

New young adult novel set in Leflore County in 1955

By KATHRYN EASTBURN

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New York publisher Houghton Mifflin Harcourt has just released a new young adult novel, “Midnight Without a Moon,” depicting the hardscrabble life of an African-American family in Leflore County, circa 1955.

The author, Linda Williams Jackson, now of Southaven, grew up in a home not that different from the one she describes in her debut novel.

The book’s narrator, 13-year-old Rose Lee Carter, lives with her grandparents, Ma Pearl and Papa, on a cotton plantation where she works in the fields alongside the men and boys.

“I’m from the Delta and grew up on cotton plantations,” Jackson said in a recent interview. She lived near Rosedale until her family moved into town one particularly bad winter when her mother, a single parent, was denied credit by the gas company to refill the family’s butane tank.

“I grew up in a house much worse than the house I set Rose in in my manuscript,” Jackson said. “As primitive as the conditions are, that was my life when I was 11.”

She set the novel in Leflore County to give it closer access to the events surrounding the murder of Emmett Till, she said, but the book is not about Till. Instead, it examines the reality of that era for rural African-Americans in the Delta.

“I can’t say it was planned. I had no idea where this story would go or whether it would ever be published,” Jackson said. “I just knew I wanted to write a story showing what life was like then and there, and I wanted to incorporate the Emmett Till trial.”

Till, a 14-year-old Chicagoan visiting his Mississippi cousins, was murdered for whistling at a white woman in Leflore County. During the ensuing murder trial, an all-white jury deliberated for about an hour before finding Tills’ killers not guilty. The men later admitted to the crime in a magazine interview.

“I wanted to show the environment Emmett Till stepped into,” she said. “It was the worst of times for a light-skinned, well-spoken, well-dressed African-American teenager to visit Mississippi, the worst possible time he could have shown up here.”

“Midnight Without a Moon” ventures into many of the complicated dynamics of life in 1955 for a young black girl, including the mass migration of rural Mississippians to northern cities, voting rights efforts and the retribution those efforts set off, the living conditions of sharecroppers, the role of religion in the black community, and notions of beauty and worth measured by the tint of

one's skin.

Jackson's novel depicts some realities not often talked about, such as Ma Pearl's condemnation of her own people for stirring up trouble by registering to vote and getting involved in the NAACP.

"During my research, I was shocked to see how resistant some black people were, not because they didn't want rights but because they feared," Jackson said. "These were people who didn't want to rock the boat, who said 'We just want to live our lives.'"

She was inspired by a book someone gave her husband, "Vernon Can Read," the story of Vernon Jordan of Atlanta, who became a nationally recognized civil rights leader and an adviser to President Bill Clinton.

"The book said something about Jordan's family like, 'We weren't concerned about what white people did or did not allow us to do,'" Jackson said. "Jordan said he became an accidental civil rights attorney. That got me to thinking. There are lots of books about that period but they're all about those who were deeply engaged in the movement."

Jackson wanted to tell a good and important story, she said, and she wanted the characters in her book to be as real as possible, flaws and all.

"I hope the book will help people understand the plight of African-Americans, that we're not that far removed from slavery, that slavery did have a big impact and that not everybody was brave enough to move on," she said.

"You have all kinds of people. Those who have the dream planted deep within their hearts, the dream that 'I will do better.' Then you have people who just don't have that in them."

The idea was to create characters, white and black, admirable or deplorable for their personal strengths and weaknesses, not for their race.

"We need to stop judging, to stop labeling people. You've got lazy, trifling people in every race. We need to stop labeling people by race."

Jackson says she thinks young adults are ready for a book examining those complicated issues, and she believes young readers appreciate a challenge. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt is marketing the book to readers from ages 10 to 12 with a national Middle Grade Media campaign aimed at libraries, reading groups and classrooms.

Jackson said that once she got a publishing deal for this book and its sequel, she began to examine her motives for visiting such a dark time and revisiting the racial divisions and human cruelty of that time.

"At first I thought, 'Why do this?' Then I went back to my own youth," she said. "I remembered how much I appreciated books like 'Jubilee' by Margaret Walker and 'Black Boy' and 'Native

Son' by Richard Wright, both of Mississippi, and how much it meant to me when I first read those books as a girl, how appreciative I was for being able to look back at my own history through a book written by someone like me.

“I told myself that’s why I wrote this book.”

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