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#1 New York Times Bestselling Author

A
CALAMITY
OF
SOULS

a novel

THE #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

BOOK CLUB KIT

Author's Note



Author: David Baldacci
Credit: John Groo

I started writing this novel well over a decade ago, by hand, in a journal like the one my mother gave me as a child to jot down my stories. Then I set the manuscript aside to work on other projects, but something kept pulling me back to the story, and it has to do with my past.

I grew up in the sixties and seventies in Richmond, Virginia, the old capital of the Confederacy, home to all those statues of rebel elites on Monument Avenue. I was not born into economic privilege, and I grew up with an ethnic surname in a world steeped in the history of the Old South, where the names Lee, Jackson, Stuart, and Davis were revered by many. Thinking back, I believe I would not have become a writer had I not been born in that place and at that time.

I was observant and curious, and I remember much from my youth. Where I grew up, the Black-white divide was so ingrained that despite the efforts of the Civil Rights movement and the Warren Court, life was not so very different from many decades before. The old ways were intractable, and accepted to such an extent that most people never even thought about it, at least people who looked like me. And while I was the observer of racial bigotry and hatred, I was never the target. To borrow a line from Mark Twain, that is truly the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.

Author's Note

There are many autobiographical elements in this story, from how Jack Lee grew up—although decades earlier than I did—to the thoughts, questions, and misgivings he had about the world in which he lived, how books played an important role in forming his outlook on life, the sometimes confusing and conflicting relationships with family and friends, and the uneasy coexistence of Black and white worlds, for they were distinct, separate entities. Like Jack, I delivered the morning paper, and I grew up to be a trial lawyer. My mechanic father fixed up an old Fiat that I drove for a period of time. And there is a Tuxedo Boulevard in Richmond, and, yes, to the best of my recollection, the county dump was at the end of the all-Black neighborhood.

My sixth-grade class was one of the first in Virginia to be bused to a Black school, finally realizing *Brown v. Board's* ruling, albeit nearly twenty years late. It was an emotionally and mentally bewildering time for all the students, which I looked back on for quite a while as traumatizing. However, as I grew older, I came to understand that it had been necessary to allow children from different walks of life to finally be together after having been separated for centuries for purely toxic reasons.

When writing a novel dealing with race in America, the subject of the N-word usually comes up. I cannot think of another term that even approaches the heinous connotations of hatred and evil that stand next to it. However, to create a story set in 1968 that takes on issues of race and fails to use it in some form would be criticized, and justly so, as inauthentic at best, cowardly at worst. Thus, I have deployed it sparingly and in a hybrid form that may not satisfy some, but was the one I chose after much deliberation.

Author's Note

Though distinct elements of self-governance date back as far as ancient Greece if not further, democracies were a thoroughly unproven and unpopular form of governance when America came into being. At that time, the most powerful nations were organized under autocratic systems, usually monarchies, and “individual freedom” was an oxymoron. Although there are other legitimate claimants to the title, the United States of America is arguably the world's oldest nation with a continuously surviving democratic government; it is certainly the best-known example. However, having only been around for less than 250 years, we are an infant in the annals of history, and our existence has been, at times, uncomfortably turbulent.

There were multiple instances in our past when we were at each other's throats, and where a decisive breakup seemed imminent. We ultimately fought a costly civil war to end slavery and keep the union intact. Clearly, enough people believed the American experiment of freedom and self-governance was worth the blood shed on all those battlefields. However, none of us should ever take that sentiment for granted, lest our system of elected representation disappears from under our distracted gaze, taking our hard-won rights along with it.

Finally, I wanted to make this a story of two people from divergent life experiences who come together to tackle a problem as difficult as any America has ever confronted. I wanted it to be an unwieldy, fractious partnership, like the one experienced by those sixth graders decades ago. I wanted each to learn from the other, and for them to eventually find mutual respect and empathy for one another.

In the end, what can we strive for that is more vital, for all of us?

Discussion Questions

- 1) What was your reaction to the opening chapter, in which Jerome is being arrested? How did the scene set your expectations for the rest of the novel?
- 2) By the end of the novel, the key takeaway is that Jack and Desiree each needed the other in order to get a not-guilty verdict for their clients. What qualities/traits in each of them were critical to the success of their partnership?
- 3) After agreeing to represent Jerome, Jack immediately doubts whether he should have done so and if he has the skill to make a sound case for his client. What factors created this uncertainty in Jack and how do you think he overcomes them?
- 4) How do you think the case would have played out had Jack stepped down and allowed Desiree to take over completely? Additionally, how do you think it would have turned out had Desiree never come to town to offer her expertise?
- 5) In Freeman County, many of the citizens are resistant to change and the Black-white divide is staunchly held, even to the point of framing a Black couple for murder. While this is a fictional county, how did this story teach you about that time period in American history? Did you learn something new? If yes, what was it?
- 6) While Jack and Desiree aren't on trial for committing any crimes, they are still villainized by some for defending their Black clients and furthering the causes of social justice. And their work then puts their lives, and the lives of their loved ones, at risk. What would you have done if you found yourself in that position? Why?

Discussion Questions

7) Hilda Lee is a complex character with a past she wants to keep hidden and an outward appearance she wants to keep up. How do you think this affected the way she raised her children? What cues did Jack pick up on that shaped his view of the world, even if he didn't realize it?

8) At the end of the book, while justice is achieved, the ending is not completely happy. How did you expect the story to end and why did you come to that conclusion? And how did the actual ending make you rethink the ways in which people hold on to hate, even when there's evidence of innocence and inequality within the system?

Book Club Menu Suggestion

I mentioned Desiree's pot roast in the novel as a nod to my mother's cooking. Recipes for this classic meal can be found to suit every taste. Just make sure you're using boneless beef chuck roast, onions, celery, small red potatoes, carrots, and beef broth, along with rosemary, thyme, salt, and pepper. And whether you're using a slow cooker or a Dutch oven, cook it "low and slow" (as my mother used to say) and you'll be in for a treat. Pair it with homemade buttered biscuits and a tall glass of iced tea for a delicious and comforting meal.

And of course, no Southern home would be complete without a meal of fried chicken. I described the fixins for one such meal in my novel: chicken breasts and legs sizzling in Crisco, potato salad cooling in the refrigerator, green beans and stewed tomatoes simmering on the stove, and homemade chocolate sheet cake for dessert. Memories!



Recommendations for Further Reading

These are some of the works I read in preparation for writing *A CALAMITY OF SOULS*. They provided me with essential facts and critical information. Even more importantly, some of these works exposed me to the perspectives and experiences of others, which I could never have conjured or confronted on my own. And they allowed me to dig ever more deeply into a tumultuous time in American history.



Law Touched Our Hearts edited by Mildred Wigfall Robinson and
Richard J. Bonnie

Driving the Green Book by Alvin Hall

Afternoons with Harper Lee by Wayne Flint

Blue Laws and Black Codes by Peter Wallenstein

The Soul of America by Jon Meacham

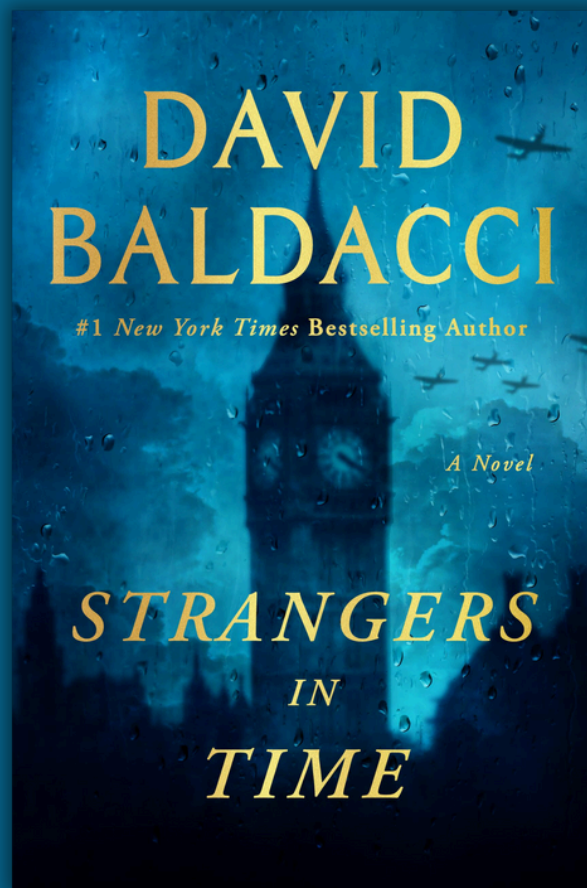
Chasing Me to My Grave by Winfred Rembert

We Face the Dawn by Margaret Edds

Visiting the Blues: PEN America 2021 Prison Writing Awards Anthology
by PEN America

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London, 1944. A bereaved bookshop owner and two teenagers scarred by war must work together to survive. But can they escape their own dark secrets?

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