them was black like her. Unfortunately, this girl was a Southern Negro and displayed all of the crass behavior of an ignorant southerner – loud voice and poor grammar. She soon tired of this friend, even though the friend had lots of money and managed to introduce her to some other black girls on campus. Emma Lou continued to dwell mentally on her blackness, and saw it as the reason for her lack of friends and exclusion from the only black sorority on campus. She did well in school, but decided to leave to move East to Harlem to find out how “real” Negroes lived. Once there, she was again isolated, but did her best to find a job and to mix in with blacks of the “right sort.” She gets tangled up with a smooth talking black man at a cabaret during a dance session. Not knowing any better, she immediately falls in love with him and pursues him – much to her detriment. This is a depressing novel of growing up black-black and the harsh treatment dark-colored blacks receive from their peers – whether actual or not. It is also a harsh review of the morals and expectations of black men in Harlem; there’s not much good said about them by the author. I was really surprised about the negative approach taken by the author in this novel. It was certainly strong, with no apparent hope in sight, either for Emma Lou or for the man she ultimately pursues and captures. Recommended.

reneeNaDaBomb says

Emma Lou has it hard in a family of mixed kin. Her mama, mamma's mama too (white slave master + slave) but her daddy is pure sweet black berry juice. The story is all about self acceptance and Emma Lou has hell a trails and tribulations ahead in her life. Enjoy.

Dee's Books says

a classic!
