
BOOK REVIEW: ZEOLA by Jewelene Banks

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Bringing Forth Our Memories of Times Past

Author Jewelene Banks brings forth a deluge of sweet memories in her debut novel, ZEOLA. Set in Ohio in the early 1970s, the story is a tale of faith, love and compassion in the African American community. It chronicles our culture and history here in the United States in ways that may have been forgotten by many.

Zeola Brown and her husband Jacob run a boarding house out of their home in Akron, Ohio after successfully rearing six children of their own. The Browns have taken in an assortment of colorful men and women whom they treat as family. These people may not have always had the best of lifestyles, yet they are accepted and not judged by the Browns. Zeola's well-stocked kitchen is where she prepares home-cooked meals and doles out dollops of wisdom braided with love to her residents. Many of them have no families of their own.

One of Zeola's newest boarders was a young woman from New York City named Jessica Jackson; she died in a horrible automobile accident. Unbeknownst to the Browns; she was eight months pregnant at the time of her death. Miraculously, the child survived the car crash and the Browns adopts the pretty little baby girl and raises her as their own. Annie Joy Brown grows up as the "little darling" of the boarding home residents. How the entire community and the church raise this child is the basis for the story. She longs to know the identity of her biological father despite the good life she has enjoyed. Annie's journey is full of sadness, joy, hope and faith.

ZEOLA is a delightfully easy read. You don't have to force it because it gives the reader an interesting story told very well. The author creates rich, full-bodied characters who are not only fascinating personalities, but they are also people with souls. Jewelene Banks is a natural storyteller. You settle into this story ready to hear it told. Using homespun wisdom, old folks' humor, poetry and Bible verses, the author gives you a portrayal of honest Christian folk who just want to do the right thing. It is a refreshing read. ZEOLA shows that having faith in a person can encourage him or her to do better. The story also shows how having faith in God can sustain you in hard times and difficult situations. The author portrays African Americans as kind-hearted and loving people. Her writing reminds me of a cross between writers, J. California Cooper and Maya Angelou. I think many readers will enjoy this novel.