



Southland

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"[A]n absolutely compelling story of family and racial tragedy. Revoyr's novel is honest in detailing southern California's brutal history, and honorable in showing how families survived with love and tenacity and dignity."

—Susan Straight, author of *Highwire Moon*

Southland brings us a fascinating story of race, love, murder and history, against the backdrop of an ever-changing Los Angeles. A young Japanese-American woman, Jackie Ishida, is in her last semester of law school when her grandfather, Frank Sakai, dies unexpectedly. While trying to fulfill a request from his will, Jackie discovers that four African-American boys were killed in the store Frank owned during the Watts Riots of 1965. Along with James Lanier, a cousin of one of the victims, Jackie tries to piece together the story of the boys' deaths. In the process, she unearths the long-held secrets of her family's history.

Southland depicts a young woman in the process of learning that her own history has bestowed upon her a deep obligation to be engaged in the larger world. And in Frank Sakai and his African-American friends, it presents characters who find significant common ground in their struggles, but who also engage each other across grounds—historical and cultural—that are still very much in dispute.

Moving in and out of the past—from the internment camps of World War II, to the barley fields of the Crenshaw District in the 1930s, to the streets of Watts in the 1960s, to the night spots and garment factories of the 1990s—*Southland* weaves a tale of Los Angeles in all of its faces and forms.

Nina Revoyr is the author of *The Necessary Hunger* ("Irresistible."—*Time Magazine*). She was born in Japan, raised in Tokyo and Los Angeles, and is of Japanese and Polish-American descent. She lives and works in Los Angeles.

Southland Details

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From Reader Review Southland for online ebook

Chris says

A little slow initially but stick with this book. Many layers to this story dealing with two diverse communities who found common ground in their mistreatment by the majority over the course of sixty years. However, the common ground was ephemeral and it takes a shoebox to start a young woman inquiring into the past on a quest for justice. She discovers more than she bargained for about her family and herself.

Aubrey says

4.5/5

I'm not good for keeping up with TV shows. Sometimes the roles of women characters will be completely subsumed by the het romance spiel, and I'll be like, eh. Sometimes producers will think the only way to promote character development of women will be to throw in noncanonical rape scenes, (here's a hint: I'll be rereading the GoT books before the next one's out, not watching the TV show) and I'll be like, nah. Sometimes shows will do something really predictable and thus really boring, like killing off their only woman of color character, and I'll be like, fuck you. Sometimes they do it even if the character's heading the show, which I got to say, I rant about the evils of capitalism often enough, but if you hate women of color so much as to shoot your production in the socioeconomic foot, your issues are for once not of the green variety. In short, that narrows me down to a handful of shows that are further whittled down by being canceled or being a one shot or whatever else can happen to ruin my picky-as-fuck-yet-still-slightly-kitsch/trashy tastes in the AV range of media. *How to Get Away with Murder's* still going strong, but one, it's not currently airing, and two, don't have all your eggs in one basket.

All that previous stuff sums up to, why not make a TV series out of this? It's not the first time I've pitched an idea for such in a review, but chances are good the works I went for earlier were all artsy fartsy and/or much better suited to paper than the moving sort of media. Plus, public money and all, although the fact that things like the white people *Ghost in the Shell* keeps getting millions thrown at it when everyone knows it's going to turn out like *AtlA* and *Exodus* and white people *Dragon Ball Z* tells me it has less to do with the public and more to do with narcissism. With this one, you've got LA bouncing around through the decades, which means lots of excuses for a great scenic compilation of all kinds of timelines featuring lesbians and bisexuals (and they fucking said it too so take your biphobia and suck it. I'm not limiting that remark to the straights amongst you all, mind you) and Japanese people and black people and Japanese black people. No Japanese black lesbians, but that's what putting your own spin on the material is for. Also, it's a mystery! People like mysteries, right? I've never been able to get a hang of them, but like big casts and lots of narrative viewpoints and a focus on characters talking rather than characters thinking, they're things I can deal with if the story's worth going places.

Part of why I don't do the whole mainstream view is cause I think that a work that can be ruined by a spoiler wasn't worth engaging with to begin with, but out of respect who rely on this sort of thing, (view spoiler). Plus bits and pieces of not that great prose, but the fantastic thing about looking at facts that are usually whitewashed over is how little of the factors in you continuing to read. There were also the UCLA mentions, but that was as much of a thrill as downer, what with all these lawyer times getting a beginning salary of 71k+. Ah well. That's what libraries are for, especially the one that owns the copy of this work that I read. I don't know when I'll next have access to the place as a grad student, but I've got time.

Joan says

An huge measure of LA history is stuffed into this wonderful tale. The melting pot that was Los Angeles before World War II and during the Civil Rights era is rediscovered by the contemporary descendents of the early Black and Japanese inhabitants, and the reader is taken along for the ride. I especially enjoyed the book, having grown up in the Southland and my parents being the same age as the older characters at the center of the mystery. In addition to mystery, I loved the descriptions of the city and her people.

Sheri says

So I wasn't really impressed with this novel. I felt like the writing was oftentimes heavy handed, the plot was transparent and everything was rather forced.

I get that Revoyr was trying to portray the full extent and continuum of racial cruelty, but when a book is this overwritten and so blatantly constructed it loses its power. Instead of being lost in the story or upset by the truisms (and yes, these are serious crimes and they are and have always been and some say will always continue to be perpetrated by the in/powerful group against the out/disenfranchised group) that are displayed here, I was annoyed with her use of language. For example, we have "the day her family was divided" and Lanier's "sternness was loneliness, calcified. The empty solitude on top of the mountain." as two easy examples of just pure blech.

I was also annoyed that Curtis was Frank's son. My first thought (of course) when confronted with the will was that he is an illegitimate child (certainly obvious answer), but then Revoyr works hard to sidetrack the reader and yep, ultimately Curtis is just an illegitimate son. I know I say that rather flippantly, but I hope that illustrates just how little these characters managed to resonate with me.

I was no sure why Jackie's sexuality even needed to enter the picture. I think that Revoyr was trying to both round out the character and provide yet another example of minority groups, but I think this was unnecessary. The relationship between Jackie and Laura was not believable or interesting on any level; the sex scene between Jackie and Lanier was unnecessary and gratuitous and this slightly too long novel could have been easily edited to leave all of that nonsense out.

The descriptive passage of the day of the riots (with the idea of the rioters as wind and storm) reminded me a bit of Eugeneides' passage in Middlesex describing Detroit during the race riots, but clearly Eugeneides was much better. The description of LA overall made me tink of Mosely's Ptolemy Grey but I'm not sure if that is just because of the whole black POV in southern CA.

Overall it was an easy, but not very compelling or poignant read.

♥ Sarah says

Required reading for a gender studies course.

This book read more like non-fiction, but was really confusing, as the narrative jumped back & forth in time.

And there were too many characters introduced, which made things very confusing. I didn't really like Jackie, and I'm not sure the author intended for readers to *like* Jackie's character... However, I did appreciate the rich, cultural histories embedded in the streets of LA...

L says

I appreciate what the author is trying to do with this book--which is to bring to our attention the long and storied history between Japanese Americans and African Americans in early 20th century LA. It's a history that is relevant and should be told. That said, I found her writing sometimes difficult to digest. Character development felt a little too simplified, and I had trouble believing some of the thought processes of these characters. This book is more of a 3.5, but I didn't feel it warranted 4 stars. Worth reading if you are interested in delving into L.A. early/mid-twentieth century history, race, and queer relations.

Kristine Brancolini says

Southland is one of four books nominated to be my university's Common Book this coming fall. As a member of the selection committee, I'll be reading all four. This book is one of my top two favorites, so I read it first. A number of factors put it near the top of my list: It's set in Los Angeles; it deals with racial tension in the city, especially Japanese and black; and it revolves around the unreported and unsolved murders of four black teenage boys during Watts Riots. The riots took place in August 1965 -- 50 years ago this coming summer, when students would be reading the book. Plus, it received numerous awards when it was published in 2003. I also have a more personal interest in *Southland*. My step-father grew up in South Los Angeles, where most of the book is set, an Armenian living in a racially-mixed neighborhood; he's also the same age as one of the central characters, Frank Sakai, owner of the grocery store where the boys were found frozen to death in a freezer. *Southland* has been on my "to read" list since I came back to Los Angeles in 2006. Why did I put off reading it for so long? I have no idea. It's wonderful and brilliant.

The book starts slowly but quickly picks up momentum. The narrator, Jackie Ishida, is a third-year law student at UCLA when her grandfather Frank dies unexpectedly in 1994. He has left a mystery behind in a box of mementos at his daughter's house; he willed his store, which was sold decades before, to Curtis Martindale. He also had \$38,000 in a shoe box in with the photographs, his Purple Heart from World War II, and many more clues to his life. The money seems to be from the sale of the store, so it should go to Curtis. But who is Curtis Martindale? Why would Frank leave him his grocery store? Jackie's aunt Lois doesn't know and she asks Jackie to investigate. Jackie finds someone who knows part of the answer, a black man named James Lanier, Curtis' cousin, who also knew Frank and many of the other players in this drama.

Against this backdrop, Revoyr explores the racial history of South Los Angeles from the years before World War II to 1965, including the settling of Angeles Mesa, the internment of the Japanese during World War II, and the changing demographics of the neighborhoods. California is obviously not the Deep South, but it's not a paradise of racial harmony either. As one black man observes, "Why do you think they call it Southland?" Beaches were segregated, officially, and stores, restaurants, and neighborhoods, unofficially, for many years.

The structure of the book is extremely effective. Revoyr moves back and forth between 1994 and earlier years, telling the stories of the many characters, Japanese, Japanese-American, and black. Most of the chapters are short, but they are powerful. Characters are sketched quickly and more than one mystery unfolds slowly and powerfully.

This book is still one of my top choices for the Common Book. Its compelling characters and page-turning narrative would keep college students reading, but it's filled with historical details about Los Angeles that resonate today. With the recent news that the policeman who killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, will not be prosecuted, protests continue across the country, especially here in L.A. The conditions that led to the Watts Riots are not entirely in the past.

Tuck says

this really sold me on revoyr and akashic books. great stories of south central LA changing over the years and decades, and how we are all in this bloody mess together, no matter how much we deny it.

Rukshana says

A very engrossing mystery about a Japanese American woman trying to unearth the death of an African American boy. She learns family secrets in the process. Themes include race, class, sexuality. Some emotionally challenging moments - I cried while reading the passage about her family's experience in the internment camps.

A really interesting way to learn about the history of South Los Angeles! After reading this book, I realized that I do enjoy mysteries, but need good recommendations for more books like this.

Constance says

i found this book incredibly moving when it went into both the history of LA and race, particularly internment and the 442nd. i nearly cried many, many times. so many books do both so badly that i really appreciate when they can be done in a natural way. however, this greatness might be a little overshadowed by the (i thought) horrible, horrible portrayal of sexuality and its intersection with race. also, the writing felt a little amateur at times (i usually like books with different points of view but it seemed a bit lazy here). but! i recommend this book to anyone who is from LA, and the story developed quite nicely. i actually really, really enjoyed it. a lot. thanks d. reddy.

Lis says

It's taken a little while to get into this, mostly because of the point of view switches, but I'm finding it well worth the journey. Once you get to know the characters more, the story is incredibly compelling and moving. With so many books dropping my (admittedly short) attention span, it's nice to sink into a novel and take my time with it. And Revoyr's writing is fantastic.

George says

“[Grandpa:] why didn’t you ever tell me that you fought in the war?” “Because it didn’t make any difference.”—page 199

In the early 1960s there was a popular Japanese nightclub, The Kabuki, on Crenshaw Blvd. in the heart of the Crenshaw District; and I could never understand why this particular club was so far removed from downtown Los Angeles and Little Tokyo. Now, after reading Nina Revoyr’s novel, ‘Southland,’ I understand.

In some respects ‘Southland’ reads almost like two separate novels. I mostly enjoyed reading those chapters about the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s and learned quite a bit about Los Angeles; but I mostly didn’t like reading the chapters where the action took place in 1994. It was almost as if they were written by two different writers. In the chapters about the ’40s, ’50s and ’60s the characters were interesting, the plots more compelling and the writing more mature. The chapters of 1994 were mostly boring, the characters shallow and superfluous and the writing often amateurish.

Recommendation: Don’t rush to read this one, but if you’d like to know a little more about the fairly recent history of Los Angeles, especially South Central L.A., this book offers an interesting perspective. Don’t feel guilty or that you’ll miss anything, though, if you skip the 1994 stuff.

[nook eRead #32:] Adobe Digital Edition (ePub), 335 pages pages: on loan from the Los Angeles County Public Library at <http://overdrive.colapublib.org/482D7902....>

Kimberly says

sigh

I had pretty much forgotten about this book until walking through the public library today and spotting it out of the corner of my eye. I had to read it for some gen ed or something in college. I remember it being awfully convoluted and depressing, but as I flipped through it today and re-read a scene near the end, it came back to me. **THIS IS THE BOOK WHERE PEOPLE DIE IN A RESTAURANT FREEZER.** Being someone who works in a restaurant and occasionally has to pop into a freezer for one reason or another, this book had a special effect on me. Every time--and I do not exaggerate when I say EVERY TIME--I step into a walk-in freezer, I prop open the door and in the back of my mind, I devise a survival plan should the door swing shut behind me. Of course, all of our freezers have a button you can push to open it from the inside, but in the unlikely event that something should go terribly wrong, I always have a plan. And these infrequent bouts of neurosis were brought on specifically by this book.

That being said, I think it's an interesting look at a particular location in California during the social upheaval of the 1960s.

Taryn Pierson says

Nina Revoyr is a writer I really enjoy reading, and I wish her works were better known. It can be tough to find books that feature queer characters that go beyond coming out stories. Coming out stories certainly have their place, but it’s also important to me to read books about queer people living their lives and getting into interesting situations and, you know, being the people they are. In Southland, Revoyr has created a

mystery/historical hybrid novel which explores complicated race relations in LA through the years, from World War II to the 2000s.

Jackie Ishida decides to dig into her grandfather's past when a mysterious will discovered after his death bequeaths the corner store he used to own to a man Jackie has never heard of before. The store was sold after the Watts riots in the 1960s, but Jackie still wants to find out why Frank would have left it to a virtual stranger. Through connections she makes at the funeral, she meets James Lanier, the cousin of the man named in the will. Lanier has some unanswered questions of his own about what happened during the riots and what his cousin's connection was to Jackie's grandfather, and he agrees to help her find out the truth.

One thing I love about this book is how it's really about the relationships—there's a lot of them, and they're all rich and complex and realistic. The mystery is solid and kept me turning pages, but what I cared about most was the people. The most powerful reveals had to do with the connections between them, as opposed to the nitty-gritty details of the crime Jackie and Lanier uncover. Recommended for fans of historical fiction and mysteries with substance—these characters and what they went through will stick with you.

More book recommendations by me at www.readingwithhippos.com

Erika says

I devoured this book. Revoyr weaves a compelling story from threads of history, identity, loss, and a bit of mystery. Her prose is straightforward, while the events and characters are subtle and complex. We get a portrait of a family, a neighborhood, an era, rendered with clarity and with love, even in the midst of the horrible and the tragic. Read it, and weep, as I did.

Lars Guthrie says

Revoyr's writing is a little clunky and awkward, but she makes up for that with the story. She takes a murder in L.A. and uses it to make a novel crime novel. I hadn't been aware of the pre-WWII connection between Japanese-American and African-American communities. Remnants of that bond still exist today, Revoyr writes. She also shows the effect the war, and racial prejudice in general, had on Japanese-Americans. The internment camps were awful but Revoyr points out that that it's the cumulative effect of racism, the disrespect and dehumanization, that is really wearing on all those who are treated as 'other.' And she does all this with a unique main character who is discovering all this herself--an upwardly mobile Japanese-American lesbian law student who digs into family secrets after the death of her grandfather. This one definitely deserves a place in the Los Angeles crime cannon, along with Chandler and more modern works by the likes of Ellroy, Connelly and Parker.

Ian says

3.5 stars.

Nina Revoyr's *Southland* (2008) is an ambitious novel concerning a twenty something, sheltered Japanese American law student who discovers that her recently deceased grandfather left a large amount of money in his will behind to a man she and her family have never heard about. From there, you tag along with Jackie as

she reconnects with her grandfather's old friends in a neighborhood in Los Angeles, where her amiable, kindly grandfather owned a store for many years that served an area mainly populated by African Americans and Japanese Americans. In her research, Jackie discovers a terrible unsolved crime that occurred on the day of the Watts Rebellion in 1965 and deeply affected her grandfather (changing his life, really). In trying to do right by her grandfather and his friends, she has her eyes opened to the state of the wider world and her family's unexplored roots in a part of Los Angeles that was only a mile or so from where she grew up, yet might as well have been another planet from a cultural standpoint.

The story is tremendous and Revoyr convincingly brings this chapter of Los Angeles history to life. It leaps around in time, gives us a number of different voices who contribute to its telling, and has the good sense not to allow the story to be overtaken by a needless romance between the two main characters: Jackie and James Lanier, a cousin of the man (or boy, really) her grandfather left the money to in his will.

This is my second book by Revoyr (third if you count her most recent read *Lost Canyon*, which I ended up putting aside after a third of the way through). It had so much going on and featured so many voices and people to get to know that it was difficult to keep straight everyone the author mentions. I think the crowdedness of the novel also meant that it didn't have the emotional impact on me that *Wingshooters* (2011), her other novel, had on me. *Wingshooters* told a dinger of a story, but didn't pull you in so many directions. It was sad and tender and never let you out of its grip until the final page was turned.

Travis says

When Jackie Ishida's grandfather dies, her aunt finds in his closet a box of cash from the sale of his old store, along with an old will leaving the money to someone they've never heard of. Jackie agrees to help find this guy, only to find out he died. Was murdered, in fact, along with three other boys, in her grandfather's store during the Watts riots in 1965. As she and James Lanier, a cousin of the boy, look into the murders, Jackie learns more than she expected to about her grandfather. [return][return]I really loved this book a lot. It's set in LA, but not the Hollywood LA that you usually see in books and movies (it's so rare to see a portrayal of the LA I know and love). The main character is a lesbian, but it's not *The Plot*, just a fact about her (what? You mean there can be stories about gay people that aren't about being gay???). She's also Japanese-American, but this isn't a story about internment camps (they are mentioned, during some flashbacks in her grandfather's POV, but it's not the point of the story, and boy is that rare). [return][return]It's also a really neat story. My one complaint is that it's really tell-y. Like, it could have been cut down by at least a third if the author had just trusted the readers instead of having so much internal exposition about what people were thinking and feeling every step of the way.

Sarah says

This book was very enjoyable, kind of uneven, and very, very sad. The way LA was written rang true to me, as did the disjointed way that Jackie tries to square her family's roots in the Crenshaw district, from which she has been immunized, with her privileged experience of the city. For me, Jackie's present-day point of view felt the weakest, in an MFA workshop kind of way. As in, it was hard to get lost in the prose and forget that I was reading someone's writing. Thinking about it more, the self-conscious stiffness of the writing also reflects Jackie's self-conscious stiffness and lack of understanding of her own life/identity, so in that sense it worked and didn't actually hinder the enjoyment of the book.

I loved the characters. I loved the city. Though not a new thought, I loved the scene where Jackie's

grandfather Frank is a teenager and joyrides to the segregated beach with his friends and is momentarily confused by the "White" and "Colored" signs dividing the beach. I remember being so confused learning about the two races -- black and white -- in elementary school. What does an Asian-American do in a culture that often doesn't even acknowledge your existence? Then I loved the way Frank chose his side and went all in.

Judy says

Several months back the World's Smallest Reading Group gained a third member who renamed it the Tiny Book Club. Because all three of us have come to California fairly recently, ie since the 1990s, we decided to read some fiction set in our adopted state. *Southland* was the perfect novel to begin our new project.

The story ranges from mid WWII, when Frank Sakai was sent with his family to the Japanese internment camp of Manzanar at the age of 15, up to 1994, the year Frank died. We learn Frank's story through the eyes of his granddaughter Jackie Ishida, a third year law school student, who is helping her aunt carry out Frank's will. In the course of learning about this man who was beloved to her, Jackie finds herself and grows from an emotionally frozen young woman into someone capable of opening up to others and to love.

This is not a mushy love story though. It is well done historical fiction and I learned about the origins of the Crenshaw district of Los Angeles where Frank grew up and lived for all of his life. The area is now pretty much a ghetto. Originally a rural area where inhabitants grew wheat and barley and hunted rabbits and squirrels, it was called Angeles Mesa. Those inhabitants were Blacks from the southern states and Japanese immigrants, living side by side in relative harmony. News to me!

Then came World War II, the camps for the Japanese, the postwar industrial and economic growth of Los Angeles, the Watts riots in the 1960s, and the destruction, fires, and racial tensions that were called the Rodney King riots in the early 1990s. Those second riots occurred within a year of my relocation to LA.

Through all these changes, Frank lived in the Crenshaw district, worked, owned a corner store, and had hardly an enemy. He also loved, made the mistakes of a young man, and paid dearly for them. As Jackie penetrates some of the mysteries of Frank's life and of her own heritage, she gets drawn into solving a murder that took place in Frank's store during the Watts riots.

It is a great read and though the author juggles several story lines and time periods, not to mention the racial and cultural tensions of those times, it never felt like she had overloaded the story. In fact, the story of Los Angeles is a loaded one, far more complex than its Tinsel Town image, and therefore far more interesting.
