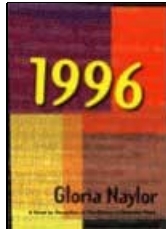


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Book Review
1996
by [Gloria Naylor](#)

Reviewer: [Geoff Wisner](#), Staff Reviewer
Posted: July 29, 2006

Whether you believe what it says or not, *1996* is a scary book. If you believe it, then the U.S. government has powerful mind control devices at its disposal, and is utterly reckless in the way it uses them. If you don't believe it, then one of the best African American authors has a serious and long-lasting mental illness.

Before graduating from college, Gloria Naylor wrote *The Women of Brewster Place*, which won a National Book Award. The novels that followed, *Linden Hills* and *Bailey's Cafe*, are among the best work done by African Americans in the last generation. Yet Gloria Naylor has published no new fiction in recent years. *1996* sheds light on why.

1996 is labeled a "novel" but appears to be fictional only in that it includes certain scenes that Naylor could not have witnessed and that must be based on speculation. In it, she describes the events that followed her decision to spend several months at her house on St. Helena Island, off the coast of South Carolina. While there, she gets into a dispute with a strange woman named Eunice Simon. Naylor complains when Eunice's stray cats leave droppings in her garden, and when an exterminator puts rat poison under Naylor's house, one of the cats dies.

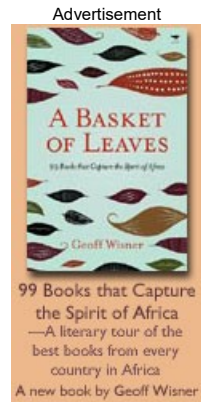
Eunice's brother Dick Simon is a high official in the National Security Agency, and as Naylor reconstructs it, Eunice tells her brother that Naylor is a drug dealer and a vicious anti-Semite (the Simons are Jewish). Naylor's house is broken into and searched, repeated drive-bys are arranged to harass her, a team of spies is installed in a nearby house, and one of Naylor's friends is pressured to steal and then return her laptop.

So far, so plausible. Naylor flees the island and returns to her primary home in Brooklyn. And there, as she believes, agents installed in the next-door brownstone begin to beam thoughts into her head with an electromagnetic device: "I'm a bitch. I hate Jews. I should kill myself." A second device actually reads her thoughts and responds to them. The implanted thoughts do not respond to medication, and only occur in certain rooms of her home. When Naylor sees a psychiatrist, the doctor is visited by government agents who leave a sophisticated bug in his office.

What really happened in 1996? Was Gloria Naylor subjected to an intensive campaign of surveillance and harassment? Did she suffer an episode of schizophrenia — and could a mentally ill woman write a book as clear and coherent as this one? Did actual harassment trigger delusions about things that never happened? Appendices give details on government experiments with electromagnetic radiation — but nothing as sophisticated as the devices she describes. In the end, *1996* leaves you with loose ends and troubling questions.

About the Reviewer

[Geoff Wisner](#) is a freelance writer and staff member of Indigocafe.com. He is the author of [A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books That Capture the Spirit of Africa](#). Visit his website at www.geoffwisner.com.



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