

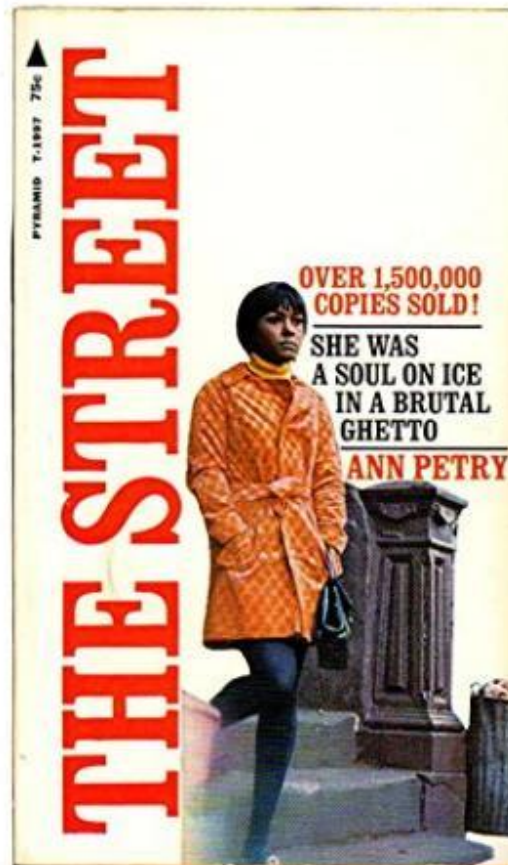
RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

The Street

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by Pamela Annas and Suzy Groden



THE STREET BY ANN PETRY (HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT, 1946)

The Street. Ann Petry. Pyramid, 1946.

The *Street* provides a powerful image of the complex ways sex, race, and class intersect -- in the life of a young black woman living in Harlem in the 1940s -- to constitute a single, unified oppressive reality.

We (Pamela Annas, Howard Cohen, Suzy Groden, David Hunt) taught this 1946 novel in Foundations in Law and Justice, an eight-credit interdisciplinary writing course for first-year students. Especially when socialists teach it, the course focuses on the gaps between law and justice. Our particular team consisted of persons trained in literature, philosophy, classics/cognitive developmental theory, and history. *The Street* shaped class discussion of the problems associated with defining and attaining social justice and, because it presents complex social issues clearly, subtly, and metaphorically, it turned out to be the point in the semester where students first understood imaginative writing.

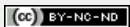
Lutie Johnson, the central character, is determined to transcend the potential of her environment to crush and corrupt her:

She was going to stake out a piece of life for herself. She had come this far poor and black and shut out as though a door had been slammed in her face. Well, she would shove it open; she would beat and bang on it and push against it and use a chisel in order to get it open.

Lutie is a fighter, but by the end of the novel she loses, for as a young and beautiful woman she is the target of everyone's needs, wants, and fears. The white women she used to work for feared she wanted their husbands (in fact she wants nothing to do with any man); black women ignore her, or think she wants their men, or try to sell her to other men; white men try to buy or bribe her; black men try to rape or pimp her. Since no one is going to derive any benefit from Lutie leaving the street, there is an actively indifferent resistance to her struggles that finally defeats her through her own anger.

The characters on Lutie Johnson's street are symbolic and grotesque: Mrs. Hedges, an enormous strong scarred survivor of an apartment building fire, who sits all day in a ground floor window of Lutie's building, who sees and knows everything, and who names "the street"; Jones, the building super, who has lived so long in basements he "ain't human no more"; Junto, the squat white man who owns most of the street and who seems to have no personal life; Min, the shapeless woman who drifts in to live with Jones.

Each character is essentially alone. There is no community on the street. Lutie Johnson's struggle to preserve her integrity and self-respect is carried on in an environment of men and women who represent both the power of the street to defeat and shape lives and the capacity of human beings to discover ways to exploit, in both the negative and the positive senses of that word, any environment in order to survive.



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