

Palace Council by Stephen L. Carter. Jonathan Cape 2008.

This is the first novel by Stephen L. Carter, Professor of Law at Yale University, that I have read, and I have since purchased his previous two.

Palace Council is a big story set against the background of three decades, the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, and largely concerns the lives of several Harlem residents, most from the highest echelons of Harlem society.

Palace Council reverberates with historical authenticity, and alongside its fictional characters has a number of real-life protagonists, not least the monstrous J Edgar Hoover of the FBI, the infamous Richard Nixon and the even more infamous Joseph Kennedy, father to John F. and Robert. And lurking behind both the fictional and real characters is a plot decisively to influence American politics with which several key Harlem figures are associated.

The principal characters in Palace Council are Eddie Wesley, a writer whose star is poised to go stratospheric, and who engages with many of the celebrated causes of these three decades, and his lost love Aurelia Garland, married to the scion of one of Harlem's great families; their separate and later shared lives are dominated by the disappearance of Eddie's sister, her involvement in a shadowy urban terrorist movement, and the search for her which spans two decades.

Stephen L. Carter provides his readers with a sustained and fascinating insight into the lives of America's black community at a time when discrimination and segregation were rife, and above all tells a story that is gripping, enthralling and beautifully described. This is a deeply satisfying read by a writer probably not yet at the height of his powers.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh