

Bayou Vol. 1 (2009)

By Jeremy Love

Rationale by James Bucky Carter

Grade Level and Audience

This graphic novel is recommended for middle and high school English and Social Studies classes.

Plot Summary

Lee Wagstaff is a young girl in the midst of several layers of trouble. As if being African American in Charon, Mississippi, during the 1930s wasn't tough enough, her white friend Lily Westmoreland tells her mother that Lee lost her locket, a prized heirloom. Lily actually had it snatched from her while playing too close to the bayou. A creature, later revealed as the dim-witted and cannibalistic Cotton-Eyed Joe, grabbed for Lily but only caught the necklace. This is just the latest instance where the bayou has caused Lee grief. A year before the story starts, Lee and her father were paid a small sum to fish out the dead body of Billy Glass. While underwater, Lee discovers the boy with a rope around his neck—he was lynched for whistling at a white woman. She also sees the boy's spirit, and, upon resurfacing, begins to hear voices and see strange things in and near the bayou. Now, her friend has betrayed her.

Lily seems sincere in wanting to make amends, and the two revisit the bayou with Lily's intentions being to swim around until she finds her locket, thereby clearing the Wagstaff family (Lee and her father) of paying off the necklace through labor. Instead, Cotton-Eyed Joe resurfaces from the swamp and gulps down Lily while she is stuck in thick mud. Lee runs home only to faint in her yard. When she awakens, her father is being taken into custody for Lily's murder. Lee tries to stop them; she and her father are beaten. He is hauled to jail, and she faints again, this time from her injuries. She awakes at her aunt's house, and she decides to visit her father and seek out the truth that might set him free. White citizens from surrounding counties are beginning to gather in Charon, though, under the auspices of wanting to aid the search for Lily's body, but really because they want to lynch Lee's father.

Lee is given some supplies and an ax from her uncle's Choctaw/African American ancestor that is supposedly blessed and will keep her safe. After visiting her father, she returns to the bayou where a galliwag tries to drown her. She is saved by the large, green, stuttering, blues-singing creature known as Bayou. Afraid of him, Lee runs to the surrounding woods despite his warnings. She falls through a game trap and is impaled through her shoulder by a stake. Despite warnings from a mosquito that his "bossman" will not be happy with him, Bayou takes the girl to his home and dresses her wound. Bayou directs Lily to Cotton-Eyed Joe's house and informs her that the bossman will not allow him to leave the swamp, so he cannot help her further.

Yet, as she leaves, Bayou sees in her the image of his own missing child, Nandi. After entering the large plantation-style home of Cotton-Eyed Joe, Lee engages the brute in battle and draws blood twice, once with a shotgun and again with her ax, just before he attempts to devour her. As the creature slams Lee to the ground in anger, Bayou's dog creates a diversion that allows her to escape to Bayou, who has decided to help despite the costs. The ruckus has aroused the bossman, who takes the form of a murder of "Jim Crows" (actual crows) that disembowel Cotton-Eyed Joe, pluck Lily's seemingly fine body from his stomach, and carry her away. Bayou tells Lee that Ol' Rabbit probably knows where Lily was taken to. Then three men on horseback appear, one of whom is the dog-faced General Bog. Bog chastises Bayou for his disobedience and has his men whip him and shoot his dog. Two men take Lee. As she cries out, Bayou sees an image of his family in chains. He decides to fight back, ripping off the arm of the man whipping him. He approaches Bog, who draws a gun, but Lee scratches and kicks at him until she rolls free of his grasp. Bog retreats, bloodied, but not before issuing a warning to the two. Lee and Bayou bury his dog, then decide to work together to find Lily.

Strengths and Unique Characteristics of the Work

The text interweaves Southern folklore and history with elements of the grotesque and uncensored fairy tales to create a mystic journey narrative replete with tropes and signifiers of African American and Southern culture. Unlike in many of the old tales, African Americans are depicted with dignity and do not embody stereotypes, but live alongside their enchanted embodiments as the world of men and the world of magic intersect.

Possible Objections

The text does use explicit language, but language accurate to what might be used in 1930s Mississippi. While the "N" word is usually represented as an "n" and a series of asterisks, other words such as "cracker" and "pickaninny" are used with their full racial weight. The golliwog that almost drowns Lee is depicted as a minstrel figure. There are images of dead bodies that have been lynched. The violence is sometimes explicit. Blood is drawn when Lee is impaled. When Bayou pulls the arm out of his assailant's socket, we see the bloody arm. As crows feast on Cotton-Eyed Joe, they cake their mouths in blood and his rib cage is exposed. As grotesque as the violence can be, other instances are as frightening but not as graphic. When Cotton-Eyed Joe ingests Lily, for example, he swallows her whole. These instances of violence and grotesquery can be considered examples of how the text keeps very much in line with many fairy tales and other magical stories in which strange and horrific events often occur around young children.

Ideas for Thematic Braiddings

References to Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* are evident in the text via Lee's name, her quest for justice in an unjust town, and via her memory of her deceased mother, who had a voice "like a mockingbird." Any text dealing with the story of Emmett Till would pair nicely with this text. Billy Glass's character meets a fate similar to Till's and the

character was actually named Emmett in the early production stages of the comic. Texts exploring this connection might include the poems “A Wreath for Emmett Till” (Marilyn Nelson), “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon” and “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till” (both by Gwendolyn Brooks). This text can also be braided with Bebe Moore Campbell’s novel *Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine* or *Wolf Whistle* by Lewis Nordan.¹

Using characters from Southern folklore offers the chance for classes to examine the Uncle Remus stories. Contrasting Love’s contemporary take—or at least *Bayou*’s contemporary feel—might be useful in comparing other adaptations, such as the now-controversial Disney film *Song of the South*. Similarly, the use of Southern songs and history might help students explore the South in Social Studies class or even through inquiries into Southern music. The town of Charon in the novel is a reference to the Greek ferryman who navigated the river of the dead, allowing for explorations of mythology beyond that associated with the South, especially because many scenes in the novel reveal Lee to be navigating the world of humans and the world of spirits; as well, the text is the first volume of an epic odyssey.

The graphic novel *Incognegro* by Mat Johnson and Warren Pleece is also set in the South of the 1930s and features an African American character seeking justice for a relative about to be lynched. Another interesting text for comparison might be Alan Moore’s *Saga of the Swamp Thing*. Both feature green, plant-like giants of the Southern swamplands but pull from distinctly different myths. The *Swamp Thing* text is written by an Englishman, whereas Jeremy Love is African American. Students may enjoy exploring the authors’ different takes on Southern swamps, the people who live near them, the stories they inspire, and, in this case, the hulking monsters they create.

Ideas for Implementation

For a pre-reading activity, one might ask students to do a Web search for images of the United State’s Southern bayou. One could ask them to write about the mood of each image they find. In discussion, one might ask if the photographs or images invoked a feeling of mystery. One might show them [this image](#)² and/or ask students to brainstorm a very short story in which they create a myth or legend associated with the bayou.

Awards

Bayou won five Glyph Awards³ in 2009⁴

Story of the Year: *Bayou*

Best Writer: Jeremy Love

Best Artist: Jeremy Love

Best Female Character: Lee Wagstaff

Best Comic Strip: *Bayou*

Reviews

“Extremely beautiful, scary and wonderful, this [Web comic](#)⁵ takes readers to a pair of almost familiar, frequently threatening worlds” — *Publishers Weekly*⁶

“Going to the bayou to look for clues, Lee falls in and effectively stumbles through the looking glass to find her own Wonderland” — Scott Cederland, [Wednesdayhaul.com](#)⁷

“With a nod to *Alice in Wonderland* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* both, Bayou takes Lee down the rabbit hole into a world that might be more dangerous than the one she comes from, and into a battle that she has no idea she’s joined....*Bayou* is beautifully crafted. Love’s ear for dialogue is wondrous to read; his sense of historical perspective deft and subtle” — John Hogan, *Graphic Novel Reporter*⁸

Resources/References

Graphic Novel Reporter interview With Jeremy Love:

Hogan, John. “Jeremy Love’s American Style.” Posted August 14, 2009.

<http://www.graphicnovelreporter.com/content/jeremy-loves-american-style-interview>.

Bayou as a web comic; more of the story:

Johnson, Kwanza. “Zuda Comics That You May Have Missed & Can Read for Free on the Web.” Posted Friday, September 10, 2010.

<http://www.zudacomics.com/bayou>.

Jeremy Love’s website:

Gettosake Blog. Last modified February 26, 2008.

<http://web.archive.org/web/20080616040238/http://www.gettosake.com/blog>.

Comic Book Resources interview with Jeremy Love:

Renaud, Jeffrey. “Jeremy Love Talks “Bayou” Trade Paperback.” Posted on February 19, 2009. <http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=20114>.

¹ Flora, J.M., MacKethan, L.H., & Taylor, T.W. (Eds.) (2001) *The Companion to southern literature*. Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press.

² http://images.chron.com/blogs/heights/1_GeoffWinningham_BuffaloBayou2003_Press.jpg

³ The Glyph Awards recognize outstanding accomplishments among black comics and creators.

⁴ <http://www.gettosake.com/blog/2009/05/bayou-wins-five-glyphs.html>

⁵ <http://www.zudacomics.com>

⁶ <http://www.gettosake.com/blog/2009/05/publishers-weekly-on-bayou.html>

⁷ <http://wednesdayshaul.com/wordpress/2009/06/26/a-southern-gothic-fairytale-a-review-of-jeremy-lovesbayou>

⁸ <http://www.graphicnovelreporter.com/content/bayou-review>