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## **White Nights, Black Paradise** Sikivu Hutchinson

In 1978, Peoples Temple, a Black multiracial church once at the forefront of progressive San Francisco politics, self-destructed in a Guyana jungle settlement named after its leader, the Reverend Jim Jones. Fatally bonded by fear of racist annihilation, the community's greatest symbol of crisis was the White Night; a rehearsal of revolutionary mass suicide that eventually led to the deaths of over 900 church members of all ages, genders and sexual orientations. *White Nights, Black Paradise* focuses on three fictional black women characters who were part of the Peoples Temple movement but took radically different paths to Jonestown: Hy, a drifter and a spiritual seeker, her sister Taryn, an atheist with an inside line on the church's money trail and Ida Lassiter, an activist whose watchdog journalism exposes the rot of corruption, sexual abuse, racism and violence in the church, fueling its exodus to Guyana. *White Nights, Black Paradise* is a riveting story of complicity and resistance; loyalty and betrayal; black struggle and black sacrifice. It locates Peoples Temple and Jonestown in the shadow of the civil rights movement, Black Power, Second Wave feminism and the Great Migration. Recapturing black women's voices, *White Nights, Black Paradise* explores their elusive quest for social justice, home and utopia. In so doing, the novel provides a complex window onto the epic flameout of a movement that was not only an indictment of religious faith but of American democracy.

## **White Nights, Black Paradise Details**

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Author : Sikivu Hutchinson

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## From Reader Review White Nights, Black Paradise for online ebook

### Kamela says

Sikivu Hutchinson's "White Nights, Black Paradise" renders visibility to everyday black women's struggle with race, gender, religion, morality and poverty. The stories of Taryn and the other black members of the Peoples Temple that Hutchinson vividly brings to life makes it clear that while many blacks submitted to the ideal salvation of the racial utopia Jim Jones pushed, this submission of sorts represented black peoples epic struggle and fight with finding a voice and life in a racially hostile homeland. This is an important and beautifully written story that restores the humanity of the followers of the Peoples Temple.

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### Liz says

This historical fiction takes place before I was born, in locations I've never seen, and from the points of view of characters whose life experiences I'll never myself know. Despite that, the story resonated for me. And for me that really is the mark of a powerful story with compelling storytelling--one that is completely outside of one's personal experience but that can be understood intimately.

Spanning decades, the story begins with Jim Jones in rural Indiana and ends with him as the leader of one of the most infamous cults in American history: Peoples Temple. The novel relies heavily on the perspectives of three women who, in various ways, become entangled in the Peoples Temple community, and it is through their perspectives that the reader gains an understanding of the complex dynamics within it.

Well-researched and well-written, I think this novel is an excellent work overall--readable, human, and profoundly interesting. I found the resistance and struggle of the three main female characters as they navigated bad option after bad option particularly compelling. These women all came to Peoples Temple on different paths, but they were fighting some of the same obstacles: racism, sexism, and financial insecurity.

I also feel as though I have a better understanding of how the real-life Jonestown tragedy could have come about after reading White Nights, Black Paradise. In its rhetoric, Peoples Temple offered the promise of a utopian, egalitarian community, and that this community didn't live up to its talk doesn't make those who dared to hope for a better life fools. Quite the opposite, it makes them human. After a person joined the Peoples Temple community, Jim Jones and his leadership used extreme isolation from outside support networks, coercion, and even violence to ensure that no one left. He forced complicity in this abuse on everyone who joined, making leaving nearly impossible.

In short, I highly recommend White Nights, Black Paradise.

tags: cults, cult leadership, mass suicide, mass murder, black women, lgbt, women of color, people of color, 50s, 60s, 70s, religion, atheism, kool aid, Jonestown, racism, sexism, classism, #weneeddiversebooks, despair, hope, American history, fiction, fictionalized history

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### Marci Akoma says

Excellent fictionalized tale of Jonestown.

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### **Ceillie Simkiss says**

I received a review copy of *White Nights, Black Paradise* as part of the Rich In Variety blog tour, in exchange for an honest review and movie cast post!

This book surprised me with how much I enjoyed it, given the craziness that you read from the characters' perspectives. *White Nights, Black Paradise* is a historical fictionization of the Jim Jones cult, based on interviews with people who were survivors or knew people in the cult. You can read more about this cult through the wikipedia because it's really interesting, but I think it would have helped to have a little bit of prior knowledge. I had no idea that the People's Temple was so racialized

Read the full review [here!](#)

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### **Viki says**

The perspective and writing style seemed to jump around a lot, in a way that made it a bit hard for me to follow, but it was an interesting story.

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### **Michael Duggan says**

If the world remembers Jim Jones and the People's Temple at all it has been mostly through the lurid and sensationalist lens of TV movies and tabloids as well as the popular catch-phrase, "Drinking the Kool-Aid." Charismatic cult leader leads sheep-like followers into the jungle where they Drink the Kool-Aid and commit suicide en masse. Many of these portrayals have focused primarily on Jones himself like *Guyana Tragedy: The Story of Jim Jones*, the 1980 CBS television movie. But what about his followers? Was it that Jones was so powerful and compelling a presence, with his promise of a socialistic and racially equal utopia, that he could lead that many people to a remote and largely uninhabitable jungle in northwestern Guyana? Of the nine hundred plus that died that day eighty percent were African-American. Why did they go? In her impressive debut work of fiction, *Sikivu Hutchinson* addresses the "why" through the perspective of several richly drawn African-American women characters. Women who were beset by the crushing economic and social disempowerment of Black life in the Fillmore district of 1970's San Francisco. Hardly mindless dupes they were drawn to Jones charisma but more importantly to the promise of jobs, housing, a sense of family and place, that the Peoples Temple provided. Not too mention a hands-on chance to build it themselves. *Sikivu Hutchinson* is one of the best commentators and analysts of race, religion, gender, and politics, that we have. Her first work of fiction is a good read and well worth your time. It will leave you looking forward to the next one.

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### **Sincere Kirabo says**

*Sikivu Hutchinson's* new novel "*White Nights, Black Paradise*" is a provocative and eye-opening piece of

historical fiction that captures a dark moment in time and gives a voice to the Black women whose heart-wrenching stories were lost amidst tragedy.

Hutchinson meticulously weaves true life events with an analysis of religious, racial, and gender dynamics. The will to believe and harrowing consequences encapsulated in this exploration of the Peoples Temple narrative provides us with a double-consciousness retrospect that interprets Jonestown through the eyes of Black women and perspectives reimagined by a Black woman.

This first but desperately needed parsing of the charismatic charlatan Jim Jones, religious cultism, and the Jonestown Massacre from the viewpoint of Black women—those mainly involved and victimized in this tragic saga—distinctly separates itself from all previous renderings that review these matters through the white gaze and a preoccupation with white protagonists.

The lead characters (Taryn and Hy Strayer) who are also sisters display an interesting dynamic with their explicit differences in personality and identities. Other characters like the sweet but tough Mississippi school teacher Ernestine Markham add depth, giving the book a more relatable feel. I felt like I could compare several of my family members to some of the characters and that element alone inspires a certain level of familiarity. The presence of Black/Mexican transwoman Devera Medeiros, and the fact that Taryn is a Black lesbian atheist, delivers a refreshing dose of complexity, diversity, and nuance that's both unique and liberating.

And of course, the layers teased out by Hutchinson in her depiction of Jim Jones brilliantly reveals the enigmatic, impassioned, problematic, and huckster pieces that made up the lothario cult leader.

Despite the tragedy of the subject matter, Hutchinson is able to impart this grim story in entertaining, thought-provoking fashion. I find this to be true art: spinning an endearing and hypnotic tale with a clever duality of bleakness and unwavering spirit that resonates throughout which gives the book a feeling of fullness.

This is the kind of book that lingers with a purpose. Hutchinson writes in such a way that satiates the reader while also inspiring us to discuss it with others as well as seek out more details of what exactly went down in Jonestown.

White Nights, Black Paradise is a delight and, more importantly, an awesome representation of women of color, whose stories and voices are often devalued or erased, even in the darkest of times.

Overall, White Nights, Black Paradise is an extraordinary work of fiction fused with a factual social context, layered characters, and an alluring and incisive interpretation of the past.

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### **Bakari says**

It's been several years since I've read a fictional book, and I was quite surprised when Sikiivu Hutchinson released this novel, which I'm glad I read.

I had just graduated from high school when the Jonestown massacre occurred, and living in the Midwest I'd never got all the details of what happened. Revisiting this tragic experience for the first time in decades, I learned a lot from reading this novel.

First off, I had never realized that the majority of the people who were members of the People's Temple, and who traveled to Guyana, were of African descent, and mostly Black women. I also didn't realize the level of influence that Jim Jones had in the political arena at the time. I simply saw what happened in Jonestown as some sort of religious cult gone terribly wrong.

Well yes, the People Temple was a cult for many of its members, but Ms. Hutchinson's novel describes the important complexities and nuances of that cult, the time period, and the members and followers who made up the Peoples Temple.

White Knights, Black Paradise is very much about race, delusional religious beliefs, and even the existential longing and desire of people to escape racism, poverty, sexism, and the social alienation they experience(d) in this country.

I would imagine that most readers of this novel already know how the novel is going to end, but how it all began —the roots and formation of the Peoples Temple — is what many readers may not know, and we should.

Ms. Hutchinson's talent and skills as a writer makes this novel highly intriguing, especially for someone like myself who stopped reading fiction several years ago. White Knights, Black Paradise is indeed a page turner. I felt for many of the characters, especially the journalist, the two sisters, and the those who tried to expose the lies and hypocrisy of Jim Jones. I was also deeply saddened to read the so real struggles that people were facing back then, and how much those issues are still with us today, though today it would probably be almost impossible for such a massacre to occur. Or would it?

As tragic as the story is, this novel needs to be read and discussed especially in these times when religious dogma and so-called dominate social morality are causing people to not think critically about long-held religious beliefs and the political and religious pandering of preachers and politicians who have such a deep influence over the lives of ordinary people.

It's because of White Nights, Black Paradise that I plan to read more fiction this year, and also will read more about what happened in the Peoples Temple.

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### **Brooke Banks says**

First sentence:

The drive from Modesto to Livermore was six degrees of cow dung, a deep rich funk for each rest stop.

White Nights, Black Paradise starts with Taryn and Hy on their way to California. It jumps around from time and place with each chapter, the title being who, where, and when. While I'd definitely say it's mostly about Taryn, Hy, and Ida, there's a smattering of other perspectives filling in the story including Jim Jones himself as a kid. Each one has its own distinctive voice that I could hear in my head. There was no trouble remembering who was who or telling them apart.

If my cart was full with the better cuts of meat, I was mistaken for a maid.

Throughout it all, the rise and fall, **the center is black women.** How Jim Jones recruited them, used them, exploited their causes and culture to place them on the bottom rung again. How society, especially white women, treated them. Every angle, problem, with housing, medical care, church, jobs, careers, and children, is examined from these women's point of view.

They got their people out to rally against all those thug police murderers in the East Bay right before we moved here.

It's chillingly clear how easy it was to believe in the causes and ideals of the People's Temple. In the beginning, **I kept nodding along thinking "YES!"** But the internal hierarchy, the execution made it all a lie and the downward spiral visible. The descent into cult madness is vivid and understandable.

*White Nights, Black Paradise* is unforgettable. I had to read it slowly to digest and contemplate along the way. It will hurt, disturb, and make you think. I can't say it was enjoyable, the struggles and pain of black women isn't a romping good time. It's enlightening, both a tribute and thesis. A testament to black woman power in all forms and shades. An indictment of white culture, white feminism, media, education, appropriation and injustice.

There's a monster at the end of this book, Grover says, as the patrols start up outside.

**Everyone needs to read this.** This is the kind of book that should be taught in a curriculum. A must-read for intersectional feminists, especially white women trying to be allies.

Sikivu Hutchinson is amazing. I first heard of her online as I coming to grips with being an atheist and all that entails. She's changed my life once again. If you don't follow her or read her work, you should.

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### David Anderson says

Sikivu Hutchinson has made a truly impressive fiction debut with her first novel, *White Nights, Black Paradise*. She has brought a unique perspective to bear upon the story of Jim Jones, the People's Temple movement, and the tragedy of Jonestown, one which, though fiction, sheds considerably more light upon this history than the facile depictions of the People's Temple as a "cult."

Hutchinson is a feminist writer and activist who is probably best known as a secular humanist advocate whose book, *Moral Combat: Black Atheists, Gender Politics, and the Values Wars* (2011), was the first book on atheism to be published by an African-American woman. That work impressed me, not only because it criticized the Black church and detailed the emergence of black atheist and freethought activism, but because

she also challenged the lack of racial diversity and attention to institutional racism in the mainstream secular and New Atheist movements, and critiqued their fixation on scientism at the expense of social justice. She also writes the blackfemlens blog and is a regular contributor to the LA Progressive. (She is also the daughter of writer Earl Ofari Hutchinson. Bias Alert: This old lefty fondly recalls seeing her father's byline on a regular basis in the now defunct American independent leftist newspaper, The Guardian.)

Hutchinson's historical fiction frames Peoples Temple and Jonestown within an African-American perspective, a sorely under-explored aspect considering the fact that the majority of Peoples Temple movement was Black and 75% of the 918 people who died at Jonestown in 1978 were African-American; in particular she gives voice to the African-American women. With this approach, Hutchinson's work provides valuable insight into the personal, cultural and historical motivations for black women's involvement in Peoples Temple and their emigration to Jonestown. While part Jim Jones' appeal was certainly rooted in the deep-seated religiosity of so many in the African-American community, this is only part of the story. The People's Temple appeal must also be placed in the context on the ongoing African-American Freedom Struggle. The Temple movement's initial embrace of progressive political activism and social justice organizing provided hope and home for many in the wake of the dissipation of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements in the 70s.

In the initial part of her novel ("Hinterlands"), Hutchinson deftly moves back and forth in time, stretching from the 70's when the People's Temple established itself in the Bay Area, back to the 40's in Indiana, exploring the roots not only of Jim Jones and his family, but also of one the central Black women characters, independent journalist Ida Lassiter, who is initially drawn to Jones but is quickly disillusioned with him and becomes an ardent adversary dedicated to exposing him. In this way, Hutchinson not only traces the Temple's historical arc in Indiana, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Guyana but also the arc of these characters development. We are also introduced to sisters Hy and Taryn Strayer. At first Taryn, a lesbian atheist, seems the more well-grounded of the two, while Hy is the passionate seeker who is initially draws them into the circle of the People's Temple. But as the story develops, Hy sees more clearly how the movement's leadership is manipulating and exploiting the yearnings and weakness of the believers, she becomes the one wanting to break away. Taryn gets a job as an accountant for a firm maintaining the books for the Peoples Temple; meanwhile, she falls in love with Jess, a therapist who eventually uses her knowledge and skills to help the leadership reign in and "reeducate" straying members. Taryn is no more taken in by the movement leaders than Hy is in the long run, but her love for Jess induces her to believe Jess's initial reassurances that they are only staying on for self-interested reasons and will eventually strike out on their own, until it becomes too late to avoid the tragedy we know is coming when they reach "The Promised Land" in Guyana.

In addition to the time shifts, Hutchinson also employs shifts between first and third person, which allows her to give voice to plethora of voices and perspectives: School teacher Ernestine Markham, whose family fled Mississippi for San Francisco in hopes of greater opportunities, only to discover racism was no less virulent, only subtle and disguised. Latina transsexual woman Devera Medeiros, who comes to the Temple with her Mamí when they are displaced by "urban renewal." We are even taken inside the minds of Jones's sons, the Black adoptee, Jimmy Jr., and biological son, Damien, who are no less conflicted than many others by the developments within the movement, by the actions of their father and the largely white female leadership he has built up around him.

In this fashion, Hutchinson not only provides perspectives underrepresented in the history of the People's Temple, she crafts a compelling piece of historical fiction that will grip you until the very end. As someone who has spent his life on the left, I found chilling the invocation of the eerily familiar ultra-left revolutionary rhetoric used by Jones and the Temple leadership to justify their actions, an aspect of the Temple that I knew

little about (shades of the Cultural Revolution I found myself thinking at one point). Hutchinson has written a valuable work for anyone interested in the intertwined histories of religion, the left, and the African-American Freedom Struggle in this country, one providing important insights for anyone concerned for the future of the progressive movement in America.

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### **Philip says**

I sort of had mixed feelings coming into this novel because Jim Jones is not the most likeable figure in American history. He's a cult leader who not only killed his flock but much of that flock was black and poor. So imagine my surprise when I came away from the novel kind of liking the dude minus the slaughtering drug fueled paranoia that ended in Jonestown, of course. It's also a frankly brilliant debut fiction effort by Sikivu Hutchinson, who, for my money, is probably the most talented African American atheist/Humanist writer on the scene and has done something that the white Four Horsemen have never done: write a really good novel. She's also seriously good looking which probably isn't fair. But I digress.

The novel is a constant explosion of ideas and you could write a critical book just discussing all of them. My copy of her novel is just riddled with notes and yellow highlighter. Here are the notes just from the first 13 pages or Chapter One: There's a woman who's thankful that she got an abortion and found it a relief. The Jim Jones church was an extremely progressive church that actually helped black people, or at least, if the novel reflects reality, wanted to help black people. (Jim Jones adopted a black male, which is going the distance. I also found myself checking Wikipedia just to see which parts are true. Yes that black adopted son exists even though he has disavowed the church, again of course...) There's a black character who openly espouses her atheist viewpoint where she says, in part: "...I don't believe in God. You know I don't have any tolerance for magical shit." And as a black atheist person who reads and watches tv and movies I don't think I've ever heard a black person openly espousing their atheism. And the whole book is like that. You're just reading things and perspectives that you've never seen before uttered by black characters. It's almost the Anti Oprah in terms of its intellectual approach to the world. (Side note: There's an attempt to turn this into a tv series and boy if a black director wanted to make his or her mark doing some completely shocking television this would be the book you could turn into your HBO/AMC produced 10 to 12 episode version of "The Wire". )

That's just scratching the surface of all the great ideas. At my own blog I might go into some of the other issues about how the novel sort of describes a dying black press (I say that as an ex Pittsburgh Courier reporter who was fired for attempting to unionize...) or this perplexing question: if you're a progressive atheist and really want to help black people are you better off just lying about religion like Jim Jones, who in the novel used the Bible as simply a tool to teach about class struggle, or do you tell people the truth about that "magical shit"? The novel strongly suggests that if you want to reach black people lying your ass off might be the way to go. For a higher good of course...

Bottom line, really a fount work put forth by Hutchinson. It's really a must read if you consider yourself a black intellectual. Its kind of like if Lorraine Hansberry was resurrected and she started to write novels. (Hoping that Sikivu doesn't smoke.) We'll still be talking about the ideas here for decades to come. Highly recommended. Really beyond Five Stars. Should immediately be placed in the must read "canon" along with "Invisible Man" and "Native Son". It's that good and she even rewrote some of it to make it "better" than the first draft I have. You know, on Facebook and Twitter, I've asked Sam Harris to write the fictional atheist version of "Handmaid's Tale" or "1984", preferably as an "Animal Farm" like allegory or even science fiction. (No one can hear you scream about fundamentalism in space...) So that atheists would have our own

metaphor for what we find troubling. Perhaps I've been asking the wrong writer to do that...

Philip Shropshire

[www.threeriversonline.com](http://www.threeriversonline.com)

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<http://writersofcolor.blogspot.com/>

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### **Ebony says**

#### **Excellent fictional re-telling of a terrifyingly event in history.**

I read this book knowing very little of Jonestown. Reading this grew my interest in the history of this story. It also terrified me at how easy it is for any of us to fall victim.

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### **African Americans on the Move Book Club says**

White Nights, Black Paradise is an interesting read for all. I have to say, that I found this novel highly intriguing. Until I read this book, I never heard of the historical events that are portrayed throughout this story. It was a great learning experience and insight for me. The characters, inside this amazing fictional world so brilliantly woven by Skivu Hutchinson, were realistic and shows readers the different lifestyles than we normally see. I kind of admire Taryn the opening character inside because she went through a lot to help and give her sister what she needed. A sister bond that lured me deeper into reading more. African American lives were harder than what school texts led us to see. Definitely an eye opener. A church that experiences so many issues that the list is unending. White Nights, Black Paradise is full of many themes that will keep readers hooked until the very last page. I would recommend this novel to readers world wide.

Danielle Urban

AAMBC Reviewer

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### **Gatbys OK says**

A heartbreakingly raw intensity. As those who've been curious about the Jonestown massacre know, the sheer volume of books, films and other "treatments" of Jonestown could fill a warehouse. Most reel the reader in with "breathless" insight into the enigma of the Jonestown murder-suicide itself without delving into the complexities of Peoples Temple and the black women members who powered the movement. White Nights, Black Paradise departs from these portrayals with verve, originality, lyrical prose and depth. By focusing squarely on black women's roles in shaping the culture and history of Peoples Temple, Sikivu Hutchinson's novel blazes a new path in Temple literature. The novel is anchored by the love-hate relationship of two African American sisters seeking opportunity and adventure, first in California, then (fatefully) in the Jonestown settlement in Guyana. Hutchinson frames their attraction-repulsion to both each other and their journeys as symbolic of black women's ambivalent attachment to the Temple and its mission. The novel comes alive through the relationships between and among the different factions of Peoples Temple—the lead character Taryn (who is perhaps literature's first black atheist lesbian?) and her female lover Jess; fiercely independent African American journalist Ida Lassiter and the young Jim Jones; Taryn's

sister Hy and Temple defector/revolutionary Foster Sutcliffe; Jim Jones' conflicted black and white sons, female lieutenants and wife; and the all black male security force who revered Jones as a father figure. All of these characters (and their relationships) are richly shaded and Hutchinson keeps up the pace by deftly weaving in gripping plot points that characterized the Temple's arc in Indiana, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Guyana. What is especially impressive is the novel's shifting in time and the way it powerfully foreshadows the tragedy of November 18, 1978 while highlighting its contemporary relevance. The novel also showcases the incredible diversity of Peoples Temple—trans, gay and bisexual characters are prominently featured—and how it reinforced its brief but strong political presence in San Francisco. One gets a vivid sense of the often perilous race/gender politics within the church and the way Jones exploited the weaknesses of parishioners with his wanna-be-black revolutionary rhetoric. The infamous white female hierarchy of Temple/Jonestown leadership comes alive in the portrayals of Jones' leading women and manager/enforcers Mariah and Carol. Throughout the novel, black women's motivations are put in the context of the Great Migration and its disappointment for black folk seeking a better and dramatically different life in the North. Shifting between first and third person, the novel, much like history itself, is a tableaux of voices and perspectives that doesn't provide pat, easy answers about guilt or innocence and implicates our all too human desire for false idols.

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