

GUIDED TOUR

By Peter Snoad

Synopsis

Joe Bell was a celebrity—a popular tour guide at Elmwood Hall, a famous Gilded Age mansion in Rhode Island. But for the last 14 years, Joe has been in jail. The African American Renaissance man known for his encyclopedic knowledge and folksy charm was convicted of burning down the historic mansion he once so proudly showed to visitors.

It's now 1986, and the world has forgotten about Joe Bell. But not Susanna Hatch. The young white law student believes Joe was framed by the FBI as part of its campaign against black militants in the turbulent Civil Rights era. And she's determined to prove him innocent. Some basic inconsistencies in the case give her grounds for hope. For one thing, Joe's motivation for the crime was never adequately explained: he had a passionate—and scandalous—affair with the mansion's wealthy owner, Lindsay Pettigrew, after she hired him as a tour guide. Why would Joe have destroyed something so precious to his lover? There were no eyewitnesses, and the prosecution's case rested entirely on forensic evidence that could have been manufactured. Moreover, Susanna doesn't believe Joe is crazy, as his defense lawyer argued in mitigation at his trial.

Susanna goes to interview Joe in the prison psychiatric unit where he's confined. While she wants justice for Joe, she's also desperate to learn the truth for personal reasons: Lindsay Pettigrew was her grandmother, and she had always idealized Joe and Lindsay as a pure and perfect love union. Plagued by doubts about her own current romantic relationship, Susanna hopes for confirmation that true love can triumph and endure.

As she discovers, the truth is rarely simple—and sometimes shocking. Joe reveals that he did, indeed, burn down Elmwood Hall and that he and Lindsay planned it. It was a symbolic act against oppression and exploitation, but one born out of love. They wanted to be together forever, and the mansion, with all its history and associations, stood in their way.

CHARACTERS:

JOE BELL, a tour guide, African American, 33 to 64 (depending on the scene)

SUSANNA HATCH, a student, white, 23

LINDSAY PETTIGREW, an heiress, white, 40's

MARTHA MCNAB, a psychiatrist, 40's

SET: Minimal; a bare stage with a table and chairs can suffice.

