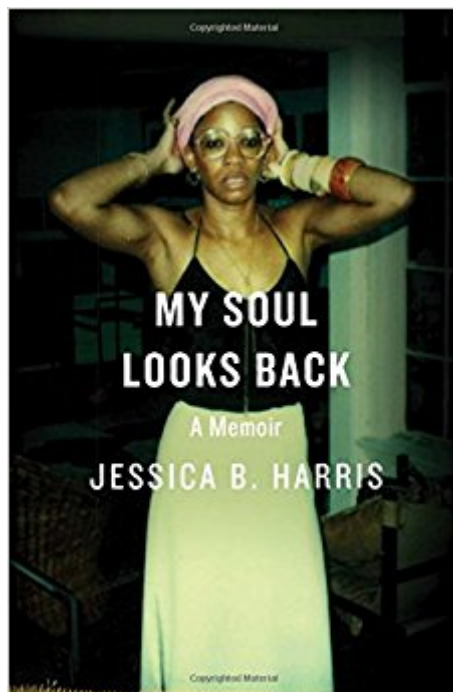


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# My Soul Looks Back: A Memoir



## Synopsis

In this captivating new memoir, award-winning writer Jessica B. Harris recalls a lost era—the vibrant New York City of her youth, where her social circle included Maya Angelou, James Baldwin, and other members of the Black intelligentsia. In the Technicolor glow of the early seventies, Jessica B. Harris debated, celebrated, and danced her way from the jazz clubs of the Manhattan's West Side to the restaurants of the Village, living out her buoyant youth alongside the great minds of the day—luminaries like Maya Angelou, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison. *My Soul Looks Back* is her paean to that fascinating social circle and the depth of their shared commitment to activism, intellectual engagement, and each other. Harris paints evocative portraits of her illustrious friends: Baldwin as he read aloud an early draft of *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Angelou cooking in her California kitchen, and Morrison relaxing at Baldwin's house in Provence. Harris describes her role as theater critic for the *New York Amsterdam News* and editor at then burgeoning *Essence* magazine; star-studded parties in the South of France; drinks at Mikel's, a hip West Side club; and the simple joy these extraordinary people took in each other's company. The book is framed by Harris's relationship with Sam Floyd, a fellow professor at Queens College, who introduced her to Baldwin. More than a memoir of friendship and first love *My Soul Looks Back* is a carefully crafted, intimately understood homage to a bygone era and the people that made it so remarkable.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"[N]ever, to this reader, uninteresting ...*My Soul Looks Back* has a simmering warmth." *The New York Times* "Eloquent and infinitely delightful." *Essence* "This is a lively, entertaining, and informative recounting of a time and place that shaped and greatly enriched American culture." *Publishers Weekly* "Scenic and engaging, *My Soul Looks Back* recounts the years author Jessica B. Harris spent on the periphery of a circle of friends that included literary powerhouses James Baldwin, Maya Angelou, and Toni Morrison. The memoir spans the globe and several decades to describe the fascinating group." *Kirkus Reviews* "Come for the insight into the circle of friends that first resolved around James Baldwin, then shifted orbit to revolve around Maya Angelou. Stay because you're enraptured by the candid, passionate woman narrating from the periphery. This is an intimate look at an inner circle of Black writers, scholars, and gals moving through the middle of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, told with bold tenderness by a woman who grew up in their company, under their gaze." *Alice Randall*, author of *Ada's Rules* and *The Wind Done Gone* "At table, before a lectern, or on the page, no matter where we encounter Jessica B. Harris, she commands our attention. *My Soul Looks Back*, her most intimate book, showcases an era when the Black artistic elite flowered and Jessica, along with her love Sam Floyd, lunched with Maya Angelou in California, shared popcorn with James Baldwin in the South of France, and nurtured a social aesthetic that spangled, all too briefly, beneath the klieg lights." *John T. Edge*, author of *The Potlikker Papers: A Food History of the Modern South* "In *My Soul Looks Back*, Jessica Harris uses her amazing griot voice and exquisite writing skills to take the reader with her on a serendipitous journey filled with everything from a sampling of her unique culinary creations to up-close-and-personal looks at some of the world's most renowned artists—from James Baldwin, aka Jimmy, to the inner circle she was allowed into by her mysterious lover, Sam. A tour de force that holds its own among the great memoirs of all time." *Charlayne Hunter-Gault*, Emmy Award-winning journalist and author of *In My Place* "Jessica Harris takes you on a magical journey through the streets of New York, through a distinctive and historical era." *Pat Mikell*, of Mikell's jazz club "I devoured Jessica B. Harris's *My Soul Looks Back* as though it were one of the feasts she describes in its pages—brimming with food, wine, wit, and wisdom. This luminous and illuminating memoir is also a song of love and praise to the heyday of bohemian, intellectual New York, and especially to the African American arts and literature community that has supplied the city with so much of its brilliance and vibrancy." *Rosie Schaap*, author of *Drinking with Men*

Jessica B. Harris is one of a handful of African Americans who have achieved prominence in the culinary world. She holds a PhD from NYU, teaches English at Queens College, and lectures internationally. The author of the memoir *My Soul Looks Back* as well as twelve cookbooks, her articles have appeared in *Vogue*, *Food & Wine*, *Essence*, and *The New Yorker*, among other publications; she has made numerous television and radio appearances and has been profiled in *The New York Times*. Considered one of the preeminent scholars of the food of the African Diaspora, Harris has been inducted into the James Beard Who's Who in Food and Beverage in America, received an honorary doctorate from Johnson & Wales University, holds awards from sources too numerous to note, and recently helped the Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture to conceptualize its cafeteria.

Good book. It reminded me of growing up, when people cared for each other and any occasion (sometimes none at all) were a reason to get a group of friends together for friendship and bonding. Ms. Harris' life was a joy to read. It was interesting and made you want to keep reading. It even brought back memories for me from the 70's that was very nice to re-visit. This is a remarkable woman with a remarkable story to share with us the reader. Very good and feel good book. Thanks to NetGalley, the author and the publisher for the ARC of this awesome book in return for my honest review.

I received an ARC of this book from Netgalley for free in exchange for an honest review. Jessica Harris has written a delicious memoir about her time with Sam Floyd and the entree that gave her to a circle of friends that is legendary. From James Baldwin to Maya Angelou and most of the African American intelligentsia of the 1970s forward, she was a part of a truly vibrant time in art, writing, and other creative endeavors. I really enjoyed the personal tone of the book. It was juicy without becoming mean or gossipy. I loved that each chapter ended with a recipe - it tied her academic interests beautifully with her personal life and how important shared meals were. I read this book in one sitting. I didn't have the self-control to pace myself and savor each chapter. I plan to re-read it more slowly in the near future.

*My Soul Looks Back* by Jessica B. Harris is a free NetGalley ebook that I read in early May. An extremely intuitive 1970s memoir in Manhattan with precise, local detail. I had really geeked out over the mention of James Baldwin being part of the author's circle of creative, sage, intellectual friends (since I just watched the documentary, *I Am Not Your Negro*). The author gains entry into

this circle by way of Samuel Clemons Floyd III's involvement in the SEEK program (dates him and shares his interests of sonorous gospel music, poetry, and golf) and attends/hosts flush & lush dinner parties. Recipes for New Years' kale, ten-boy curry. She describes her childhood, family, upbringing, going to United Nations International School (learns French), High School of Performing Arts, and Bryn Mawr; travels to Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, Haiti, Cote d'Ivoire (initially called a bitch by Nina Simone, but quickly recruited as a personal assistant once she finds that the author knows French). Sam's dies from complications of AIDS in the late 1980s and mourns him with Maya Angelou. The book finishes with aftermaths/postscripts on each member of her social circle.

Not what I expected but it was a good read. From the synopsis, I thought this would be a book about lively times with famous people. It seemed dreary to me and I think her "circle of friends" should have been called "circle of acquaintances" instead. The story was well written but a little too flowery at times and the name dropping almost made me dizzy trying to keep up. For those that love cooking, recipes are included as an added bonus.\*\*I received a complimentary copy of the book in exchange for an honest review\*\*Kenya ESoul Sistahs Book Club

My Soul Looks Black by Jessica B. Harris is a great memoir. Her book is about famous African Americans featured in New York. Yet, I felt this Read fell flat. She spoke about the people but didn't give more details about them that would have made this more of a fascinating read. It seemed like she mostly talked about those around her and not about having direct contact with these people mentioned. When she mentions a little bit about herself, it was okay. Still Jessica B. Harris could have done more for this memoir. I was interested in the title of this book and was curious as to what it held. After reading it, I'd say it's okay but not exceptional. 3.5-stars

An extremely sensitive and compelling story of NY in the 60s and the life and times of some of Americas greatest literary figures. This brilliantly told story is not only a page turner but a deeply emotional and touching insight into the plaque that swept America in the 70 and 80. Eloquently written by Jessica Harris this tale is a must for anyone born before 1950.

I have just begun this book but so far, so good. Very interestingly written and wonderful topics!

A very good read. Kept my interest as she brought the characters to life.

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