



Roadwalkers

Shirley Ann Grau

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In this amazing odyssey of two black women from the 1930s to the present, all the storytelling gifts of a brilliant Pulitzer Prize-winning writer are abundantly displayed. When we first meet Baby, she's one of six black children abandoned by their parents during the Depression. They are roadwalkers - homeless wanderers across the rural South, leading a dangerous, almost enchanted life. One by one they are saved, lost, or simply disappear, until only Baby and a brother are left, living off the land - a primitive gypsy existence hauntingly described. Finally Baby is captured - almost like a wild animal - by the white farm manager of an old plantation where the children have been hiding. He sends her to an orphanage in New Orleans, where she guards the rich mythic content of her wandering against the invasive kindness of the nuns by covering the walls with strange, brilliant drawings of flowers and animals. We next see Baby decades later, through the eyes of her daughter, Nanda, who at thirty-six looks back at her own childhood. Baby and Nanda move into the middle class through Baby's eccentrically successful career - first as a seamstress, then as a designer of dresses for rich white women. Raised a princess in the protective circle of Baby's magic, Nanda in her teens is suddenly catapulted into the white world when she is sent off to integrate a white Catholic girls' school in the East. Seeing herself - as her mother saw herself - alone in an alien place, Nanda finds an entirely different means of survival. A rich and wonderfully fresh - often astonishing - evocation of the black experience in the South, seen through the lives of two fascinating women.

Roadwalkers Details

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From Reader Review Roadwalkers for online ebook

Will says

Roadwalkers, by Shirley Ann Grau, Kindle edition

105 That was the way she reckoned. Not by days, nor hours. Time did not lead one day to the next. Her days were like a hoard of bright-colored beads, their connecting thread broken, lying loose, single, jumbled.

140 Fire was their keeper and their enemy. Their life and their destroyer.

166 Summer fires were for joy. Winter fires were for survival.

249 They never spoke of her again. The space where she had been filled up with time and vanished.

403 Baby kept her distance and her silence so that he would not fall into one of his rages. Once she stood too close to him, and he knocked her backward into the fire. The burns on her legs still hurt.

549 "I drunk lonesome water from under hollow rocks," he finally told his parents. "And I got to go back and get her.

762 The Lord put many colors in the world the better to confuse us....Here,

778 In his blood, oxygen sparkled like shiny pennies as his heart tumbled them through his veins.

840 The dead were not troubled by weather or anything else; they were saved or damned and that was all there was to it.

1011 He looked at the crowd of people in the churchyard, all of them related to him, all of them strangers. "Blood just ain't enough." (NOTE:Re: buried jars of money from bootlegging)

1058 I'm a midnight gardener. With secret out-of-sight midnight crops. (NOTE:Charles thinking about the homeless black vandal).

1368 If times were different, or if things were different, I might just be out there with him. I might even be him.

1452 There were as many poor as there were stars in the sky overhead.

1631 NOTE: Great feral child description

1631 The eyes did not blink. Metallic eyes with a frost on them, like a knife blade left out in the cold.

1716 The pupils contracted in a flash, and became again only slits in the skull of an old dying tomcat, not windows on an empty universe in a time before the world was made.

1846 zinnias—she inspected each flower carefully, staring into them one by one, as if she were searching faces and trying to remember, as if she had known them before, as if they were friends from another time and place.

1897 She is glad to see me, Rita thought, because she wants to leave, and she can't, not until someone takes her away.

1996 I don't need your prayers, said Mary Woods. I bring my gods with me. From before. You should know them. I've painted their pictures for you a hundred times. But you didn't see.

2344 I was the mouse in the pantry, the moth in the woolens, the worm in the ground, moving silently through the heart and halls of the school.

2401 I looked into her smiling face, freckled to the color of a paper bag, and I thought: You are a fool to think you can make me feel at home with kindness.

2415 A minority child like me must be forgiven her sins. The jungle is still close to her. She requires understanding. Her moral code is not fully developed.

2690 (each of us with a copy of Euell Gibbons in her backpack).

2700 me....I myself, in my virginity, I am weary of sex. I know it for the business it is.

2727 These skills and sounds and melodies came from her family to me so that I became a part of her traditional America, my native land, where I was a stranger. I intended to slip into her world, to hide there until I belonged to my country as much as she did.

3095 a doppelganger rode with me, a second self, a sister under the skin, a betrayer. An ordinary woman, with ordinary needs, ordinary ambitions, who was me.

Cheri says

3.75 Stars

The year is 1934 as this story begins, midway between the beginning and the end of the Great Depression, and towns and cities everywhere in the country had people who lost everything, or walked away from what little was left of what they once owned.

"In 1934 this is the way that it was.

"Homeless people were moving in a steady flow across the southern part of the country, back and forth across the surface of the earth, seaweed on a tide that ebbed and rose according to the seasons, following rumors and hopes, propelled from place to place by police and sheriffs and farmers with shotguns, and closed doors and locked gates."

.....

"They were called roadwalkers. Each night they closed their eyes on a day of nothing and opened them in the morning to the exact same thing. There was nothing behind them and nothing ahead of them; they didn't have a past and they didn't have a future. Floating, drifting, they clustered together for comfort and safety."

.....

"Her name was Baby. And she was one of those children. She, her brother, and her sister. Roadwalkers, frog spawn. And black."

They used to have a family with a mother and a father, and three more siblings. Once upon a time, they lived in a house with their grandparents, with a yard with four pecan trees. Then their grandfather died, run over by a car, and the money he brought in as a porter was gone, then, too. Their father was next, leaving for another woman. After Baby was born, and about six months had passed, their mother packed up her things in a sack and was seen no more. Then a fever struck them, and their grandmother died.

Six children left alone, the oldest daughter, Corey, moved in with the man who bought their doors and windows, since he needed a woman. That left five by the time they started on their way: two boys, Buster and Joseph. And Sylvie, Delia and Baby; the three girls.

For the first year, they stayed with their father's brother, and then Buster took up with the owner of the Sweet Shop. Then Delia had an accident and then there were three. Joseph, Sylvie and Baby left for their Aunt Rosie's, where they stayed for a couple of years, until one day when they were left behind mid-way on a drive when two of them had to go into the woods for relief, and when they returned, their bundled up worldly possessions were there, next to Baby. Joseph, Sylvie and Baby, on their own. Again. And yet, Baby learned to measure time by darkness and light, by the signs of the seasons.

"That was the way she reckoned. Not by days, nor hours. Time did not lead one day to the next. Her days were like a hoard of bright colored beads, their connecting thread broken, lying loose, single, jumbled.

“She grew still older. And she learned how to live.”

My parents rarely talked about those years, the Great Depression, but they were both very young when the Depression began. My mother's father had owned a small “chain” of several pharmacies and I believe lost all but three during that time. One of the very few stories I know about my mother's family was that her Aunt Lil used to mark her fence so that those “in need” would know they were welcome to eat there.

Shirley Ann Grau, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for her 1964 novel ***“The Keepers of the House”*** is known for her stories which are set, primarily, in the Deep South, which deal with race and gender. This was the first book of hers that I've read, and I knew nothing about her, until I read a review of this book by my goodreads friend Diane, who won me over with the words “There is something so addicting about Grau's writing, her prose is wonderful and the story flows very easily.”

I can't really think of a better way to say how I felt about this story, except - despite some flaws - I really had to know how this story ended, and I was enjoying the journey to get there, and, yes, Grau's writing is addicting, her prose is wonderful, and the story flows beautifully.

Thank you, Diane!

Diane's review: <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

mary grady says

My favorite writer

Shirley Grau's fascinating, colorful and often tumultuous history of the south combined with strong heroines make her one of best writers of woman's fiction.

Chrissie says

On completion:

Although I gave the author's The Hard Blue Sky five stars and her Pulitzer Prize winner The Keepers of the House four stars, this one disappointed me. My reaction is simply that the book was just OK, thus only two stars. Almost the whole first half is a review of numerous characters (several generations of families that really are not the main focus of the book) and historical events (Civil War, Reconstruction, WW1 and the Depression). Lead events are simply dropped, never to be mentioned again. It covers too much and thus lacks depth. We are told rather than shown. This portion has little dialog.

The latter half is about the daughter of one of the original "roadwalkers" introduced at the very beginning. As explained below, "roadwalkers" is the term used for the homeless wandering the South during the Great Depression. This portion about the daughter focuses upon being African American in the South, about being a teenager, about being "the girl who integrated" her school. There are some great lines in this section. It is a

coming of age story AND focuses on one woman's path toward feeling comfortable with her black identity. BUT, it covers her entire life up to modern times....

This is not a long book. If you add two and two together it is obvious that you cannot in a short novel also achieve depth. A few sections zoom in on a short time period, and here the writing is at its best. I loved her time as a young adult. What sass! Some of her remarks about her parents are priceless. The dialogs are great too. BUT this section ends too, and falls back on breezing over many topics. It covers modern liberal views on drugs and sexuality. It covers modern views on black identity and equality of the sexes. Black identity is covered with deep perception...in parts.

The author, when she focuses on smaller events, really has a wonderful way with words! She describes clothes, gosh they are gorgeous. She conjures them in front of your eyes. She describes traditional Southern Christmas traditions, so you really wish you could be there too. The mother is a talented artist, and the author paints her creations with words. Beautiful! And dialogs are fantastic. Also, the coming of age section shows real insight and understanding of what kids go through.

I really enjoyed the narration by Karen Chilton. The smart aleck teenager and then the suave adult she later becomes are perfectly executed. The final section is told from the first person point of view; the words and the intonation are perfectly matched.

In one sentence, the book tries to cover too much and thus lacks depth, but it is good when it focuses and it does have some great lines.

After chapter two:

YES, the tone does change - by the end of chapter two, but they are long chapters. So be patient! Now I am enjoying the book. By the end of chapter two the book begins to focus. From the Civil War and WW1 and all the details about family relations you finally get to the 1930s. Things start happening! Descriptions of places are always excellent, but I needed some dialog, some excitement, some action, and now all this is delivered. Race and the power of money are, as usual, central themes - and the "roadwalkers", that is the homeless wandering the South during the Depression. What happens in this chapter I did correctly guess, but I am not telling YOU!

After two and one half hours of listening (of a total 10 hours):

What a shock. The tone of this book is so different from the last I read by the author: The Condor Passes! No one can accuse the author of repeating herself. This reads like Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House books! Large time periods are rapidly covered - from the Civil War and Reconstruction through to WW1 and then the Depression. All very cutely presented. No depth. I am not saying it is bad, just maybe not for me. This reads like a delightful child's book.

Will the tone change?

Becky says

Always enjoy this author and her unusual stories told in surprising ways.

Jen says

The first 40 pages were beautifully and hauntingly written. I was immediately invested in the characters and the story. Unfortunately, the rest of the book felt disconnected and fell flat for me.

Theresa says

This is a beautifully-written book, and for the first half of it I believed I was going to give it five stars, however the promise of a story just around-the-corner never was fulfilled. There is virtually no plot. It's just a cluster of character profiles that were put there for no obvious purpose. Actually quite maddening. Okay so I've got this guy down: I know all about his personality, background, motivations, daily routine, dreams—WOooosh! There he goes! Never to be seen again. Here comes another character...

Ann McManus says

This is the extremely well written story of children abandoned by their parents to roam the rural roads during the great depression. It is a story of adventure and survival. And to say more would give away the plot.

There is no bad spelling or editing to distract and indeed, I stayed awake far too late on several nights in order to read just one more page.

Teresa says

This is the story of a mother (called Baby, later Mary) and then her daughter Nanda; and, unfortunately, it reads like two different books instead of one seamless work.

While I absolutely loved the first 'book,' I was rather disappointed with the second part. Perhaps that's because I think more of the first character (and the man whose subplot intersects briefly with hers) would've been perfect -- she and her story (and his) were so interesting, so compelling, so unique, as were all the characters in the first part of the book. We don't get any of that in the second half.

One scene in particular in the first half I know will stay with me -- it broke my heart and made me smile at the same time.

Mighty_k24 says

very nice reread (1st read was in 1998), not breath-taking, surely not the best i ever read, but good enough for 4 stars.

Caroline says

its an okay easy read with lots happening with very little details. You really have to utilize your imagination.

Mel says

This book is... Odd. For lack of a better word.

Like the author was observing a woman then her daughter from afar. Spying on them. Writing down their actions without actually ever speaking to them.

It started off with promise. I find the premise interesting and would like to find out more about real life "Roadwalkers" during the depression. If they existed.

There are two narratives. The first half belongs to "Baby". The second half to her daughter Nanda.

Baby and her six siblings start off with two parents. Living in a house. Their father disappears after killing his mistress. Their mother disappears. The number of siblings dwindle until it's down to two. Baby and her brother Joseph. Roaming the countryside.

When her brother starts making trouble, Baby is left alone. She's found and, eventually comes to live with other orphaned children with nuns as her guardians. She is renamed Mary.

I had more questions after the book was done.

We learn Baby survived by selling herself. Her passion for drawing led to a lucrative career in design. But what happened post orphanage? Why was Charles introduced at all? He certainly didn't play a large role. It was pivotal. But, no need to learn his background for it.

I'm assuming her daughter lacked feelings because Baby did? Even though it seemed like Baby cared for her daughter when she was young. As she grew older it was different. Was it because she saw how readily her family left her growing up? Between the two women, they never displayed emotion. Detached.

That time period was very tumultuous in terms of race relations. Segregation ended in 1964. How did Nanda and Tom just hang out? Her being readily accepted to his family gatherings?

There's more. But I'll leave it at that.

Diane S ? says

3.5 It is the year 1934 , the depression just a few years in the past, many people have lost everything, some walked away from farms they could no longer keep. These people were called the Roadwalkers, often coming from the deep south hoping to get to the more prosperous North, others just walk trying to find new lives. Baby and her sister and brother join this group after they are left parentless and homeless. So begins the story of Baby.

There is something so addicting about Grau's writing, her prose is wonderful and the story flows very easily.

There are holes in this story, but while reading I became so involved in her wonderful story telling ability that wasn't until after that I spotted a few things I would have liked to be different. The story is about Baby, the men who find her, the nuns who looked after her and later her daughter. I felt a remove from the characters in this one, but her characterizations are so great that this did not lessen my enjoyment of this story. While I can't say that I really liked these characters, I can say that I admired them. Baby came from nothing and built herself and a business into a very successful something.

I sometimes think that if an author can really write, they can make almost anything interesting. This author can write.

Linda says

A very unusual book.

Gwen says

Interesting story but I did not like the flow.
