

# SHORT TAKES

NEW SELECTIONS FROM  
PITTSBURGH AUTHORS

by JOHN ALLISON

**K**ATHLEEN GEORGE'S EVOCATIVE novel set in the Hill District of the 1930s and '40s walks right in to the space opened by Mark Whitaker's "Smoketown" (reviewed in Pittsburgh Quarterly's Spring 2018 issue). Whitaker's

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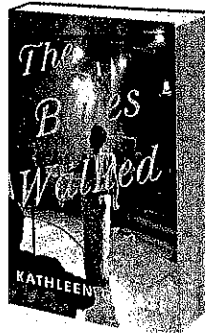
sweeping examination of the Hill as “the other great black renaissance” of that era even focused on the central figure of George’s story: Lena Horne, the singer and actress whose formative years were spent in Pittsburgh, though not with the fondest of memories. **“The Blues Walked In”** might therefore seem, in cocktail terms, like a chaser to “Smoketown,” but it’s a full-bodied concoction of its own.

George’s ninth novel, and her eighth set in Pittsburgh, displays the qualities you’d expect from a professor of theater (she’s taught at University of Pittsburgh for decades). The stories of three main characters skillfully interlock and overlap across the years and from coast to coast as Lena Horne’s career takes her to Hollywood and back to Harlem. Back in Pittsburgh, there’s young Marie, the middle child of a Lebanese Christian family running a grocery in the Hill District. A movie buff, she idolizes Horne, whom she sees around the neighborhood and in the papers. The third player, Josiah, a young African-American son of a plumber, feels the same about Horne. He dreams of making it big in Hollywood, and what he really wants to do is direct.

George made her mark with intricate crime

novels that show a command of police procedure and the criminal soul. “The Blues Walked In” stretches her range beautifully. She gets inside the anguish of Lena Horne, a gifted artist trapped in a terrible marriage and a Hollywood system that wants her typecast. The story of hardworking Marie (somewhat inspired by George’s own mother) is quintessentially American—she ends up marrying a great guy, also Lebanese, and moving to Dormont. It’s the role of Josiah that provides the fulcrum and shifts the story into a tale of crime and injustice that rings sadly true today. To describe more would kill the element of surprise, but let’s just say that George shows the full spectrum of good cops and bad cops.

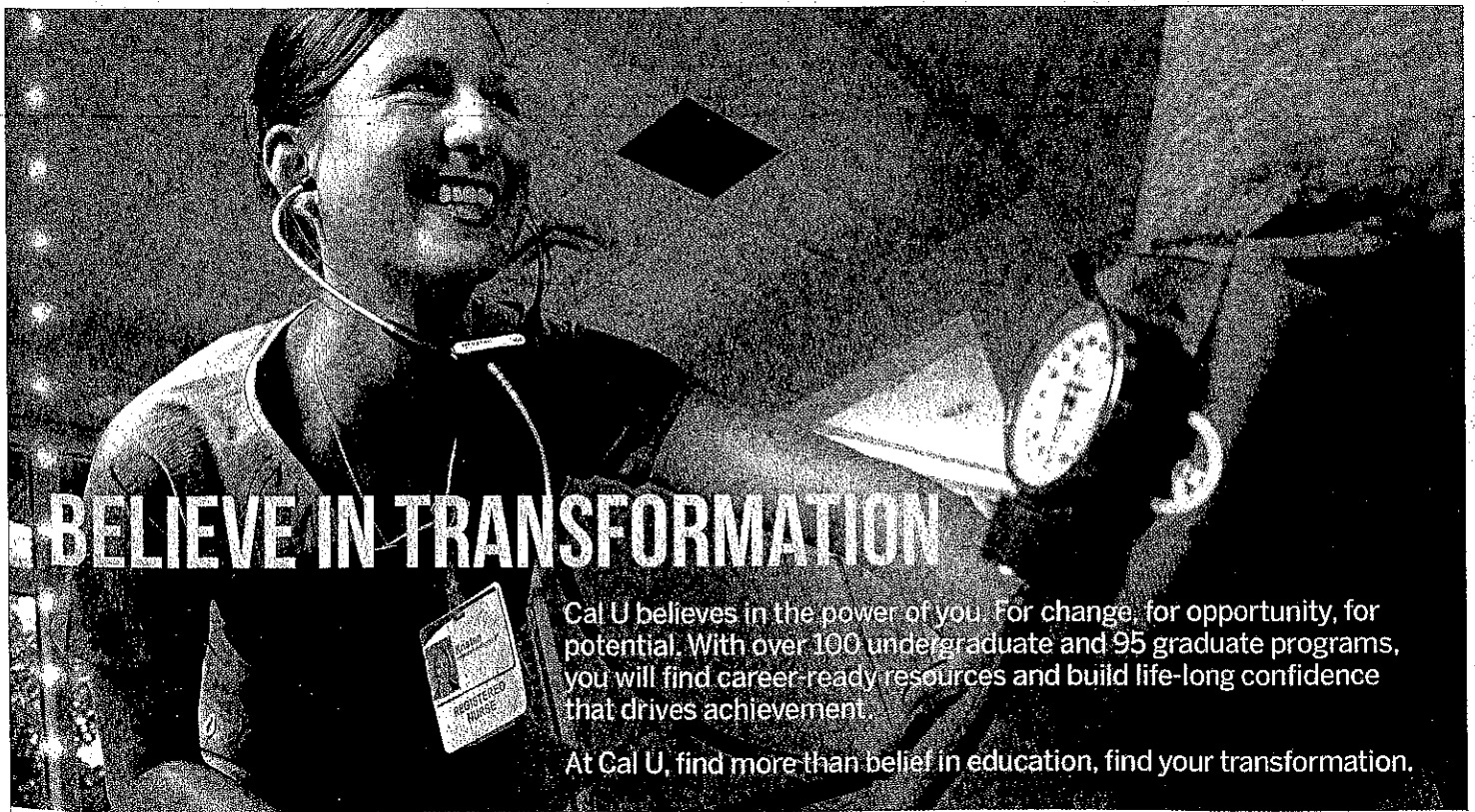
The delights along the way are many, especially as George imagines the private lives of these public figures. Lena Horne becoming fast friends with fellow Pittsburgher Billy Strayhorn, but not until they meet in California, is a well-documented story. In George’s hands, it takes flight. “We’ll do things together,” Strayhorn says to Horne, the night they meet at a Duke Ellington show. “We’ll kill time by using it.” It’s these theatrical flourishes that keep “The Blues Walked In” toe-tapping with a steady beat. 



**“The Blues Walked In”**

By Kathleen George

University of Pittsburgh Press (\$24.95)



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