



The Twelve-Mile Straight

Eleanor Henderson

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From *New York Times* bestselling author Eleanor Henderson, an audacious American epic set in rural Georgia during the years of the Depression and Prohibition.

Cotton County, Georgia, 1930: in a house full of secrets, two babies—one light-skinned, the other dark—are born to Elma Jesup, a white sharecropper's daughter. Accused of her rape, field hand Genus Jackson is lynched and dragged behind a truck down the Twelve-Mile Straight, the road to the nearby town. In the aftermath, the farm's inhabitants are forced to contend with their complicity in a series of events that left a man dead and a family irrevocably fractured.

Despite the prying eyes and curious whispers of the townspeople, Elma begins to raise her babies as best as she can, under the roof of her mercurial father, Juke, and with the help of Nan, the young black housekeeper who is as close to Elma as a sister. But soon it becomes clear that the ties that bind all of them together are more intricate than any could have ever imagined. As startling revelations mount, a web of lies begins to collapse around the family, destabilizing their precarious world and forcing all to reckon with the painful truth.

The Twelve-Mile Straight Details

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From Reader Review The Twelve-Mile Straight for online ebook

Kristine says

WOW! I was not surprised that this novel was a tough read, given the subject matter, but I was surprised that it was so good! The author made rural Georgia in the 1930s come alive with her descriptions of daily life and the struggles to make ends meet. The characters were well developed, as the story was told from varying viewpoints. The selfishness of human motivations were laid bare in this book, sparing no one. I loved how the truths in the story were revealed slowly, in layers, reaching backward and forward in time, until it was a fully formed yet imperfect flower. My mind keeps going back to The Twelve-Mile Straight and the lives lived and lost there.

Louise Wilson says

Set in rural Georgia during the years of the Depression and Prohibition. Cotton County, Georgia, 1930: in a house full of secrets, two babies, one light skinned, the other dark, are born to Elma Jesup, a white sharecroppers daughter. Field hand Genus Jackson is accused of her rape. He is lynched and dragged down The-Twelve-Mile-Straight. In the aftermath, the farms inhabitants are forced to contend with their compliantly in a series of events that left a man dead and a family irrevocably fractured. Elma begins to raise her babies as best as she can. As startling revelations mount, a web of lies begins to collapse around the family.

This is a family saga set in a time of historical shame . The storyline goes back and fourth giving the back stories of the characters. This book is beautifully written and the reader gets a feeling of a time and place. Fans of historical fiction will love this book.

I would like to thank NetGalley, HarperCollins Uk 4th Estate and the author Eleanor Henderson for my ARC in exchange for an honest review.

Melissa Crytzer Fry says

3.75-4

Eleanor Henderson had me hooked from page one – with the mystery of these two babies born with different skin colors (no spoiler – this is part of the book jacket copy). Then she reeled me in with the unimaginable actions of one of the characters against her own daughter. And I had to know: “How on Earth *could* she...?” and “Why on Earth *would* she?” And then... other events occur that had me flipping pages for more answers.

The stakes are high early-on in this story that is a reminder of the country’s history of hatred. And even though slavery had been abolished some 60-plus years earlier, its after-effects and growing forms of bigotry were alive and well in 1930s Georgia. The book covers every misdeed and reprehensible human behavior imaginable: racism, infidelity, KKK group-think mentality, murder, rape, illegal activity. This novel paints a clear picture of human ignorance and offers no excuses for it – just a telling reality of the baseness of which man is capable.

The language in this story is lovely and poetic (Take, for instance, the initial pages and the description of the

babies):

In their overstuffed nest, with the delicate claws of their fingers intertwined and their eyelids trembling with blue veins, they looked like a pair of baby chicks, their white skullcaps like two halves of the single eggshell from which they'd hatched. Only if you looked closely – and people did – could you see that the girl was pink as a piglet and the boy was brown.”

You may feel a sense of remove at times from the characters with the third-person omniscient telling, which also includes a great deal of backstory for multiple, multiple characters. It's a family saga, so don't let the 539-page count scare you. Sagas are long, and there is much to share, and much to be revealed about the themes of family, sisterhood, blood ties, faith, redemption, and love.

Cathy says

Find all my book reviews, plus fascinating author interviews, exclusive guest posts and book extracts, on my blog: <https://whatcathyreadnext.wordpress.com/>

The book is written in a distinctive narrative style which conjures up the period and location in which it is set. From its immensely powerful opening chapter, the book tells a story of poverty, cruelty, prejudice and secrets.

‘There were things no one wanted known by the outside, and no one knew that better than Elma.’ Although it would be unfair to describe it as a ‘misery-fest’, it's certainly the case that for the characters in *The Twelve-Mile Straight* happiness is rare and, where it exists, it is often fleeting. The book depicts a situation in which power over livelihoods, housing, even life and death, is concentrated in the hands of a few individuals. It's a world in which corruption or the complicity of officialdom allows a blind eye to be turned to their misdeeds. And, notably, it's a patriarchal society where women are viewed as domestic slaves and sexual objects to be used and abused. For too many of the people who live in the environs of the Twelve-Mile Straight their experience of life is one of grinding poverty, backbreaking labour, disease, alcohol abuse and early death.

The storyline weaves back and forth in time giving the reader the back stories of characters and their different perspectives on events. I enjoyed *The Twelve-Mile Straight* (if ‘enjoyed’ is quite the right word given the experiences of most of its characters) but think I would have appreciated it just as much had it been around 150 pages shorter.

I received a review copy courtesy of NetGalley and publishers Harper Collins UK/4th Estate in return for an honest and unbiased review.

Diane says

One of the great joys of reading is discovering an debut author whose work just blows you away. Eleanor Henderson did that to me with her 2011 novel *Ten Thousand Saints*, set in 1987 New York City and Vermont. It is such an amazing book (made into a movie in 2015), I put it on my Most Compelling Books of 2011 list.

I was thrilled to hear that Henderson would be at the Book Expo this year signing copies of her followup novel, *The Twelve-Mile Straight*. I was first in a long line of people, all eager to tell her how much we loved *Ten Thousand Saints* and how we couldn't wait to read this new one.

The setting for *The Twelve-Mile Straight* is a small town in Depression-era rural Georgia in 1930. Young Elma Jessup gives birth to two babies- one black, one white. Her daughter is the child of the grandson of the wealthy man who owns the farm that her sharecropper father Juke works. Elma and Juke accuse a young black man who works for Juke, Genus Jackson, of raping Elma resulting in Elma's son.

Juke, who made moonshine on the side that he sold to men in the town, convinced others to join him in making Genus pay by lynching him, dragging his body behind a truck and leaving it in the road in town. The death scene is horrific, and we soon learn that there is more to this story.

Elma's mother died when she was a baby, and Elma was raised by Ketty, their black housekeeper. Ketty's daughter Nan grew up with Elma, and they were best friends, even though Elma went to school and Nan worked with Ketty, eventually learning from her how to be a midwife.

As the story unfolds, we find out that there are many secrets in this house, secrets that will affect everyone who lives there for years to come. People are curious about Elma's two babies, and their two different fathers, and Elma eventually meets a doctor, Oliver, who wants to study this unique phenomenon.

Oliver is a terrific character; he suffers from polio and he wants to be a research doctor. He is fascinated and compassionate towards Elma and her babies. There is a couple, Sarah and Jim, who came from up North and work on Juke's land. Why they are there is a mystery, but they provide company for Elma, for which she is grateful. And gentle, quiet Genus is such a sweet young man, his murder is devastating.

There are some powerful scenes in the story, including a baptism for the babies, where several townsfolk turn out believing that at least one of the babies "has the devil in him." Oliver's memory of his time spent on a ship filled with other polio patients because people feared catching polio was heartbreaking.

Henderson creates such a sense of time and place, you can feel the blazing summer sun and see the dust kicking up on the twelve-mile straight road. The reader is transported to this world, one that she conjured from stories her father told of his growing up, one of eight children born to a sharecropper.

Her writing is so precise, it feels like she worked to craft the perfect sentence for each paragraph. I got so lost in *The Twelve-Mile Straight* that frequently I found myself completely tuning out my surroundings, losing all track of time and place.

But it is the relationship between Elma and Nan that is at the heart of this emotional, moving story. The two women are as close as sisters, but it is the secrets between them that drive the momentum of the book to its shattering conclusion.

I highly recommend *The Twelve-Mile Straight*, and if you haven't read *Ten Thousand Saints*, pick that one up too. I'm not the only one who feels this way, *The Twelve-Mile Straight* has made many Best of Fall lists.

Andrew Campbell says

I came to respect and appreciate this novel more than it promised in its opening pages. But I never did come around to liking it, exactly. Which I daresay is the author's intent.

Ms. Henderson testifies to this on the back cover: "I wanted to capture the innocence of those country stories, and also to fracture it." Fracture it she does, far beyond a funhouse mirror and into a thousand jagged shards.

This is a punishing book. Oh, it's easy enough to read, and (for the most part) smoothly told in its construction. The end is a relief and a release, as it's hard to imagine much worse could happen to the characters that survive.

Can fiction be penance? I had the distinct sense during *The Twelve-Mile Straight* that I was reading a writer's attempt to turn over every rock and bring to light every transgression and injustice- real and imagined -that her relatives might have been connected to. Her scholarship is so thorough that it's hard to discern where the history gives way to fiction.

Impressive as this is, there is a fundamental flaw in how she has conceived of her story. The third-person omniscient voice, spanning lifetimes and contracting back and forth across decades, allows the reader to remain removed from the characters. The overriding and overwhelming sentiment is "Gosh, how terrible"; and this over and over and over and over again. And again.

It's like a Christopher Nolan movie: expertly constructed, and yet so singularly minded that it contains almost no relief or humor to elevate or vary its thematic insistence. (And unlike a Chris Nolan movie, a novel isn't finished in 130-odd minutes.)

"It's called realism," I can hear the retort. Well, no. Surely even the most disadvantaged of our fellow human beings experience more relief, diversion, and distraction than what is doled out to the characters here. (Think of favela boys piecing together a makeshift pelota out of paper and rubber bands.) In 500+ pages I experienced precisely one passage which allowed for delight in the experience of a character.

All this monolithic purpose becomes, mainly, a testament to the author's tenacity- and, in turn, to the reader's superiority. We remain at the advantage and remove of History, bestowing precious little on these characters apart from sympathy and pity. But the worst of this reading experience is not emotional redundancy; the worst of it is that almost nowhere in the narrative can the reader find herself. Almost entirely missing from these pages is the shock of recognition and identification that calls the reader to account, a challenge that unsettles her where she sits today and which marks the very best of fiction.

(There is a whole strain of this infecting contemporary fiction, a tendency to confuse misery for verisimilitude; this includes such critical darlings as *A Little Life* and *Imagine Me Gone*. Ms. Henderson's achievement in historical fiction is much greater than these, however, and I suspect a great many readers will enjoy it as a kind of guilt trip.)

While I am not sorry to have read the book, I will not recommend it. It contains much to admire, but it has little to offer.

KC says

I would like to thank Harper Collins/ECCO and Eleanor Henderson for the advanced readers copy in exchange for an honest review. 1930 Cotton County, Georgia and a young Elma Jesup finds herself pregnant. She gives birth to twins but to everyones surprise including her own, her daughter is light skinned and her son is dark skinned. The townspeople accuse local farmhand Genus Jackson of raping her. Genus is lynched, dragged by truck down the twelve-mile straight and then dumped in the town square. This tale continues as Elma raises her twins as best as she can, under the scrutinizing eye of her father and with the help from their

black housekeeper Nan. Family ties stretch, lies come to the surface, and the pain and suffering of one man haunts many. There is a lot of book here and I felt the story dragged a bit but the writing was dark, fluid, and compelling.

Paromjit says

This historical Southern Gothic novel set in the depression era and prohibition is a hard read with its relentless depiction of the Jim Crow time. It is 1930 in Florence, Cotton County, Georgia, when a sharecropper's daughter, Elma Jesup, a white single woman, gives birth to the Gemini twins, one baby is white, and the other is 'coloured', an exceedingly strange event. Elma's father, Juke, who sells moonshine, is instrumental in pointing the finger at the good, kind and sweet Genus Jackson as the perpetrator of rape, and the stirred up townsfolk murder Genus by lynching him and dragging his body down the Twelve-Mile Straight, the road to town. Journalists are bribed to ensure the 'right' story is told to the town. This sickening injustice is not to end there, the narrative goes back and forth in time, as the repercussions of these events leaves no-one untouched as the parts they contribute to them are revealed. Nan is the black housekeeper, who like her mother before her becomes a midwife, she and Elma have been as close as sisters, knowing each other from childhood. The story of the two women with secrets is the central tenet of the novel which moves relentlessly to the violent and tragic conclusion as the the painful truths are not to be denied.

In a town where rumours continue to circulate, the babies grow up. George Wilson, owns the mill and 200 acres of the Twelve-Mile Straight. His grandson, Freddie, and his part as a person of privilege is seen by the reader. This is a brutal, unforgiving, intertwined and twisted family drama that focuses on race, hatred, incest, white privilege, poverty, class, lies, secrets and the desperate positions that women found themselves in. In this intense harrowing, and moving tale, Henderson paints a picture of some of the worst sides to humanity with her beautiful and vivid prose. This is a compelling and tension ridden read which exposes a particular time with its downright deplorable brutality, prejudices and attitudes. What makes this particularly hard to bear is that many of the painful issues raised in the book continue to play out in our contemporary world. I highly recommend this novel with the proviso that you will need a strong stomach to read it. Many thanks to HarperCollins 4th Estate for an ARC.

Carol says

E-galley provided through the generosity of Edelweiss, Ecco Publishing and Author, Eleanor Henderson, to be published September 12, 2017. A shout-out to Bookseller, Charles Bottomley of Northshire Bookstore, Manchester, Vermont for his recommendation of this forthcoming book.

Eye-brows are raised and tongues are wagging as well you might think they would be when you hear the premise of this story set in 1930's Cotton County, Georgia. Elma Jessup, the unmarried pregnant daughter of a sharecropper labors in delivering a light-skinned girl and a dark-skinned boy. Even the unpaved twelve-mile straight, so named due to the exactness of this description, can't separate the nosiness of her righteous neighbors and what is not their business. This birthing of innocents leads to long reaching and tragic events in a South struggling with racial issues. Eleanor Henderson wrings this character driven saga of motherhood and parentage every which way only a talented author can. Are the babies, Wilson and Winnafred a blessing or curse? Can the sins of the fathers ever truly be forgotten much less forgiven? Compellingly written, I could not put it down.

Michelle Humbard says

I loved this book! It was written with such authenticity that you almost thought it was a work of non-fiction. You can tell the author did a lot of research on the area even down to the cadence in the deep south during that era. It was uncomfortable to read about the mistreatment of many of these characters as the author makes you feel like you are right in the room. Well done!

Angela M says

Florence , Georgia, Cotton County, The Twelve Mile Straight road in 1930's , depressed times on a farm. Lynching and racism that makes you sick, women abused, deception and lies and secrets, some genuinely evil people. In the midst of it all a "colored" and a white baby are born . They called them Gemini twins, and they wanted you to believe they were born of the same mother at the same time but of two fathers and because of that lie a man is lynched . Up front I have to say this is dark, gruesome, sad and brutal. It was hard to read but more than likely so reflective of the time and place and so important not to forget that as atrocious as things were , this was what happened in that time and place. Even with that, why was I was compelled to keep reading? I've given up on books that were hard to take before but I just had to find out what happens to the innocent children. I was also compelled by the writing. Even with the third person narrative, the thoughts, motivations of the main characters are readily reflected. Chapters move back and forth in time before the babies were born and even before that to the earlier lives of the adults and the transitions were fairly smooth. The past sheds light on the present. My complaints : it's a little too long at 560 pages and the secrets revealed in the end were obvious much earlier in the book .

It's a real saga of families, black and white, a time of historical shame when black women were controlled and abused by white men, when the white women had little or no control of their lives. You can read the book description and some other reviews for more specifics on the story and the characters. I'll just say that if you're up for a gritty, gut punching read of what I would say is historically significant, then I'd recommend it. There is within some love to offset the things that happen. 3.5 stars but I have to round up .

I received an advanced copy of this book from Ecco/HarperCollins through Edelweiss.

Bamboozlepig says

DNF'd this one at the halfway point. I was into it when it first started, but by the halfway point, it seemed like the plot was spinning its wheels in the mud. Part of it was for every character in the novel, there was a lengthy backstory to introduce. The shifts between the character's past and where they were in the current timeline was not handled smoothly.

I also didn't buy the "Gemini twins" angle because it seemed so implausible that people in the area who knew the family would be gullible enough to think both the colored baby and the white baby were born to Elma. Maybe it was better explained in the portion of the book I skipped.

Henderson does have a nice way with description and the dialogue seemed authentic, so did the historical aspects. Maybe some stronger editing might've served the story better and tightened it up into a four-star read

for me.

Fran says

George Wilson owned two hundred acres of land along the Twelve-Mile Straight Road in 1930's Cotton County, Georgia. Additionally, he owned the cotton mill. The Jesups were the principal sharecropping family since the turn of the century. Juke Jesup's daughter Elma and Negro maid Nan lived with Juke in a house provided by George Wilson while Negro pickers like Genus Jackson lived in windowless shacks.

Elma Jesup and Nan grew up together and worked side by side in the cotton and cornfields. Upon the death of Ketty, Negro midwife and Nan's mother, Nan took over the local midwifery duties since town doctor Manford Rawls refused to make house calls.

The trouble began when Elma and Nan, both unmarried, became pregnant. Juke Jesup kept them hidden in a shack without windows until the babies were born. The tightly knit opinionated community was informed that Elma birthed Gemini twins since the infant girl was white and the newborn boy was dark skinned. It was assumed that Freddie Wilson, grandson of George Wilson and Elma's fiance fathered baby girl Winnifred. Who fathered son Wilson? Juke helps disseminate information indicating that his neighbors should rise up, do what is necessary and go after Genus, Elma's supposed rapist. Kind, gentle Genus is hanged. Freddie Wilson, present at the lynching, helps himself to Genus' alligator boots. When newspapers run the story, there is Juke, front and center, relating the story and pointing a finger at Freddie Wilson. Juke plies Sheriff Cleave and others with his self-produced moonshine. Reporters interested in the Gemini twins were given Mason jars of gin to make sure they reported the "correct" story.

Subsequent financial woes landing on the Jesup doorstep encouraged Elma and Nan, with twins in tow, to agree to blood tests for monetary gain at Emory University to be conducted by Dr. Manford Rawl's son, Oliver. Twins Winna and Wilson are unlike and perhaps their twinning was not to be believed. An undercurrent of many secrets existed, but, what would be the repercussions of these revelations?

"The Twelve-Mile Straight" by Eleanor Henderson is a historical novel dealing with the haves and the have-nots often based upon race, gender and class. The Depression Years in the Deep South were wrought with intolerance some of which exists to the present day. Difficult to read at times, nonetheless, a thought provoking tome.

Thank you Ecco Books/HarperCollins Publishers and Edelweiss for the opportunity to read and review "The Twelve-Mile Straight".

Roman Clodia says

This got off to an emotive start with the lynching of a young black man accused of raping a white girl who has given birth to twin babies, one white, one black. But this implausible scenario is just the start of a tale which feels predictable, overly melodramatic, and too long. With a narrative which moves back and forth in time and with extended back stories to new characters, the plot seems to circle and stall rather than progress.

The themes, too, can be ticked off on one hand: rape, violence, patriarchy, racism, misogyny... All important

issues, for sure, but they're too pat here, used for dramatic effect rather than real insight. The twisted relationships feel contrived and the writing is somehow distanced so that it's difficult to feel involved. There are a lot of books out there about the American South and its oppressive past: this one repeats all the usual tropes and adds nothing new to the mix.
