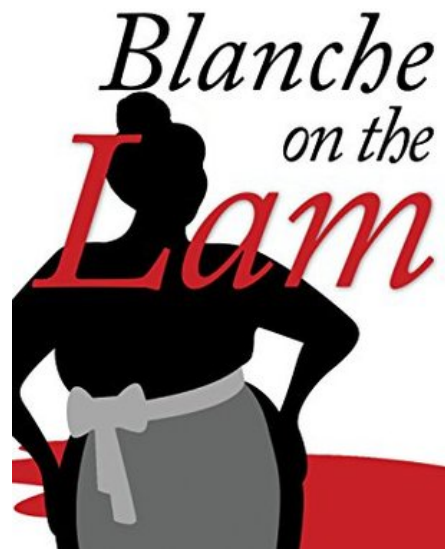


BARBARA NEELY



Blanche on the Lam

Barbara Neely

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BLANCHE ON THE LAM

Barbara Neely's Smart, Sassy and Groundbreaking Crime Novel

Blanche White is a plump, feisty, middle-aged African-American housekeeper working for the genteel rich in North Carolina. But when an employer stiffes her, and her checks bounce, she goes on the lam, hiding out as a maid for a wealthy family at their summer home. That plan goes awry when there's a murder and Blanche becomes the prime suspect. So she's forced to use her savvy, her sharp wit, and her old-girl network of domestic workers to discover the truth and save her own skin. Along the way, she lays bare the quirks of southern society with humor, irony, and a biting commentary that makes her one of the most memorable and original characters ever to appear in mystery fiction.

Blanche on the Lam Details

Date : Published September 2nd 2014 by Brash Books (first published 1992)

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Author : Barbara Neely

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Genre : Mystery, Fiction, Cultural, African American, Crime, Thriller, Mystery Thriller

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From Reader Review Blanche on the Lam for online ebook

Ginger says

This could have easily been an average cozy/mystery book. Barbara Neely's ability to grasp and convey race and class issues while also delivering a fun mystery make this book much more than average.

Aleatha says

3.5 I loved Blanche, the mystery wasn't super compelling but I'll be reading book 2 because I enjoyed Blanche so much.

Jan says

"Don't worry, darling, she'll cooperate. I promise you." Why not just insert "BBWWWwaaaaa Hhhaaa Hahaha" here, with some hands rubbing together?

I like Blanche. She is resourceful and observant. I do not need the nitty gritty details of her every thought to get that. She is worried about the kids. I GOT IT. Stop bringing it up and MOVE ON. The baby steps she takes to describe her characters is maddening. Like this:

"Blanche studied him. She noticed the folds in the corner of his eyes, the thickness of his fingers. Of course, she thought. Now she remembered who he'd reminded her of earlier. It was Baby Joe, Miz Harriet's son. But Baby Joe had serious mental problems from Down's syndrome. Could you have Down's syndrome but show it only a little bit?"

I had to stop reading. Too many books, too little time, and this one was going to be no end of irritation.

Also - it's Down Syndrome, not Down's syndrome.

carol. says

<https://clsiewert.wordpress.com/2014/...>

Remember how I said I grew up on Christie? It took college to really open my eyes to the insight that I had read very few books by authors who were not white and from an American or British tradition. It became a personal project to increase the diversity of my reading (while still hanging in my favorite genres of mystery, sci-fi and fantasy). I was scanning through my college's small bookstore, looking for my books for the semester when I saw the Penguin paperback edition of Blanche, no doubt on the list for some literature class. I quickly grabbed it and settled down for a read. Blanche on the Lam held my attention, but even more than that, it shares and affirms an experience seldom portrayed in literature.

Blanche is an African-American domestic worker, recently moved to North Carolina after unsettling events

in NYC. She's barely making ends meet, living with her opinionated mother and taking care of her deceased sister's two children. When called into court for a bounced check, nerves and claustrophobia get the best of her and she makes a run for it before she can be taken into jail for a multiple-month sentence. Needing someplace to stay, she decides to show up at a temporary agency job she had already refused, claiming to be her replacement. It turns out a couple, their elderly aunt and disabled cousin will be traveling to their country retreat for a week, giving the normal servants a week off. As she tries to mitigate the idiosyncrasies of her new employers and come up with a strategy to deal with being a fugitive, she realizes her employers are acting extremely strange, even for white people. When an elderly black gardener shares his own concerns with Blanche, she starts to fear for her safety.

Once I got past my struggle with the idea that Blanche would become a fugitive over a check-cashing case, I enjoyed the plot. It begins more like literary fiction, with Blanche primarily focused on solving her current problem, as well as developing a strategy for caring for herself and the children. Tempted to go AWOL from her life, the story is about her as much as the mystery. In fact, while she notes the oddness in her employer's household, she isn't really drawn into their troubles until the black gardener is found dead. Unlike many amateur sleuths, Blanche is a reluctant investigator, adding a more realistic angle to the story.

“Blanche had learned long ago that signs of pleasant stupidity in household help made some employers feel more comfortable, as though their wallets, their car keys, and their ideas about themselves were all safe. Putting on a dumb act was something many black people considered unacceptable, but she sometimes found it a useful place to hide.”

Characterization is interesting, and clearly a strong point of the mystery. Blanche is a practical, straightforward person that has realized that sometimes the best way to get along is to keep her mouth shut, but she's only able to do that for so long. Despite her own relative poverty, Blanche has had a wealth of experiences providing insight into human nature. Neely stated in an interview that she started the Blanche story as a way to deal with writer's block on another project and was surprised by the enthusiastic reception Blanche received. As a lifelong activist, she was interested in presenting “political fiction” as she wrote from the perspective of the underrepresented, that of a “poor black woman (a nice interview with Ms. here).

There's aspects that do make this feel like a first book. Although the plotting and characterization are quite good, the tone can be a bit didactic, with Blanche doing a great deal of ‘telling’ through her inner voice. While insightful, it could have been less heavy-handed, done through memories or experiences. During my second read, I found myself far less tolerant of it; not that I minded the message, but that it could have been so much meaningfully relayed through action. Otherwise, the writing style is sophisticated, with nice variety. Blanche's observations give a nice sense of the opulent homes and the Carolina setting.

A number of the reviews I've seen mentioned that they found this book through criticism of *The Help*, and I'd definitely encourage reading about Blanche over the moviefied version. I recommend the series if you are a mystery fan interested in broadening your reading experience.

FreeFormLady says

I'm giving this book 4 stars because I really like Blanche. However, the story is really slow. The pace didn't pick up until the last 50 pages.

Heather Montes Ireland says

I love Blanche White! This was one of those books that immediately draws the reader to the main character. Blanche is a domestic worker in the South who gets into "trouble" with the law and hides out for a week working for a rich white family--and ends up solving a series of murders along the way. The author's portrayal of Blanche is as a woman with a fierce intellect and deep interior life, honed by her experience as a working class Black woman and mother, who theorizes the white supremacist patriarchal system and subverts it--and solves solves murders as she goes. I recommend "Blanche on the Lam" as a great book to read rather than "The Help" that features a Black woman domestic worker as the main character with an adept social critique--who (did I mention?) also solves murders. Looking forward to the next in the series.

Ivonne Rovira says

I first read *Blanche on the Lam* in the 1990s, when I devoured all four of the books in the series. Blanche White was unlike any other amateur sleuth anywhere: resilient, generous, comfortable in her own skin, savvy, determined — well, sometimes downright too stubborn for her own good — but absolutely a gem.

Imagine my dismay when, after 2000's *Blanche Passes Go*, author Barbara Neely went silent. No more Blanche! No more candid observations about race, gender, body image, or class! No more incredibly original mysteries! Desperate, I even emailed some university where Neely was teaching a course in the hopes that so many of us were begging that she'd reconsider.

So imagine my delight when I saw that *Blanche on the Lam* was being re-released in the Kindle format! An entire new generation can discover the opinionated, clever *zaftig* domestic worker for themselves!

In the debut novel, Blanche takes refuge in Hokeysville, N.C., as a maid in a home right out of *Southern Gothic Monthly*: the privileged but nervy Miz Grace, Grace's shifty husband Everett, the feeble-minded cousin Mumsfield, and Aunt Emmeline, the reclusive, rich crone. Like a modern-day Amanda Wingfield, Miz Grace tries to pretend that everything's just peachy on the plantation, but Blanche doesn't take long to figure out that something murderous is afoot.

Readers will love the humor, the clever plotting, and, most of all, the irrepressible Blanche herself. Here's to hoping that the rest of the series makes it onto the ebook format soon.

And, Ms. Neely? It's still not too late to continue the series. Just sayin'.

Udeni says

Blanche White is not exactly a fairy tale heroine like her near namesake, Snow White. She is a strong-minded, kind-hearted woman, who is also a housekeeper in the "post-racial" South. Blanche likes her job and is good at it. One of the many joys of this detective book are the mouth watering descriptions of Blanche's superb Southern cooking. My diet was sorely tempted by these sections!

While on the run for a minor check cashing incident, Blanche ends up at a creepy Southern mansion. She is surrounded by a satisfyingly dysfunctional cast of characters: a frail blonde second wife, a drunken matriarch, a bullying womaniser, a racist Sheriff, and an elderly gardener who knows more than he lets on.

It's not long before the bodies are piling up, and Blanche is in fear of her life.

This is skilful writing that seamlessly combines a pacy plot with sharp observations on racism, sexism, and poverty. I laughed out loud in recognition of some of Blanche's strategies for dealing with these issues. The whodunnit aspect is a little superficial hence only 4 stars. But I've bought all the remaining Blanche books, so I'm now a fully paid up Blanche White fan. This is perfect light reading.

Lawyer says

I received a copy of Blanche on the Lam: A Blanche White Mystery through Netgalley, offered by Brash Books, in exchange for an honest review.

Blanche on the Lam, Barbary Neely, First Ed., St. Martin's Press, New York, New York, 1992

Barbara Neely, Social Activist, and Author, born 1941, Lebanon, Pennsylvania

Still hoping to find an employer willing to pay for a full service domestic instead of the bunch of so-called genteel Southern white women for whom she currently did day work. Most of them seemed to think she ought to be delighted to swab their toilets and trash cans for a pittance."

Blanche White, a savvy and independent black woman finds herself in Farleigh, North Carolina, living with her mother and the two children she had promised her sister, Valerie, dying of breast cancer, she would raise and see to their well being. It's not an easy life.

This is not the life Blanche had planned for herself. She never intended on marrying. Children weren't in the picture. A practical woman, she knew her services as a full time domestic were valuable. Up north, in New York, she had earned a good living. But that was before her sister died and she made a promise she was committed to keep.

About Farleigh, North Carolina. I didn't find it on the North Carolina map. Perhaps Ms. Neely changed the location to protect the guilty. However, other North Carolina locations are bantered about without concern. For Neely's purposes, the name suffices, establishing Blanche the domestic, a resident of the South, whose importance is of little note to the white citizens of the community, authoritarian, social or otherwise.

Farleigh was still a country town, for all its pretensions. The folks who lived here and had money, even the really wealthy ones, thought they were still living slavery days, when a black woman was grateful for the chance to work indoors. Even at the going rate in Farleigh she'd found no black people in town who could afford her--not that working for black people ensured good treatment, sad to say.

Things really turn sour for Blanche when she's arrested on warrants for bad checks. Checks she wrote for groceries to support her niece and nephew, counting on her employers making good on her payday. However her employers decided to take a powder, uhm, vacation, to Topsail Beach, or some other likely vacation spot.

Blanche ends up before a Judge who got up on the wrong side of the bed, mistakenly reads her record, and becomes indignant to find her before the Court a fourth time. Thirty days in jail, plus restitution. It crosses one's mind how anyone makes restitution while incarcerated.

Blanche panics. Away from her children, yes, she's come to look on them as her own, for thirty days? The County's liable to come calling and her children will be in the State Foster Care system. At the first opportunity when a brouhaha breaks out in the courtroom, Blanche goes on the lam.

That's when things get interesting. Blanche was scheduled to take a placement through an employment service. What better way to go into hiding working for wealthy white folks. And Blanche only thought she was in trouble.

One Cranberry Way. A week long job. Time to figure out how to handle this check problem. Get a lawyer. That's what she should have done.

The occupants of One Cranberry Way are the Carter family. Aunt Emmaline is the family matriarch. Who would have thought it? She parlayed a \$50,000.00 inheritance from her late husband into a fortune in the stock market. Do we need a reminder that money is the root of many evils?

Niece Grace's parents are dead. She's a likely heir upon Emmaline's death. She is married to Everett, a villain from the point of being introduced into the cast of characters. Grace is his second wife. His first was murdered. Having a cast iron alibi, Everett, reaps the benefit of wife One's legacy. But that money is gone.

The other likely heir is Mumsfield, cousin to Grace. Mumsfield is the most sympathetic character in the novel. With a diagnosis of Mosaic Mongolism, Mumsfield functions quiet highly. Derided constantly by Everett, Mumsfield is drawn to Blanche who treats him kindly.

Blanche intuitively recognizes that Everett and Grace mean to gain Aunt Emmaline's estate. If appointed Mumsfield's guardians, Emmaline's fortune is at their disposal.

Blanche and Mumsfield share a kind of invisibility in the Carter household. A black domestic and an adolescent deemed incapable of understanding the manipulations of Aunt Emmaline going on underneath their noses are things that Everett and Grace are confident will not be unraveled before the money is safely in their hands.

However, events take a turn toward violence. Everett and the Sheriff apparently are at odds of serious import to one another. Blanche overhears a sharp interchange between the two. The following morning, the radio news carries the story that the Sheriff committed suicide the previous night, driving his car over O'man's bluff.

Old Nate, the long time Carter gardener, drops by the kitchen to talk to Blanche over a cup of coffee.

"Hear about the Sheriff?" He asked her without a 'Hello' or 'How are you?' He didn't even wait for Blanche to answer. 'Shame, ain't it?' he added. But the huge grin that turned his face into that of a much younger, more carefree man didn't match his words. It was probably events like the sheriff's death that got her slave ancestors a reputation for being happy, childlike, and able to grin in the face of the worst disaster. She could just see some

old slaver trying to find a reason why the slaves did a jig when the overseer died.

But Blanche knows there are things better ignored.

It would be better to forget about the sheriff's visits, his conversations with Everett, and the limousine rolling silently down the drive that shouldn't be a problem. She had plenty of experience not seeing what went on in her customer's homes, like black eyes, specks of white powder left on silver backed mirrors, cufflinks with the wrong initials under the bed, and prescriptions for herpes. She was particularly good at not seeing anything that might be dangerous or illegal. But as good as she was at being blind, there were certain things she couldn't overlook.

However, the sheriff is only the first to go. The body count increases. Will Blanche herself leave her job safely? And what about Mumsfield? Who's to take care of him. Or will she "be murdered over some white people's shit that didn't have a damned thing to do with him?" It would be easier to skip town and head to Boston, lose herself back up North. Send for the kids when it was safe. But things just happen to fast.

Neely knows how to spin a yarn. This is not your conventional mystery. Rather, Neely relies on building characterization of the main players in this tale of a family divided by its greed for the family fortune. The dialog is sharp. Blanche is a refreshingly savvy investigator, though a reluctant one. Interwoven into a well plotted story is a starkly honest portrayal of black anger in the face of a heritage of white oppression.

It's no spoiler that Blanche survives. This is the beginning of a series. Neely's debut drew the attention it deserved. The Agatha Award for Best First Novel, 1992. The Andrew Award for Best First Novel, 1993. And the Macavity Award for Best First Novel, 1993.

The novel's ending may leave some readers conflicted. Be warned. I won't reveal anything more than to quote the old saw, "Two wrongs don't make a right." I leave it to the reader to determine how the conclusion of this novel strikes them. Blanche on the Lam: A Blanche White Mystery

To state there is no racial divide in our country would be specious at best. Neely clearly establishes the suspicion with which the races warily eye one another. There's an infinite degree of sadness that this divide seemingly has no end.

Kudos to Brash Books for reprinting Blanche on the Lam: A Blanche White Mystery. It's good to see Blanche White back in print.

One last thought:

Alisa says

I read about this in a recent article in "The Root" about Kathryn Stockett's "The Help." The Root article said that Stockett isn't the first to write from the perspective of black Southern maids, and mentioned Neely's series about amateur (or accidental) detective and professional housekeeper Blanche White. The article suggested that Blanche is the counterpoint to Mosley's better-known Easy Rawlins.

Based on "Blanche on the Lam," I'd say Neely's novels aren't as complex, and are definitely more domestic. But they're not "cozy", and they have a strong black, feminist, realist perspective. Blanche deals with the same racial, social, economic issues, but in a different environment than Mosley's hard-boiled LA.

It was a quick, enjoyable read, and I really appreciated Blanche's perspective, her commentary on her employers, her information sources, and the structure of the world she lived in. I'll likely check out another Blanche novel in the future.

Lisa says

I started this expecting a cosy mystery but got something slightly different. It has some of the elements of cosy; an amateur sleuth, a domestic situation set in a mansion and some humour...
...but Blanche is not really in the mood to be humoured!

The book is permeated with sadness from Blanche's personal situation through to the mystery and the people affected by it.

I enjoyed seeing how Blanche played the parts expected of her being a black housekeeper in a rich white family's house whilst informing us what she is really thinking. Blanche is feisty and strong-willed but can do meek and stupid if called for. Her detecting skills are very different from your usual mystery but I think it worked really well.

To sum up this is a good murder mystery with melancholic undertones and a 'that's life' attitude.

Lois says

This was light hearted, funny and surprisingly intersectional/feminist. I loved the narrator as well. They were perfect for this story.

Monica **can't read fast enough**** says**

I was worried for about the first half of reading this one because I really want to love this series and it wasn't happening. I felt lost in what time period this was actually taking place in for a while. The things that were happening, the atmosphere and sense of place made me think at first that this was happening in the late 50's or 60's but it is really taking place in the late 80's early 90's (I think). I still don't actually know. If you know the actual decade please let me know! The last of the book is where I really got invested in how the story was going to unfold. All of my issues could be do to this story being the first in a series. I definitely enjoyed the last third or so-it just took me a while to get in the groove of what was going on. I will continue on with the series and hopefully I'll have a better sense of when these adventures are taking place.

You can find me at:

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Didi says

My video review: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U8kmc...>

Sarah Weathersby says

I would never have found this book, if not for one of my reading groups on Goodreads.com. It was first published in 1992, and first of a series of Blanche White mysteries. We're fortunate to have the series now available on Kindle, as the paperback and hardcover versions are out of print and available as used books.

Blanche is a feisty character who gets into legal trouble for writing bad checks, but manages to sneak out of the courthouse, escaping from a sentence of 30-days in jail. And that's just the first chapter. From then on she is "on the lam," as "the help" for a wealthy white family. While she watches a mystery unfolding in the household, she imparts tidbits of wisdom, survival skills for black people in the Jim Crow South, and how to maintain your dignity in spite of those who might put you down.

It's a great read, even in 2015.
