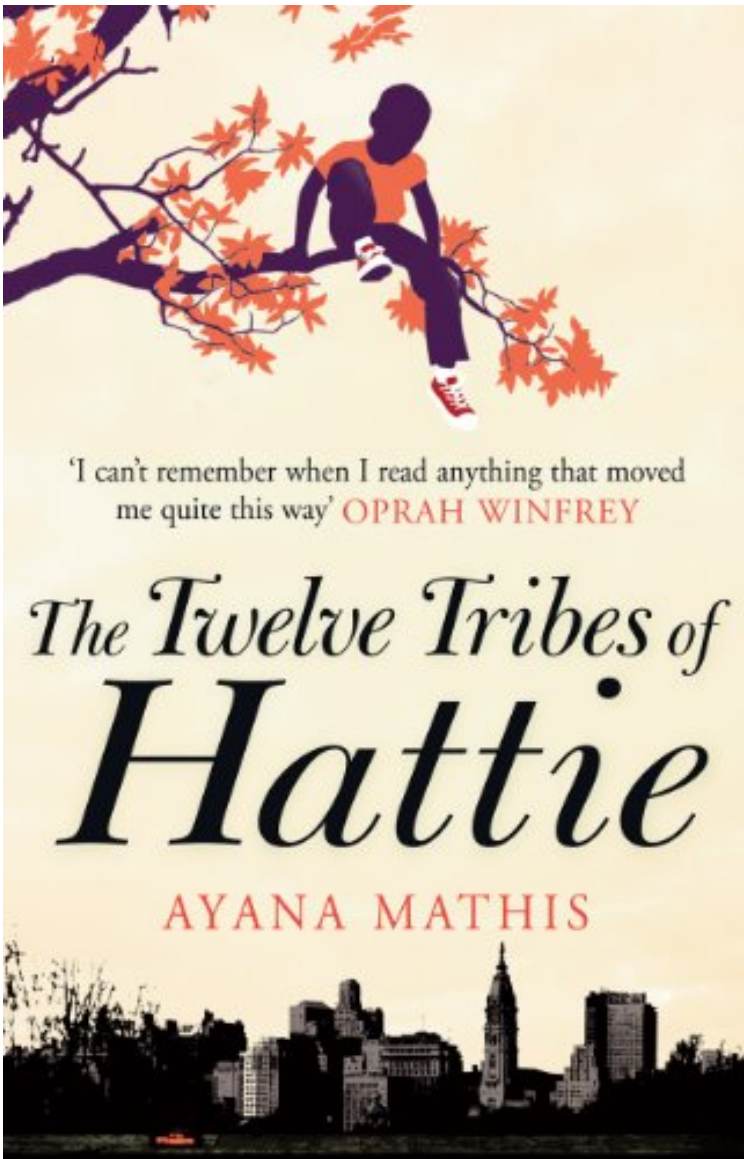


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The Twelve Tribes of Hattie



Par Ayana Mathis
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurNEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER'I cant remember when I read anything that moved me quite this way, besides the work of Toni Morrison. Oprah Winfrey'Mathis traces the fates of Hatties 12 children and grandchildren over the course of the 20th century . . . [it] is remarkable.' Sunday Times'Ms. Mathis has a gift for imbuing her characters stories with an epic dimension that recalls Toni Morrisons writing.' New York TimesFifteen years old and blazing with the hope of a better life, Hattie Shepherd fled the horror of the American South on a dawn train bound for Philadelphia.Hatties is a tale of strength, of resilience and heartbreak that spans six decades. Her American dream is shattered time and again: a husband who lies and cheats and nine children raised in a cramped little house that was only ever

supposed to be temporary. She keeps the children alive with sheer will and not an ounce of the affection they crave. She knows they don't think her a kind woman but how could they understand that all the love she had was used up in feeding them and clothing them. How do you prepare your children for a world you know is cruel? The lives of this unforgettable family form a searing portrait of twentieth century America. From the revivalist tents of Alabama to Vietnam, to the black middle-class enclave in the heart of the city, to a filthy bar in the ghetto, *The Twelve Tribes of Hattie* is an extraordinary, distinctive novel about the guilt, sacrifice, responsibility and heartbreak that are an intrinsic part of ferocious love.

Excerpted from the Hardcover Edition Ruthie 1951 Lawrence had just given the last of his money to the numbers man when Hattie called him from a public telephone a few blocks from her house on Wayne Street. Her voice was just audible over the street traffic and the baby's high wail. It's Hattie, she said, as though he would not recognize her voice. And then, Ruthie and I left home. Lawrence thought for a moment that she meant she had a free hour unexpectedly, and he might come and meet them at the park where they usually saw each other. No, she said. I packed my things. We can't . . . were not going back. They met an hour later at a diner on Germantown Avenue. The lunch rush was over, and Hattie was the lone customer. She sat with Ruthie propped in her lap, a menu closed on the table in front of her. Hattie did not look up as Lawrence approached. He had the impression that she'd seen him walk in and had turned her head so as not to appear to be looking for him. A cloth satchel sat on the floor next to her: embroidered, somber-hued, faded. A bit of white fabric stuck up through the latch. He felt a rush of tenderness at the sight of the bag flopping on the linoleum. Lawrence lifted the satchel onto the seat as he slid into the booth. He reached across and tickled Ruthie's cheek with his finger. He and Hattie had never discussed a future seriously. Oh, there had been plenty of sighs and wishes in the afternoon hours after they made love: they had invented an entire life out of what-ifs and wouldn't-it-be-nices. He looked at her now and realized their daydreams were more real to him than he'd allowed himself to believe. Lawrence wasn't a man who got hung up on ideals or lofty sentiment; he had lived pragmatically as far as his emotions were concerned. He had a car and nice suits, and he had only infrequently worked for white men. He left his family behind in Baltimore when he was sixteen, and he had built himself up from nothing without any help from anyone. And if he had not been able to save his mother from becoming a mule, at least he had never been one himself. For most of his life, this had seemed like the most important thing, not to be anybody's mule. Then Hattie came along with all of those children, that multitude of children, and she didn't have a mark of them on her. She spoke like she'd gone to one of those finishing schools for society Negro girls that they have down south. It was as though she'd been dropped into a life of squalor and indignities that should not have been hers. With such a woman, if he would only try a bit harder, he might become a family man. It is true that he had not met Hattie's children, but their names Billups and Six and Bell were seductive as the names of foreign cities. In his imagination they were not so much children as they were small docile copies of Hattie. What happened? he asked Hattie. Ruthie kicked at her swaddling. She looked very like him. The old wives tale says babies look like their fathers when they are new to the world. Ruthie was light-skinned like him and Hattie, lighter than August. Of course, Lawrence had not seen Hattie's other children and could not know that most of them were this same milky tea color. Did August put his hands on you? Lawrence asked. He's not that kind of man, she answered sharply. Anybody is, if his manhood is wounded enough. Hattie looked at him in alarm. A lot of men, I mean, Lawrence said. Hattie turned her face to the window. She would need money that was certain and they would be able to spend more time together now that August knew the truth. Lawrence could put her up somewhere. It occurred to him now that his choices were two: run from the diner and never see her again or become, all at once, a man of substance and commitment. I'm so ashamed, Hattie said. I'm so ashamed. Hattie, listen to me. Our little baby isn't anything to be ashamed of. She shook her head. Later that evening, and for years to come, he would wonder if he had misunderstood her, if her shame wasn't at having a child with him but something larger that he didn't understand, and if it wasn't his failure to grasp this that had doomed them. But in that moment, he thought she only needed convincing, so he talked about renting her a house in Baltimore, where he'd grown up, and how they'd bring her children from Philadelphia and what it would all be like. Hattie's eyes were red-rimmed, and she kept glancing over Lawrence's shoulder. He had never seen her so skittish, so in need of him. For the first time, Lawrence felt Hattie was his. This was not proprietary but something all together more profound he was accountable to her, wonderfully and honorably obliged to take care of her. Lawrence was forty years old. He realized that whatever he'd experienced with other women lust? infatuation? had not been love. Hattie was incredulous. She refused him. This is our chance, Lawrence said. I'm telling you, we won't ever get over it, we won't ever forgive ourselves if we don't do this. Baby. But do you still . . . ? she asked. Lawrence had

discussed his gambling in passing. He had told Hattie he made his living for the most part as a porter on the trains, which had been true for a few months many years ago. Hatties uncertainty made Lawrence understand that she did not take his gambling as lightly as he had supposed. Ill stop, he said. I already have, really. Its just a game or two when its slow with the trains. Hattie wept in heavy wracking sobs that shook her shoulders and upset Ruthie. Ill stop, he said again. Lawrence slid next to Hattie on the banquette. He leaned down and kissed his daughters forehead. He kissed Hatties temple and her tears and the corner of her mouth. When she calmed, Hattie rested her head on his shoulder. I couldnt stand to be a fool a second time, Hattie said. I couldnt stand it. Hattie had hardly spoken during the four-hour drive to Baltimore. Lawrences was the only car on the highway his high beams tunneled along the black road. Such a dark and quiet night, the moon was slim as a fingernail clipping and offered no light. Lawrence accelerated to fifty miles per hour, just to hear the engine rev and feel the car shoot forward. Hattie tensed in the passenger seat. Were not too far now. He reached over and squeezed Ruthies fat little leg. I love you, Lawrence said. I love you both. Shes a good baby, Hattie replied. August had named the baby Margaret, but Hattie and Lawrence had decided before her birth that theyd call her Ruth after Lawrences mother. When Ruth was nine days old, Hattie brought her to meet Lawrence in a park in his neighborhood. This is your father, Hattie said, handing her to Lawrence. The baby fussed. Lawrence was a stranger to her but he held her until she quieted. Hush, hush, little Ruthie girl, hush, hush, he said. Tears rose in his throat when the visit ended and Hattie took the baby back to Wayne Street. In the hours and days until he next saw her, Lawrence thought of Ruthie every instant: now she is hungry, now she is asleep. Now she is cooing in the arms of the man who is not her father. It was possible, of course, that Hattie was mistaken and Ruthie was Augusts baby, but Lawrence knew, he knew in a way that was not logical and could not be explained, that she was his child. Lawrence tightened his grip on the steering wheel until his fingers ached. They never made a car better than the 44 Buick. I told you it was a smooth ride, he said. Didnt I tell you? I drove this car all the way to Chicago once to see my cousin. You told me, Hattie said. A car passed in the opposite direction. Hattie put her hand over Ruthies eyes to shield her from the headlight glare. Youll like Baltimore, Lawrence said. Youll see. He did not know if she would. They were to live in a couple of rooms in a boardinghouse until he could get the money together to rent a house. A place large enough for all Hatties children would cost twenty-five dollars a week. Lawrence could make that money easily; he could pull six months rent in a single night with a couple of good hands. It wasnt the money that made him nervous, though he was skinned at the moment. As the sparks fly upward . . . , Hattie said. Its from the Bible, she added. Well, thats dismal. Dont you remember anything else? Hattie shrugged. Guess not, Lawrence said. He reached over and tapped her playfully on the knee with the back of his hand. She stiffened. Come on, baby. Come on, lets try and be a little bit happy. This is a happy occasion, isnt it? I like that verse. It makes me feel like Im not alone, Hattie said. She shifted away from him in her seat. Youre going to pick up more shifts on the railroads, right? she asked. We talked about this. You know I will. Lawrence felt Hatties gaze on him, uncertain and frightened. Her shine was going, Lawrence thought. There was something used and gray about her these days. Lawrence did not want Hattie to be a normal woman, just any old downtrodden colored woman. Hadnt he left Maryland to be free of them? And hadnt he married his ex-wife because she was glamorous as a rhinestone? It did not occur to him that he contributed to the fear and apprehension that had worn Hattie down. He missed the Hattie hed found so irresistible when they met a little steely, a little inaccessible, angry enough to put a spring in her step and a light in her eye. Just angry enough to keep her going, like Lawrence. And there was another side of her, the one that yearned and longed for something she wouldnt ever have the two of them had that in common too. Lawrence took Hattie to New York a few months before she got pregnant. The trip had required elaborate lies Hattie told August and her sister Marion that shed been hired to cook for a party at a white womans place way out on the Main Line and that she had to stay overnight. Marion kept the children. Lawrence had not anticipated Hatties guilt, but it had cast a pall over their trip, and over New York City itself or so Lawrence thought until the next day when they were driving back to Philadelphia. As they drove out of the Holland Tunnel, Hattie turned for one last glimpse of the citys ramparts glowing in the setting sun. Then she slumped in her seat. Well, thats gone, she said. Something in the New York streets was familiar to her. More than familiar, she said, she felt she belonged there. Lawrence understood. It seemed to him that every time he made one choice in his life, he said no to another. All of those things he could not do or be were huddled inside of him; they might spring up at any moment, and he would be hobbled with regret. He pulled to the shoulder of the road and held her. She was a beating heart in his hand. Lawrence hardly recognized the distant, distraught woman next to him now. You act like your whole life was one long January afternoon, Lawrence said. The trees are

always barren and theres not a flower on the vine.It wouldnt do any good to go around with my head in the clouds.It would sometimes, Hattie. It sure would.He was responsible for her now. She might, he thought, at least try to be a little more . . . Well, after all they were starting a life together that very day, that very moment. Lawrence needed her steeliness. He needed her resolve to bolster his own. More was required than his charms and his sex and a bit of laughter and forgetting. He had to be better than August.That bum. August was always out at nightclubs or at the jukes. Lawrence saw him once at a supper club where all the dicty Negroes went. August was on a date; he was all dressed up like the mayor of Philadelphia while Hattie was at home on Wayne Street elbow deep in dishwater. August could have gotten a decent job, but he chose to work catch as catch can at the Navy Yard out of pure laziness. A man had to be responsible. Lawrence was responsible. Whatever else he might be, he took care of his own. He had this Buick, didnt he? Free and clear. And a house in a decent neighborhood. Hed kept his ex- wife in nice dresses while they were married and was still keeping her in them now that they were divorced. He saw his daughter once a week didnt miss a visit unless there was something really important, no, something damn near unavoidable. She was the picture of good health, didnt want for anything. There were all kinds of ways to be responsible. Maybe he hadnt made his money in the way most people would approve of, but none of his had ever gone without.You have to take some joy from the little things, baby. Look at this fireworks!A gold flare rose above the treetops and peacocked into a fan of light over the highway. Isnt that something? he said. We must be closer to Baltimore than I thought. Hattie barely glanced at the lights bursting overhead.Hey, Lawrence said, after a few moments, do you plait your hair at night?What?Your hair. Do you plait it at night and tie it down with a scarf?What kind of a thing is that to ask?I just . . . I guess I just realized I didnt know.Oh, Lawrence, Hattie said. Her voice quivered. After a long pause, she said, I tie it down.Revue de presse"Ms. Mathis has a gift for imbuing her characters stories with an epic dimension that recalls Toni Morrisons writing, and her sense of time and place and family will remind some of Louise Erdrich, but her elastic voice is thoroughly her own both lyrical and unsparing, meditative and visceral, and capable of giving the reader nearly complete access to her characters minds and hearts." (Michiko Kakutani New York Times)"The opening pages of Ayanas debut took my breath away. I cant remember when I read anything that moved me in quite this way, besides the work of Toni Morrison." (Oprah Winfrey)"A vibrant and compassionate portrait of a family hardened and scattered by circumstance and yet deeply a family. Its language is elegant in its purity and rigor. The characters are full of life, mingled thing that it is, and dignified by the writers judicious tenderness towards them. This first novel is a work of rare maturity." (Marilynne Robinson, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of GILEAD and Orange Prize-winner of HOME)"Beautiful and necessary from the very first sentence. The human lives it renders are on every page lowdown and glorious, fallen and redeemed, and all at the same time. They would be too heartbreaking to follow, in fact, were they not observed in such a generous and artful spirit of hope, in a spirit of mercy, in the spirit of love. A treasure of a novel." (Paul Harding, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of TINKERS)