'Them' by Nathan McCall

Gray areas: when a black neighborhood turns white

By Paula L. Woods, Special to The Times

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Thirteen years after its publication, Nathan McCall's bestselling memoir, "Makes Me Wanna Holler," still reverberates in my mind. With its vivid images of his beating up whites on the streets of Portsmouth, Va., to the prison where he served time for armed robbery as well as found inspiration in the writing of Richard Wright, to his transformation into a Washington Post reporter, McCall's journey drew comparisons with Claude Brown's "Manchild in the Promised Land" and foreshadowed numerous gritty urban memoirs and novels from the likes of rapper Sister Souljah, poet Sapphire or California crack-addict-turned-attorney Cupcake Brown.

Yet years later, McCall's memoir and "What's Going On," a 1997 collection of essays, remain notable not only for their streetwise prose and trenchant social observation but for the author's willingness to take a hard look at his less-than-noble behavior. Among the standouts in the latter work are the essays "Old Town," concerning white gentrification of a black neighborhood in Alexandria, Va., and a meditation on black literature titled "Airing Dirty Laundry," in which McCall bemoans black America's aversion to revealing the race's shameful secrets and its shoot-the-messenger animus for those who do.

"The point is," he writes after noting how Mario Puzo and Philip Roth caught hell from their respective ethnic compatriots, "every race has dirty laundry, and it seems that every group is sensitive about how it's depicted in literature and film." And noting how some black critics attacked Alice Walker's "The Color Purple" and Terry McMillan's "Waiting to Exhale" as man-hating, he worries that "surely they'll come at the struggling wretches on the lower rungs of the black literary ladder, including me."

McCall's words may prove prophetic, because some 10 years later he has returned with "Them," a scathingly funny yet serious first novel on race and class that may spark the wrath of black and whites living in "transitional neighborhoods" who would just as soon not reveal their respective sins as they are just trying to get

along.

The novel revolves around 40-year-old Barlowe Reed, a printer and long-time renter in Atlanta's Old Fourth Ward, birthplace of Martin Luther King Jr. and spiritual heart of black Atlanta. Barlowe would remind you of one of those brothers at the barbershop or neighborhood council meetings, threatening not to pay taxes to an unjust government. Yet even when he's in a full-tilt meltdown, Barlowe isn't crazy, although his attack on a postage machine that won't dispense the black-themed stamps he prefers over American flags gets him thrown in jail for the weekend.

Through scenes both hilarious and poignant, McCall establishes Barlowe as a man of principle, even if he does lean a little toward conspiracy theory. So when he notices whites cruising the neighborhoodhe instinctively fears some sort of post-9/11 surveillance. "His whole life he'd felt people --*them* --watching like they expected him to do something violent or strange." It doesn't occur to him until much later that they are the harbinger of something far more ominous. Whites, "feather-footed in their Birkenstocks and tie-dyed shirts," are moving back into the neighborhood they'd inhabited early in the last century, buying and renovating long-neglected houses from elderly black residents or absentee white landlords.

The infiltration threatens Barlowe's cherished "dark, separate corner of the world": the older men who sit in front of the Mini-Mart, passing a pint and commenting on life's passing parade; the members of the Old Fourth Ward Beautification Committee who award an annual prize for the best-kept garden; even the denizens of the Purple Palace, a run-down rooming house where a younger crowd plays cards and drinks shots amid rumors of more sinister activities. But the threat remains amorphous until Sandy and Sean Gilmore, a young white couple, move into the house next door to Barlowe's and proceed to "improve" their property by building fences, calling the cops on drunken neighbors who stumble past and otherwise wreaking havoc on neighborhood traditions.

The addition of the whites' perspective, chiefly through the eyes of Sandy Gilmore, lends a resonance to the story that Barlowe's voice or that of the other black residents of the Old Fourth Ward could not convey alone, and allows readers to see into the hearts and souls of frightened whites whose "commitment to building bridges" is repeatedly tested. But more than getting Sandy's and the other white voices right, McCall also is dead-on in his depiction of the differences between whites and blacks when it comes to home improvement, community policing and problem-solving, themes he began to explore in his nonfiction but which are fully

and incisively realized here.

Despite "Them's" sidesplitting scenes in community meetings, whites' homes or at the Mini-Mart-cum-latte-shop, the novel's most intense action occurs across the fence that separates Barlowe's and Sandy's properties, a geo-racial divide where, amazingly, a fragile friendship grows, fraught with all of the cultural misunderstandings one could imagine between the races in the Old Fourth Ward, Brooklyn's Bed-Stuy or L.A.'s own Mid-City. Through it, Barlowe and Sandy are transformed into people sadder yet wiser, more resolute yet also more compassionate. It is this knowledge in the power of honesty across the color and property lines that makes "Them" a novel that may draw comparisons with Tom Wolfe's "A Man in Full," but manages, in its depiction of Atlanta's more downscale citizens, to go the master of New Journalism one better.

Paula L. Woods, a member of the National Book Critics Circle, is the author of the Det. Charlotte Justice novels, including "Strange Bedfellows."

Them
A Novel

Nathan McCall

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