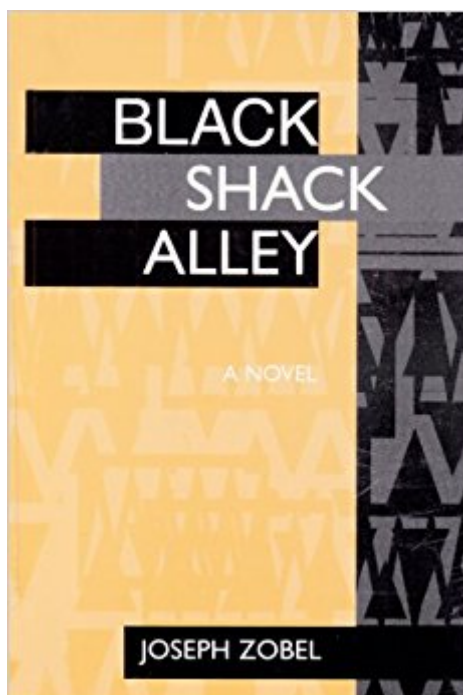


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Black Shack Alley



Synopsis

This work of compelling lyrical unity tells the story of growing up black in the colonial world of Martinique.

Book Information

Paperback: 184 pages

Publisher: Three Continents Pr; 1st English language ed edition (May 1980)

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Customer Reviews

Text: English, French (translation)

Haunting autobiographical-like story of Martinique in the early 1900's, reads as most post-colonial novels and histories read: despair, hope, then more despair, then more hope, then a happy medium, makes one realize how good one has it living in present times.

I haven't read the book yet, but saw the movie when I was younger. It was very inspirational story that anyone should read. Also, the story gives you some background info of the island of Martinique. I am definitely recommend

Young or old, many people have grown up reading of a coming of age story. Whether it is the story of *Catcher in the Rye* or *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, readers are compelled by the story and the hardships that the characters face. *Black Shack Alley* is no different. It's a captivating story about a young boy named Jose Hassam who lives in the slums of a Caribbean island called Martinique where he goes through many life experiences of identity, racial, and social class struggles. Through his experiences and the help from his grandmother M'man Tine (Amantine),

Jose finds the courage and motivation to acquire an education to help him have a better and brighter future. Zobel presents this coming of age story through the eyes of Jose which gives insight into how the struggles of life was back then through the eyes of a child. Black Shack Alley is broken up into three parts that showcase the progression of Jose as he grows up. The setting of the story takes place sometime in between the world wars and is also set in post slavery times where Martinique was still currently a colony of France at that time. Although slavery was abolished by this time, many of the descendants of the free slaves were still working for the *blancs* (French colonial settlers) in sugar cane fields. The book goes through the struggles of living as a poor black person in Martinique and Zobel shows a good representation of this in the way people dressed and how they went about living life. In reading this book it is important to have a little background about the racial and social classes that existed inside of Martinique during this time. The plantations in Martinique played an important role in determining social classes in these communities. The white *blancs* were usually the ones who owned these plantations and were profiting from poor black workers who worked the hard labors of the treacherous cane fields. The black workers lived in a little land set aside by the plantations which were shacks. Little communities within these shacks were formed and within these communities social activities took place. Within these little communities, Zobel presented that the complex power structure of these societies were determined by the color of your skin. You get an eye opener on how hard it was for poor black skinned people in Martinique and the very few opportunities that were present for them during that time. Today there are still tensions between the *blancs* and the descendants of former slaves which Zobel does a good job in showing how the complexities of these tensions came about. This book is a great coming of age story that is seen through the eyes of a child. Zobel is real effective in giving a real innocent vibe to the book and as you read through the book you get to see the growth of Jose as a person. The flow of the book was easy to follow in which there is a continuous stream of the story and that it doesn't go off course. The book does tend to move fast but is necessary to help move the story on. Although I would recommend this book to anybody who's interested in Caribbean literature, please keep in mind that this book has been translated from French to English so there might be some language discrepancy within the text. If you are interested in a coming of age story and want to know more about the culture and traditions of Martinique, this book is a great start.

Black Shack Alley is the beautifully presented story of one young boy, Jos *Hassam* and his struggles to understand the racially divided world of Martinique. The author Joseph Zobel, through the first person narrative of Jos *Hassam*, gives us insights into the hard life of the cane plantation

where JosÃ© first lives with his grandmother, the opportunities that schooling provides to a young black boy and the ultimate struggle of giving up one's culture to become alienated but more successful in society. That is the choice for Martiniquans who desire to succeed, they must become alienated from their creole beginnings to fit into the only acceptable society, which is white and French. Zobel presents this as the only real option for JosÃ© which concurs with the social feeling at that time. This book is a reminder of the struggle for identity that has occurred in the past of Martinique. It is a long way from the more contemporary work of Patrick Chamoiseau and his book Texaco which heralds a new era that applauds the creole beginnings and rejects accepting all white ways. This is a very moving story which can teach us a lot about Martiniquan traditions as well as being valuable in the time honoured tradition of storytelling. Necessary reading for understanding the depths of Martiniquan society.

The difference between this treatment of the subject is that it is seen through the innocent eyes of a child and the story goes on as he approaches manhood recounting the changes in his impressions. So the hero is not perfect. While the book is critical of race relations in colonial Martinique, it celebrates the human bonds of family and friends that help us to face the many challenges of life

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