Hello, friends! We’re four middle grade authors who are passionate about great middle grade reads. Each month, we’ll be sharing a variety of fun content to complement our chosen read, including recipes, activities, discussion questions, and even sometimes author interviews! This month, we’re looking at Linda Williams Jackson's phenomenal debut novel, MIDNIGHT WITHOUT A MOON, which explores one of the most heartbreaking moments of the Civil Rights movement through the eyes of one young girl.

Cindy Baldwin
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It’s Mississippi in the summer of 1955, and Rose Lee Carter can’t wait to move north. But for now, she’s living with her sharecropper grandparents on a white man’s cotton plantation.

Then, one town over, an African American boy, Emmett Till, is killed for allegedly whistling at a white woman. When Till’s murderers are unjustly acquitted, Rose realizes that the South needs a change . . . and that she should be part of the movement.

Linda Jackson’s moving debut seamlessly blends a fictional portrait of an African American family and factual events from a famous trial that provoked change in race relations in the United States.
Where did the idea for Midnight Without a Moon" come from?

Being a socially awkward kid…. Hanging around adults instead of playing outside with other children…. Being nosy…. Soaking up family stories….

I always knew I wanted to write a story set in the Mississippi Delta and center it around a sharecropping family. When my mother, who had never before mentioned anything Civil Rights related, suddenly made a comment about the Emmett Till murder some 50 years after it happened, I realized I couldn’t write a
Rosa Lee's grandma, Ma Pearl, is downright diabolical. What inspired you to create Ma Pearl and what challenges did you face creating someone who does so many awful things to Rosa and others throughout the book?

Diabolical?!?! Ah, come on now. There was some good in her, too, right? I mean, she was genuinely concerned about where her family would live, whether they would have food to eat, and whether they would stay alive during those turbulent times, right? Plus, she did take care of Rose, Fred Lee, and Queen without financial support from their parents (even if the care was a bit lopsided when it came to showing favoritism toward Queen). Am I right?

But that's not what you asked me, is it?

Okay, so Ma Pearl, sadly, was inspired by the fact that there really were African Americans who resisted the Civil Rights Movement. But please keep in mind that this resistance didn’t necessarily come from the fact that they were happy in their circumstances, but from the fact that they feared that things could get a lot worse if they complained or dared join a resistance movement of any type.

As far as Ma Pearl’s cruelty, that, too, was inspired by people I know in real life. Sadly.

With all that being said, is it horrible to admit that I didn’t face any challenges creating Ma Pearl?

You mentioned in your NPR interview that your family was in the "don't rock the boat" camp during the bulk of the Civil Rights movement. Did you talk to others who had taken a more active role as you researched this story? What else went into the research for the book?

Now that I’ve said that a few times in interviews, I realize how unfair it is of me to make that assumption and declare it publicly as fact. I don’t know what camp my family was in. I can only assume that they were “don’t rock the boat” kind of people because I never heard anyone talk about the Civil Rights Movement, nor did I ever witness anyone involved in any type of activism.

My research was primarily written documentation—the Internet, books, magazines, newspapers, etc. I also watched YouTube videos to help refresh my memory of growing up in the Mississippi Delta in order to create an authentic setting.
I’ve been surprised by so many things that have happened since the book’s release—the NPR interview, the Washington Post book club selection, NYPL’s & San Francisco Public Library’s recommended reading lists, ALA Notable Book Nominee, several Mock Newbery lists—but the biggest surprise for me was when the book was chosen as one of Amazon’s top 20 children’s books of the year so far. The reason that I’m so surprised is because I don’t know what they based the criteria on. It’s not among the top selling books nor does it have tons of reviews. But the Amazon editors chose it as one of the top 20 children’s books. I keep thinking, “REALLY? How did THAT happen?”

**Lots of writers face rejection on their way to success. Was Midnight Without a Moon rejected on its journey to publication? What tips or advice do you have for young aspiring writers?**

The bulk of my rejection happened before I wrote Midnight Without a Moon. I spent five years on the Query Train and gathered many rejection tickets along the way to The Land of Literary Acceptance. Midnight did receive a fair share of rejection, however. I queried roughly 50 agents with the projects and queried for four and a half months. But that number is relatively small compared to the amount of time I spent on previous projects.

My advice to aspiring authors: If you have a project that can’t land you a “yes” after a year or so, move on. Ideally, you should be working on a new project while querying the first one, the second one, the third one…or however many projects it takes to get your breakthrough. This is a discipline you will need anyway once you do get a yes.

On the flip side of that, don’t be afraid to revise. But use caution. Don’t get stuck in Revision Land, either. Revision Land is that place where your original story gets so lost in the confusion of everyone else’s suggestions/critiques that you can’t even remember why you wrote the story in the first place. Don’t. Go. There.

**What are you working on next?**

Right now I’m just trying to make sure MIDNIGHT WITHOUT A MOON reaches its full audience and to prepare the sequel, A SKY FULL OF STARS, to reach the same audience when it releases on January 2, 2018. I have some more historical fiction from the Mississippi Delta brewing in the pot as well.
1. Rose (or Rosa, as she’s later known) is a plucky heroine who dreams of a better future. How does this aspect of her personality help her through struggles in everyday life? How do Rosa’s dreams compare to the reality of her life on the sharecropping farm with her grandparents?

2. Rosa often reflects on the shade of her skin, particularly how it compares to other “lighter-skinned” members of her family. Her grandmother Ma Pearl describes Rosa’s skin as “midnight without a moon.” How does this image affect Rosa’s feelings about her appearance? Do Rosa’s feelings on her skin change throughout the narrative?

3. In one scene, Hallelujah and Rosa explore the meaning behind the phrase: “stars can’t shine without darkness.” They come up with several explanations. What is your interpretation? What does this phrase mean to you?

4. When Aunt Belle brings Rosa’s cousin Queen multiple sets of pantsuits, the tradition-bound Ma Pearl expresses her disapproval of the clothing. Why do you think this is? What could the trend of women wearing pantsuits signify in the 1950s?

5. After Rosa sees a photo of Emmett Till, the 14-year-old boy who was killed, she remarks on his resemblance to her best friend Hallelujah. How does this coincidence affect Rosa? How does Rosa connect to Emmett’s death?

6. Throughout the narrative, Rosa desperately wants to leave Mississippi. Yet at the novel’s conclusion, she rejects an offer to live with her aunt and chooses to stay with her grandparents. What are her reasons for this change of heart?

7. History Extension: Rosa’s story takes place in the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement. Using an online or textual encyclopedia, map a timeline of the Civil Rights era. Mark down important highlights, such as Emmett’s death and specific marches and boycotts. In 1955 headlines spoke of another woman named Rosa. What is her story and how does it relate to the movement?

8. Rosa’s grandfather is a sharecropper, and lives on a sharecropping farm
How do sharecroppers compare and contrast to the earlier generations of slaves?

Ma Pearl's Pinto Beans and Cornbread

"I should've been tired of beans, seeing that we ate them nearly every day, but Ma Pearl didn't fix beans the way other folks fixed them. She simmered hers with tomatoes, brown sugar, onions, and green peppers..."

Beans

(Julie's Recipe)

The great thing about a recipe like this is that you can easily adjust it to make it vegetarian (although I love the flavor the bacon and/or ham bone adds!) or to tone down the spice. The tricky thing about cooking with dried beans is that sometimes there's a huge variation in cooking time. If the beans are fresher, it could take as little as an hour after soaking. If they're older, it can take 3 (!!!) hours. So leave a little wiggle-room in your cooking time just in case.

1 bag of dried pinto beans
1-2 dried chilis (depending on heat level you can choose an

Cornbread:

(Cindy's Recipe)

2 eggs
1 cup buttermilk, or 1 cup milk soured with 1 Tbsp lemon juice
1/4 cup oil
1/4 cup honey
1 1/2 cups corn meal
1 cup flour (white or whole-wheat)
2 1/4 teaspoon baking powder
3/4 teaspoon salt

Heat oven to 400° F. Grease 8 or 9 inch square or round pan (or muffin cups). In large bowl, combine all ingredients and mix well. Pour batter into greased pan. Bake for 20-25 min or until toothpick inserted comes out clean. For muffins, bake 15-20 minutes.
1 head of garlic, peeled
1 ham bone (optional)
1 pound of bacon (replace with a couple tablespoons of olive oil for vegetarian)
1 bell pepper, chopped
1-2 hot peppers, chopped (optional)
1 onion, chopped
1 bay leaf
2 quarts of chicken or vegetable stock
1 T kosher salt
1 t smoked paprika
1 T brown sugar
1 can diced tomatoes
hot sauce, diced onions, and sour cream for garnish (my mom always puts ketchup on instead of hot sauce!)

1. Put the dried chilis, the head of garlic (saving two cloves for later), and the beans in a pot of water. Cover, bring to a boil, and then turn off to soak overnight.
2. The next day, drain the beans and pick out as much of the chili/garlic as you can. Rinse lightly and return beans to the pot.
render. Then add the bell pepper, hot peppers if using, onion, and remaining two cloves of garlic and cook until browned. Add the bay leaf, the salt, paprika, brown sugar and tomatoes and cook until the tomatoes are bubbly and start to break down.

4. Add skillet contents to the bean pot, along with the ham bone if using.

5. Add chicken/veggie stock to the pot and stir to combine. Bring to a boil, cover and simmer until the beans are soft and the sauce starts to thicken, 1-3 hours (see note above).

6. Top with hot sauce, diced onion, sour cream and big chunk of warm cornbread.

"Dreams have more meaning when you have to fight for them."

Each of us is part of a community, usually several communities. You are part of the community of your class, your family, maybe a church congregation, your neighborhood, and your town. And even though you are only one person, YOU
1. Think about who you are. What are you good at? What is something you care a lot about? Was there ever a time in your life when you went through something really hard, or were really sad?

2. Now think about your different communities. Are there any problems? Do you see any people who might be going through a hard thing like you did? Or who might be sad like you once were? Do you see something that isn't fair? Do you see someone (or a group of someone's) who are picked on or left out in some way?

3. Make a plan to do something to help one of the problems you saw and act on it!
   Maybe you will be like the people in Rose's community and take a meal to someone who is sad. Maybe you can collect school supplies or books for a library because education is important to you. Even just sitting by someone who needs a friend makes a difference.

4. Print off the card below, fill it out, and share it with us on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, or through email. We want to hear how you are making a difference!

Want more ideas on how to make a difference? Check out some of these websites and blog posts.

35 Service Projects for Kids
Start a Snowball: Helping Kids Do Good
Do Something: Volunteer For Social Change
Don't Forget!
Our Twitter book club chat will be on August 15 @ 9 pm EST. Use the hashtag, #mgbookclub.
See you there!

If you liked *Midnight Without A Moon*, check out these great books next!

*One Crazy Summer*, Rita Williams-Garcia  
*The Watsons Go To Birmingham, 1963*, Christopher Paul Curtis  
*Stella by Starlight*, Sharon M. Draper  
*March*, John Lewis (slightly older readers)

Do you have a middle grade historical book you love? Tweet us @mgatheart, or tag us on instagram @mgatheart!

**Next Month's Book Is:**

*One Shadow On the Wall*  
by Leah Henderson
Take a picture during your summer travels (local or far-flung) and post it on Instagram with the hashtag #mgroadtrip2017. Our winner will receive a nature journaling kit!

Amanda, Cindy, and Julie, are all mentoring Middle Grade entries in Pitch Wars this summer. Check out their mentor bios and wishlists [here](https://us16.campaign-archive.com/?u=c3a7dc0e98e068e9668e7be81&id=9e118c9b99) (Amanda and Cindy) and [here](https://us16.campaign-archive.com/?u=c3a7dc0e98e068e9668e7be81&id=9e118c9b99) (Julie)!

Amanda and Cindy are also teaching a webinar class on August 3rd on writing middle grade novels with sticking power, called The Four T's of Classic Middle Grade. Details and registration can be found [here](https://us16.campaign-archive.com/?u=c3a7dc0e98e068e9668e7be81&id=9e118c9b99)!

Kit recently presented to the Austin SCBWI chapter on Online Contests and the Book Twitter Community. She's currently immersed in editing services and planning a fall curriculum for her creative writing course.
Don't forget to add Amanda's and Cindy's books to Goodreads:

The Three Rules of Everyday Magic
Where The Watermelons Grow

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