



The Living is Easy

Dorothy West, Adelaide M. Cromwell (Afterword)

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One of only a handful of novels published by black women during the forties, the story of ambitious Cleo Judson is a long-time cult classic. "The Living Is Easy" is delightfully wry and ironic humor--even bitchiness--of the novel coexists with a challenging moral and social complexity.

"A powerful work."--"Essence"

"Dorothy West is a brisk storyteller with an eye for ironic detail...a deft stylist and writer of social satire."--"Ms."

"Long beloved for its wry and ironic humor, this novel continues to delight and challenge readers."--"Feminist Bookstore News"

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Suggested for course use in:

African-American studies

20th-century U.S. literature

The Living is Easy Details

Date : Published April 8th 1948 by The Feminist Press at CUNY (first published 1948)

ISBN : 9780965392129

Author : Dorothy West , Adelaide M. Cromwell (Afterword)

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Genre : Fiction, Classics, Historical, Historical Fiction, Cultural, African American, Literary Fiction, Womens

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From Reader Review The Living is Easy for online ebook

Lamine Ka says

Well, it was a difficult one. Difficult not because of the complexity of the writing nor the storyline, but because of its protagonist, Cleo. Numerous were the times when I found my jaw on the floor due to this character's actions. She is manipulative, deceitful, and most important of all, the queen of liars! And the naivety of some of the other characters was just through the roof.

It was a good read, nonetheless.

Ady Grafovna says

Cleo is possibly the least sympathetic character I have ever read about. I wouldn't call her a villain. She is far to human to be a mere villain. But she is selfish and manipulative and blindly ambitious. The story is unlike any I have ever read. I didn't even realize this time period for blacks existed in American history. It is a well written book and my distaste for Cleo does not detract from my enjoyment of the tale. In fact, I think that it is rather the point.

Kathleen Hulser says

Portrait of Cleo, a powerful woman, social climbing in age of discrimination as light-skinned Southern black woman tried to turn her child and her sister's children into proper Bostonians around WWI. Cleo's terrific determination and energy rivet your attention as she stuffs her house with relatives, meanwhile relegating her husband to the role of meek bread-winner running a banana import business down at Fanueil Hall docks. West was a lesser-known figure in the Harlem Renaissance who ended her days presiding over a parade of visitors to her house in Martha's Vineyard at the Oak Bluffs enclave. West founded and edited The Challenge, but could not sustain the quality of submissions she sought, growing tired of stories of racial struggle which began to seem repetitious and presaged the late 20th century's focus on stories of agency and power rather than victimhood.

Theresa says

It's difficult to like a story when you strongly dislike the main character. Cleo was a horrible, despicable human being. It had the potential to be a well written story, but somehow the author missed the mark. The funny thing with fiction is that although it's not true, it has to be believable and this story wasn't. The only redeemable character was Judy. She was wise beyond her years, thoughtful and had a beautiful heart. Beyond her, every other character was almost laughable. I struggled to finish this book.

I Be Reading says

Have not had a fiction character make me want to pull my eyelashes out in quite awhile but Cleo fixed that!

This novel is very different from "The Wedding", which I absolutely loved, but it was still a great read. I wish Dorothy West had written more.

Ari says

Whereas The Wedding brings up many topics of discussion, the issues discussed in The Living Is Easy, are much more subtle. You have to read between the lines, look at the character's actions because their words are usually false. I have to admit, Cleo drove me nuts. She was so SELFISH. I can understand wanting your family to be near you since she hasn't seen them in many years, but the ways she goes about bringing her sisters to Boston is horrible. Cleo is manipulative, greedy, cruel and yet, she has her soft moments that hint at an inner kindness. The moments are rare and far between though. Worse than Cleo were her spineless sisters. Cleo really isn't that powerful, she is only able to manipulate those who are weaker than her, so she's not as impressive. She doesn't understand the concepts of saving money (thinking her husband's money will last forever) and she is stuck on color. Light color. Her dark daughter, Judy, is repulsive to her. Cleo herself is very light as is most of Boston's elite. Yet for all her faults, Cleo does have the right idea, she just goes about in a twisted way. She wants to teach her daughter and the children of her sisters to be proud Black children, they are second to no white people. "You're four little children. That's all you have to call yourselves. if you think you're different, you'll just act different, and people will treat you differently. Just remember that brains are the only thing that counts. And brains are not black or white. [...] If she let her heart go, it would flood with pity because they were little colored children. And what would she use then to bolster their pride?" pg. 221-222

This novel provides a fascinating look at life in Boston for the Black elite. Some members tried to pass, they were usually successful because the rich Black Bostonian community would not tell their secret. It's infuriating but many of them looked down on Southern Black people. If you had no money and weren't a member of the Old Families of Boston, you were considered to be nothing. Issues of class and race intersect as does family. Cleo doesn't think she loves her husband, but she takes him for granted. I wish the novel had explored the relationships of Cleo's sisters better (especially Victor, Lily's husband. He seemed like a fine man until Cleo came along). The worst part is, Cleo ruins the lives of her sisters and her husband and daughter, but they don't blame her. The Living Is Easy quite clearly demonstrates that the living is not easy and it does so in a vivid, page turning way.

PS A sweet exchange between Serena and Robert as Serena prepares to leave her husband, Robert and the girls' father for Boston to visit Cleo. Robert: "I can't read but a little bit. I never went to school.'

She said with tenderness, 'There'll be love in my letters, won't there? All you have to do is watch for it to spill out the envelope, and hold your heart ready to catch it.

'You won't go off and forget to come back?'

'When I forget God's in the sky, I'll forget to come back to you. And there's no way to live and breathe in this world without knowing God's on high.'" pg. 163

J says

(FROM JACKET)"The Living is Easy" tells the story of Cleo Judson, daughter of southern sharecroppers

and wife of 'Black Banana King' Bart Judson. Cleo seeks to recreate her original family by urging her sisters and their children to live with her, while rearing her daughter to be a member of Boston's black elite.

Nyasha Junior says

Muddled storyline. Meh.

JaniceF says

The main character is an ambitious, greedy woman who will stop at nothing to get what she wants, including lying to her husband and sisters. She persuades her sisters and their children to leave their husbands, and move in with her and her family. Also, she cons them into giving her money, persuading them into thinking that the reason is due to hard times. Her husband is a successful banana merchant, who thinks she has the sisters living with them because they are having financial and family trouble. He wants to help. I like this book because it has similarities between the characters and people the author knew. Like her main character's husband, the author's father was a banana merchant.

Georgia Herod says

A most fascinating narrative about the rising middle class of African Americans who had moved to Boston as part of the Great Migration from the south.

West is a member of the Harlem Renaissance group, one of several outstanding women authors.

More later

Nicolejanne says

This book was really interesting providing a glimpse into living after the Harlem Renaissance in Boston. The language is old-school and it's sometimes tough reading about the crazy classism/racism and deception. But, very entertaining.

April says

Okay, many may find it ironic that this is the most frustrating book I have read from the AA genre, but it is. Perhaps because this book lulled me into a false sense of security. With all of the other books I have read from this period and genre I already knew to expect frustration, sadness, and a general disappointment with American society. This book deceived me.

I know what you are thinking, "But April, isn't that the point?" ::sniff:: Maybe, but I am so badly scarred that I do not care. I will now end on that dramatic, or "wild", note.

Lauren Paletta says

I only read chapter one of part one for African American Writers ENG 338, but it was wonderful and I hope to finish the book soon!

Ronda says

I truly enjoy the writings of Dorothy West. I discovered her writings when I was vacationing in Martha's Vineyard. I gained an appreciation for the black elite in the 1950's through reading her writings.

Emily says

The premise enticed me to read this book about the daughter of a poor southern sharecropper moving to Boston and longing to fit in with high society. But the unlikable protagonist and her dysfunctional family are tiring.

Rebekka Steg says

So, The Living is Easy by Dorothy West was written in the 1940's, one of few books to be published by black women at the time, and takes place in the beginning of the 20th century. It's about a woman, named Cleo Judson, who's adamant that she'll become a member of Boston's elite. She's married to the "black banana king", and through manipulation she gets her sisters and their kids to come and live with her.

I thought the book was interesting, it taught me many things about the lives of black women at the turn of the century. It wasn't the best book I've read, but if you're interested in learning more about women's lives at this time, I do recommend it

Ramona says

The anti-heroine - West created a character that you may feel morally obligated to hate, and yet, it's not that easy. I enjoyed reading the book; however, I also admit that I have forgotten most details in a matter of weeks. Therefore, only three stars from me.

Vel Veeter says

Dorothy West didn't write that much fiction all told. But she was forever involved in publishing, editing, and other fields related to writing. In the mid-1990s she published her first new novel in a few decades *The Wedding* which won acclaim because it's good, because Oprah took notice, and because it was her first novel in a few decades.

This novel came out in the late 1940s and it shares an obvious connection to another novel from that time *The Street* by Ann Petry. They have some parallels. Both novels are written by educated Black women (in an era where that was not the norm); both look at city life in the North for Black women, and both start with a Black woman looking for a new place to live. Whereas Ann Petry's novel has a darker tone and is about the complications of poverty and single motherhood, this novel has a much lighter tone, somewhat loftier goals for the protagonist, and not necessarily the most sympathetic ends for her either.

Similar to scenes from *Native Son* where liberal whites try to give African-Americans a chance (laden with unfair expectation and a nefarious racist mission) this novel begins with a rich white man offering his nice house to Cleo for much less than it's worth to rent. While he plays at altruism, it's clear to both the reader and to Cleo that he just doesn't want to be associated with the changing complexion of the neighborhood. Offered an exceedingly good deal, she haggles. That sets the tone for the novel: in the face of disingenuous white generosity, she bites back and takes what she can. For example, her next steps are to bring in as many boarders as possible to make her already good deal that much sweeter.

From there the novel involves Cleo convincing her sisters to move back in with her and then goes through a series of different mishaps, plots, and events. There's not a strong throughline of plot in this novel, other than the themes of family connection, race, and womanhood.

It's an interesting novel that I enjoyed for the most part, though it definitely became a bit of a chore to finish.

Londa says

Cleo is one of the most despicable characters I have ever had the displeasure of reading about.

This book can be summarized something like this.

Once upon a time a devilish child named Cleo was born. Her sisters had the misfortune of being very innocent and naïve. She took advantage of them. She hurt them. She was happy.

Cleo grew up and moved away. Her sisters started to have normal lives. Cleo was unhappy about this. This simply would not do. They were too far away from her tentacles. She tricked them. She hurt them. She was happy.

The elite colored Boston community was also caricatured. They were Cleo's equals in cruelty and heartlessness. She was among her peeps.

I love a good villain, but Cleo was just too much for me! Unfortunately that was not the only problem I had with this novel. The storyline just did not interest me, and I struggled to finish this one.

Ursala says

My feelings toward the main character are ambivalent, so maybe I should give it a higher rating. It is interesting when an author can create a central character who is sympathetic and loathsome...
