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A fascinating, thoroughly researched historical novel of Haiti and Africa, and the early United States, outlining Haitians battle for freedom seen through the eyes of one man. This 1947 outing features Albion Hamlin, who comes to Boston in 1800 to defend a man accused of violating the Alien and Sedition Act. In a whirlwind of action, Hamlin is jailed, then escapes to Haiti in search of his client's daughter, Lydia Bailey, with whom he has fallen in love simply by gazing at her portrait. Roberts is known for his historical accuracy, so this should please fans of the genre.

Lydia Bailey Details

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Author : Kenneth Roberts

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John says

I realized pretty quickly that I might have to bail on this one due to racism, and yup...made it a little over a hundred pages. I was remembering how black characters were treated in "Oliver Wistwell," and when it became clear that the main character of this one was headed to Haiti, I kind of knew where we were headed. I might have soldiered on regardless, but the first few chapters weren't that great anyway. This book has a bad case of "as we all know so well" disease. Right from chapter one, there are characters going on long detailed rants about things like the Alien and Sedition Acts, even though all the characters in the room already KNOW everything about the Alien and Sedition Acts and this is clearly an awkward way of dumping out reams of exposition. "John Adams, who has been the president since 1796, signed the Alien and Sedition Acts to target Jeffersonians, as we all know so well!" Etc. You get the point.

And this is all in service of getting our hero (from Maine, obviously) to Haiti, where he can encounter wacky black comic relief characters. I'm sure defenders will claim that Roberts is sympathetic to Haiti and Haitians, and makes the villainous characters the "real" racists, and "product of its time" and all that, but the fact is that the book presents a picture of Haiti circa 1800 that is ignorant and misleading and counterproductive if you actually want to understand the history of Haiti. I need to go back to Roberts's books that are set in Canada, maybe. Does he have time to be racist in "Rabble in Arms"?

Ed Lehman says

Read this as a teen...don't remember what year but remember enjoying it.

Sarah says

I put this down about halfway through because the descriptions of many of the characters were racist and I lost interest.

Cyndi says

I saw a news story a few months ago about a man who had checked out this book about 60 years ago from his school library and found it. He did the right thing, and returned the book to the library. A cute piece for the evening news but when asked about the book, the man remembered it and said it was a good book so I decided to find it and read it myself. It is a good book.

Based on real events of the United States in Haiti and other parts of the world, the protagonist, Albion Hamlin, falls in love with a picture of a girl who he is told is dead and later finds out is alive. He sets off to Haiti to find her but that part of the world erupts in war. They get away and find they have been betrayed by a smarmy character who keeps cropping up and they are enslaved in Tripoli and fight again. I liked the personal story of Albion and Lydia.

So much political comment that seemed as relevant today as it did in the early days of America. One line from the book says so much. "But I'd be mightily interested in helping America to remember, with fireworks or anything else, the harm that the weakness, blindness, shortsightedness, selfishness, jealousy, and political rancor of small men in high places can bring upon their country and the world." When these small men (and women today) try to carve out a legacy, so many others get hurt in their wake and hundreds of years later, their legacy is shown for what it truly was, desperation.

Ian Durham says

I was prepared, early on, to give this a lower rating for some of the racial and gender stereotypes. A deeper consideration of this book gives me exactly the opposite view. In fact there was a bit of role reversal going on here. It was ultimately the portrayal of the character of King Dick, a Sudanese man, that stood out. King Dick was portrayed as an indefatigable and strong leader who, through his various connections, his ingenuity, and his worldly intelligence, repeatedly saved the day, as it were. The character of Hamet Karamanli was also strong as was the titular character Lydia Bailey. Roberts was, of course, partly constrained by history in what he could tell and how he could represent the characters who were historical. And I do think that he might have gone a tad overboard on some of the descriptions of people like Dessalines and Joseph Karamanli which did seem to play up stereotypes to some degree which is why I only gave it four stars. But it was enlightened even by some modern standards, but particularly so for a book written in 1947. King Dick was, hands down, the hero of this book and he was portrayed in a very non-stereotypical manner, at least in my reading of it. Of course, that is merely my own reading of it and, as a white male, I have a certain natural bias. But I thoroughly enjoyed it (though was angry at the ending which Roberts was bound to because of history).

Beakerkin says

I have read some of the criticism of this book and it is wholly unjustified. The Haitian Revolution was fairly brutal in comparison with other revolutions.

The book is a fine effort from a brilliant author. When one reads a Kenneth Roberts novel the best friend of the lead character is frequently more interesting than the lead. As for the book itself King Dick is the real star of the book. When the book was written in 1953 the notion of the Black Hero as seen in films much later was not even a concept.

The love story angle other than the falling in love with a woman from a painting is better developed than in other Roberts novels.

If you are reading for enjoyment this book is pleasurable on many levels. It imparts plenty of history without being a bore.

POINTER to those considering reading this book. When reading any work of Kenneth Roberts remember to store the names of people you meet in a few pages as you will frequently be seeing them later.

Steve Schinke says

Slow to start, but a good read of Haiti and the Barbary Coast. A bias, understandably, against pissant politicians that stop good people from doing the right things. I like the way the Roberts develops his characters.

Katrina McCollough says

Firstly, I never thought I would fall in love with a character named King Dick. I'm a horrible reviewer, but this book was one of the best I've read in so long. The dynamic of characters, the fluidity of time and places passing. Amazing read.

Readitnweep says

This story takes you on quite a ride. There is a romance within its pages but make no mistake - this is an adventure story. Lots of action and travel. The imagery is well crafted, and the characters are highly defined. At just over 600 pages, it's long but I had no problem staying with the story. Great ride!

Meleah says

amazon descrip: The fledgling settlement at the mouth of the Cape Fear is menaced by pirates in this novel set in the early 1700s. Blackbeard, working out of his base on Ocracoke Island, hinders the overseas trade that Huguenot refugee Robert Fontaine hopes will bring prosperity to Carolina coast. Fontaine's daughter's courtship and marriage to the enterprising David Moray add a romantic element to the novel. The action moves back and forth between Europe and points in the New World. This is the third novel in the author's Carolina Series.

Nina says

I read this in high school. Made no particular impression on me at that time. Then I read an article where 100 famous people told what their favorite historical novel was. Two or three said Lydia Bailey because it was their first clue that America hadn't always done things honorably. Either I already knew that or just didn't find it surprising. The novel covers the alien and sedition act and our less than honorable actions in Haiti and Tripoli. The little love story isn't bad, although I find Lydia herself annoyingly perfect. What struck me were the descriptions of blacks: "simian countenance;" "black banana lips;" "Black banana fingers"; and "wool" instead of hair. I guess that was acceptable in the 1940's when this was written, but makes me gag (and have a lesser opinion of Kenneth Roberts).

Deb says

Kenneth Roberts is a memorable author.... he goes through enough detail and adds enough human story that the history and story stay with you. But Roberts has that writing magic to make it feel real, as if i was living it, so it stays with me.

We should understand the fate of the colonial-based colonies and how each struggled for independence and the perils. I don't ask myself questions about why Haiti has NO trees on it anymore, or why the poverty is seemingly unshakeable. Roberts helps you live the entire story. Surprisingly, I was not left with the feeling that the French officials are 100% responsible for Haiti's condition today, close, but there is enough blame for all.

The Barbary War part of the story was completely new to me. I am sure there is another side to the story... but, politicians (man and politics combo) again illustrated their total ineptness. So interesting!!!!!!!

John says

This is historical fiction that takes place in New England, Haiti, Spain, and Arabia. There is romance, but mostly it's about war.

Maybe it's not one of this author's best, but it's very good. This was very gruesome and violent, but he was trying to stay historically correct. It was because of this revolution in Haiti that Napoleon was unable to attack the U.S. as he planned, leading to the Louisiana Purchase

Duane says

This historical novel is set in Haiti during the mid 19th century when it was a French colony fighting for independence. The novel was well written but brutally descriptive with very violent scenes. Very compelling characters with a little romance thrown in made it an entertaining read. Thanks to my Grandmother, I have a copy of this 1947 publication on my bookshelf.

Cindy says

I discovered Kenneth Roberts many years ago. He was a master storyteller who had a gift for turning research into fascinating stories.
