



60 years out of Georgia

Oprah's new Book Club pick follows an African-American family's trail of tears

THE TWELVE TRIBES OF HATTIE, by Ayana Mathis. Alfred A. Knopf, 243 pp., \$24.95.

BY MARION WINIK
Special to Newsday

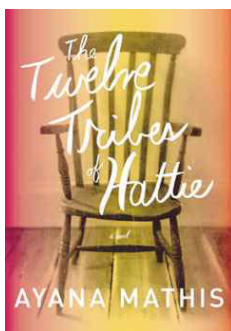
The Lord has spoken. “The Twelve Tribes of Hattie,” a debut novel by Ayana Mathis, is the next choice of the Oprah 2.0 Book Club. Iowa Writers Workshop graduate Mathis tells a grim tale, but equal to the grievousness of the events she describes is the power and beauty of her writing. This brutal, illuminating version of the 20th century African-American experience belongs alongside those of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston. In all the best ways, this is Oprah’s kind of book.

But be prepared: The story starts with the twin babies of a teenage mother dying in her arms after days fighting for their lives, without medicine, heat or money. Nothing good happens to Hattie Shepherd, or to any of the other 10 children that she raises after losing the twins, optimistically named Philadelphia and Jubilee. They are followed by Floyd, Alice, Billups, Franklin, Ruthie, Six, Bell, Ella, Cassie and Sala (actually Cassie’s daughter, Hattie’s grandchild), all welcomed into a life of grinding poverty and very little tenderness. Though their father, August, is occasionally affectionate and jokey, he’s so ineffective

a caretaker that his contribution makes no difference.

For most of her life, Hattie sees no other way to be. “Hattie knew her children did not think her a kind woman — perhaps she wasn’t, but there hadn’t been time for sentiment when they were young. She had failed them in vital ways, but what good would it have done to spend the days hugging and kissing if there hadn’t been anything to put in their bellies? They didn’t understand that all the love she had was taken up with feeding them and clothing them and preparing them to meet the world. The world would not love them; the world would not be kind.”

And it is not. In a series of vignettes spanning the years from 1925 to 1980, we follow the fates of Hattie’s children. Most find no happiness in love. Several have mental or emotional disorders, one is sexually abused, one is scalded with boiling water in early childhood, one has to be given up in infancy because there is no money to feed her. One is deeply shamed by homosexual feelings, one ends up on a hideous assignment in Vietnam, and another nearly dies of tuberculosis after betraying her mother with Hattie’s one old flame.



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An excerpt from “The
Twelve Tribes of Hattie”
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Author Ayana Mathis’ debut novel beautifully illuminates a dark and unsparing world.

What keeps the reader going on this trail of tears is the resonant truth the story contains, both emotionally and historically. Mathis’ evocation of the Jim Crow South and the Great Migration of blacks to the North begins with the murder of Hattie’s father in his blacksmith shop by white men “walking away . . . without enough shame to quicken their pace or hide their guns. Hattie had seen that and she could not unsee it.” In a chapter set about 25 years later, Hattie’s sister Pearl and her husband, Benny, are traveling from Georgia to Philadelphia by car. They stop at a clearing labeled “Negro Rest Stop,” where Pearl unpacks a basket

with linens, china, silver and a picnic of fried chicken, tomato salad, biscuits and peach cobbler. No sooner have they begun their meal than a car full of men — “mangy, half-starved white trash,” thinks Pearl, and liquored up, too — drives up to harass them and God knows what else. The suspense of this incident and the subtlety of its outcome are a good example of Mathis’ accomplished storytelling.

In the final chapter, Hattie and her husband, August (one of the wonders of the story is that this marriage lasts), have come to raise the heartbroken child of daughter Cassie, who has been institutionalized for schizophrenia. And as she

watches this child begin to be sucked down by the quicksand that has taken all the others, Hattie makes a stand. “Here we are 60 years out of Georgia, she thought, a new generation has been born, and there’s still the same wounding and the same pain. I can’t allow it. She shook her head. I can’t allow it.”

That the sliver of hope and possibility of change offered here — no more than a couple of paragraphs on the last page — means so much is a testament to the power of “The Twelve Tribes of Hattie.” I read the passage over and over the way one sucks a lemon drop, looking for and finding its sweetness.