



Blues City: A Walk in Oakland

By Ishmael Reed

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Blues City: A Walk in Oakland By Ishmael Reed

Oakland is a blues city, brawling and husky . . .

Often overshadowed by San Francisco, its twinkling sister city across the Bay, Oakland is itself an American wonder. The city is surrounded by and filled with natural beauty—mountains and hills and lakes and a bay—and architecture that mirrors its history as a Spanish mission, Gold Rush outpost, and home of the West’s most devious robber barons. It’s also a city of artists and blue-collar workers, the birthplace of the Black Panthers, neighbor to Berkeley, and home to a vibrant and volatile stew of immigrants and refugees.

In **Blues City**, Ishmael Reed, one of our most brilliant essayists, takes us on a tour of Oakland, exploring its fascinating history, its beautiful hills and waterfronts, and its odd cultural juxtapositions. He takes us into a year in the life of this amazing city, to black cowboy parades and Indian powwows, to Black Panther reunions and Gay Pride concerts, to a Japanese jazz club where a Lakota musician plays Coltrane’s “Naima.” Reed provides a fascinating tour of an untamed, unruly western outpost set against the backdrop of political intrigues, ethnic rivalries, and a gentrification-obsessed mayor, opening our eyes not only to a singular city, but to a newly emerging America.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Blues City: A Walk in Oakland By Ishmael Reed Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #5999338 in Books
- Published on: 2003-10-21
- Released on: 2003-10-21
- Formats: Abridged, Audiobook
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 2
- Dimensions: 4.90" h x .40" w x 5.60" l,
- Running time: 120 minutes
- Binding: Audio CD

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Novelist and critic Reed (*The Freelance Pallbearers*; *Mumbo Jumbo*) tours historic districts and homes, and attends parades, festivals and performances, to discover the "many worlds within Oakland," a city with "one of the most ethnically diverse populations in the country... [and where] identities are blurred." Reed's treatment is part homage and part rant (mostly against Mayor Jerry Brown and his "elegant density" plan to gentrify the downtown area with hi-tech businesses). The author has reason to be frustrated: "Classical buildings and traditional landmarks are being leveled and replaced by vertical trailer parks that seem to be thrown up overnight"; but some of his comparisons are a bit extreme, as when he likens the dot-com generation to the exploitative 1849 Gold Rushers: "California has never recovered from the damage caused by these earlier invaders... and their treatment of the California natives must rank as one of the cruelest episodes in human history." The book's best parts come from transcribed interviews, such as author Malcolm Margolies's description of a pre-development Lake Merritt and David Hilliard's stirring Black Panther legacy tour. But Reed's own language vacillates from bland ("I attended the annual Black Cowboy parade. Attendance was up over the previous parade") to venomous ("the black upper class is kept out of sight, lest some white Americans lose their self-esteem, whose foundation is the myth of black inferiority, their psychological Prozac"). This slender volume, while filled with facts, dates and a variety of cultural events, doesn't live up to the "husky and brawling" swagger of the city Reed describes.

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From [Booklist](#)

Reed, novelist, poet, and longtime Oakland resident, offers an eclectic look at the multicultural city that thrives in the shadow of the better known and celebrated San Francisco. He describes Oakland as "blues city" because of its affinity to labor cities of the Northeast while still maintaining California's physical beauty, famous cultural melange, and political radicals. Reed chronicles his own personal journey to Oakland, by way of New York City and early fame. Fearful of wearing out his welcome--and creative juices--he moved to California. He was attracted by the politics of black power and the literary heritage of Jack London, Bret Harte, and Joaquin Miller. Reed offers a historic overview as well as acerbic commentary on the political and cultural scene of Oakland with celebrations of black cowboys and Native American powwows. He laments a move in politics from the Black Panthers to Jerry Brown's countercultural style, which includes "a brutal capitalist philosophy." Fans of Reed and Oakland will enjoy this engaging book. *Vanessa Bush*

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From the Inside Flap

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?Naima.? Reed provides a fascinating tour of an un-tamed, unruly western outpost set against the backdrop of political intrigues, ethnic rivalries, and a gentrification-obsessed mayor, opening our eyes not only to a singular city, but to a newly emerging America.

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Richard Davy:

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