



Can Anything Beat White?: A Black Family's Letters (Margaret Walker Alexander Series in African American Studies)

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Ann Petry (1908-1997) achieved prominence during a period in which few black women were published with regularity in America. Her novels *Country Place* (1947) and *The Narrows* (1988), along with various short stories and nonfiction, poignantly described the struggles and triumphs of middle-class blacks living in primarily white communities.

Petry's ancestors, the James family, served as in-spiration for much of her fiction. This collection of more than four hundred family letters, edited by the daughter of Ann Petry, is an engaging portrait of black family life from the 1890s to the early twentieth century, a period not often documented by African American voices.

Ann Petry's maternal grandfather, Willis Samuel James, was a slave taught by his children to read and write. He believed "the best place for the negro is as near the white man as he can get." He followed that "truth," working as coachman for a Connecticut governor and buying a house in a white neighborhood in Hartford. Willis had sixteen children by three wives. The letters in this collection are from him and his second wife, Anna E. Houston James, and five of Anna's children, of whom novelist Ann Petry's mother, Bertha James Lane, was the oldest.

History is made and remade by the availability of new documents, sources, and interpretations. *Can Anything Beat White?* contributes a great deal to this process. The experiences of the James family as documented in their letters challenge both representations of black people at the turn of the century as well as our contemporary sense of black Americans.

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