



Rails Under My Back

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A dazzling family saga that brilliantly reflects the reality of the African-American experience in the United States

Hatch and Jesus Jones are cousins on their fathers' side and on their mothers' side, and you can't have a family much more bound than that. And family is the most important entity for these young men, even when family seems to be defined by abandonment. *Rails Under My Back* traces these two men from one form of bondage or freedom to another, from one job to another, as they face down danger and try to come to terms with their family's past.

This ambitious novel, which has been hailed by critics nationwide as a rare achievement on the level of fiction by Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and Richard Wright, is the communal expression of a century of African-American life in America, with its imagery of exodus and exile, departure and destiny. It wields extraordinary literary, religious, and historical power, and announces the triumphant debut of a most powerful and utterly original voice.

Rails Under My Back Details

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Author : Jeffery Renard Allen

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From Reader Review Rails Under My Back for online ebook

Gillik says

This book does amazing things with language. I can see why there aren't a lot of reviews for it, it's certainly not a fast or easy read. There are no quotation marks and sentences blur together, thoughts of one character becoming memories of another. But turn to any page and learn ways to twist, stack, break open words. A master class on the act of writing even beyond the plot (which is a free-roaming look at one Black family's life and times in this weird jumble we call America). With characters named Lucifer and Jesus (Lucifer's embittered nephew) the symbolism is bound to be seven layers deep below the page.

The vernacular takes some getting used to and you very well might go through all 563 pages without being 100 percent sure of what's going on (thank God for those family trees), but there's wonder starting from the opening lines and carrying all the way through:

"Long before Jesus entered the world, blades of southern grass sliced up the slides of his grandmother's feet. Her blood leapt from the danger, drew back into the farthest reaches of her heart, and the roots of her soul pulled away from the sharp earth which had nurtured her. But nothing escapes the laws of gravity. We martyr to motion."

"Lucifer renamed New York the City of Trains. All rails glowed with the memory of those speeding colorful objects his eyes had witnessed years before. A babel of color inside and out. Scrawled tongues twisting into a mute vision of motion and voice. So his nostalgia had formed."

"Records are black seeds which begin to sprout musical trees. You hack through foliage. Perched birds sing on six twanging limbs."

"Even the sky was dirty here, canvas-colored, a rough sun pasted to it. Used papers fluttered about, giant moths. The morning full of sirens, moving in waves, crashing and rising again. Stonewall and Red Hook ran the distance of the horizon. Gateways in his eyes."

"You sleep good at night? Lucifer said.
I sleep like a baby, John said. That's how you win."

That's how you do it.

Kate says

Opening this book was like getting thrown into a culture and world I had no knowledge of except for media stereotypes which are hard to accept. But I was drawn to it by the music of the words, the very poetry of images: "The earth cooled. A heat hushed night, The heavens low-hanging. Moonlight soft-showered the window. You rested under the white bedspread translucent from use, safe now..."

Descriptions so wonderfully strange: referring to T-Bone, "Held his barking bull dog taytoos in check with the leashes of his shirtsleeves." or, of Porcha driving in the rain " Her wipers quit. The windshield cried with blind rain."

The song of this multi-generational family pulls you along all their moves and resettling, their hanging on to one another from childhood to death is so beautifully crafted that you are swallowed up in the story.

Sam says

4.5 but I rounded up because of the amazing writing. The landscape descriptions, particularly some of the descriptions of the trains, are wonderful. I also loved the use of different language to represent the diverse generations portrayed in the book. It is a long book but did not feel nearly as long because of how good Allen is at taking you into the world of each character

Venessa says

A first novel, experimental in form; jumping back and forth in one family's time, but starting and ending with the event that will change their lives forever. Brilliant and complex, with themes of travel (by rail of course) tying the generations together.
