



## A Million Nightingales

*Susan Straight*

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From National Book Award finalist Susan Straight comes a haunting historical novel about a Louisiana slave girl's perilous journey to freedom. Daughter of an African mother and a white father she never knew, Moinette is a house maid on a plantation south of New Orleans. At fourteen she is sold, separated from her mother without a chance to say goodbye. Bright, imaginative and well aware of everything she risks, Moinette at once begins to prepare for an opportunity to escape. Inspired by a true story, *A Million Nightingales* portrays Moinette's experience—and the treacherous world she must navigate—with uncommon richness, intricacy, and drama.

## A Million Nightingales Details

Date : Published May 8th 2007 by Anchor (first published 2006)

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Author : Susan Straight

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## From Reader Review A Million Nightingales for online ebook

### Susan says

This book just about broke my heart. To live a life so fettered - emotionally, physically, intellectually - must be intolerable, but to add the loss of anyone and anything meaningful in your life has to be unbearable. Yet Moinette, our heroine in the truest sense of the word, continues on in spite of all her heartbreak.

The writing is lush and beautiful, which makes the subject matter even harder to bear, as Straight captures the rhythm and cadences of early 19th century Louisiana.

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### Walt says

If you are looking for a book for relaxation to read, this is not it. Read a sample first, which is what I should have done. I pride myself on my reading comprehension skills, however, I found the dialogue, the one word sentences, the repetition of coffee beans, boutons, hair, finger eating, etc., so boring that I quit this book when I reached the half way mark. There have been just two books I had to ever quit, Beloved, and now A Million Nightengales, and I have read hundreds of books in my lifetime. I truly gave this book a chance, but it did not work for me. I understand prose, but understanding this prose was VERY difficult.

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### Karen says

I tore through this book faster than any novel in a long time. It's a glimpse into the complexity of slavery in the US.

I found myself thinking about the characters and the prose even when I wasn't reading. I love Susan Straight's writing style, character development, and subtlety.

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### Teresa says

An interior novel that would work very well as an audio book. Perhaps I think that because I heard the author read a short passage from it and her rendering was very moving. (At times I could still 'hear' the author's voice while I was reading.) Maybe I think it because some of the connections the narrator makes in her somewhat stream-of-consciousness telling might not sound as repetitive in an audio as they sometimes look to be on the page. But that is a minor issue.

Moinette's story (loosely based on court records that the author found that deal with a 'free woman of color' buying her son) is told with admirable empathy and was one I wanted to come back to when I had to put it down. Being from Louisiana, I found it interesting and important from a historical viewpoint. Much as with Holocaust stories, there may already be many fictional narratives from this time period (slavery), but that doesn't mean there aren't many unique, important stories still to be told.

I wasn't surprised to learn (from the acknowledgments) that one of the author's inspirations was Intimate Enemies: The Two Worlds of the Baroness De Pontalba. I thought of that nonfiction book immediately while reading what happens to one of Moinette's owners.

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## Sarah says

Susan Straight's *A Million Nightingales* is the story of Moinette, a young teen with a white father and an African mother who is sold at the age of 14 to another slave-owner. The novel takes place during the Antebellum era of the old South.

I'm ashamed to say that I discarded this novel about mid-way through - I just didn't find it captivating or original, especially when compared to other novels on similar subject matters by Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. Although there are many possible plots for novels of the Antebellum era, I didn't feel as if this particular "slave-girl" novel was interesting enough to stick out.

Straight's style in writing protagonist Moinette's voice is simplified to a degree that allows us to better hear and understand this character; however, the writing is so simplified that I failed to see the story as anything other than bland. I know that as readers, using our imagination is part of the job to relate to novels, but *A Million Nightingales* just isn't lively enough. The pictures painted of Moinette's experiences as a slave are vague and fuzzy, and just not colorful enough to have a major impact.

My favorite novel about the Antebellum-era is *The House of Dies Drear* by Virginia Hamilton. I went through a childhood phase that had me obsessed with anything about the Underground Railroad! My favorite novels by Alice Walker and Toni Morrison are *The Color Purple* and *Beloved*, respectively.

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## Sundry says

I very much enjoyed this book. I like Susan Straight's work, and I think this is my favorite since *I Been In Sorrow's Kitchen and Licked Out All The Pots*, though I think I've missed one somewhere in between.

An amazing story of a slave woman. Of women. Of intelligent women in the first half of the 19th century in the South.

I can't really say much more about it right now, except that as hard as some of the events of the story were, I am going to miss going to Louisiana every day in my mental life.

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## Judy says

In *A Million Nightingales*, her fifth novel, Susan Straight achieves parity with the writing that made Toni Morrison one of my top three most admired novelists: a perfect amalgam of intelligence, empathy and artistry.

This novel is a slave story, and like the Civil War, World War II, the Holocaust, the Cultural Revolution, it takes hundreds, maybe thousands of stories to encompass these huge, life altering events. Fiction, biography,

memoir, as well as history books are all required to bring the tales of individual human beings, locations and the legacies of the past forward to people who live now.

Through Moinette, daughter of a Louisiana slave and a white sugarcane planter, we get an entire society and socio-economic world set in a discreet location. Susan Straight has said that she combined the stories of slave ancestors told by her in-laws with extensive research. By sheer artistic genius she transmuted it all into the life of Moinette and created a woman whose experiences made her a strong survivor.

It is a horrific tale but left me with huge love and admiration for Moinette, who was a "cadeau-fille" or "gift girl", because her mother, Marie-Therese was gifted to a visiting white planter for an evening's entertainment. Various characters present gifts to Moinette, in the form of education, protection and funds which enable her to survive. Cephaline, the rebellious daughter of Moinette's first master, who lived only to study, read and write, passed on the skill of reading to Moinette. Between Marie-Therese and Cephaline, though their words and teaching differed, Moinette worked out the basics of survival for a mixed-blood slave woman.

As in all of Ms Straight's novels, motherhood is a strong factor, as is a love of language and an implacable urge for freedom. She makes it clear that personal freedom is attained and maintained through strength, intelligence, extreme wariness and plenty of luck. Even with all of those elements in place in any individual, there are absolutely no guarantees because human beings are also capable of depths of weakness, stupidity and unawareness. Furthermore, life is random including weather and dangerous environments. These are the lessons and realities of Moinette's life.

One of the great benefits of reading an author's novels from earliest to most recent is seeing the development of the author herself. I see *A Million Nightingales* as Susan Straight's finest, most powerful novel. In answer to the question of what she wanted readers to take away she says, "I'd like them to take away a few hours of having lived like someone else." I have taken that from all of her novels so far, but more than ever in this one.

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### **Rachel Swords says**

I first heard of this book while attending a master class by the author in New Orleans. She read an excerpt, and her gentle reading voice along with the poetry of the words convinced me to give the story a try. "*A Million Nightingales*" is a haunting, tragic book that tells the story of Moinette, a slave who is sold to several different masters before obtaining her freedom. Along the way, she meets many people and faces several hardships that would understandably weaken anyone, yet Moinette is able to survive due to her faith and resilient spirit. This book is additionally noteworthy for its poignant phrases and glimpse into the lifestyle of Louisiana in the early 1800s. Anyone who enjoys historical fiction or stories of courage should give "*A Million Nightingales*" a try.

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### **Ismahane says**

This novel was an emotional journey for me. I can't accurately put into words how I felt while reading it. At times I felt inspired by the characters, at other times I felt betrayed by the author. However, I do understand the author's choices for the characters since life has never been fair to anyone, let alone to slaves in 1800s Louisiana.

What I most love about this novel -is what I've come to realize that I love about all of Ms. Straight's

writings,- is the sense of genuineness I feel whenever I read one of her books. While reading this book for my MA dissertation no less, I felt transported to that time period of history, I found myself adapting the way of thinking and completely immersed in the novel. Hence the red weeping eyes and puffy nose I am currently supporting while writing this review.

In short, this was an amazing read, I recommend to all who wish to take a dive into Louisiana's history and see life from the point of view of a survivor.

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## **K says**

Reasons I'm quitting this book about halfway through:

1. Exceedingly slow plot
2. Annoying stream-of-consciousness writing, often disjointed and ESL-like (yes, I get that the main character's English may not have been that great but surely her thoughts were coherent)
3. Uninteresting main character

For those who want to know, this book is about a teenage female slave, Moinette, who is sold away from her beloved mother. I just wasn't in the mood to read the rest of the tragic stuff that happens to her, in light of the above. But if you've read this and think it's worth finishing, I'd love to hear from you!

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## **Cheryl Klein says**

In this book even more than ever, Susan Straight creates a palette of physical details (hair, bone, ink, bodily fluids) that in turn create a world. In this case, it's French Louisiana in the early 1800s, where a young biracial slave uses her considerable wits to rise from powerlessness to relative freedom. I loved how she was something of a scientist in a time when science barely existed, always wondering about the natural world. The novel reminded me a bit of Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* in terms of Straight's emphasis that other groups (women, gay men, Indians, quadroons, free people of color) suffer under slavery's many variations. A sometimes sad, sometimes uplifting, always visceral book.

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## **Meg says**

Straight up, this book does it in ways that only Toni Morrison has ever touched on slavery (and more importantly the slavery of being female on a planet filled with hate for women). The language is wonderful. I'm going to read all her other books now...

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## **Ardene says**

Set in Louisiana in first half of the nineteenth century, this is the story of Moinette, a slave mulatresse (half-white, half-black) and her search for freedom and love. Moinette is the daughter of a slave laundress who can remember crossing the ocean with her mother in a slave ship.

Moinette's mother tells her Moinette belongs to her, but in fact Moinette is sold and sent away around age 14

without a chance to say good-bye to her mother after the daughter of her owner dies (Moinette had served as her maid).

One of the things that interests me about this book is how in Moinette's view white women are only marginally better off than slave women. Cephaline, the daughter of the plantation, loves to learn, but is being prepared to marry someone wealthy in order to bring money into the family. Pelagie, another white woman she serves later in the book, is prevented from living the life she wishes to live as well. White women are sold into marriage.

Moinette tries to run back to the plantation where her mother lives, but doesn't succeed. She is raped twice in the book; the first rape results in a child, but her work takes precedence over childcare, and she doesn't get to spend much time with him. She is later sold again away from the plantation he lives on.

Her third owner, a white man from the northern US, treats her as a human being, and things start to look up. I was a bit afraid at one point that this story was going to have a happier ending than I thought was possible for the time and place, but I needn't have worried. Though the ending was a bit rushed, it did not "pretty up" slavery.

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## Hans says

I read this book for both good and ridiculous reasons, but I am really glad that I did.

Ridiculous: I recently read the third book in the trilogy *Between Heaven and Here*. I'm a completist, so I don't read books out of order and I read all of them.

Good: I really enjoyed *Between Heaven and Here* and wanted to find out the stories that occur before and after. (The third book chronologically falls between the first and second books.)

Ridiculous/Good: I discovered the GoodReads "most read" authors list feature and was embarrassed by 1) how few female authors were on the list, 2) how low they were in the rankings (first ones were tied for 22nd and that included J.K. Rowling), and 3) how high James Patterson was on the list (tied for 5th). So, I am working on getting some strong female representation in the top 10 (e.g. Margaret Atwood, Patricia Highsmith, and possibly Susan Straight).

The not as good: I thought the ending of the story felt rushed and took a few too many dark turns: (view spoiler). It was another case of the main character needing a restraining order from the author's plot lines. There was also one turn that did not feel true to Moinette's character: (view spoiler)

The good: I really enjoyed Moinette's journey and the poetic telling. Her involvement in so many different areas and lives did not feel forced. The plain truth moment between Cephaline and Moinette was a high point.

I'm looking forward to reading more from Susan Straight including the second book in this series.

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## Lori says

I labored through this but kept going. I found the writing style disjointed and had a hard time keeping track

of characters. I just wanted more story with this. More background and personality of characters and less description of blood this and blood that, I got tired of the main character Moinette's constantly referring to people as animal, flesh, skin, bone.....I think a little of that goes a long way and we get the point. I would like to try another of her books because I would like to see how the dialogue differs from this one. Maybe one set in modern times. I will definitely give another book a try. Just wasn't crazy about this one.

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