



# Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil

*John Berendt*

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A sublime and seductive reading experience. Brilliantly conceived and masterfully written, this enormously engaging portrait of a most beguiling Southern city has become a modern classic.

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It is a spellbinding story peopled by a gallery of remarkable characters: the well-bred society ladies of the Married Woman's Card Club; the turbulent young redneck gigolo; the hapless recluse who owns a bottle of poison so powerful it could kill every man, woman, and child in Savannah; the aging and profane Southern belle who is the "soul of pampered self-absorption"; the uproariously funny black drag queen; the acerbic and arrogant antiques dealer; the sweet-talking, piano-playing con artist; young blacks dancing the minuet at the black debutante ball; and Minerva, the voodoo priestess who works her magic in the graveyard at midnight. These and other Savannahians act as a Greek chorus, with Berendt revealing the alliances, hostilities, and intrigues that thrive in a town where everyone knows everyone else.

## **Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil Details**

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## From Reader Review *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* for online ebook

### Annet says

Extraordinary story and characters, slow read, some parts for me were a bit hard to get through, that's why four stars and not five. A classic though. Loved it. Now I want to go to Savannah too....

Another early review of mine coming up... how times flies.  
Oh my, I loved this book!

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### Phrynne says

I found this one a struggle. Several times I stopped and looked the title up again on Goodreads to make sure it really is non fiction. Surely all those weird characters could not really have existed in one place. Surely there must have been a huge amount of artistic licence going on. The court cases themselves rang true but ended up not being a major part of the book. Two stars because the author writes well. My struggle to read it was based purely on disbelief and not at all on the quality of the book. Disappointing.

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### Amanda says

Murder, gullah, drag queens (these are a few of my favorite things . . .) There's probably not much I can say about this book that hasn't already been said, but that won't stop me. I saw the movie when it first came out and loved it, but just never got around to reading the book. I thought that the entire book would be about the murder trial of Jim Williams, the prominent Savannah antiques dealer accused of murdering Danny Hansford (with whom it was rumored he was having a sexual relationship). While a generous portion of the book is dedicated to the details of Williams's four trials, the book is much more than that. This is a collection of stories about the people and history of Savannah--some of it true, some of it embellished, and some of it flat-out fabricated. The characters are eccentric, but likable (particularly The Lady Chablis--the foul mouthed drag queen who has labeled herself "The Grand Empress of Savannah;" she's by far my favorite character, followed by Minerva, the fascinating practitioner of voodoo). And, while I knew he was probably a scoundrel, I also liked Jim Williams, who insisted on continuing to live in Savannah because "it pisses off all the right people."

There was a lot of discussion at book club as to whether this should be classified as fiction or non-fiction. Here's my verdict: who cares? If the story is entertaining and well told, whether or not it's 100% factual shouldn't make a whit of difference to anyone who is looking to be entertained.

It should also be said that the cover art for the book is perfect. The bird girl of Bonaventure Cemetery stands there like Savannah itself, prim and old-fashioned, holding out both good and evil--head cocked in curiosity to see from which bowl her citizens will take.

Cross posted at [This Insignificant Cinder](#)

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## Taylor says

**Note, February 2014:** I was just rereading this review, and FUNNY STORY, I moved to a small town. Not so much a big city person as I had originally thought...

**Original review, circa 2007:** I love this book to the point where I don't even really know what to say about it, because nothing I can say about it will be good enough to explain just how incredible this book really is.

After reading this book, I had to restrain myself from booking a flight to Savannah. It makes you want to be there, it makes you want to know the people, it makes you want to pick up and find a place just like it so you can move there. I am a city person through and through, but this book made me want to move to a small town. The characters are so remarkable, so interesting that you can't believe they are real people. This book makes you proud to be a human being as much as it makes you laugh at our ridiculousness.

A NOTE ABOUT THE MOVIE: don't see it before you read the book. (but if you have seen the movie and haven't read the book, please read the book because it's so much better.) while the movie essentially leaves no doubt about the actual account of the murder that it focuses around, the book does not. and the book is also not nearly as centered around Jim Williams as the movie is.

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## ALLEN says

One advantage of bringing fresh eyes to an old town like Savannah, Georgia, is that the newcomer can cross social, racial, religious and economic lines with relative ease, and reporter John Berendt made the most of it in this bestseller. *Midnight* is a penetrating look at Coastal South culture that is zestily written and a hell of a lot of fun to read.

While I enjoyed the ensuing movie very much, I like the book even more because it can take more time doing its job -- basically following a very bemused New York reporter (Berendt) around in search of answers to a controversial murder, as he crosses paths with Uga the "Damn Good Dog," meets Luther the "fly man," gets special permission to visit the Married Women's Card Club, learns about the hustler who was "the good time not yet had by all," dabbles in hoodoo, and of course makes the acquaintance of Lady Chablis, who had to tape her "Thing" down before she appeared in public. And for all the eccentricity, you'll actually learn a lot about Savannah!

The book under review, which is not to be confused with *AFTER MIDNIGHT IN THE GARDEN OF GOOD AND EVIL* by a different author, is worth seeking out specifically. Used copies are plentiful, too, even in hardcover. I, for one, consider this MIDNIGHT among the very best of investigative crime NF with a "creative non-fiction" flair, and would rank it at or near such works as *IN COLD BLOOD* or John Cullen's *COLUMBINE*.

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## mark monday says

this book has a lot of fans. that makes some sense. magazines are certainly very popular, and this is magazine writing at its most polished. Berendt knows how to create an atmosphere. he knows how to describe things in

a style that is careful, subtle, and enfolded with a deadpan but rather mischievous irony. he can certainly describe the way a rich man's house looks - so well that you could then describe it to someone else as if you've been there. characters are sketched with an expert's hand - using a combination of physical details and the telltale mannerism or two - "objective" but rather sympathetic. the mystery at the heart of this novel is an absorbing one. and the book's central figure - the maybe-a-murderer - felt like he was an iteration of the film JFK's Clay Shaw, as played in an unusually fancy style by Tommy Lee Jones. which i liked, at first.

so why only 2 stars? well, *it is polished magazine writing*. it does not transcend, it does not delve deep. there is the slow but increasingly annoying realization that Berendt sees our anti-hero as a kind of social peer, which for some reason really bothered me. who knows, maybe i just automatically hate the rich & parasitic. Berendt writes about a whole gallery of characters, all characterized briefly but adroitly, and eventually i realized i was reading a classier version of a tourist-eye's view of Southern grotesques, a drive-by tour of weirdos. how aggravating! who knows, maybe i just automatically empathize with the weirdos and am annoyed by the normals. and then there is the sad fact of **THE LACK OF BLACK PEOPLE WHO COME ACROSS AS REAL PEOPLE**. yes, they are there (several) but for the most part they are part of the gallery of grotesquerie. this novel takes place in a part of the country that has a huge black community and i found the lack of this demographic - even ones who, i suppose, Berendt would consider non-grotesque - to be perplexing and troubling.

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### **Jess ✨Harbinger of Blood-Soaked Rainbows✨ says**

3.5 stars rounded up to 4

### **B is for Berendt**

#### **Read a book with antonyms in the title**

So I just realized that I totally forgot to review this one.....idiot moment #85749

For me, Savannah's resistance to change was its saving grace. The city looked inward, sealed off from the noises and distractions of the world at large. It *grew* inward, too, and in such a way that its people flourished like hothouse plants tended by an indulgent gardner. The ordinary became extraordinary. Eccentrics thrived. Every nuance and quirk of personality achieved greater brilliance in that lush enclosure than would have been possible anywhere else in the world.

This is probably one of the best nonfiction tales I've read in quite awhile. In fact, many times I felt like I was reading a novel. Berendt's writing style is comfortable, approachable, and conversational; everything I want in a narrative nonfiction book. The characters were so interesting and dynamic, and the setting is SAVANNAH for crying out loud. Each idiosyncratic and vivid identity depicted within these pages seems like something out of a novel, so I loved loved loved that they all are, in fact, real, living, breathing human beings who lived in Savannah when this book was written.

From an eccentric gay antique dealer who may or may not have murdered his young, redneck, playboy lover in cold blood to a beautiful trash-talking drag queen (my personal favorite of the bunch) to a mysterious and

slightly loony voodoo priestess to a penniless womanizing philanderer, these characters were all extremely memorable and were my favorite part of this book. The setting of Savannah, a character in itself, was perfect and made me want to plan a trip there soon.

Where this book lost me a bit was the long and detailed murder trial of Jim Williams. It was oddly thrown in halfway through, and while I enjoyed knowing what would happen, it was written as the principal story among all the other stories, and the one I found the least interesting. So I was a little disappointed that it took up the most real-estate. I needed more of Chablis and her fierce attitude, Joe Odom and his pretty but naive fiancée, Mandy, and Minerva's voodoo. I would have taken 300 more pages of their stories.

The real bits, the pieces of factual information I gained about Savannah's culture and history were an added bonus to the story, but the magic of this is in the characters. Read this book for them. They are better than most fictionalized people you will ever meet.

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## **Richard Derus says**

BkC7)Delicious, shimmering prose. Wonderful story. Savannah really should give Mr. Berendt a pension.

Well now, I have to dim my searchlight to a streetlight. Still think it's good but now, well, now I can't see past the one-hit-wonderness to the glories I once took for granted.

Rating: 3.75\* of five

**The Publisher Says:** Shots rang out in Savannah's grandest mansion in the misty,early morning hours of May 2, 1981. Was it murder or self-defense? For nearly a decade, the shooting and its aftermath reverberated throughout this hauntingly beautiful city of moss-hung oaks and shaded squares. John Berendt's sharply observed, suspenseful, and witty narrative reads like a thoroughly engrossing novel, and yet it is a work of nonfiction. Berendt skillfully interweaves a hugely entertaining first-person account of life in this isolated remnant of the Old South with the unpredictable twists and turns of a landmark murder case.

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**My Review:** Bored Manhattanite journalist realizes, back in the 1980s, that lunch at a trendy restaurant costs more than air fare to a sexy Southern retreat (those were the days!) and the resulting experience was more lasting. So John Berendt becomes a commuter to Savannah, Georgia, which is the American Bath for sheer physical prettiness, though quite a lot hotter.

Being a good journalist, he meets everyone worth meeting, and being a gay man, meets the entire A list of

gay life in this small city in record time. Then he stumbles into an amazing story of murder and skulduggery among the social elite as the elite intersects with gay and gay-for-pay culture.

Along the way he talks to every single interesting person in Savannah and builds a word-picture of its typically Southern hierarchical social scene. As The Lady Chablis, an African-American drag queen would say, "Flawless!"

Not exactly flawless, but wonderful. Southern characters abound, including the old root woman who introduces Yankee John to the world of the haints and spirits and loa that Southerners, even the Babbiss ones, are aware exists, even when they scream and rail about it as evil, wrong, bad...well, they do that about sex too, and with as much effect.

Cemetery dirt is a powerful ingredient in the sympathetic magic the old root women practice. Where it comes from, that is whose grave it was, matters, as do many other factors, and Yankee John reports with wide-eyed fascination on the entire experience of getting involved in the magical universe to help an accused murderer.

The end of the story is, very sadly, the end of a single book career. The City of Falling Angels notwithstanding, this is Mr. B's one book. Fortunately, it's a very good one. Unfortunately, it's the only one. And so I ding a half-star off for literary incomplete pass. But it's a helluva read!

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### **Adam says**

This was a decent book. There was a lot of mood, of which I'm a big fan. The characters all had the potential to be very interesting, but unfortunately, they weren't developed. That's not to say you don't spend a lot of time with them, or find out anything about them, it's just that you don't really give a damn.

The book is written by a magazine journalist who ends up living on and off in Savannah, GA for eight years to investigate and chronicle a murder and it's trials. This book is more or less one long magazine article, detailing the events, and lives, but never really giving you sympathy for any of the characters.

It does a fine job of keeping the mystery of whether Jim Williams really did the deed a secret, but in comparison to *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote (which I'm reading currently) this is not worth the effort.

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### **Fuchsia Groan says**

Desde que John Berendt publicó *Medianoche en el jardín del bien y del mal* en 1994 el libro se situó durante años en la lista de best sellers de no ficción del *New York Times*. Además, el aumento de los visitantes de la ciudad de Savannah (Georgia) fue notable desde ese momento, y no es para menos: en la primera parte de la obra tenemos una crónica social brillante de esa pintoresca ciudad sureña, atractiva por su historia, su arquitectura y sus habitantes, plagada de cotilleos, de pequeñas historias algo inconexas pero interesantes sin duda. En la segunda mitad nos adentramos en el crimen que dio origen al libro y en el posterior juicio, que ya conocía por la brillante película de Eastwood.

Desde luego la obra es difícil de clasificar, como dice la sinopsis, a medio camino entre la novela de viajes, la crónica social, el trabajo periodístico e incluso el thriller (aunque a quien vaya buscando esto último le digo desde ya que este no es su libro). Y esta mezcla es quizás lo que menos me ha gustado, aunque como narrador no haya nada que criticarle a Berendt, quizás le pesa demasiado su faceta periodística, y le cuesta un poco dar vida a la historia. Me ha costado un poco introducirme en ella al lado de los personajes, brillantemente presentados y descritos, por los que me he interesado y he buscado información, pero a los que no he visto cobrar vida (la mejor, sin duda, Lady Chablis, quien se interpretó a sí misma en la película).

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### **Tea Jovanovi? says**

Ova knjiga je jedan od meni najdražih prevoda, i žao mi je što film nije pomogao knjizi... Naime, knjiga obiluje živopisnim likovima, a Clint Eastwood je u svom filmu samo našeo te likove, a nijednog nije u potpunosti prikazao... Ono što je posebno interesantno u vezi s ovom knjigom jeste to da je ona potpuno promenila život u male Savane u Džordžiji... Gradi? koji ne voli promene, koji ne voli savremene tekovine, odjednom se našao pod najezdom turista koji su se tu sjatili posle ?itanja ove knjige... Bila je veliki hit krajem prošlog veka... :)

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### **VictoriaNickers says**

One of the best 'true crime' book I have ever read. Every inch of the story is fascinating. It reads like a novel. I actually had to keep reminding myself that it was, in fact, a true crime book. From the very first chapter I felt drawn in. I immediately wanted to go to Savannah and see it for myself.

So often in true crime books the characters are a little flat. Berendt was really able to make them come to life. His writing made the whole city come to life. His ability to infiltrate the seemly exclusive Savannah society and do such an awesome character study was amazing.

The personalities in the book are so bizarre and fantastic. It is almost hard to believe that they all live in a small city together. It had almost the same Southern society vibe to it as *Time to Kill*. The focus was not so much on the crime but rather the mesh of characters are interwoven into the plot (if I can call it that).

In to my re-read pile it goes!

Just found out that it's a movie with Kevin Spacey. Wonder if it's on Netflix?

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### **Lena says**

There was a lot of hype around this book a few years back, but in this case I think it is actually deserved. For one, Berendt is a skilled writer who understands how to tease a compelling story out of the material he's working with. And, oh, what material! The true-crime mystery at the center of the book—whether the social-climbing, closeted gay antiques dealer shot his lover in cold blood or self-defense—is interesting enough, but Berendt decorates that story with outrageous character portraits of Savannah's very oddball residents.

Whether he's discussing the quirky, old-South rituals of the Married Women's Card Club or the disturbed local genius who may or may not be plotting to poison the town's water supply, Berendt kept me so engaged I relished every moment.

Be wary of the movie version of *Midnight*, though. Good actors, bad adaptation. If you like the book, however, you may want to watch it just to see the notorious drag queen play herself. Sometimes, truth really is better than fiction.

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### **Montzalee Wittmann says**

*Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil: A Savannah Story* by John Berendt is a weird story about even weirder people! I would be gone from that town soooo fast. What creepy people! With the strange people you knew the murder mystery would be just as creepy, but not good. Easy to figure out that Jim and Danny were lovers right away. Why hide it in this town? You have a man that only puts make up on one eye, a man who walks an invisible dog, a man that hordes enough poison so he can at sometime kill everyone, and a transvestite dating a man. These are the sane people! I wasn't impressed with the writing, the plot, or the mystery. His weird characters were weird but that was it. Not my kind of book.

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### **Jonathan Ashleigh says**

The writing was great, the story was led into in an interesting way, but the trial was trivial and so were many characters that were introduced in the first half of the book. But, I liked reading about them anyway and, while the book came together well in the end, the whole thing wasn't cohesive. That said, I feel like I should have more good things to say about a book I enjoyed reading so much.

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