

Patricia M. Muhammad
presents

Sweet As Murder

Interesting Facts:

Sweet As Murder is a mystery/detective romance/magical realism novel set in 1950s Atlanta, Georgia. One of the biggest events among those of the coloured elite is the annual baking competition. The author mentions the 'talented 10th' philosophy of the prolific educator and activist, W.E.B. DuBois. However, one of the characters assumes that she is not a part of this category and dismisses the importance of this notion. Though his ideology countered that of Booker T. Washington, both focused on the goal for the upliftment of the 'Negro' people.

1. The author included W.E.B. DuBois as he was a member of the intellectual coloured elite as well as the exclusive social scene of 'coloured' upper class. The Society that hosts the annual baking competition is a part of the coloured elite, but is also a part of the grander hierarchy in which they work within the very society that asserts that blacks cannot do for themselves.
2. The fictional society's mission is the upliftment of coloured folk through philanthropic endeavours, including gifts and supports to communities throughout the United States. This corresponds with DuBois' philosophy that the 'talented 10th' will likely be the ones to usher in a new era of progress for the 'Negro'.
3. Participants of the baking competition are primarily housewives, however, they are an important part of upholding the coloured family. The contest is not merely a display of culinary skills, but also a way for black women to socially engage in a presumably safe environment. During the 1950s and earlier, such competitions as well as visits among volunteer social clubs were part of the "society pages" of local newspapers and periodicals.

The baking competition is intense. History has shown that women will do anything to pull one another down. Within the 'Negro' community a nuanced envy exists which became known in modern terms as "crabs in a barrel" mindset. Scholars have noted this peculiar behaviour as an intergenerational mental defect. Laymen often refer to this psychological syndrome as being an "Uncle Tom", a pejorative based on the namesake character of a book written by Harriet Beecher Stowe. It manifests when one person of colour, in this context a black person, lacks the intelligence, skill, talent or otherwise is not qualified to be in a higher ranking position or granted a certain opportunity will use any form of deceit, torment, slander or the like to destroy the one person who is. They will pretend to be for the upliftment of the Negro whole, but their actions display just the

opposite. This social hypocrisy exhibits their true intentions, that they only sought self-aggrandizement and are willing to attack or even kill innocents in order to attain it.

The Society's mission is intended for the progress of coloured people. However, it seemingly subscribes to the 'talented 10th' philosophy that supports their search for the 'chosen one' each year. DuBois was an avowed Communist in real life, yet he worked for the betterment of his people. The author used Dorothy as a conduit to highlight the conflict between philosophy, goal and individualism. Dorothy uses Communism as a weapon against her fellow bakers with the knowledge that, at least in her understanding, that she is performing the duties assigned to her by the Society. She uses the philosophy that earlier Negroes incorporated in the unwritten manifesto for their race's improvement as a means to annihilate her competitors beyond the baking contest. This is exactly what the McCarthy hearings produced, destroyed lives.

4. In the end, Dorothy does not realize that she may be worse than what she perceives as the oppressive white male Congressmen who question her about *her* un-American activities. She unwittingly becomes the agent of the very system that she claims does not work for the benefit of all Americans. The reality is that neither did she. Dorothy transforms into a duped double-agent and her personal intent veils her from her self-destruction. She is of no further use to the Society. Dorothy would never be selected as the chosen one. She is now passed on to the Congressional guillotine that is ready for her execution.
5. During the earlier portion of the 20th century, coloured Americans enjoyed a limited freedom in associating with the Communist Party, Intellectualism, the Harlem Renaissance, and the solidifying of the coloured elite in the Northeast as well as the progression of higher institutions of education for coloureds seemed to be parallel to the furtherance of the Negro people within the United States. During the McCarthy era, however, innocent Negroes were brought before Congress on false allegations. Despite this, DuBois, with known affiliation with the Communist Party was also seized during what many called a 'witchhunt'.

Although it may have seemed rare or of legend that a female coloured detective existed in the 1950s, it would not be beyond the scope of American history for such a woman to be a pioneer in the workplace. In the 1930s, a Negro woman by the name of Eunice Carter was the first black woman to work in the New York district attorney's office. She also worked for the state dealing with welfare cases and helping women. In the 1920s, Josephine Baker, although by this time abroad as she was wholly embraced by Europe for her talent, was a war spy and an entertainer. Some scholars indicate that the depiction of the typical domesticated housewife ignored the discriminatory and impoverished reality of black women. They, just as during the time of municipal slavery, were at the bottom of the social and gender hierarchy.

6. Though the depiction of "coloured" women in this novel may seem a bit more fictionalized, there were Negro housewives who were able to fit within the above accepted societal mould as they were married to well-established

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coloured men. Their lives easily crossed over from domestic life to that of socialite, depending on which tier of the social hierarchy their husband's wealth placed them in.

7. Patricia M. Muhammad pens female black detectives as protagonists in her era-driven mystery/detective novels. In the *Speakeasy Murders*, the author writes the detective Helen Williams as initially being single until she goes undercover and meets the love of her life, an Englishman named Thaddeus. Career becomes easily secondary even if it was likely difficult to attain the position initially due to her race and gender. In *Murder By Dissent*, Jacqueline Thompson is a detective already wed to her British husband, but her case leads her to consider retiring from her career. The protagonists in both of these novels consider their jobs important, but their future and family life with their husbands take precedent.

Flounced skirts and dresses with hems stopping at or just below the knees were the popular form of fashion during the 1950s. Women wore gloves, their pocketbooks (handbags) and gloves. The women often wore folded scarves on their head tied just below the chin, usually for travel and visits. Upon their arrival they would relieve themselves of this fashion accent, revealing the popular hairstyles of their era.

8. The author used the feminine fashion of the 1950s to demonstrate that appearances can be deceiving. Although most of the bakers are polite, courteous and feminine, the progression of the competition elicits the true side of some of the others. Dorothy is the easiest to discern where her overbearing, aggressive and underhanded demeanor tears away the soft flounce of her fashionable appearance.
9. The dresses become a casualty during two events. The first is during Delilah's death. It once adorned a viable woman that may have been a strong contender in the baking competition. As her lifeless body lays, the dress is still, just as Delilah. The second time this juxtaposition of feminine with less than savory behaviour is the fight between Sarah and Wilhemina. Although Dankworth maintains her decorum throughout the conflict, she must engage in the physical altercation in order to defend herself. The detective is feminine but confronts the menacing predator in the form of Sarah. Not only did she hurl Dorothy's filtered false rumours, she leapt at Wilhemina with unwavering bestial instinct.