

Praise for *Pleasantville*

“To say that Locke’s debut, *Black Water Rising*—ambitious, socially committed and beautifully written—created a stir is almost to understate the case, and one wonders if it weighed heavily on her shoulders that she would be obliged to deliver something equally impressive as a follow-up. She did just that with *The Cutting Season* and now we have *Pleasantville* . . . *Pleasantville* is every inch as impressive as its predecessors, with a new nuance and complexity burnishing the narrative . . . the next time you find yourself in the company of a crime reviewer, don’t bother asking who you should be reading. You know the answer: Attica Locke” *Independent*

“*Pleasantville* is another superb example of Locke’s personalised genre of African-American-political-recent-historical thrillers, as a murderous mayoral race in Houston in 1996 exposes an attempt at social engineering in the 1940s. In a crowded field in which even stars follow traditions, Locke has the feel of a true original” Mark Lawson, *Guardian*

“In *Pleasantville*, Attica Locke returns to Jay Porter, the black lawyer hero of her magnificent first novel, *Black Water Rising*. This one is just as good” Marcel Berlins, *The Times*

“Locke’s novel offers a beautifully detailed character in Jay Edgar Porter’, a bereaved father struggling to cope with his loss. The story also has a fascinating political angle in the dirty-tricks campaign, aimed at disrupting the power of the black voting bloc and prefigures the Rove-Bush strategy in the 2000 presidential election. All told, it’s a gripping blend of the personal and the political” Declan Burke, *Irish Times*

“It’s a fascinatingly complex setting and Locke maps it with great skill, charting the struggles of her characters as the crime remains unsolved . . . a smart legal thriller about how far people will go to gain power, and keep it” Jeff Noon, *Spectator*

“Outstanding . . . Locke just gets better and better as a writer. This is a grown-up, politically engaged novel as well as a moving portrait of a family upended by grief” Jake Kerridge, *Sunday Express Magazine*

“This is a cinematic, panoramic view of African-American life, but it is also a sharp, tender account of Jay Porter’s inner struggle . . . brilliant” Isabel Berwick, *FT*

Praise for *Black Water Rising*

“Started reading *Black Water Rising* with my morning coffee and barely set it aside until I’d finished it that evening—that’s the kind of grip it has. Attica Locke serves up a rich stew of venal politicians and legal chicanery in which staying alive is hard enough and hanging on to your integrity harder still. Longshoremen, Civil Rights and Big Oil—John Grisham meets *Chinatown* in 1980s Texas” John Harvey

“*Black Water Rising* is a terrifying reminder of how recently America was a very bad place to be young, gifted and black. This is an authentic, atmospheric debut that burns with an entirely reasonable anger” Val McDermid

“What a ride! *Black Water Rising* is a superlative debut; a wonderful treatise on the Texas of the 1980s—the best bad town novel in some time. Attica Locke is a stand-out in every imperative young-writer way” James Ellroy

“*Black Water Rising* is a stylish, involving literary thriller with a strong emphasis on human politics and character. An auspicious debut from Attica Locke” George Pelecanos

“The most impressive crime debut I’ve read this year” Marcel Berlins, *The Times*

“[An] atmospheric, richly convoluted debut novel . . . she is able to write about Jay’s urgent need to behave manfully and become a decent father with a serious, stirring moral urgency akin to that of George Pelecanos or Dennis Lehane . . . subtle and compelling” Janet Maslin, *New York Times*

The Cutting Season

“I was first struck by Attica Locke’s prose, then by the ingenuity of her narrative and finally and most deeply by the depth of her humanity. She writes with equal amounts grace and passion. I’d probably read the phone book if her name was on the spine” Dennis Lehane

“An intelligent and beguiling mystery that examines how our past haunts our present, told by a unique voice in contemporary crime fiction” Stuart Neville

“Beautifully conveys the atmosphere of a sad past haunting a benighted present” *The Times*

**ATTICA
LOCKE
PLEASANTVILLE**



A complete catalogue record for this book can
be obtained from the British Library on request

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is coincidental and not the author's intent. Pleasantville is a real place, but portions of its history and geography are fictionalized here for the sake of a good story.

*Any politician worth his salt knows the road
to elected office passes through Pleasantville.*

—JAMES CAMPBELL, *Houston Chronicle*

Election Night

TEXAS, 1996

They partied in Pleasantville that night, from Laurentide to Demaree Lane. They unscrewed bottle tops, set the needle on a few records, left dinner dishes soaking in the sink. They sat on leather sofas in front of color TVs; hovered over kitchen radios; kept the phone lines hot, passing gossip on percentages and precinct returns, on the verge, they knew, of realizing the dream of their lifetime, the ripe fruit of decades of labor and struggle. They were retired army men, some, grown men who wept openly in front of their TV sets as the numbers started to roll in. They were doctors and lawyers, nurses, schoolteachers and engineers, men and women who had settled here in the years after the Second World War, in Pleasantville, a neighborhood that, when it was built in 1949, had been advertised over

the city's airwaves and in the pages of the *Defender* and the *Sun* as the first of its kind in the nation—"a planned community of new homes, spacious and modern in design, and built specifically for Negro families of means and class," a description that belied the rebellious spirit of its first inhabitants, the tenacity of that postwar generation. For, yes, they endured the worst of Jim Crow, backs of buses and separate toilets; and, yes, they paid their poll taxes, driving or walking for miles each Election Day, waiting in lines two and three hours long. Yes, they waited. But they also *marched*. In wing tips and patent leather pumps, crisp fedoras and pin-striped suits, belted dresses and silk stockings, they marched on city hall, the school board, even the Department of Public Works, holding out the collective votes of a brand-new bloc as a bargaining chip to politicians previously reluctant to consider the needs of the new Negro middle class, and sealing, in the process, the neighborhood's unexpected political power, which would become legend over the next four decades. And it was hard not to believe it had all been leading to this.

Channels 13 and 11 were already calling the local race, putting Sandy Wolcott and Axel Hathorne, a Pleasantville native, in next month's runoff for the mayor's seat, and Houston, Texas, that much closer to getting its first black mayor in its 160-year history. Channel 2 was running a concession speech by Councilman Lewis Acton, who looked to finish a distant third—and word was now spreading down the wide oak- and elm-lined streets of Pleasantville that the man himself, their onetime neighbor, Axel Hathorne; his father, Sam "Sunny" Hathorne, patriarch of one of Pleasantville's founding families; and key members of the Hathorne campaign staff were all coming home to celebrate. From Gellhorn Drive to Silverdale, folks freshened up coffeepots, pulled the good gin from under the sink. They set out ice, punch, and cookies and waited for

the doorbell to ring, as they'd been told Axel wanted to knock on doors personally, shake a few hands, just as Fred Hofheinz did the night Pleasantville helped put him in the mayor's office, and Oscar Holcombe before him—celebrations that wouldn't come close to tonight's.

The girl, she wasn't invited.

But she didn't expect to be.

She had played her small part, put in hours on the ground, knocked on some doors, and now what she wanted, more than anything, was to go home. At the appointed place, the corner of Guinevere and Ledwicke, she waited for her ride, her blue cotton T-shirt a thin shell against the damp night air. It was well above seventy degrees when she'd left home this afternoon, and she'd never meant to be gone this long, but she was due a bonus, a little extra cash in her pocket, if she unloaded all the leaflets she'd been given to distribute. She was too smart, or proud, to toss the lot of them into a trash can at the neighborhood community center as others before her had tried, only to be fired the second the ploy was discovered by the campaign staff. This job meant more to her than to the others, she knew that. She was six months out of high school with no brighter prospect on her horizon than moving up to the cash register at the Wendy's on OST where she worked part-time, so she'd pushed herself a little harder, made a show of her unmatched fortitude and productivity, pointedly staying past nightfall, a plan she hadn't thought all the way through, as evidenced by her lack of a decent coat or even a cotton sweater, and the fact that she was flat broke after spending what little money she had at a pay phone at the truck stop on Market Street. Once more, she checked to make sure the last leaflet, the one she'd saved and carefully folded into a neat square, was still inside the front pocket of her leather purse. Rooting around inside, she checked the time on her pager, the one Kenny had bought

her when he left for college, promising they'd make it work somehow. Had he called? She scrolled through the phone numbers stored in the tiny machine. How long would she have to wait out here? It was already coming on nine o'clock, and she knew her mother would worry. She could picture her right now, smoking a Newport out the kitchen window, still in her pink nurse's scrubs, and listening to KTSU, *All the Blues You Can Use*, glancing every few minutes at the yellow sunflower clock above the stove, wondering why her daughter wasn't home yet. The girl crossed her skinny arms across her chest, a defense against the night air, which seemed cooler here at the southernmost edge of the neighborhood, where the base of Ledwicke ended abruptly, running smack into the lip of a wide, untamed plot of scrub oak and weeds and tall, clawlike trees. This far to the south the streetlamps in Pleasantville gave out, and she was all too aware that she was standing alone on a dim street corner miles from home, with nothing but the low, insistent hum of an idling engine as unwelcome company.

He'd been watching her for a few minutes now, the nose of his vehicle pointed east on Guinevere, the body tucked under the low-hanging branches of a willow tree, so that she could make out no more than a man's rough silhouette behind the windshield, sharp angles outlined by a faint yellow light coming from a window on the side of a house across Ledwicke from where she was standing. His headlights were dark, which is why she hadn't seen him at first. But he was facing in her direction, his engine running, his features wearing an expression she couldn't read in the dark. She couldn't tell the make or model of the vehicle, but it was the height and width of a van, or a truck of some sort.

Run. Just run.

It was a whisper inside her own skull, her mother's voice actually, calling her home. But she should wait for her ride,

shouldn't she? She felt a stab of uncertainty, a panic so sharp it made her eyes water. Everything hinged on this one choice. *I should wait for my way out*, she thought, still wanting to believe a way out was possible, but already knowing, with a creeping certainty, that this night had turned on her, that her disappearing had already begun. She knew she'd made a mistake, knew even before she heard the van's door open. *Just run.*

Jay Porter stood on his own lonely street corner clear across town.

It was late that same night, a little after eleven, when he got the call that someone had broken into his office on Brazos Street, just south of downtown, about half a mile from the Hyatt Regency. He could see the twinkling white lights of the high-rise luxury hotel from the corner of Brazos and Anita, where he was waiting on the squad car that ADT had assured him was on its way. The hotel sat on the other side of the 45 Freeway, the dividing line between the city's corporate heart and Jay's neighborhood, a clunky mix of old Victorians turned over for business, glass-and-brick storefronts, record shops, barbecue stands, liquidation centers, and the shell of an old Montgomery Ward. He'd hung out a shingle here last year, finally moving out of the cramped office in the strip mall on W. Gray, paying cash for this place, which was falling apart when he found it, a foreclosure that had been sitting empty for years. The house was a modest Victorian with good bones and an open floor plan and a room upstairs for his law library, a place where he could write his briefs away from the phones and the noise on the street. It was the kind of house Bernie would have liked to call her own, even more than the rambling suburban three-bedroom ranch they'd settled in a few years after their youngest, Ben, was born—a fine house, sure, but one he

could hardly distinguish from half a dozen others on their block. Rows and rows of beige brick and lacquered wood, their subdivision was the real estate equivalent of a box of drugstore chocolates, pretty, but dull.

Jay had refurbished the eighty-seven-year-old Victorian himself, as if his wife might *yet* have the chance to spend slow afternoons on its wraparound porch, as if they might still have a shot at starting over. He half-expected to walk through the front yard's wrought-iron gate one day and find her sitting there, on the white two-seater swing he'd built himself. The house, with its bottomless demands and clamors for his attention—missing doorknobs and broken light fixtures, the floors he'd stripped by hand—had saved his life during the worst of this past year. He thanked it daily for putting tools in his hands, all those long, idle afternoons when he let his practice go to shit.

There'd been three break-ins in the area since June.

Even the Hathorne for Mayor headquarters on Travis got hit, and much political hay was made in the *Chronicle* over the former police chief's seeming inability to secure his own campaign office. Jay's place had been raided in July, when thieves had taken the back door completely off its hinges. They'd made off with a drill set from Sears and a color TV, a little pocket Sony on which Eddie Mae had watched gavel-to-gavel coverage of the O.J. trial, plus some petty cash and a gold bracelet of hers. A week later he'd had the alarm system installed.

They must have come in through a window this time.

When he'd pulled up to the house, the headlights of his Land Cruiser had swept the front porch, lighting up pieces of broken glass. There were shards of it still scattered across the porch's wide slats, a rough pile in a semicircle just under the first-floor window, the glass lying where it had fallen, the scene strangely preserved, as still as a snapshot. Whoever had broken in tonight had exited the house a different way, or was, at this very

moment, still inside. Jay, who didn't keep guns in his home anymore, not since the kids, had a single registered firearm, and it was right now sitting useless inside a locked box in the bottom drawer of his office desk. Hence his patient vigil across the street, waiting for the cops. There was nothing in that office that he couldn't live without, not a thing in the world he would put before the need to get back home to his family in one piece. He wasn't trying to be a hero.

The Crown Victoria came riding low, with its light bar off, its tires crunching loose gravel in the street. The officers pulled to a stop at an angle that brought the front end of their cruiser to rest nearly at Jay's feet at the curb, its headlights hitting him square in the chest. He instinctively raised his hands.

"Porter," he said, loud and clear. "This is my place."

The woman was youngish and short. Her hair was slicked back into a tiny nub of a bun, and her lips were full and pink, a dime-store rose that most women abandon in their twenties. She came out of the car first, one hand on the handle of her service weapon, already en route to the front door. She nodded at the sound of his name, but otherwise said nothing as Jay unlocked the front gate.

"You been inside?"

Jay shook his head, stepping aside to let her pass.

He handed her the key to the front door.

The woman's partner was taking his time. He was slow getting out of the car, slow coming up the front steps, not the least bit of tension in his stride. For all Jay knew, this might have been the fiftieth break-in they'd handled tonight. He was older than the woman, but not by much. Jay didn't believe he'd set foot into his fourth decade. He wore a mustache and a hard part on the left side of his head, and he smelled heavily of cologne as Jay let him pass. Crossing the threshold, he too put a hand on the handle of his pistol. Jay followed them into the house, the

soft creak of the pine floors beneath their feet the only sound in the dark. He felt along the wall for the light switch, the one between the front door and Eddie Mae's desk. It cut a shaft of light through the center of the waiting room, shadows scattering like startled mice. The younger cop was in motion, down the main hall toward the back of the house, the storage closet, and the kitchen. Her partner was walking up the stairs. There was the law library up there, plus the conference room. Downstairs, Jay inspected Eddie Mae's desk, opening and closing drawers. Then he walked down the hall to his own office in the rear-left corner of the house, the room closest to the back door, which was standing wide open. "Must have been the way they got out," he heard behind him. It was the cop with the mustache. "I didn't see anything upstairs." His partner likewise had nothing to report from the kitchen. She had already holstered her weapon and was reaching for an ink pen. Within ten minutes they filled out a full incident report. Jay could see nothing that was missing: not his checkbook, or the sterling letter opener he hardly ever used, not his collection of LPs and 45s, obscure R & B pressings from Arhoolie and Peacock Records, including a mint-condition copy of A. G. Hats's *Belle Blue*. It was the Texas blues of his childhood, music that can't be replaced on CD. He had a turntable in here too, an old Magnavox he kept behind the door, also untouched. He checked both the petty cash and the metal lockbox with his .38 revolver, which was right where he'd last left it, stowed away since the very morning he'd moved into this office. It took the officers more time to inspect his gun license than it did to fill out their paperwork. Whoever it was, they guessed, maybe the alarm had scared him off. It looked as if someone had simply opened the back door and walked out. The cops did a cursory search of the backyard. It was a tiny, blank square of grass, and a single glance was more than sufficient to wrap up their entire investigation. "Okay," Jay said,

shoving his hands into the pockets of his slacks. He walked the cops to the front steps, zipping his windbreaker. Another dispatch call was coming in, something about a 22-11 over on Crawford Street, just off Wheeler. The one with the mustache lifted his radio first, and then the two of them were off. Jay locked the gate behind them, watching through the wrought-iron bars as the squad car peeled down Brazos Street, this time flashing its red and blue lights. Back inside, Jay walked to the hall closet to get a broom. He would need plywood too, or at least a thick piece of cardboard, something he could put over the broken window for the night, or however long it would take to get a guy out to fix it. He'd painted the house oyster gray, but had otherwise left the exterior, including the original windows, intact. Replacing this one would cost him at least two hundred dollars.

The broken window sat just to the side of Eddie Mae's desk, and if tomorrow's temperature was within even ten degrees of what it was now, Jay's entire day would consist of listening to a long recitation of the ingredients she would need to buy for a home remedy to fight the bug that was inevitably setting up shop in her throat and lungs. He could picture her shivering, clearing her throat every fifteen minutes, and eventually asking for a long lunch so she could hunt down some chicken soup. The thought, at this hour, as he stood broom in hand, actually made him smile. It had been nearly twenty years now, the two of them working together. He'd put her through school, set up a trust fund for her grandkids, from the portion of the civil settlements that was Eddie Mae's cut. Back when the money was still rolling in, of course, when Jay still had more than one client. She was now a certified paralegal, shopped exclusively at Casual Corner, and had narrowed her choices of coiffure down to two wigs, both of a color that occurs in nature. But Eddie Mae was still Eddie Mae, and there wasn't

a day she didn't think could be better passed over a few beers and an early dominoes game. She was nearing seventy now, stuck in a house full of kids, and, aside from one grandson at TSU who worked part-time at a Radio Shack, the only one with steady employment. She weekly cursed Jay for setting up that "dang trust," giving her progeny an excuse to perfect the art of waiting—and forcing her to work out of the house thirty hours a week just to get some peace and quiet. She was one of the few constants in Jay's life, and he'd come to love her for it, the parts of their daily life that he could set his watch by.

Jay held the metal dustpan in his left hand. He felt his forty-six-year-old knees creak as he squatted beside Eddie Mae's desk, aiming the bristles of the wooden broom at the spot where dozens of pieces of broken glass *should* have been.

And that's, of course, when he saw the thief's mistake.

There wasn't a single shard of glass inside the house.

The floor beside Eddie Mae's desk was bare, covered only by the corner of a hand-woven Indian rug he'd bought at Foley's. *The glass is on the wrong side*, he thought. It was so obvious to him now that he couldn't believe he hadn't realized it before. He couldn't believe the two officers hadn't noticed it either. But, hell, they'd given the incident no more than ten minutes of their time, and Jay knew if he weren't paying a monthly service fee to the alarm company, HPD wouldn't have sent anyone at all, not with the pressures on the department being what they were. Houston's crime problem was as much a part of its cultural identity as its love of football and line dancing, barbecue and big hair, a permanent fixture no matter the state of the local economy or the face in the mayor's office. Two law-and-order candidates—Axel Hathorne, former chief of police, and Sandy Wolcott, the current district attorney of Harris County—were running to change that. There was probably no greater evidence of the electorate's singular focus—the widespread fear that