

A READING GUIDE TO

Pacific Avenue

By Anne L. Watson



Shepard & Piper

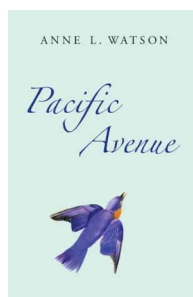
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About the Book

Where do you go from the end of the line? This is the question facing Kathy Woodbridge as she steps off the bus in the port city of San Pedro, California. Nineteen years old, from Louisiana, she is running away from her past. There's a lot to run away from.

What do you do when there's no one to do for? That's what Lacey Greer wants to know, with her only child off at college. When Kathy gets a job at the office where Lacey works, she can tell that Kathy's in trouble. Lacey's husband advises her to stay out of it—but what's she supposed to do, buy a rocking chair?

Set in San Pedro, Baton Rouge, and New Orleans in the early seventies, *Pacific Avenue* explores themes of love, belonging, helpfulness, hope, forgiveness, reconciliation, interracial marriage, and healing from the trauma of war. At the end of the line, will Kathy find a way to return home?



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About the Author

Anne L. Watson is a retired historic preservation architecture consultant and now pursues a variety of interests, including photography, soap-making, and puppetry. She is the author of several other books, including the epistolary novel *Skeeter: A Cat Tale*. Anne has lived at various times in New Orleans, Baton Rouge, and San Pedro, California, the settings of *Pacific Avenue*. She currently lives in Olympia, Washington, with her husband and fellow author, Aaron Shepard.

Anne is glad to interact with reader's groups by email, phone, video chat, or in person for local groups. You can find her online at www.annelwatson.com or write her at Anne@annelwatson.com.



Reviews and Comments

“A magnificent story. The writing is superb, the main characters are three-dimensional and very human. . . . Combines elements of hope and happiness with tragedy and triumph, and ends up with that compromise known as reality. . . . Ms Watson has packed a world into less than 320 pages.”

J. Cameron-Smith, Amazon Top 500 Reviewer

“Quickly lights up into a dynamic and vivid story that will capture most readers’ interest and hold it to the very end. . . . Told in a suspense-filled manner. There is no way any reader can predict or anticipate the powerful blow that alters Kathy’s world forever but with which she eventually makes peace. . . . Most highly recommended.”

Erika Borsos, Amazon Top 500 Reviewer

“Captivating. . . . So raw in its emotions, I had to keep reminding myself this was fiction. . . . Not predictable in any way.”

Sandy Heptinstall, Whispering Winds Book Reviews

“Absolutely wonderful. . . . I was extremely surprised by the quality of the writing of Anne L. Watson. She delivered the complete package: a well-crafted plot, proficiently-developed characters, and a writing style that has nothing to be jealous of the greats in the genre. The fact that I read this novel in one sitting speaks to the kind of grip the story gets on the reader. . . . I do not exaggerate when I say this is one of the best books I have read in the last few years.”

Sebastian Fernandez, Amazon Top 1000 Reviewer

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December 1974, Interstate 10, Westbound

Kathy

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I CHOSE A WINDOW SEAT on the Greyhound, but I didn't look out. For almost the whole trip, I stared at the rough tan upholstery of the seat in front of me. It had a rip on one side and three dark stains.

A woman settled into the aisle seat. She raised her footrest, but it clunked back down. When I glanced her way, she caught my eye and smiled.

"How do you make these things stay put?" she asked.

I meant to answer—the words were lined up in my mind. But before I could say them, they slipped apart like beads when the string breaks. I gave up and studied the seat cover again. Still tan, still ripped, still stained. The next time I looked, the woman was gone.

Evening came, but I didn't use my reading light. Late at night, awake in the breathing dark, I imagined running my fingers over the seat back, erasing the stains, mending the seam. In the morning, I almost believed I could fix it. So, I took care not to touch it, not to find out for sure.

In the afternoon, the bus left the freeway and crept through downtown traffic. I turned then, and peered through the mud-spattered window. As far as I could see, Los Angeles was a city of warehouses. I sank back into my seat.

When we reached the station, I claimed my suitcase and dragged it through the waiting room to the street. Outside I found blank walls and empty sidewalks. No direction and no one to ask.

Well, I ran away from college, then from New Orleans, and then Baton Rouge. Is it too soon to run away from here?

The traffic light at the end of the block turned green, and cars passed me by. When a city bus stopped and opened its doors, I climbed on. I couldn't think what else to do.

I paid the fare and took a seat near the front. Even though I pulled my suitcase aside, it poked out into the aisle. More people piled on at every stop, and all of them had to squeeze past it. I expected everyone to glare, but nobody gave me a second glance.

The bus started, stopped, started again. We passed through neighborhoods with trees and shops. The crowd thinned as passengers got off, going home. *Should I get off too? No, not here. Where? Next stop, no, the one after. No, not that one.* Every stop would be a whole different life, a different second chance.

Choose, choose. I couldn't. I rode till the bus pulled over and parked.

"Seventh and Pacific, San Pedro, Port of Los Angeles," called the bus driver. He turned to me and added, "End of the line, Miss."

I waited till the other passengers got out, hoping the driver would help me with the suitcase. He watched blank-faced as I wrestled it down the steps. Setting it on the sidewalk, I looked around.

I'd reached the end of the line, all right. Pacific Avenue was like a street in some Third World country. The candy-colored buildings were old and grimy. Christmas tinsel sparkled around the windows, but the sidewalk glitter was broken glass and gobs of spit. The crosswalk lights cycled green and red, green and red. Their afterimage flashed inside my head when I closed my eyes: *Walk, Don't Walk. Choose, choose.*

I couldn't decide which way to go. The bus pulled away in a cloud of exhaust. A man ran past me, shouting, "Hey, stop, hey! Son of a bitch!" A few steps behind him, a woman jerked a crying child along by the arm. Gusts of wind sent sidewalk trash skittering after them like rats.

Seventh Street looked quieter, so I tried it first. But after the first block, the buildings thinned out and the street plunged downhill toward a gleam of water. Silhouettes of tall cranes made black Xs against

the evening sky. Like scissors, waiting to cut it into strips. Nothing but the port down there. Nothing there for me.

So, it had to be Pacific Avenue. Night was coming, and I dreaded wandering the streets after dark with no place to stay. I backtracked quickly, then began to search for motels, rooming houses—anything halfway decent.

All I saw was stores. I passed the Thrif-T-Mart, with its displays of sun-bleached plastic housewares. The Angel Bakery—a wedding cake behind plate glass, a ventilator spewing the scent of sugar and grease. Next door, a boarded-up entryway added a reek of stale pee. A pigeon flapped past my face. Flinging up my hands to ward it off, I dropped the suitcase on my foot. My eyes filled with tears, but I didn't have time for them. I grabbed the suitcase handle and kept going.

I scanned the signs, but some of them meant nothing to me—Baile, Mariscos, Menudo Hoy. For all I knew, any of those might have meant Rooms. I hesitated a couple of times, but the places didn't look like boarding houses, so I walked on by. I passed Antiques, in a window with a black velvet painting of Elvis and a tangle of pole lamps. The next block offered Ten Minute Oil Change, Auto Upholstery, and Radiator. Everything for cars, nothing for people.

In the block after that, I rested beside a storefront—Salvation Army, used Christmases for sale. The dinged-up manger scene in the window was nothing like my family—the mother, the father, and the baby were all there. I laid my hand, then my forehead, against the cool glass. *Oh, God, let me find a place to sleep tonight.*

When I turned back to the street, I thought I saw a sign advertising Room and Board. I hurried toward it, suitcase bumping my legs. Two motorcycles roared from behind me and pulled over to the curb a few yards ahead. One of the riders looked back, and the low evening sun flashed from his blank helmet. Faceless, dangerous.

I bolted across the street, hardly checking for traffic, and scrambled back the way I'd come. Didn't even look over my shoulder for half a block, but when I did, no one was following. Shaking, I set the suitcase down and leaned against a wall. Right beside me hung another sign, Madame Sofia—The Mystic Eye—Botanica.

The dusty store window displayed roots, stones, and cards, like the voodoo shops in New Orleans. A sign propped against a plaster pyramid said Apartment for Rent. I went in.

A woman sat behind the counter of the dim shop, spotlighted by a small lamp. A black-and-white cat sat beside her.

She didn't smile as I came toward her. Her eyes were almost opaque, like pale blue marbles. Her face seemed young, but her hair was white as a piece of paper and nearly as straight. Dime-sized mirrors glittered on her embroidered dress as she reached for a tarot pack at her elbow.

"Tell you the future, five dollars."

I would have paid more than that not to know.

"I came about the apartment," I said.

"Apartment?" She sounded so confused, I wondered if I'd come to the wrong place.

"The sign in the window," I prompted.

"Oh, the *apartment*. Two hundred a month, utilities included. You want to see it?"

"Yes, please."

She led me out the way I'd come and around the corner to a side door. Instead of unlocking it, she turned back to me.

"What's your name?"

"Kathy Woodbridge."

"Where you from, Kathy?"

"Illinois." My voice sounded squeaky and forced, but she didn't seem to notice. She let me into a narrow hallway that might have been white the last time it was painted.

A fluorescent tube flickered on the ceiling. The mustard-yellow carpet was a felted material that trapped twigs and cockleburrs. The only way to get rid of them would have been to pick them out by hand, but it looked like no one ever did.

I followed her up a dark red stair at the far end of the hall. At the top were three doors.

"This used to be offices," she said, "but I decided to remodel them into apartments. There'll be two, but only one is ready." Judging by that faded For Rent sign, she was taking her time about it.

“What’s the third door?” I asked.

“Stairs to the roof.”

She unlocked the apartment door, jiggling the key to make it work.

I could tell the apartment had been patched together from offices. The rooms were all misfits—a living room with tin cabinets in one corner to make a sort-of kitchen, then a too-small bedroom and a too-big bathroom.

At least it was clean. Rips in the linoleum floor were mended with parallel lines of tacks. Everything else, even the light switches and door-knobs, had a fresh coat of paint.

I tried to raise one of the living room windows, but it stuck. Giving up, I stood and looked down at Pacific Avenue, its shabby buildings all but erased by the dusk. If I didn’t take this place, I’d have to go out there and find another one.

I turned and considered the room again, wondering if I could stand to live in it. Madame Sofia watched me take it all in.

“The walls are white to go with your curtains and rugs,” she pointed out.

Pictures swirled through my mind, almost like a movie. *I open my suitcase and pull out my curtains and rugs. A bookcase, a table, all my old stuff. My suitcase is bottomless. I pull out books, dishes, my paints and wood-carving tools, marionettes, our bed. Last of all, Richard steps out, with Jamie toddling beside him.*

Tears stung behind my nose, but I pulled myself together. Madame Sofia hovered expectantly. *Well, if she sees the future, guess she knew all along I’d go for it.* I didn’t have two hundred in cash, but I still had my old checkbook. I fished it out of my purse and began to write.

“Make it to Marilu Collins,” she said.

I had already written “Madame Sofia,” so I started over with a new check. No reason to save them—two hundred dollars about cleaned out the account. As I handed her the check, I realized my old address was on it and stifled an impulse to grab it back. But she didn’t even glance at it, only tucked it into her pocket and gave me the key. I said good night and closed the door—*my door*—as she went downstairs.

A box of crackers and a bag of raisins from my suitcase would do for dinner. As I ate, the room went dark except for streetlights fanned across the ceiling. I spread my coat on the floor to sleep on and wadded up clothes for a pillow.

That was my first night on Pacific Avenue. Nobody knew my name but the woman dressed in mirrors. And no one at all knew where I came from, or why.

Questions for Discussion

1. Compare the issues of the early 1970s with issues today. How might the story have played out differently in the present?
2. To what extent are the novel's themes tied to its locations? Would the story have unfolded differently in other cities?
3. Kathy's family members differ greatly in their positions on contemporary issues. How does this affect her own opinions?
4. Richard fears racial violence less than Kathy does. Could this be due to his military upbringing? How and why does the racial culture of military bases differ from that of civilian towns?
5. Lacey has wildly conflicting feelings about her daughter growing up. Have you experienced something like this yourself or seen it in others? Is it more common when the child is an only child?
6. Lacey believes that gender discrimination is harder to fight than is racial discrimination. Is she right?
7. Because of Jamie, Kathy's father undergoes a change of heart. To what extent does the appeal of his grandchild override his feelings about Richard? How might his attitude have changed further if he had lived another twenty years?
8. Do you believe that Kathy and Richard have a strong future together?

A Note from Anne

I began *Pacific Avenue* with a greater sense of place than of characters. I put my main character, Kathy, into the gritty world of Pacific Avenue in San Pedro, California, a place I knew well. To my surprise, she began to walk around, think for herself, and talk back to me.

She brought up long-forgotten pictures of my years in New Orleans as well. Of men who came back from Vietnam, with their unimaginable memories. Of families struggling with the war, and with racial justice. Kathy is a young woman who “lives in interesting times,” as the saying goes.

So, *Pacific Avenue* grew out of my love of these two places—San Pedro and New Orleans—and out of memories of the turbulent late ‘60s and early ‘70s. But it is not simply a political novel. It is a story of personal lives, loves, and coming of age.

It’s also a story of an artist’s development: Kathy becomes a puppeteer, and the puppets’ stories are added to her own. Years before I wrote the book, I was a puppeteer myself. When my husband suggested I include this experience in the book, I knew it was exactly what the story needed.

Though it deals with serious issues, this is not a novel of despair. Instead, it weaves together love, loss, altruism, and forgiveness. I see it as a story of hope.

Author Online!

For more about Anne L. Watson
and her work, please visit her at

www.annelwatson.com