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# The Saints of Banias

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

THE SAINTS OF BANIAS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Jennifer Maritza McCauley

2014

To: Interim Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Jennifer Martiza McCauley, and entitled The Saints of Baniyas, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgement.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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Lynne Barrett

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Meri-Jane Rochelson

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Debra Dean, Major Professor

Date of Defense: November 3, 2014.

The thesis of Jennifer Maritza McCauley is approved.

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Interim Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts and Sciences

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Dean Lakshmi N. Reddi  
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2014

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## DEDICATION

This novel is dedicated to Sonia Correa McCauley, my first reader and best friend; my brilliant father Jerry McCauley, and my endlessly optimistic brother Timothy. My family has given me their support, strength, love and history, and without them this novel would never have come to be.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

THE SAINTS OF BANIAS

by

Jennifer Maritza McCauley

Florida International University, 2014

Miami, Florida

Professor Debra Dean, Major Professor

THE SAINTS OF BANIAS is a novel set in a fictional slavetown in Louisiana during the Reconstruction Era. The work seeks to blend myth, magic, and history to create a world that is both believable and otherworldly. The novel follows Beah, an ex-slave girl travelling to the town of Baniyas in hopes of finding her mother; Prophet Moon, an itinerant vision-seer who offers to help Beah with her goal; and the founder of the town, Claude Baniyas, who struggles to protect Baniyas from bloodthirsty radicals. As the characters' lives intertwine, they face more challenges and secrets.

THE SAINTS OF BANIAS is loosely based on the biblical story of David and Bathsheba, with Claude acting as David, Beah as Bathsheba, and Prophet Moon as a hybrid of Nathan and Uriah. The novel primarily explores destructive love, the value of hope, and the price of preserving a culture.

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*Poor mourner's got a home at last  
Poor mourner's got a home at last*

*O, mourner, mourner  
Ain't you tired a-mourning*

*Bow down on your knees and join the band with the angels*

*No harm, no harm  
Go tell Brother Elijah  
No harm, no harm  
Poor mourner's got a home at last*

*O, sinner, sinner  
Ain't you tired a-singing*

*O, seeker, seeker  
Ain't you tired a-seeking*

*O, preacher, preacher  
Ain't you tired a-preaching*

- "Poor Mourner's Got A Home," American Negro Folksong

*My destination is no longer a place, but a new way of seeing.*

- Marcel Proust

**Part One: The Seen**

## **I. BEAH RUND**

*Eight miles outside of Thibodeaux, Louisiana*

*August 24th, 1874*

Beah found Prophet Moon in the field outside of the Griffin farm. She found him face-flat, dirty-shirted and twisted up in cordgrass. His hips jutted high, a stripe of white sun slept between his shoulder blades. A cypress, broken at mid-back, leaned over the prophet. Beah saw the scar curling down his left ear, down his neck. He had the mark Purple Gal said he'd have.

Beah didn't know how to wake a prophet. She wondered if she should poke him, kick him respectfully. Prophet Moon didn't twitch; his head didn't rise. She hoped he wasn't dead, or right about to die. Beah took a step forward, the urine-colored grass crunching beneath her little shoes. Beah sucked her teeth and waited. Prophet Moon didn't move. She waited more. The river bugs sagged over a dried-out stream nearby and bleated loud. Two cows, brown and muscle-heavy, grumbled and licked up mud. The ground beneath them all stank with earthy, swampy sweetness. The summer heat in Louisiana did that, made everything stink like something. The brown cows were stinking milk and shit; Beah was stinking sweaty, spicy human smells; Prophet was stinking like ash, rust and old things.

Prophet Moon groaned long. He blinked by widening his eyes big then shutting them into quick slits. He folded his body up and sat on his haunches. He threw his hands down and turned on his behind to face her, spreading dust as he turned. Prophet was younger than Beah thought he'd be. He was no boy; he'd certainly been alive longer than

Beah's seventeen years, but she guessed him to be a few years past thirty. From Purple Gal's talk, she thought Prophet Moon would be almost-elderly with hollowed out cheeks and latticed wrinkles. Instead, this man's face had a fresh, tawny glow, despite the haygrass and filth wedged in his beard. His eyes, though, his eyes felt true-old. Those two dark things seemed weighed down with past, too-much knowing, and magic.

Beah said a little, "Ahem." The Prophet didn't speak, just stared at Beah's forehead. He squinted, and finally moved his weird old-eyes from her face to her toes. Beah looked down at her clothes self-consciously. She was three months from turning eighteen and worked as an assistant to a dressmaker in New Orleans, but Beah still had a poor girl's clothes. Was she supposed to dress better? She didn't have much. Her once-fresh blouse now stuck wetly to her breasts and stomach. Her red plaid skirt was still wrinkled from the nap she'd taken a few hours ago. At least she'd washed out the buckmouths, nips, and hard mud from her scalp and plaited her hair. She re-tied the ribbon at the end of her braid.

Prophet just kept staring, but he wasn't looking at her the way men do when they want a lady's inside-parts. He was going past the skin, looking past blood, all the way to cloudy spirit.

Beah gulped and came up to a half-bend, slowly.

"You want something, gal?" Prophet said.

Beah licked her lips. She wasn't ready to answer the question so quickly.

"Sorry I woke you, sir. Seemed you were sleeping dead."

The Prophet let out a “hm,” that was neither friendly nor condescending.

Beah elaborated, politely. “I mean you look like a dead man when you sleep. Don’t know how a body can breathe with his nose pressed in the ground like that.”

The edges of Prophet’s lips flicked up. Beah felt a little better.

“I can breathe just fine, little gal, don’t worry. Don’t see how I sleep.”

Beah pointed her chin up at the farmhouse, its roof wilting at the center. She said, “They won’t let you sleep inside? Bad folks up there?”

Prophet brushed grass bits from his cotton tunic. “They good. They good folks who do good things. I do a little work for them and they give me a cot if I need it. But some days, I like sleeping outside. I can see what I need to look upon better.”

Beah didn’t like the outdoors unless she was sitting on a fine porch, watching the Louisiana sun crumble behind live oak. She’d seen enough of the outdoors when she ran from Master Rund’s place at nine years old. She couldn’t appreciate the wobbling water, bone sky, and fluttering warblers the way Prophet Moon probably could.

“What things you see better, sir?” Beah asked.

“You know, don’t you, dahlin’? Or else you wouldn’t be coming here seeking me out in my quiet place.”

Beah fell back into her crouch. “Truly, I ain’t trying to trouble you. I came down here from New Orleans with my mistress few days back to work on some wedding dresses for her relations. Met a shopgirl named Purple and we got to talking. She say she got family in a little town that folks say is Zion-like and some of them folks is from Rund’s plantation. I done told her I’m from Rund’s place.”