

Praise for Dazzled by Darkness

“In *Dazzled by Darkness*, Erica Miles’ unique voice captivates the reader with its exploration of a culturally-clashing romance set in 1960’s Brooklyn. Imaginative and richly detailed, the novel deftly portrays two singular protagonists caught up in a time of racial, sexual, and artistic revolution.”

—Silma Smith, Former Senior Editor, *Magical Blend Magazine*

“This deeply textured first novel by Erica Miles welcomes the reader into a world where fantasy and reality, darkness and humor, race and art, and, ultimately, love and longing intermingle in a dance of opposites that both explore and reveal. An adventurous debut!”

—David Pérez, Author of *Wow!*

“A young Jewish intellectual who hears voices and her Latino artist admirer who hallucinates conversations with the likes of Leonardo da Vinci and Picasso begin a relationship that draws both of them into the world and takes the reader on a fun ride through 1960’s New York and beyond.”

—Bob Camba, Visual Artist, Art Teacher, Art Historian

“Raw and explicit, psychological and perhaps psychotic, inquiring and existential, this graphic and almost surreal account of a relationship between a 25-year-old, white college girl and a black high-school dropout skillfully explores the multiple ambiguities of ‘other’-ness. Both characters make their own journeys, as their paths cross to an ‘other’ place. Sure to transport you, as well.”

—Rob Spencer, Librarian

“A metaphysical romp through worlds and planes of ‘might be,’ as we follow young lovers Sara and Gavilán on their journey of discovery through and of love. Past, present, and imaginings all mesh into a startling future.”

—James M. Keane, Writing as JMK758 on FanFiction.net

“This quirky tale of love and miscommunication in a ’60’s interracial romance also offers a unique look at European art history through the eyes of a young Afro-Latino visionary.”

—Diane Reus, Publishing Technologist

“An exciting read about a young woman’s relationship with herself, her lover, her religion, and her world. Ms. Miles’ language is flavorful and lively, often jumping off the page. Her detailed descriptions of the New York City area could only be written by someone who lives and loves everything New York! Is *Dazzled by Darkness* a journey to find self and God or just a schizophrenic/psychedelic trip? You’ll have to decide for yourself.”

—Kymberley Clemons-Jones, Pastor, Spiritual Life Coach, Author of *Cured but not Healed: How to Experience Deeper Faith on Your Journey with God*

“The illustrations by Selma Eisenstadt appear effortless and completely real, and are instinctively right. In their rudimentary simplicity, they evoke much emotion, without unnecessary detail. They engage the viewer to feel each character’s inner self.”

—Linda Wallace, Artist

“This book will appeal to anyone concerned with issues of race in intimate relationships, as well as to both male and female baby boomers who will be invited to re-live their own coming of age in the late ’60s. The book will also appeal to younger readers interested in the period.”

—Ellen Schecter, Author of *Fierce Joy*

“With raw-nerve honesty, Miles unveils the deepest thoughts of her two major characters with intuitive and intelligent strokes.”

—Jean Kilczer, Author of *Kraken’s Keep*

“*Dazzled by Darkness* is an electric, riveting novel written by an author who is an accomplished artist of words. The characters, artists or not, live, breathe, struggle, love, hate, connect, and disengage in a moment, compelling the reader to turn pages and chapters to find out what happens next. An unconventional, dazzling read.”

—Shauna L. Smith, Family Therapist and Author of *Making Peace With Your Adult Children*

“The author knows how to keep the reader wondering: ‘Does this character get high a lot or do I just have to suspend my disbelief?’”

—Carmen Pabon, Former Sales Associate, Museum of Modern Art Bookstore

“There is something about working in a public building that invites exploration. Miles draws that very well.”

—Bobby Maestro, Former Museum Employee

O Dali!
Clearer than the critics,
Yes
Clearer even than Gala,
Dali

I see
Your thoughts
Wrapped into and over
Your subjects

And clearer than the critics,
Yes,
Clearer even than Gala,
Dali

I understand
And desire
Your riveting paranoid
Mind

But I stayed with him all last night, Dali,
On a soft loose quilt bed
And we loved long and gently, and
Unsuspectingly

O Dali!
Shall I tell you
How much of your
Overwhelming magic
He undid
With my clothing?

– Shauna Smith



Dazzled by Darkness

Seeing Things in Brooklyn

Erica Miles

Dazzled by Darkness
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Disclaimer:

This book and the characters in it are fictional. Although artists' names have been used, this work is not meant to be read as an historical account of any artist's life. Any resemblance of any characters in this book to persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

The author would like to acknowledge the following:

In the chapter "Breaking Off," a quotation from Leonardo da Vinci's journals is used as a line of dialogue.

In the chapter "Bushwick," a passage is quoted from *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* by Betty Smith. Harper & Brothers Publishers, copyright 1943, 1947; 2001, HarperCollins Publishers. Used with permission.

In the chapter "A Trip to the South of France," a passage from one of Van Gogh's letters to his brother Theo is quoted from *Vincent Van Gogh, The Letters*, published online by the Van Gogh Museum Enterprises, B.V., Amsterdam. Ed. by Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker. Used with permission.

The poems "O Dali!" preceding Title Page and "To Picasso" following end of novel are by Shauna Smith.

The interpretations of a Picasso painting (p. 34), a head sculpted in stone (p. 36), a portrait of Michelangelo (p. 86), a Modigliani painting (p. 110), a Renaissance portrait (p. 156), a Van Gogh drawing (p. 190), and a contemplative figure after final page are the work of the author.

All other drawings in this book are by Selma Eisenstadt.

*This book is dedicated
to the memory of my parents,
Frances and William Ehrlich,
and my uncle, Harold Sole,
and
to the students and staff
of the GED Programs,
Community Impact at Columbia University
and the Stanley Isaacs Youth Center*



SCHIZOID IN THE SIXTIES

While other young Americans were caught up in Civil Rights marches, the Vietnam War, protest songs, and psychedelic drugs, Sara Gott was hearing voices in her head and thinking of applying for Supplemental Security Income.

Contrary to popular expectations, Sara's voices weren't screaming hysterically, telling her to kill people. In truth, they sounded just like telephone voices—"Hello? Who is it?"—speaking at the same time as the loud-mouthed men and women around her, making themselves heard above the everyday sobs of electric guitars, chatting away to their friends on a mysterious party line wired to her brain. Still, they were distracting.

How could she work, for example, or lead an ordinary life? And aside from those personal considerations, what if the disturbance worked both ways?

Did the voices sense her presence, her breathing, her beating heart? Did they experience little frissons of excitement, as her psychic ears took in their private information? Did they intend those precious tales they told their friends in actuality for her?

Sara knew they were real voices belonging to real people. But people she wouldn't normally meet. Most likely from other neighborhoods—"dangerous" neighborhoods—like Sunset Park, Red Hook, Crown Heights, Bedford Stuyvesant....

One voice, in particular, commanded Sara's attention. It spoke in Black slang, and—as any fantasy-ridden woman would expect—its late-night calls were all about you guessed it!—turning her on. Not sexually, but linguistically. Its fascinating rhythms, so loose and free, resonated with a wild streak deep within her. She called this voice "Sweet Sir Galahad," after the Joan Baez song.

How much should she tell her doctor? Better just let him know she still felt depressed, had trouble concentrating, felt lonely and isolated at times—the usual patient complaint list.

But he called her bluff. "You can't stop hallucinating," he remarked, when she saw him that Monday. "I could send you to the hospital—but I'd rather not."

How did he know? she wondered.

"Oh, no, please don't send me to the hospital."

"I won't—if you're willing to work with me. But you need to find some structure in your life."

"Like a real job?" Sara offered.

"Gadzooks! I didn't mean— But why not give it a shot! You think you could handle that? A little more medication might make it possible...."

As long as it doesn't interfere with my voices, Sara thought. *Especially his. You can take away the rest—but not "Sweet Sir Galahad!"*

She couldn't picture his face, but she knew he went from phone booth to phone booth, all over Brooklyn, just to reach her. Even though he was talking to somebody else.

Sara lived in Flatbush but longed to explore other parts of Brooklyn, too. So, deciding to leave her parents' house—she was twenty-five, after all—on a dare from her shrink, she set out on her journey.

Being a fan of fine art, the first thing she did was circle a Help-Wanted ad in *The New York Times* for a secretary at the Brooklyn Museum Art School.



LOOKING AT TREES

A week later, Sara was sitting at a green aluminum desk in a tower office, surrounded by brightly colored tempera paintings, buoyed by the novelty of typing letters that asked for money.

The museum was just her kind of place—a monumental building, taking up an entire block on Eastern Parkway, and topped by an eerie-looking dome.

The gothic-arched windows of her office offered a microscopic view of the Botanical Gardens below. Since the fall flowers were now in bloom, Sara decided she'd spend the lunch hour of her first day strolling through those gardens.

When the clock with Roman numerals on the wall showed both hands on the XII, she let out a working woman's sigh, aglow with a sense of normality. Neither Margaret nor Lloyd had criticized any aspect of her performance so far, despite her stolen glances out the window.

This job was going to be a breeze. She boldly stood up from her desk, pulled her sweater from a peg on the wall, and announced that she was going to lunch.

How lovely the scenery was in the fall, a well-kept secret. How thickly the foliage grew on a wisteria-covered arbor. Some of the deciduous trees were just beginning to turn orange.

Flower beds, verdant and dense with blossoms—chrysanthemums, daisies, lavender, phlox, the last of the summer roses.

Sara inhaled. *What do I smell? Is it everything? And why am I feeling so strange? It's like I'm—happy....*

She wandered down a lane with curvy-branched, crab-apple trees on either side. What a paradise for the small, probably migrating, birds she saw feeding off the tiny fruit.

At last, she came to a spacious lawn, such as one might see before a Southern manor.

She stopped to admire an unusual cherry tree, while tearing off pieces of her tuna sandwich to throw to the pigeons on the grass.

The silky-barked tree was divided into three parts, branches twisting outward. As Sara looked through the opening from twelve feet away, she found herself staring straight into the bemused eyes of a young Black man, standing immediately on the other side, practically camouflaged. He was almost the same color as the trunk of the tree—a pinkish, silvery light brown—but less pink and more light brown. Neatly dressed, with stylishly disheveled hair, he seemed to be frozen in a dance motion like a reflection of twisting branches.

Sara was transfixed. *A male dryad! She curtsied. I am queen of the pigeons....*

A crowd of pigeons had gathered at her feet, jostling each other for the choicest pieces of bread. She tossed her last crumbs, trying to aim for the less aggressive beaks.

Suddenly, something large and dark flashed in front of her, hitting one of the pigeons, and then flying off again. The rest of the flock took off.

Oh, my God! Sara stared at the motionless youth by the tree. He appeared to be posing for her, watching her intently, waiting to see what her reaction would be to his presence.

The targeted bird lay on its side before her, its claws clenched.

“Did you see that?” she called.

No answer. No motion.

“It must have been a hawk!” Sara said.

The predator hadn’t taken its prey. *Will it return for it later, she wondered, and what if hawks attack humans...?*

“Do you think we should call the police?” she cried. More silence.

He had a concave chest and minimal biceps. She saw him as a reed, a sapling. He didn’t scare her—the way knottier-bodied, mature men sometimes did. In spite of her loss and shock at the death she’d just witnessed, she smiled awkwardly at his strange beauty, the way he fit so naturally into the scene, and even at the joke he seemed to be playing on her.

“Can you talk, or are you pretending to be a tree?”

Out of the corner of her eye, Sara saw another shadow coming toward her. Feeling the hawk was about to strike her this time around, she raised her shoulder bag reflexively to her head and bolted toward the cherry tree, the only shelter she could see.

“Whew!” she breathed, running directly into the path of her garden companion, nearly falling into his arms. “It’s just like in that movie—‘The Birds!’”

The tree artist didn’t reply, seemingly content with gazing up at the bright noon sky. *Maybe he doesn’t go to the movies*, Sara thought, scanning the sky for herself. She took a step back.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Who me?”

He speaks!

“I don’t see anybody else. Do you?”

His brown eyes shifted to the pigeon’s corpse. He had not touched her when she’d thrown herself at him, and now he didn’t return her smile.

Sara tried again. “Where are you from? Are you a student at the Brooklyn Museum Art School?”

He just continued staring into space, like the Maharishi Yogi. She turned to go. Lunch hour was almost over. When she glanced back at the cherry tree, he was gone.

Sara spent the rest of the day with his image rooted in her mind—a boy who resembled a tree. *I didn’t imagine him, Dr. Schwarzkopf. I touched him. He was real....*

The following day at lunchtime, she spotted his face in the museum cafeteria and attempted a friendly “Hi.” They were passing each other and had stopped about a foot apart. He stared at her intently and answered her with a casual smile. Sara felt a powerful current between them, almost mystical.

Away from the grass and sky, he now looked like a regular person. He was about six feet tall but not very muscular—a youth still developing into a man—dressed in black chinos, a white t-shirt, and black sneakers that slapped the floor as he walked.

His head seemed larger, but perhaps that was due to his explosive head of hair; and the gold-rimmed glasses he’d just pushed up his nose gave him the look of an intellectual.

He was much lighter than she remembered—hardly Black at all. Was it a trick of the fluorescent lighting? He also appeared more mature, somehow. She inhaled. Fresh cologne. Was that really the way he smelled?

She met his eyes again and felt herself flush—as if he had lifted her skirt.

He walked away, not looking like a tree at all.

Later that day, back in the office, Sara was sitting bent over, labeling crayon drawings, chewing gum, when she heard rapid footsteps on the tower stairs, ten feet from her desk, and caught a whiff of his fresh, young, male aroma.

He rose up, panting, onto her landing.

Laughing between deep breaths, he strode up to her, one hand pressed to his side, the other hand extended. He didn't stop at the front of her desk, but walked all the way around to the side of her chair.

"Name's Gavilán. Umm, I'm a prospective art student here just ran up seven, umm, flights to see you."

She swallowed her gum and sat up straight.

"Why didn't you take the elevator?"

He waved his hand dismissively. Then he broke into a dazzling smile, turned his hand palm up, and offered it to her.

She immediately slapped it. It was the first time she'd ever tried that with anyone. With him it felt right.

"Umm. I didn't mean gimme some skin." He grabbed her hand, and they quietly held hands for a few seconds.

"What'd you say your name was?" she asked.

He laughed. "Just call me 'G.'" A final squeeze. "Is your boss around?"

Sara felt a rush. "No. Why?"

"If he was, I'd shake his hand, too."

"It's a her," she said.

"Excuse me?"

"My boss is a woman."

"She look anything like *you*?"

Sara laughed. "Meaning what?"

G's eyes explored her blushing face, light brown hair, Indian Madras dress, and white fishnet stockings, taking her in as if she were an exotic flower. To Sara, the message was unmistakable: *I want to be close to you, study you, be inspired by you.*

"I saw you in the cafeteria this morning," he said.

"I know. I saw you, too." She blushed a deep pink. "What about in the Botanical Gardens?"

He looked at her quizzically.

"What were you *doing* behind that cherry tree?"

"The cherry tree? Like in George Washington?"

She giggled. "I hope you didn't think I was being too forward."

"Not at all." He smoothed the dark fuzz on the sides of his mouth

"It was just that I was feeling really scared."

"You were?"

Sara nodded meekly, unable to forget her bizarre brush with death, but remembering to give a bounce to her hair.

G took her hand again, and pulled her to her feet. *Are we about to kiss? To dance?*

"Did you see the movie, 'Carousel?'" he asked.

"Yes." *Are we about to sing?*

"You remind me of Julie."

That ingénue who stands on the seashore with her hair blowing in the wind? The one who falls in love with the rough-talking Billy Bigelow?

"Thank you."

He swung their joined hands through the air, indicating the entire room around them and the view of the Gardens through the window. He dropped her hand, just as she was getting into the movement.

“It can be an in-timid-dating place,” he joked, “if you don’t know your way around.”

“You know that’s not why.”

“Why what?”

“Why I was afraid.”

G gave her a teasing look.

Sara really wanted to talk about the hawk. He obviously didn’t. Maybe it wasn’t a “cool” topic. *Talking with G is like dancing. Better just let him lead.*

“Oh, but it’s an *interesting* place,” she continued. “I love to wander through it all.”

“What’s your favorite part?”

She gave him a sly look. “The cherry esplanade.”

“Uh—I’m talking about in the museum.”

“Oh. I thought you meant in the Botanical Gardens.”

“That’s a cool place too. What do you think of the Art School?”

Sara was beginning to feel confused. *Let him ignore my comments*, she said to herself. *Just let him keep looking at me like he never wants to take his eyes off of me.*

“Do you like it here?” He shot a glance around the office, taking in the psychedelic posters and junior masterpieces on the walls.

“You mean at my job?”

“Or at the museum.”

Before she could answer, he had picked up one of the small, Giacometti-styled sculptures from the

antique display counter and turned the figure over in his hands.

“What’s this supposed to be?” he asked. “A horse?”

“Or a dog. You’re not supposed to touch.”

There’s something about his voice, Sara thought. *Something familiar. What is it?*

G held her gaze as he continued to handle the statue. Then he batted his curly eyelashes and set the animal down. When he looked at her again, his eyes were wide with curiosity, his smile irresistible.

“Oh. You asked me what I liked here!” she blurted. “That’s what you want to know. I like the watercolors on the second floor and the pottery on the first. I haven’t seen much of the rest of the building—oh, except for the African exhibit on the main floor.”

“You like Africans?”

This time it was Sara who didn’t respond.

G shifted his eyes away from her. Was it with embarrassment? If so, was he embarrassed for himself or for her?

Say something appropriate, Sara. It’s your turn to explore.

“Do you come here often?” she asked.

“Where?”

“To the museum.”

“Oh. I thought you meant here—to your office.”

“Well, that, too.”

“Now I will,” he said, deepening his voice.

Oh, my God! That’s the voice I’ve been hearing. It’s Galahad!

Was she really meeting her imaginary phone man? Was she someone in a movie that was playing in *his* mind?

Sara had never experienced such instant chemistry—or any chemistry at all, for that matter. Did he find her alluring because she was white? If he was flirting with her, she had never been flirted with so eloquently. Letting her questions drop like petals to the ground, she felt a sweet awakening—as if she were drinking in new nectar. *Does G—Galahad—thirst for it, too?*

But the second he walked out the door, she realized she was once again projecting her own fantasies onto her would-be paramour, as she pictured him locked inside a glass booth, head cocked to one shoulder, blabbering into a corded, black receiver.

• • •

“Hey, James. It’s me. I just met this girl in the museum. Not quite a girl. She’s an older chick, but not too old... old enough to make it interesting, you know what I’m sayin’? I got this feeling I’m gonna make it with her.... Not much to look at though. Wears thick glasses. Looks like a school teacher. No makeup. Not even lipstick. Average figure. Straight brown hair... yeah, right, the hippie shit.

“Funny thing. She thinks she saw me standin’ next to some fuckin’ cherry tree. She kept talkin’ about it. Don’t know what she’s talkin’ about. I don’t hang out in the Gardens, man... All that pollen... I could paint you what a sinus headache feels like....

You know who digs trees? Leroi, he’s into that communin’ with nature shit.... Hmm. Bet she got herself a case of mistaken identity... Yeah, exactly, all the black guys look alike... Dumb-ass white people.... She doesn’t notice Leroi’s three years younger and a couple of shades darker than me.

“I’ll humor her. She wants a Brother. I’ll give her one. Uh-oh. Time’s up, man. Gotta go.... Yeah, I know we just got started, but there’s this heavyweight brother outside, waitin’ to make a call, and I don’t wanna mess with him. Looks a little like Cassius Clay—or should I say, Muhammad Ali? Shit, he’s big. I better go. I’ll talk to you later.”