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Jam on the Vine by LaShonda Barnett

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Jam on the Vine
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Grove Press
ISBN: 978-0802124678
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Reviewed by Shawn(ta) Smith-Cruz

This book needs no praise here; it has already been reviewed by Oprah Magazine, and the audiobook is narrated by Phylicia Rashad. Still, while the mainstream heralds its literary merit, we must note that Barnett ruptures mainstream expectations by conjuring a novel, which allows for the sexual and professional bond of two black lesbian writers. Rooted in their love of writing, until even their age difference becomes normalized, this novel, written in parts, is grounded in historicized fluidity as water is the sap that leads the vine to grow—water appears by the river, forms tears, fortifies thirst, criminalizes, is disrupted by fire, and finally returns when seas are crossed to new possibilities.

Using extensive archival research from American newspapers housed at the Library of Congress and Chicago Public Library, Jam on the Vine, by LaShonda Katrice Barnett, is the coming-of-age story of a journalist, Ivoe, who is an outlier for three reasons: entrepreneurship, genius, and lesbian love. Ivoe’s mother, Lemon, is self-sustaining through the ownership of a family-run jam business. As a child, Ivoe finds discarded newspapers of her mother’s initial white employer and reads them with fervor, and after winning a writing competition, Ivoe wins a scholarship to a local university, then falls in love with her college professor, Ona,
a dreamer who teaches letterpress, fonts, and complete sentences. The two eventually launch “Jam! on the Vine,” the first black-woman-owned newspaper. These realities relieve the protagonist and her Muslim family from forced relocation, lengthening the shift from the small community of ex-slave-lineage blacks and “didn’t have no business leaving behind” departure, where “the wood was a record” to the “somewhere out in the velvet black night” big city.

The best recommendation to approach this text is to note that it is written in multiple sections and literary styles. During Ivoe’s childhood, the reader will encounter Lemon’s garden. In the suppulent ownership of their yard, the reader experiences Ivoe through her mother’s memories as we collectively climb trees, pick okra or berries for eating and jamming, and visit ancestral trauma. The language is lush and dreamlike, often from the point of view of a small child, through the windowpane of home: “Sometimes it takes generations for opportunity to come, but if you keep on living, it will show up. Balancing an armful of pies, Lemon glanced around her yard. Three children, each having their own way with her heart . . .”

Compared to Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, the first half of the novel resembles connections to the black American literary tradition via its setting in Jim Crow America, and use of floral, opulent, and feminine, natural language couched in water, magic, and the maternal. Associations with water, for example, describe the wombed haven of their owned home in Little Tunis rather than their eventual rented apartment in Kansas City (which is juxtaposed in the second half of the novel). In Little Tunis, Texas, water represents freedom: “Sometimes you go to the water—be with it a while—to quiet the waters in you. When was the last time she’d taken a late night swim in the creek? . . . While the water boiled, she pulled her braids apart, freeing the coarse hair that framed her face like a crinkly mane. She added the last drops of rose geranium oil to her bath and leaned back . . .”
Despite the novel’s display of generations of women in love, there are also men in the novel. Our protagonist Ivoe has a father and brother, branded from the thirst “of another man’s glass.” The men are interwoven with narratives of freedom and confinement with strict gender roles pitted against both the time of Jim Crow and Reconstruction, but also from Barnett’s strategic character development. Subject to their own maleness, we as lesbian readers experience the woman’s gaze upon incarceration, estrangement, and a sadness that exists in the men of the novel, caught in a country that has made them black heads of families they cannot support: “Sitting on the riverbank next to buckets filled with sunfish, anybody could see James had a lot on his mind . . . It was the first time Ennis saw a grown man cry and it stirred something in him.” Writing into existence two black men with their black boys crying by the river, and the river representing time is a daring and conscious act on the part of Barnett.

*Jam on the Vine* uses narrative as a tool for documentation, and re-writing black visibility. Barnett’s characters represent a potentially undocumented or ultimately forgotten community. Documentation is also present in the replication of archival records in the second portion of the novel, filled with fictional reproductions of letters and published news articles. These very densely curated writings are juxtaposed with a first kiss, passionate touches, a dildo with unexpected top/bottom configurations, and Ivoe as our sexual tour guide to lesbian life in the early twentieth-century Kansas City.