



## By the Light of My Father's Smile: A Novel (Ballantine Reader's Circle)

By Alice Walker

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**By the Light of My Father's Smile: A Novel (Ballantine Reader's Circle)** By Alice Walker

**By the Light of My Father's Smile** is Alice Walker's first novel in six years--a stunning, original, and important book by "one of the best American writers of today" (The Washington Post).

A family from the United States goes to the remote Sierras in Mexico--the writer-to-be, Susannah; her sister, Magdalena; her father and mother. And there, amid an endangered band of mixed-race Blacks and Indians called the Mundo, they begin an encounter that will change them more than they could ever dream. Moving back and forth in time, and among unforgettable characters and their stories, Walker crosses conventional borders of all kinds as she explores in this magical novel the ways in which a woman's denied sexuality leads to the loss of the much prized and necessary original self; and how she regains that self, even as her family's past of lies and love is transformed.

**By the Light of My Father's Smile** presents, as Alice Walker puts it, "a celebration of sexuality, its absolute usefulness in the accessing of one's mature spirituality, and the father's role in assuring joy or sorrow in this arena for his female children." It explores the richness and coherence of alternative culture, experience of sexuality as a celebration of life, of trust in Nature and the Spirit, even as it affirms the belief, as Walker says, "that it is the triumphant heart, not the conquered heart, that forgives. And that love is both timeless and beyond time."

*From the Hardcover edition.*

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**Bibliography**

- Sales Rank: #378250 in Books
- Published on: 1999-08-31
- Released on: 1999-08-31
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 7.15" h x .60" w x 5.01" l, .45 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 222 pages

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

The Mundo are a new tribe, created by the intermingling of escaped Black slaves and native Indians in the Mexican Sierras. Ineligible for academic funding, a husband-and-wife team of African American anthropologists pose as Christian missionaries to secure sponsorship to live among the Mundo and study their culture. This soul-stifling deception underlies the family tragedy at the heart of Alice Walker's novel, her first in six years. The father, preaching the message of his puritanical Protestant sponsors, is "sucked into the black cloth" of Christianity and blinded to the Mundo's life-affirming ways. When he discovers his daughter Magdalena's affair with a young Mundo, he beats her with a belt, thus estranging himself from both her and the younger daughter, Susannah. The first of several narrative voices to speak is his. Dead, he has become an "angel" who observes his daughters from the "other side" and seeks to make amends for the pain he inflicted on them in life.

It is the conceit of *By the Light of My Father's Smile* that angels have complete access to the consciousness of the living beings they observe. One of the book's very first scenes involves the ebullient lovemaking of Susannah and her partner, Pauline, reported in sweaty detail by the angelic paternal voyeur. Highly explicit, this set piece is a kind of guerrilla assault on our sensibilities, preparing us to receive Walker's urgent message--that sexuality and spirituality are inextricable, that denying one causes the other to atrophy as well. The blessings of fathers are, according to this canon, essential to the sexual flowering and spiritual maturity of their female offspring. It is in the loss, the conferring, and the claiming of these blessings that the novel finds its narrative thrust.

*By the Light of My Father's Smile* is intended perhaps less as a story than as a parable presenting Walker's cosmology for the new millennium--one that synthesizes ancient and modern wisdoms in a way that's as artistically daring as it is politically correct: Sex is good, repression is evil. Dominant is bad, distaff is good. European culture is dead meat, the third world is wise, there is ongoing commerce between the living and the dead, great orgasms shall set us free. Many readers will agree that a world built upon these precepts surely would be preferable to the one we now inhabit. Here, as in previous fictions, Walker the storyteller is spellbinding, Walker the preacher-theorist, less so. On the other hand, what other novelist risks so bravely or with such generosity, and seeks to give so much? With the proper mindset, Walker assures us, anyone can become a member of the Mundo tribe. --Joyce Thompson

#### From Publishers Weekly

A passionate but somewhat misguided polemic against the abuses of patriarchy, Walker's first novel since *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) tells the story of two daughters who overcome the sexual repression forced on them by their anthropologist father. In the early 1940s, the Robinson family travels to rural Mexico, where Mr. Robinson (who, unnamed, narrates most of the novel from beyond the grave) and his wife, Langley, are studying a doomed people known as the Mundo, the wise, egalitarian descendants of escaped slaves and Indians. The central event of the book comes when Mr. Robinson, ordinarily a gentle man, finds his 15-year-old daughter Magdalena having sex with a local boy, Manuelito, and beats her, in a scene witnessed by Magdalena's younger sister, Susannah. To the relief of Mr. Robinson's repentant ghost, both daughters find ways of fulfilling themselves despite this trauma: after an encounter with a fortune-telling dwarf (the village outcast in the native home of Susannah's Greek husband), Susannah leaves her husband and enters into a loving lesbian relationship; Magdalena, now a hugely obese academic, bumps into Manuelito (now an alcoholic, crippled, impotent Vietnam vet) on an airplane and, against all odds?in the

book's one disappointingly reticent love scene?reconsummates their love. The deeper reconciliation between father and daughters takes place in the spirit realm. Even Walker's fans are likely to find the novel hard going, as the narrative moves confusingly back and forth between living and dead characters, the past and the present. Between the highly schematic plot and the characters' habit of speaking in self-righteous pieties and (fictitious) indigenous proverbs, Walker can test one's patience. Yet her spare, charged language, and her earnestness (whatever one may think of her extravagant historical claims or her essentialism in matters of race) will no doubt continue to win her a wide readership. Author tour. Editor, Kate Medina; agent, Wendy Weil.

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From Library Journal

Reading more like an essay than a novel, this latest work by the prodigious Walker (Anything We Love Can Be Saved, LJ 5/1/97) is an "exploration of sexuality and how society's attitudes toward it have damaged both men and women."

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#### **David Anthony:**

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