The Warmth of Other Suns Study Guide

The Warmth of Other Suns by Isabel Wilkerson

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Summary

The Warmth of Other Suns, The Epic Story of American's Great Migration by Isabel Wilkerson is the story of the migration of southern blacks to the urban areas of the North and West in hopes of finding a better life for themselves and their families. The Great Migration began in 1915 and continued steadily until the 1970s when all the vestiges of discrimination and racism in the South finally began to vanish. During those many decades, six million black southerners made their way from the Deep South to the North and West to escape Jim Crow laws and to forever leave behind the racism that was oppressive and all-encompassing. Some historians believe that the number of migrants was far greater than six million because there was no formal recordkeeping and many of the departures were secretive and in the dark of night.

The Warmth of Other Suns begins with a personal anecdote from author Isabel Wilkerson. She is a second generation descendent of a southern black migrant. Her grandmother fled from the Jim Crow south in favor of a more level playing field up north. Wilkerson heard many stories over the years about the unbearable conditions in which blacks were forced to exist. She also heard how the decisions to leave were heart-wrenching – the migrants were leaving so much behind – family, friends, memories, their hometowns. Wilkerson also learned of what it was to be flung into what was the equivalent of a foreign land for many of the migrants. People in the North were fast-talking with strange accents; everything was crowded; the food was unfamiliar; and, the migrants had to deal with snow and cold temperatures and homesickness.

The Warmth of Other Suns focuses on the migration of three real-life individuals. Ida Mae Gladney, her husband, George, and their two young children fled in the dark of night from the cotton fields of Chickasaw County, Mississippi, to Milwaukee and then on to Chicago. George Starling escaped the citrus fields of Eustis, Florida, and a possible lynch mob when he hopped a train for New York City. Dr. Robert Pershing Foster left Monroe, Louisiana, for Los Angeles, California after every hospital in the South refused to offer his a staff position despite the fact that he was a successful surgeon in the U.S. Army. Although the focus is on the lives of these three southern migrants, they represent the six million other migrants with whom they shared so much.

Most immigrants thought that escaping to the urban centers in the North and West would fulfill their hopes of achieving the American dream. When they arrived they found that the fantasies that they had about the North were just that. Wages were higher but so were costs. There were no Jim Crow laws in these urban centers but that didn't mean that there wasn't any racism or bigotry – it was alive and well in the North and just as prevalent as it was in the South, only more subtle. When the three principles in this work migrated to the South, the country was still a few decades away from the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This act signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson made it illegal not to rent or sell property to a person because of his color. The law also made it illegal for an employer to discriminate against an applicant because of race. The northern landlords and employers weren't blatant about rejecting blacks. They made up excuses

for not hiring them or renting to them but they were just as adamant in their determination to keep them out.

Some migrants couldn’t make it up north and returned to the oppression that awaited them at home. But the vast majority of immigrants wouldn’t give up their hope to live the American dream. Despite set-backs and obstacles that could never be surmounted, the migrant spirit – the migrant advantage – compelled these transplants to make the best of their lot in life and fight for more for their families and for the generations that would follow.

Part One & Part Two: Pages 3 - 88

Summary

During the years between 1915 and 1970, some six million black southerners left their homelands in the South to migrate to the northern and western states looking for a better life. The impact of this Great Migration changed America forever and its impact is still being felt to this day.

Author Isabel Wilkerson had found an old sepia snapshot of two young women who had reunited in Washington, D.C. after fleeing the South. One of those young women was Wilkerson's mother who mused about what life would have been like had she not left. America would not have had Toni Morrison, B.B. King, Richard Wright and his groundbreaking novel Native Son. Historian James N. Gregory wrote that a comprehensive account of the Great Migration did not exist. Wilkerson wrote The Warmth of Other Suns to rectify that omission. The book covers 100 years and follows the lives of Ida Mae Gladney, George Starling and Dr. Robert Pershing Foster after their escape from the South.

In 1996, Wilkerson interviewed Ida Mae Gladney in her adopted city of Chicago. She lived in a second floor flat on the South Side of Chicago. She did not come to the city to live in the midst of poverty and crime but that had become her reality.

In her native Chickasaw County, Mississippi, blacks were under the invisible rule of whites. Whites were all around but they were separated from blacks. Ida Mae had very few actual encounters with white people. The majority of her encounters with whites had not been pleasant. In one especially disturbing experience, she was dangled over a well by two white boys who, unprovoked, threatened to let her fall and kill her. They were just having a little fun. She helped a nice white woman deliver eggs. The woman gave the family eggs and chicken knowing that they were struggling. The woman was shocked at the names Ida Mae was called by some of her customers. A white farmer was kind to the blacks until he got drunk. He would terrorize his black workers, shooting off his pistol and threaten to kill them. When a black family called the Carters lost two sons to a lynching, the remaining family left for the North. It was a sign to Ida Mae that there was a way out for her.

The desire to escape the Deep South had been ongoing and growing since 1915. Railroads in Pennsylvania had been quietly recruiting blacks for cheap labor. Quietly, several hundred black families had fled Selma, Alabama, in February 1916. It was the start of the Great Migration. For years after the Civil War, there had been discontent among white farmers and plantation owners. They found the blacks difficult to deal with after they'd been given their freedom. The blacks were no better off after gaining their liberty. After Reconstruction when northern monitors withdrew from the South, a caste system was established in the South based strictly on race. The U.S. Supreme Court

approved the system in Plessy v. Ferguson. Blacks were flung back in time and became secondary citizens who lacked the rights and privileges of whites.

A sure way to a lynching was even just the hint of an indiscretion by a black male toward a white woman. Black men and women were frequently tortured and mutilated for perceived misbehavior. Some were burned alive. The Ku Klux Klan became a chilling presence in the Deep South. Jim Crow laws were established that regulated every aspect of the lives of black people.

Those early migrants from Selma left without the leadership of a Martin Luther King or Malcolm X. They listened to their hearts and to reason. At the turn of the century, the new generation of young blacks had no personal knowledge of slavery but suffered under Jim Crow and the whites who seemed to hate them. They saw the contradictions in their lives – they were technically free but in reality were oppressed – suffering under the misery and dehumanization of Segregation.

Ida Mae, George and Pershing all endured the travails of Jim Crow. Jim Crow collapsed under its own weight but the prejudicial treatment of blacks outlasted it.

George Starling was interviewed in New York City in 1996. He lived in a Brownstone basement apartment in Harlem. He related his story that began in Eustis, Florida, in 1931. He and some other boys were caught in an orange tree stealing tasty green oranges by the church deacon who threatened to tell their fathers. That was the worst punishment a young black child could get. Their parents had raised them to be subservient and never step out of line. The parents would always side with the accuser rather than the child.

George was born on a tobacco farm near Alachua Florida in July 1918. His grandfather, John, was a sharecropper who had been a slave on a North Carolina farm and had been flogged regularly. One day the slaves turned on the plantation owner and killed him. They fled and were never captured. After leaving the plantation, the family moved to St. Petersburg. George's parents split up and he lived with his grandmother for two years. He then joined his father in Eustis.

Big George worked at the loading dock for a packing house. He also ran a small convenience store and sold homemade goods and elixirs to day workers and students. Florida was particularly egregious in its treatment of blacks and it had long been a passionate supporter of states' rights dating back to 1861 when it became one of the first states to secede from the union. The Civil War was the bloodiest conflict ever conducted on U.S. soil, including the American Revolution. After the South's defeat, Florida was quick to pass legislation limiting the rights of blacks. They were not equal to the white man and, therefore, should not be treated equally under the law. Hatred, violence and death ensued in the Sunshine state.

George and Inez kept their marriage secret. George wanted to spring it on his father if he wouldn't allow him to return to school in the fall. But Big George used the marriage against George, claiming that he was ready to send him back to school until he learned

he was married. George had no choice but to work to support a wife who he loved but who he was not ready to commit to, and, there was no nearby college who accepted black people.

Robert Pershing Foster was interviewed in Los Angeles in 1996. Foster remained bitter about his experience in the South, his homeland. He had a successful career as a physician and was reputed to be a very good one. His story began in Monroe, Louisiana, in 1933 when he was a teenager. He lived in the segregated south and on the wrong side of the tracks in Monroe. He was the youngest in a family of high-achievers despite their poverty and the racism that they suffered under.

Pershing grew up under the constant threat of violence, torture and death. He lived with it but never accepted it.

Analysis

The author is providing a general overview of the Great Migration. She provides specifics as to the duration of the black migration from the South and the remarkable number of blacks who chose to leave their homeland behind in favor of the many unknowns that would await them in the North and West.

By doing so, the author is providing a premise for telling the story of the black migrants of the South. She wanted to lay a solid foundation for the material that follows. She also describes her personal interest in the story of the black migrants who fled the Deep South between 1915 and 1970. She herself is a descendent of the Great Migration; her grandmother had fled the South. Wilkerson had heard her grandmother's account of her family's migration. It is important to the author to the story of the migration on several levels: it had impacted her family and probably changed the trajectory of her own life and she wanted to have a definitive account of the Great Migration for future generations.

It is obvious that she was inspired by her grandmother's stories and wanted to learn more. She makes the point that the Great Migration is one of the most significant turning points in American history but one that had been vastly ignored by scholars and historians. She wanted to change that and create an account that would contain this history for posterity. Soon all the original migrants will be gone and without a book like The Warmth of Other Suns their story would be lost forever.

In this first part, Wilkerson also introduces the three migrants that she focuses on in her book. She relates the personal stories of these three individuals but they also represent the six million migrants who shared similar experiences with them in both the South and in their new homes in the North and West.

It is essential reading for anyone interested in the nation's history. It is truly an important movement that lasted more than fifty years and changed politics, demographics and American society forever.

Vocabulary

oxbow, feudal, consigned, metaphorically, untenable, suffice, ornery, itinerant, sharecropper, clandestine, arbitrary, officious, pilfering, expatriate, pontificate, beleaguered

Part Two: Pages 89 - 179

Summary

Former black residents of the Deep South often revisited their old homelands with tales of their great success and huge incomes. But they were generally presenting a skewed picture of life in the North and West that wasn't much better than what they had in the South. The dreams of the young were of a world that was free and accepted them. Life was particularly hard on the young people because they had no option other than to stay.

Gilbert and Percy sat on the porch one night and become ear witnesses to the torture and death of a black man pursued by nameless white men who told the man that they were going to kill him. Gilbert was interviewed fifty years later and had never been able to get the man's moans and pleas out of his mind. That was when he decided that he would leave the South some day.

After author Wilkerson's uncle found the hood and robe of the Ku Klux Klan in the drawer of a man he worked for, he left for Detroit the next day. As children Ida Mae, George and Pershing Foster all had dreams of a better life. Newly married Ida Mae moved to the cotton plantation where her husband worked. Ida Mae had to pick cotton but continually fell behind. Picking her quota of 100 lbs of feathers was backbreaking and akin to gathering 100 lbs of bricks. Ironically, Ida Mae could not afford a cotton dress; she wore flour sacks sewn together. She dared to dream that there could be more.

In 1939, George Starling sat on a flatbed truck bound for the groves instead of sitting in a classroom where he wanted to be. George told himself that picking fruit in the groves was a temporary set-back. Despite the labor-intensive work, there was competition among the pickers. The foremen selected the best pickers for their groups. The workers picked through their rows as fast as they could so they could move on to empty rows. The veteran pickers called George "schoolboy" and couldn't fathom why he wanted to return to school. George was good at math and in checking the pay of his co-workers often found that they had been cheated out of some of their pay.

In 1935, Pershing was sixteen and had just completed eleventh grade which was as far as a colored child could go in school. He made his first trip out of Monroe to St. Louis to visit his brother, Madison. He resented the area marked for the colored on the bus but he had no options. As the bus filled up on subsequent stops, he was told to move to the back of the bus. His visit was a blur. His brother gave him a tour of the hospital where he was a resident. The family had saved enough money to send Pershing to Leland college for two years and then on to Morehouse which was a prestigious college for the colored.

Once in Atlanta at Morehouse, Pershing saw professional blacks living in nice brick houses and enjoying the good life. It gave him and other black youths the hope for a brighter future. He decided he would never live in Monroe or the Jim Crowe south again. He met fellow student Alice Clement in choir practice. She was the daughter of the president of Morehouse's graduate school. He was immediately attracted to her and they soon began dating. Alice's father would not have chosen Pershing for his daughter. However, after getting to know him he liked Pershing's ambition and confidence that he would succeed. After graduating from Morehouse he went on to graduate school and then to Meharry Medical College in Nashville.

On late night in October 1937, Ida Mae was woken by a rapping at the door. The plantation owner and several other men were looking for Joe Lee who was her husband's cousin and who lived in the same cabin as Ida Mae and her family. Joe Lee had been accused of stealing the owner's turkeys. The men caught Joe Lee trying to slip out the back door.

George left a temporary job he took in Detroit after rioting broke out. He returned to Florida and the groves. George had been drafted but flunked his physical. World War II had taken most of the young male pickers. So when George returned, he used the labor shortage to leverage more pay which infuriated the foremen. But for once George and the other pickers had the upper hand and he was able negotiate better pay and conditions for the pickers.

By 1941, Pershing and Inez married. The wedding was an elaborate affair and the high-note for that year in Atlanta's black community. After the wedding, Alice went to New York to study at Juilliard and Pershing was off to medical school in Tennessee. After a year at Juilliard, Alice returned to Atlanta to teach with Pershing still in Tennessee. After graduation, he moved to St. Louis for his residence at Homer G. Phillips Hospital, the colored facility where his brother had also served his residency. He acted on the recommendation that he be trained as a surgeon.

Pershing reported for duty as a medical officer and became Captain Foster. He was encouraged by an army colonel to stay with the army where he could become chief of surgery. He was aware of the many black men who had served in the army and were confronted with the overt racism that existed within the ranks. After serving their country, many returned to the Jim Crow south where they had to deal with racism the rest of their lives.

Pershing and his family moved to Salzburg where Pershing reported to his new commanding officer. Unfortunately, Pershing was thrust back in time when he quickly learned that his commander, who was from Mississippi, was appalled that his new chief surgeon was black. The colonel refused to deal with Pershing who was relegated to staff doctor under a white chief surgeon. Pershing did not feel welcomed by the other staff doctors who were all white. He was not allowed to operate on any white women.

The men pounding on Ida Mae's door that dark night caught Joe Lee and almost beat him to death. The turkeys they accused him of stealing had wandered off the property

and showed up the next morning. That incident compelled Ida's husband to leave the Jim Crow south forever.

Word got around that George Starling had gotten twenty-two cents per box pay for the pickers. He also got the reputation for stirring up trouble and speaking up to whites which scared some blacks off. The owners plotted to go after George and lynch him. Word got back to George and he left town right away.

Pershing did well as an army doctor. Yet after the war he wasn't allowed to work in any southern hospitals. He had always dreamed of going to California and he had friends and contacts there. It wasn't segregated there and he could be himself and live free. He would go first and send for Alice later.

In October 1937, after Joe Lee's beating, Ida Mae and her husband George decided to pick as much cotton as they could until the crop was done then they would leave. They would tell no one other than a few close relatives. They secretly plotted the details of their departure. George scraped enough money together to purchase four train tickets north. Ida Mae was a couple of months pregnant but kept it to herself.

George Starling broke the news to Inez that he was leaving out of Wildwood. George knew that he could be taken any minute but didn't know by whom – the KKK or a crew foreman or the sheriff. He had to get out. Inez was angry that he had put them all at risk with his behavior. He was going to New York and would send for her later.

Pershing was working at Fort Polk and saving his money to go to California. Pershing was not like his brother, Madison, who was a physician in Monroe. Madison was happy to do his job and "stay in his place." Pershing wanted to be able to walk in any place he wanted to. He tried to get Madison to go with him to start all over in California but Monroe was his home and he had accepted it as it was.

Analysis

The author provides anecdotal information about the circumstances and events that compelled the migrants to head north. Her own uncle left the Deep South after he found a Klansman's hood in his boss's desk. How could he have continued working for a man who belonged to an organization that was established to keep blacks repressed and in many cases even kill them?

The black migrants are portrayed as proud people who put on a brave face when visiting back home. They didn't want to share with their friends and families that everything wasn't ideal in their new destinations. By boasting about the North, many more black migrants felt encouraged to take the same big step themselves.

The working conditions in the cotton fields in Mississippi and in the citrus fields of Florida were reprehensible. But what was worse was the violence that blacks faced. Two boys who heard the wailing of a man who was being beaten haunted them forever. They didn't see the beating – hearing it was enough!

The tragedy of what could have been looms over the story of the blacks who suffered under Jim Crow laws in the South. The education of black people in the South was an exercise in futility to white landowners. Why education them – all they can be are field workers and servants? Pershing Foster was a brilliant doctor and surgeon who was not allowed to practice in the South.

George Starling was bright and good with numbers but had to drop out of college so he could pick fruit. The fruit pickers he worked with called him “schoolboy” which they thought was a pejorative. George enraged the white citrus farm owners because he out-foxed them in negotiations on the pay for the pickers. With those kinds of skills, George could have been a CPA or mathematician. The landowners were so angered with him that he hurriedly fled Florida for New York City. He never regretted it because he was sure he had avoided a lynching.

The author provides some of the reasons that the blacks left the South. She does so in a clear way without demagoguery; she lets the fact speak for themselves. By providing anecdotes of why specific individuals left the South, she makes these people real to the reader. Learning the oppression that these people lived under makes for a better understanding of the suffering of America’s black citizens many of whom still struggle to live the American dream.

Vocabulary

mayhem, protocol, bourgeois, besotted, judiciously, inertia, vagrancy, curry, fervent, arbitrary, caduceus

Part Three: Pages 180 - 224

Summary

Ida Mae and the children rode to the train station in her brother-in-law's truck. Miss Theenie didn't want them to go but prayed for their safety. Ida Mae was on edge. She had never lived any place other than Mississippi. She hated leaving her mother and her sister and friends. She felt comfort knowing that her sister Irene would be there in Milwaukee to greet them. She had other relatives and friends in nearby communities. Ida and the children boarded the train and sat in the Jim Crow car, heading for a new life.

George Starling had to get out of Lake County before the grove owners got to him. George was traveling light. On April 14, 1945, Roscoe Colton drove George to the train station where he climbed into the train heading for New York.

Pershing Foster pulled away from his father and brother on Easter morning 1953 and headed for California. Many Mississippians had gone west before him. Young Huey Newton traveled with his parents from Monroe to Oakland where as an adult he founded the Black Panthers. Basketball player Bill Russell was another migrant from Monroe to Oakland. Many blacks migrated to California during World War II. Pershing decided to choose between Los Angeles and Oakland.

Ida Mae Gladney sat on the train to Milwaukee in October 1937 heading for a new life for her and her husband and their children. The train had long been the symbol of freedom to black people in the South. The Illinois Central Railroad was founded in 1850 and operated steamboats down the Mississippi. Mark Twain had piloted some of the steamboats and Abraham Lincoln was the attorney for the railroad. The Union army took over the railways during the Civil War. It was also the vehicle that brought the Chicago Defender, a black newspaper to the blacks of the South. The newspaper informed them of another life that awaiting them in the North.

George Starling road in the train to New York in the baggage car with other blacks. It was the first car in the passenger area. The blacks were put in the first car so they could take the brunt of the injuries in case the train crashed.

Pershing stopped to see a doctor friend in Texas. He was invited to stay and work with his friend but Texas was segregated and it wasn't for Pershing. He had to fight sleep driving through Texas where he wouldn't be allowed to stay in a motel. He had to head for a city in New Mexico that allowed black guests.

Ida Mae wasn't sure if there would be food on the train for her family. The Pullman car was made available to the whites first; the blacks got what food was left. Author Wilkinson's father who had served as a pilot in World War II had trouble getting food

during train rides after returning from the service of his country. Ida Mae, like other blacks, felt a bit of prestige just being on a train.

On April 15, 1945, George Starling was on the Silver Meteor heading to New York, finding himself in the Carolinas. The farther away he got from Eustis, Florida, the more he felt confident about his future.

When Pershing passed through El Paso, Texas, it was a milestone. After El Paso, Jim Crow laws didn't apply. The signs above the doors that said "colored" went blank. However, it was the discretion of hotel and restaurant owners whether they served blacks or not. When the trains returned to California, the signs went back up. This schizophrenic nature of the trains went on until Jim Crow laws died in the 1960s. Pershing didn't feel comfortable until he was out of Texas and into New Mexico. He was able to find a room in Lordsburg, New Mexico. He felt he was finally in the land of the free.

Pershing drove through the desert in Arizona which was a new experience for him. The crisp outline of purple mountains was off in the distance. He ran into problems renting a room in Phoenix – rejected four times by motel owners. A kind white man bought Pershing a cup of coffee and warned him that he would encounter racism in California, too. Pershing was deflated. He was so exhausted that he wasn't sure he could make it to the golden state but if he could, it apparently wouldn't be the place he dreamed of.

Without a place to stay, Pershing had to push on even though he was beyond exhausted. He headed to San Diego which was closer than Los Angeles. He had a near disaster on a curvy road forcing him to be more alert. He finally had to sleep in the car for a much needed nap. He made it to San Diego. He was dreading California now but there was no turning back.

In October 1937, Ida and her family crossed the Mason-Dixon Line into Kentucky and Illinois. It was a spiritual and symbolic experience for blacks to cross over. Jim Crow law was no longer applicable. In April 1945, George Starling arrived in Harlem at the doorsteps of his cousins. Finally arriving in San Diego in April 1953, Pershing stopped a black man and asked him where a "colored" hotel was. The man frowned. He couldn't tell him where a "colored" hotel was but he pointed him to just a plain old hotel. He still didn't know whether he'd wind up in Los Angeles or Oakland but a sign advertising "Lucky Lager" that read, "It's Lucky when you're in California" made him believe that California would be lucky for him.

As soon as the migration to the North began, there was debate about why it was occurring. Southerners blamed northern recruiters. Some economists blamed the boll weevil that devastated the cotton crop and greatly diminished the opportunity for field work. But many migrants didn't hail from cotton fields. There were many personal reasons but most of them had to do with seeking a better life. The numbers grew over the years from its start in 1915 because black southerners had friends and family in northern cities that could help them in their new lives.

The estimate of five million black migrants from the South to the North and West is believed to be greatly understated.

Analysis

In this section, the author depicts the bravery of migrants like Ida Mae who was a young woman who'd never been off the farm or on a train before. She had never dared to step beyond the parameters of the farm she and her husband sharecropped. She never stood up to any of her white bosses. But somehow she found the strength to take on the biggest and riskiest challenge of her life. Ida Mae didn't have much formal education but she was a smart woman. She knew that the oppression she lived under was wrong by any standards, especially God's. There was a determination that resided deep within her – she was resolved that her children would have a better life than she did. Ida Mae trembled with fear yet she stole away in the dark of night with her two young children to a future that was at best uncertain.

George Starling had an urgent reason to leave town. He didn't want to be lynched. George was very bright and had the audacity to take advantage of a labor shortage and negotiate increased earnings for the fruit pickers. He enraged the white landowners who vowed to get their revenge. As soon as George heard they were looking for him, he knew what that meant – it meant it had to get out of town and fast.

Pershing's trek wasn't on a train like the others. He chose to drive alone in his car to California. His journey took him through Texas and Arizona where he couldn't get a room because he was black. He drove all the way from Louisiana to California with hardly any sleep. The readers can relate to just how difficult this trip would have been.

There was one commonality in the flight of these three migrants – they all really wanted to leave their homelands. There was fear and doubt but one thing was made clear by the author, they did not want to live the rest of their lives in the Deep South and more importantly, they wanted their children to have a better future than they did.

Wilkerson points out that finally someone began paying attention to the Great Migration when the black southern migrants came streaming into urban areas by the thousands. Everyone began pointing fingers. Where did the fault lie? What compelled these people to leave in droves? Some tried to blame a devastated cotton crop but many migrants did not come from the cotton fields. America, once it tuned in, had to take a good long look at itself for allowing the oppression of American citizens in the South to endure for decades.

Vocabulary

remnants, mercurial, pompadour, cantina, plateau, arbitrary, proprietor, flustered

Part Four: Pages 225 - 331

Summary

When Ida Mae and her family arrived in Chicago, there were more people scurrying around the streets than she could have ever imagined. The train station felt bigger than the small towns she'd known all her life. But when she was interviewed years later about that moment, Ida Mae said that Chicago looked just like heaven to her.

In just twenty-four hours, George Starling had left behind the citrus groves and the threat of lynching to arrive at Penn Station in America's biggest and brightest city. Years later Pershing was to see purple mountains ahead of him as he drove west. For George Starling, the mountains that literally blocked out the sun were concrete and steel with the Empire State Building its tallest peak. He found his way to his aunt's apartment in Harlem. Interviewed years later, he said he didn't feel a part of any movement. He was just getting away from Florida. He just wanted to live as a free man without the threat of lynching.

Pershing arrived in Los Angeles in April 1953 where he found wide boulevards all with exotic Spanish names. The city seemed perfect, too perfect, fantastical and overdone. He drove to the house of another black physician, Dr. William Beck, who had been one of Pershing's medical school professors. There sheer distance between the Deep South and California had discouraged large numbers of migrants to the Golden State. There was competition from other migrants, particularly Mexicans, for low-paying jobs that blacks would seek. However, the black population increased over the years. Racism existed but it was spread out among the Hispanics, Asians, blacks and others who flocked to the temperate climate of Southern California.

Pershing stayed with the Becks and met up with an old friend to take in Los Angeles. Pershing loved what he saw. But how would he survive and take care of his family? He drove to Oakland to learn if that was where he future might lie. The black neighborhood reminded him of Monroe which was why many black migrants had chosen Oakland over the state's more glamorous locales. He stayed with a friend in Oakland. Pershing visited local hospitals in the area. He didn't take to the city or the opportunities it held out for a career. It was a done deal – Los Angeles had seduced him.

In November 1937, Ida Mae was becoming accustomed to a new life in Milwaukee. The family initially stayed with her sister, Irene. Beloit, Wisconsin, was a draw for many migrants from Chickasaw County, Mississippi. It had foundries and steel mills and factories that manufactured farm implements. There was work to be had in Beloit. Ida Mae was mesmerized by her new surroundings – bridges that raised and lowered, exotic people and alien tongues, nuns with crisp white headdresses that looked like halos around their faces. Blacks were migrating to Milwaukee and Europeans were immigrating there in droves. Blacks were given the worst and lowest paying jobs but in

1937 even those were scarce. When employment opportunities waned, blacks were the first to feel it. Ida planned to travel back to Mississippi to have her third child.

In the spring of 1945, George Swanson Starling took a job as a coach attendant on the Seaboard Air Line railroad which kept him away for weeks at a time. He earned more than he did as a citrus picker but less than the white workers on the railroad. He was twenty-seven years old and still called “boy” by white travelers. But George liked Harlem and felt free. Harlem had long been a haven for blacks from Africa when it was all farmland. A race riot broke out between Harlem blacks and Irish immigrants over conscription during the Civil War. But the flow of blacks to Harlem was steady even during the Depression.

Pershing was making Los Angeles his home. To accumulate enough money for his own apartment, he took a job as a physician with a colored insurance company. He made visits to the homes of people who had applied for insurance for a quick exam and a urine sample. The work was beneath him but he needed quick money. He was shocked when one black applicant, a woman, refused to let him examine her because he was black. That was a first for him. It made him realize how complicated the culture in California was. He struggled to establish a career as a physician and surgeon.

Ida Mae had her baby in Mississippi in August 1938. She waited until the baby was a few months old before she and the children returned up north. George had taken a job as an ice man in Chicago and rented a basement apartment on the South side for his family. The South Side of Chicago was a black enclave. Ida Mae found the living conditions barely superior to those in the South. Roomers slept in shifts in airless and windowless rooms. There was no light or heat and sometimes no water. Women hung their wash out the windows and cooked on hot plates.

After several months in Los Angeles, Pershing treated whatever patients Dr. Beck referred to him and continued working for the insurance company. He ultimately decided to get an office and start his own practice. He found the perfect suite in a building across from USC and began building a practice. Pershing still ran into blacks who preferred going to white doctors – even old friends and relatives from home. There were old resentments involving Alice’s parents who may have been rough on them in the classroom. And there was a jealousy of Pershing’s potential success. The abandonment by his own people hurt Pershing and stayed with him for decades.

There was a lot of tension between Pershing and Alice. Alice was ashamed that they lived in an apartment. She would not join any social organizations until they bought a house. To create an elite image, Pershing bought a Cadillac. Many old friends from Monroe thought it was over-the-top and pretentious. But Pershing didn’t care; he was going to do his own thing.

After proving himself as a surgeon, Pershing was able to join the staff of Metropolitan Hospital in Los Angeles. He was annoyed by the white doctors on staff who frequently talked about going to Vegas. Pershing wanted to go there more than anywhere but blacks weren’t allowed to stay in casino hotels. He found a contact in Vegas who

arranged for Pershing and a group of black professionals to come to Vegas as a group – it would be pushing the racial barriers. After a mix-up about their reservations, they were given their rooms. Pershing had a great time – just the kind he had dreamed of having in Vegas. Now he could join in the conversation with the white doctors.

Ida Mae and George Gladney had been in Chicago two years. They were having trouble finding work. Jobs that they applied for went to immigrants from Europe. Employers in the North claimed that they didn't hire blacks because their white workers wouldn't stand for it. Whites would often threaten to quit when blacks were hired to work with them. There was friction in the workplace over the hiring of blacks.

Finally, George was hired to work on the line in a Campbell's Soup plant. It was tedious work like picking cotton but this time he'd be paid for his efforts. Northern industrialists hired blacks during strikes and depended upon them not to join unions. They were cheap labor. As difficult as it was for black men to find work it was that much more difficult for black women.

After George Starling had been in New York six years, he got word from Florida that an old acquaintance, Harry T. Moore, who was a civil rights activist, and his wife had been killed in a bombing as they slept in their bed. It was quickly determined that the Klan was behind it but no one was ever charged with the murders.

In the late 1950s, Pershing had earned the respect of the other migrants from his hometown. He was considered a good doctor and his clientele base continued to increase. Musician Ray Charles was on the verge of becoming a big star when he started seeing Pershing. He had also migrated from the South. The two became fast friends. Pershing loved the career and was able to purchase an upscale house for his family.

Analysis

The vast majority of the black migrants had left unbearable conditions and headed for the unknown. Many figured that anything had to be better. They had high hopes but they lived in fear of leaving their homeland and loved ones behind for a better life. But there were no guarantees.

The author writes about the adjustments that the people had to make in their new lives. She also tells of the disappointment and disillusionment that many experienced once they arrived at their destinations. Many had thought that their new homes would solve all their problems but they soon found out that was not the case. It is human nature and a kind of internal defense mechanism that spurs a person on to improve his lot in life, especially if, like the migrants, he was living under egregious conditions. If the migrants hadn't fantasized about how their lives would start anew in a better place, they would have never gone.

There was racism and bias in the large urban areas of the north. It wasn't as blatant as it was in the Deep South but it was there. It was difficult for migrants to find decent

places to live – rent was higher in the North and West and many white landlords didn't want to rent to them. Finding work was difficult as well. Black migrants were thought of by some as lazy and unreliable. Black women especially had difficulty finding work and when they did, they had to be concerned about sexual exploitation.

In this section, the three migrants had made it to their new homes with, as mentioned before, mixed results. There were positives and negatives but the color of their skin was still an issue in most of their experiences. They had left the South but shades of the hatred and racism they left awaited them in their new locales. The struggle wasn't over. They had traded one set of problems for another… but there was light at the end of the tunnel. At least in their new cities, there was no threat of lynching and they were able to enter a store without being arrested.

Vocabulary

taciturn, arbitrary, stoic, unfurled, covenants, emporium, perfunctory, mulatto, terminus, devilment, incendiary, vestibule

Part Four: Pages 332 - 432

Summary

Ida finally was able to get decent employment and the family moved to a large flat. Like most migrant families, there was a steady stream of friends and family – the curious – who visited to see what life was like up north.

One night in 1961, Ray Charles' wife called Pershing. She was in hysterics. Ray had fallen and sliced his hand on a glass table. He was bleeding profusely. Pershing performed emergency surgery that night and advised Charles not to use the hand for six weeks but Ray was scheduled to go on tour and ignored the warning. Pershing came along on the tour to tend to Ray's hand. Ray Charles was grateful to Pershing for seeing him through his recovery – he was one of the dearest people he had ever known. He named a son Robert after Pershing.

George Starling worked as much as he could to stay away from Inez. He loved her but she was difficult to deal with. She had an inner anger that raged ever since she was abandoned by her mother as a child. They had another daughter in 1954 named Sonya.

In 1962, Ray Charles had a hit song called "Hide Nor Hair" and it was a tribute to Pershing. It was a thank you for saving his hand. Pershing's practice really took off then; he had too many patients to handle. His patients would wait for him whether he was in surgery or whether they figured he was at the track.

Ida Mae didn't return home often – only for funerals or illnesses. Pershing didn't go home often either. George Starling was afraid to return home. When his job on the train took him into Florida, he stayed on the train and out of sight.

Ida Mae and George and their adult children were all employed blue collar workers by the late 1950s. They wanted to pool their money and move to a decent place where they could live together. But it was difficult to find an affordable and safe place. There was a white exodus to the suburbs including to Dearborn near Detroit. At the same time, Rosa Park was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a public bus. In 2000 the black population in Detroit was eighty percent – across the expressway, Dearborn, Michigan had a black population of one percent.

George Starling watched the unrest and rioting that was going on around the country. There were always reminders that he was an alien and not completely welcomed in free and open New York City. He felt hurt and angry to watch the suffering of the black people. He still had relatives and friends in the South. George was hurt and angered when he heard about three churches being set on fire in Georgia in 1962.

In 1961, Pershing's older brother, Madison, needed gall bladder surgery. Pershing talked him into coming to Los Angeles where he could get the best treatment. The surgery went fine but Madison died several days later from a blood clot, a complication

that was not preventable. Harriet, Madison's wife, held it against him for years. Pershing blamed himself and would never get over it.

In 1966, Ida Mae listened to a speech given by Martin Luther King on a crowded street in Chicago. He spoke about the migration of blacks from the South only to find racism and hardship in the North in cities like Chicago. It was difficult for King to identify the exact cause because racist behavior was subtle and unofficial. Blacks were made to work longer hours for less money and were restricted in housing choices. They were repressed and denied their civil rights not in an overt manner but a in a stealthy manner that was just as devastating. King and other civil rights activists weren't fighting unfair laws they were fighting against the fear and hatred in the hearts of northern whites.

In 1968, George Starling had to enforce new laws that ended the segregation of train passenger cars in the South. President Johnson had signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and blacks had full rights and segregation was unlawful. But the South resisted and black passengers on trains were still expected to give up their seats for white passengers. George's conductor would give him a list of the passengers that were to be moved to "Jim Crow" cars as they approached the South. George knew it was wrong and quietly alerted black passengers that they didn't have to move. If he were caught advising passengers to defy the conductor, he could be fired. Some took his advice and politely refused to move. Others, who were victims of the long-held customs of Jim Crow, moved when they were asked to.

By 1967, Ida Mae and her family had been in Chicago thirty years. Her children were grown and a whole generation of her family had been born there. They finally were able to purchase their own home in South Shore, a white neighborhood that had opened up to black residents. It was a three-floor flat that had room enough for the entire family. Soon whites rapidly moved out of the neighborhood. In just one year, the area had gone from all white to all black. Small business owners shutdown their shops and moved on. The neighborhood of Hyde Park was the only truly segregated community south of Chicago. It was surrounded by all black neighborhoods.

In 1967, George and Inez Starling sent their thirteen-year-old daughter, Sonya, to Eustis for a visit. She got pregnant which shocked George and almost killed Inez. The pregnancy caused further division in George and Inez's marriage which had never been happy. Sonya had a son, Bryan, when she was fourteen. Another woman gave birth to a son, Kenny, a short time later. She was a woman that George had been seeing behind Inez's back.

The Clements were constantly pressuring their daughter to return to Atlanta. It drove Pershing away from Alice. He focused on his practice and on Vegas, horseracing and drinking. Alice threw herself in the girls into the social world. But Alice packed up and threatened to leave once; she had had enough of the long hours he spent drinking and gambling. However, she stayed and discovered that she and Pershing shared one passion – posh parties and dressing to the nines.

A protest for higher wages was held in February 1968 at the hospital where Ida Mae worked. She respected the strikers but she wouldn't join them. She had come a long way from the cotton fields and wasn't about to jeopardize her job. She crossed the picket line and was called names but she was never physically at risk and didn't miss any work.

The year of 1970 was considered the turning point in the Great Migration. Fewer black southerners were leaving the South and children in the South were attending integrated schools without any problems. Things had changed.

Ida Mae had totally acclimated to Chicago and never looked back. She had lost her eldest daughter, Velma, in a car accident. It was something that Ida Mae could barely speak about even years later. Ida Mae and her husband George were part of the masses of migrants who worked hard and succeeded in their new northern homes. However, the focus of the media always focused on the minority that didn't adjust well and went on welfare.

In 1970, George Starling turned fifty-two and had been in Harlem for twenty-five years. He never realized his dream of being a scientists or mathematician. He was in an unhappy marriage and had two kids who hadn't made the best choices. He had a two-year-old son he was supporting. He didn't like where black youths were heading. There were choices to be made during one's youth. George's life changed forever when his college career ended. It had forced him to give up his dreams and marry the wrong woman. He preached against doing things for spite because he had suffered from an act of spite for the rest of his life.

Pershing had led his life trying to gain acceptance from those who rejected him. He had proven that he was better than anyone ever thought he was yet he couldn't get over the rejection that he had endured.

Analysis

In this part, the migrants are depicted having largely adjusted to their new lives. They are working hard and establishing themselves in their new communities. But the specter of racism – past and present – always looms. None of these three migrants returned home often – only when they had to for illnesses and funerals. They made the break from the past and they didn't want to return.

The three migrants had suffered hard times and tragedy and loss – things that they would never completely get over. But they persevered. Their strength and resiliency had taught them that they had the ability to get through any hardship or problem. The loss of loved ones is the most difficult experience for anyone to deal with. But the migrants had been on such a forward trajectory since they left the South that the sheer momentum of their lives spurred them on. Nothing could stop them.

There had been new laws enacted and advancements and progress made in society. Conditions had improved but still the migrants were wise and knew that laws didn't

change hearts. Ironically, George Starling had to enforce the new laws that ended segregation on the trains where he still worked in. He whispered to black passengers that they no longer had to move out of white compartments. Sadly, some were afraid to stay in the white cars – segregation had just been too much a part of their lives and the prospect of change was frightening.

The author points out that the success rate of the migrants was high. However, some who failed to make the adjustment in their new homes were forced to go on welfare. Sadly, the focus seems to always be on this minority rather than on the hardworking families like Ida Mae's that outnumber them.

The reader can gather from this part that although there are successes, there is still much progress to be made before there is fully equality.

Vocabulary

protocol, sanctified, supremacists, mercurial, culmination, antipathy, quarantined, demographic, epicenter, fatalistic, protocol, zeitgeist, bourgeois, colloquia

Part Five: Pages 433 - 525

Summary

In 1970 in Chickasaw County, Mississippi, thirty years after Ida Mae and her family left the cotton fields behind, nothing much had changed. The farmer that Ida Mae and George worked for had died. The man who had hunted down Joe Lee that night now operated a thousand-acre farm. The land was still mostly devoted to cotton but the work was down by combines and modern farm implements. The community was sparsely populated and resistant to change. Even Brown v. The Board of Education a Supreme Court ruling in 1954 that made segregated schools illegal did not compel most schools in the South to comply. The state funneled federal funds targeted for public schools to private white schools. It would take fifteen years before there would be full compliance. Marches and protests and court rulings did not change southern hearts.

In Lake County, Florida, in the last 60s and 70s, black and white children began attending the same schools and classes. There was resistance and violence but the times were changing and finally the people stopped resisting.

By the 1970s, Monroe was undergoing the process of integration in all facets of its existence. Once during a last visit to the town, Pershing ate in a diner that he wouldn't have been allowed to set foot in even a decade before. Back at home he tried to forget Monroe but he was never able to fully shake it.

George Starling continued to counsel kids at his church and in his neighborhood on the choices they made. He felt he had the wisdom to help them because he'd been part of the Great Migration and had made the way for them in Harlem and surrounding areas. George had seen the perils of both sides of the migration. While the migrants fled from unbearable conditions in the South, they failed to recognize the barriers to success and the dangerous choices that met them in the North.

Nearing sixty in 1978, Pershing enjoyed his position at the Veteran's Hospital. It was a vindication in those days when he wasn't allowed to be on staff at any southern hospitals. However, he had clashes with staff members and was transferred to cramped quarters in an old building. He complained to the Labor Department. He felt he was being singled out and transported back to the Deep South.

In 1996, George had passed away and Ida Mae is eight-three years old when Wilkerson interviews her. She keeps up with her children and grandchildren and the folks back home. Looking out her second-story window gives her a bird's eye view of the crime that's taking place just outside. She's seen drug deals made and seen cops catch them. She felt bad for the "lost" kids of the Great Migration – children of migrants who lost their way. Too many people packed together in poverty is not a positive environment for young kids. She never leaves her home other than to go to church or on errands. She'd

never would dream of going out at night. She recently witnessed the cops arrest over a dozen people but thinks the cops are much better than the people.

When Wilkerson interviews George Starling in 1996, he is seventy-eight years old and a grandfather and great-grandfather. He is a deacon in his church and is an articulate speaker who enunciates every syllable and explains everything in great detail. The preacher stops by and the two men discuss the bad influence that the city has on young people. They talk about how people used to help other people but everyone has become Americanized and that doesn't happen any longer. Though he has a large family, he is happy with his solitude. He rarely sees his two sons and his daughter Sonya died in a car wreck in Florida after George had undergone heart surgery. He had much to be sad about.

In 1996, Pershing Foster talks about everything with ease – his wife who had passed away, his three daughters, his career, his love affair with Vegas and the race track. He has heart trouble but feels he's accomplished everything in life. He spends his time gambling or the on the phone giving out free medical advice. Among his best achievements are the many lives he saved and made better through his medical practice and the daughters who he'd saved from the strictures of the South.

In July 1996, it had been over fifty years since George stood up to the citrus growers and almost lost his life. Although he left Florida, his hometown and the incident that drove him away was never far from his mind. He had been gone ten years before he returned the first time. He is amazed that there are black mayors and politicians all over the South. He had a hard time getting used to seeing a black man and white woman walking down the street holding hands.

Although California wasn't the fantasy land that he had imagined, Pershing is happy with his decision to move himself and his family to California. Given all considerations, he feels he couldn't have done as well any place else. He's never gotten over his gambling addiction nor has he tried to.

The Harlem that George Starling first new is gone. There is no Savoy Ballroom. Wealthy blacks no longer live in Sugar Hill – they live wherever they want. The brownstones are aging and the streets are owned by gang members, prostitutes and crack dealers. George still loves Harlem although he is well aware of its perils; Harlem is his home; it had been his haven and saved his life.

By the end of 1996, Pershing's health began to deteriorate. He was on dialysis every two weeks. By summer of 1997, Pershing was more restricted in his movements and had little reason to wake up each morning. He was going to dialysis twice a week. In late July he suffered a massive stroke and fell into a coma. He never came out of it. He died at the age of seventy-eight in August 1997. Unlike his wife, Pershing had lived long enough to see the success of his daughters and his grandchildren.

Even after his death, Pershing's life was the topic of many conversations. Patients he had his entire life adored him. He was an outstanding surgeon who always had a

personal touch with his patients. He really cared about them – their physical as well as mental and emotional health. He had rejected being buried by Alice in Kentucky. Los Angeles was his town and that's where he wanted his cremation to take place.

Ida Mae knew her alderman and local politicians. In 1996, she voted to send a young Hyde Park constitutional lawyer and community activist to the state senate. He wasn't from Chicago and had an unusual name, Barak Obama. His wife, Michelle, was from the South side. After his election, Barak Obama attended one of Ida Mae's community meetings. He gave the group a short talk on how state senators can help them. No one in the room would have ever believed that the slender thirty-six year-old black man would one day be the President of the United States.

George Starling's health began to suffer in the spring of 1998. He had taken a few falls and was sent to a nursing home for rehab. He fell again and hit his head. He suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and fell into a coma. Gerard came up from Florida to see him. He had his own health issues and was torn apart to see his father so ill. Within a few days after returning to Florida, Gerard died of a massive seizure. George died in the hospital in September 1998. There were services for him both in Harlem and in Eustis, Florida.

Ida Mae Gladney outlasted most everyone she knew and she outlasted George Starling and Robert Pershing Foster two men she didn't know but had all been the part of a huge movement. She had become a Chicagoan. Every day was a blessing to her and every breath she'd taken was a gift.

Analysis

It is the end of the long road for the three migrants. The author interviews each of them near the ends of their lives and completes their stories. They were all satisfied with the decisions they made so long ago to leave the Deep South. There were regrets, of course, there always are. They learned that no place is perfect and that bias and racism exists everywhere. They learned to cope with their new surroundings and all felt that they fared better in their new homes than they would have fared had they remained in the South.

This last part is important because it tells the story of survival – people who have lived through unbearable conditions and who had the courage to try to make a better life for themselves and their families. Although their transitions weren't without a few bumps in the road, the steps they took demonstrate that unfair and oppressive conditions do not have to be tolerated. There are options.

The author has chronicled the long tale of three lives that were made better by refusing to live under oppressive circumstances and by taking assertive action. Despite the heartaches and the hardships that these people suffered, as well as the other six million migrants, the story is inspirational and will leave an indelible mark on the heart and mind of whoever may read it.

Vocabulary

comportment, consolation, solemnity, philanthropic, triage, churlishness, inoculate, idiosyncrasies, stalwart

Important People

Ida Mae Gladney

In October 1937 Ida Mae Brandon Gladney was preparing her children for their departure from Mississippi. She had sold off their personal items. Her husband was settling up with the plantation owner for his last year of labor. No one in the family had been on a train before. She didn't try to explain what was going on to her two small children, James and Velma. Miss Theenie, Ida's mother, had seen her other children leave and had to accept the departure of another. Ida Mae and the children packed up and left to meet George at the train depot.

In 1928, at fifteen, Ida Mae was courted by two men. Her mother, Miss Theenie, didn't like either one – they were both too old for Ida Mae. Miss Theenie's oldest daughter, Irene, had already gone off and gotten married. Her sons, Sam and Cleve, had already fled to the North and her husband, Ida's father, had died at the age of forty-three from exposure and perhaps diabetes. Miss Theenie was raising her three youngest children, all girls, as a single parent. The family worked the cotton fields of a large farm as sharecroppers.

The death of her father had been traumatic for Ida Mae. It haunted her the entire summer that followed his death and even when she returned to school. Her school was a one-room schoolhouse for all the black sharecroppers' children from first through eighth grade – with eighth grade being the end of their formal education. It was a one-mile walk through the woods to her school.

Ida Mae had a crush on another boy when she met George Gladney at the New Hope Baptist Church. But he pursued her and finally won her over. They were married in October 1929. They sharecropped cotton on the Edd Pearson plantation. Two weeks after they married, the stock market crashed and a life that promised to be difficult became harder than they had ever been imagined. When Ida Mae and George had two small children, they decided to migrate north to Milwaukee where her sister Irene had escaped to.

It was frightening for Ida Mae to leave the only home she'd ever known but the decision was made. After a short stay in Milwaukee, the family moved to Chicago. George and Ida worked hard and despite many set-backs and the racism that was rampant in Chicago, they persevered and made a home for themselves on Chicago's South Shore. It wasn't a perfect existence but it was a vast improvement over life in Chickasaw County, Mississippi, during the Jim Crow south.

Robert Joseph Pershing Foster

In April 1953, in Monroe, Louisiana, Robert Joseph Pershing Foster packed his surgery and medical bag and personal items. He wasn't referred to by his first name, Robert,

rather he was called, Pershing. His mother had named him after a famous general in World War I. She thought it was an elegant name that made her son sound important. Later in life he insisted on being called Robert.

The night he finally decided to leave the Jim Crow south behind along with his hometown of Monroe, Louisiana, he headed to California where he planned on finally having a career as a physician/surgeon and the chance for he and his family to live the good life – like white people did.

He said goodbye to his father who told him to follow his dreams. He loaded his things into his 1949 Buick Roadmaster and left behind the town where he was born and raised. He was leaving because he wasn't allowed to practice medicine and couldn't walk into the department store to try on a suit.

Pershing had been hurt and angered by the treatment of blacks since he was a kid. As a teenager, he compared the paved streets in the white neighborhood to the lumpy dirt roads in his part of town. He knew the places in town he could enter and where the entrances for blacks were located on the buildings. He could go to the movie theater but there was separate seating and even separate ticket windows. He loved movies; they took him away from his reality in Monroe. He was a proud young man and having a dream for a better life was the only way he could bear his existence.

Foster's parents were both college graduates from Leland College in New Orleans. They settled in Monroe where his father, Madison, took a job as principal and his mother, Ottie, as a teacher of the displaced black kids from other areas. Madison also served as the pastor at a local Baptist Church. The church was shut down by authorities when violence broke out over whether Madison or another pastor should be head of the church. The incident impacted Pershing who was thirteen at the time; he carried a sense of betrayal and insecurity with him the rest of his days.

Pershing had a difficult time distinguishing himself from his talented and gifted siblings. He was small in stature and teased mercilessly for being the principal's son. The reality that no matter how well he did in life, he would always be considered an inferior, subservient person because of his color. Pershing was dismayed when a new high school was being built for the white kids. His school was basically a small run-down building. The books the black students used were those cast away by the white school. Although his parents did well in comparison to other blacks, they were compensated far below the earnings of white educators. With the wages that blacks made there seemed no possibility for a brighter future. Government funding targeted for black kids was often used for white students instead.

Pershing Foster took all the travails and wounds of his young life with him when he migrated to California. Although he did well in Los Angeles and had a robust career as a surgeon, he never got over the deep hurt that he suffered during his young life in Monroe when he was reminded on a daily basis that he was a second-class citizen.

George Starling

George Starling took a train heading north from Wildwood, Florida. The train cars were separated by a railing down the middle of the aisles – one side of the compartment was for whites and the other for blacks. He was on the run and wouldn't relax until he was out of Lake County. He had broken "grove owners' laws." There was no place in the Jim Crowe south for him. He was New York City bound and would send for his wife, Inez, later.

As a young boy, George had heard stories all his life about the danger of being black in the south, especially a black male. As a young man, he experienced it himself. When George was a teenager the torture and death of another young black man, Claude Neal, was an event that made an indelible impression on George. Poor and feeling doomed with a future that was perilous at best, George and some of the neighborhood boys began stealing food from local shops. School work came easy to George who was tall, mischievous and charming. George didn't participate in the lies that the other boys told about how far they got with girls.

Being only one of the six students who graduated from high school and being class valedictorian, George was offered a scholarship at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical State College in Tallahassee. His father couldn't understand why George wanted to go. After two years of college, his father forced him to quit so he could help on the farm. Big George was always a poor mouth about his lack of money. George was angry when he found a drawer full of receipts of deposits that Big George made to a savings account. George wanted to hurt his father. He took his revenge on him by eloping with Inez Cunningham, a backwoods girl who his father didn't approve of.

George was smart and a little arrogant. His fellow pickers in the citrus fields of Florida found him to be very bright but a bit condescending. He was able to turn a labor shortage during World War II into an advantage for the pickers. He negotiated an unheard of twenty-two cents per box of picked fruit for the pickers with the landowners who were furious with him. Later the anger escalated into rage and what George perceived to be a possible lynching. It was time for him to leave Florida and head to New York. George always wanted to return to college and earn his degree but that was a dream that vanished after he settled in Harlem. It was one of many dreams that he would have to let go of.

James K. Vardaman

James K. Vardaman, a white man running to be governor of Mississippi in 1903, vowed that if it was necessary, every Negro in the state would be lynched. His platform included his belief that there was no reason for blacks to go to school. It was just a waste of time because all they could become was either a field hand or a cook. Vardaman was elected into office and later became a U.S. senator.

Hortense Powdermaker

Hortense Powdermaker was an anthropologist who studied the Deep South's sharecropping system of the 1930s. She concluded that only 25% of the sharecroppers got the "share" that they had earned. Their settlements weren't necessarily money. Many landowners felt that since the black sharecroppers were given a place to live that it was payment enough. Some said that mules were treated better in the South than black sharecroppers.

Claude Neal

Twenty-three-year-old Claude Neal, who was black, was accused of raping and murdering a young white woman. He was arrested but hunted down by vigilantes who stormed the jail and dragged him out with the silent consent of law enforcement. Several thousand people showed up for his lynching. But prior to his execution, he was taken to the woods and tortured. He was castrated and forced to eat the severed parts. Toes and fingers were cut off during his slow death. He died before he could be lynched. The dead girl's family – men, women and children – were allowed to stab the corpse.

The incident caused understandable outrage in other parts of the country. Thousands wrote to President Franklin D. Roosevelt in protest of the treatment of Claude Neal who had never been found guilty of anything. Jackson County where Neal's murder took place claimed that the crime was done by persons unknown. It was discovered later that Neal and the dead girl were lovers and word was spread by family members of the liaison so that Neal would be lynched.

George Hughes

Monroe saw its share of violence against black citizens. George Hughes was accused of raping a white woman. The circumstances of his "confession" were dubious. A mob took over the courthouse when the trial commenced. The building was set on fire and dynamited. George Hughes was found dead in his cell from the impact of the explosion. None the less, his body was hung on a tree and set of fire. But that wasn't enough. The mob went on to torch all the homes and businesses in the colored district.

Wilbur Little

Wilbur Little was a black soldier who returned home to Blakely, Georgia in 1919 after serving in World War I. A group of white men spotted him in the train station. They ordered him to take off his uniform and walk home in his underwear. He refused but began receiving death threats at his home. Ultimately he was attacked by a mob and beaten to death. He was wearing his uniform.

Huey Newton

Huey Newton, a political activist, was born in Monroe, Louisiana, the same town where Pershing was born. When he was a youngster, he and his sharecropper parents left Monroe during the Great Migration and headed for Oakland, California. The family was compelled to leave after Huey's father had nearly been lynched. As he matured, Huey became disillusioned by the conditions that blacks lived with in Oakland and virtually everywhere in America and in 1966 founded the Black Panther Party.

Bill Russell

Bill Russell who was to become a basketball star in the NBA was born in Monroe, Louisiana. Like the other youngsters who lived in the South Russell saw the indignities and abuse that his parents suffered. His father was threatened with a shotgun when he got tired of waiting for all the white people to gas their cars up and started to leave. His mother was warned by a police officer not to try to dress like a white woman. The family moved during the Great Migration to Oakland, California. He would never have been able to play college ball in the South. Had the family stayed in Louisiana, the sport of basketball may have gone without one of its biggest stars.

Eddie Earvin

Eddie Earvin migrated from the Mississippi Delta area in 1963. As the South was losing its grip on the caste system that made blacks subservient to whites, the final two battlegrounds – the states that clung to the past the most zealously – were Alabama and Mississippi. These states are considered "war zones in the final confrontation" between civil rights leaders and devoted segregationists. It was a violent and frightening time in Alabama and Mississippi.

Eddie was twenty in 1963 and a day picker in a large plantation. He had picked since he was five years old. When he was seventeen he got a deep gash in his finger when cutting spinach one day. He let it go a few days but knew it needed treatment. As he started to take the six mile walk to the doctor's office, the plantation foreman scolded him for not asking permission to leave the plantation. That's when Eddie began making his plans to leave the South. Three years later when he was twenty, he and his sister and her children got on a bus heading north and never looked back.

James Cleveland Owens

Nine-year-old James Cleveland Owens left Alabama with his parents during the early 1920s to migrate north to Cleveland, Ohio. On his first day of school, the teacher asked him his name. Due to his thick southern accent, the teacher misheard his response. He said his name was JC; she thought he said Jesse. From that day on, James Cleveland

Owens was known as Jesse Owens who came to worldwide fame in the 1936 Olympics where he won four gold medals.

Ray Charles

Just before singer and musician Ray Charles hit it big, he had an appointment with Dr. Pershing Foster. The two immediately struck up a friendship that lasted until Pershing's death. On one occasion, Charles had suffered a severe cut to his hand. Pershing advised him to cancel a tour that he had scheduled but Charles wasn't about to. Pershing went on the tour with him to tend to make sure his injury didn't become infected. Charles wrote a song in Pershing's honor called, "Hide Nor Hair" that spent seven weeks on the Billboard Chart.

Emmet Till

Fourteen-year-old Emmett Till was from Chicago and was staying with relatives in Mississippi during the summer. He was accused of saying something unacceptable to a white woman. Till was bludgeoned and shot to death. His body was found in the Tallahatchie River. His mother Mamie Till insisted on having an open casket so that everyone could see what had been done to her only child.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Ida Mae heard a speech given by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on a street in the South Side of Chicago. King knew that blacks were suffering in the large urban areas of the North but he had a difficult time fighting against the silent conspiracy that existed in the North. He had fought ardently against Jim Crow laws in the South but in the North the bias and racism was more subtle and difficult to define.

Sheriff Willis McCall

Sheriff Willis McCall had been mistreating and abusing the black people of Lake County for decades. He was still sheriff in the early 1970s. The Groveland case in which he shot two shackled black defendants accused of raping a white woman had made him a legend. He was investigated 49 times and survived them all. He refused to take down "colored only and white only" signs in the sheriff's office. Finally in 1971, he was indicted for second-degree murder for kicking a black prisoner to death. He was acquitted and ran for sheriff in 1972 but lost because of the votes of young whites and black voters who were encouraged to end his reign of terror once and for all.

Objects/Places

Reconstruction

After the Civil War ended, the federal government took over the South in what came to be known as Reconstruction. The federal government sent forces who acted as monitors, almost occupiers, to ensure that black citizens were no longer being treated as slaves. The feds watched closely southern authorities to confirm that rights formerly denied to blacks were now afforded to them as freely as they were to white citizens. Everything was available to blacks – on paper at least – they were free to vote, live anywhere, marry, attend neighborhood schools and enroll in colleges. In the mid-1870s, federal authorities believed that equal rights was a settled matter in the South and recalled their monitoring forces allowing southern authorities to take over.

Plessy v. Ferguson

U.S. Supreme Court heard the case of Plessy v. Ferguson. The case involved Homer A. Plessy, a black man from Louisiana, who sued the state for its new law that prohibited a train passenger from entering a “compartment to which by race he does not belong.” In June 1894, Plessy challenged the law by buying a passenger ticket, sitting in the white area and refusing to move. He was arrested for violation of the state law. The Supreme Court found in favor of the South and established that “equal but separate” accommodations were constitutional.

Ku Klux Klan

The Ku Klux Klan was an organization of white southerners who took vigilante action against the civil rights of black citizens. The violent behavior and hatred displayed by the Klan terrorized black citizens. The Klan was known to lynch blacks, burn crosses in front of their homes and burn down their property. The Klansmen, as they were known, wore white robes and white pointed head coverings that came down over their faces, with two eye holes to look out of. For decades, Southern law enforcement turned its head to the activities of the Klan.

Debt Peonage

World War II had caused a serious labor shortage in America. Authorities in Florida arrested black men who appeared to be idle or unemployed. They were charged with vagrancy and forced to work as pickers in the citrus fields. The money they earned was handed over to the state to cover their “fines” for violating the law. These “captured” workers were beaten or shot if they tried to escape. This practice, known as debt peonage, was considered a form of slavery and was, of course, illegal.

Migration Advantage

Although black migrants from the South encountered many obstacles in their new homes in the urban centers in the North and West they were, as a whole, resilient, determined and as successful as it was possible for them to be. Their positive outlook for their chances of achieving their goals was a phenomenon that sociologists referred to as “migrant advantage.” It is a spark that lies within any immigrant who is compelled to leave one place for another, better place. These people prove to be extremely goal-oriented which keeps them from becoming disillusioned or discouraged in their quest for a happy new existence. Immigrants from the same regions often form groups to encourage each other and to keep up the spirits of one another.

Chicago Biracial Commission

In 1919, after the city of Chicago had been devastated by two riots, a white-led, biracial commission was established to determine what the lead-up was to this unrest. The commission reported its findings and made its conclusions in a 672-page report entitled, “The Negro in Chicago.” To this day it remains the most comprehensive analysis of the early days of the Great Migration and race relations in general in northern urban areas.

The report made fifty-nine recommendations for improving race relations in the city of Chicago. It called for the city’s “colored section” to be cleaned up by the police – to rid the section of drugs and prostitution. It also made recommendations to improve the education of young blacks and for the treatment of blacks be on an even keel with that of whites. The commission had no enforcement arm and most of the recommendations were ignored. It did nothing to alleviate the racial tension that existed in Chicago; in fact, the sides only stiffened in their own corners.

Harlem

When George Starling first arrived in New York City after escaping a possible lynching in Florida, he contacted relatives who lived in Harlem. Harlem had been settled long before by a mix of immigrants from Germany, Russia, Italy and Ireland along with a large number of Jewish residents. As black migrants from the South drifted into Harlem, the others began to cede the area to them, moving onto other more upscale areas of the city and surrounding area. By 1930, 165,000 blacks lived in Harlem and had become a very crowded and majority-black neighborhood. There was a unique and sophisticated culture in black Harlem in the early days. Revered institutions like the Cotton Club, the Savoy Ballroom and the Abyssinian Baptist Church were established. There were poetry readings in private salons but there was also the rise of illegal numbers running which was catching on like fire among the black residents.

George found Harlem vital and exciting as a young man. However, over the years he lived there, Harlem devolved into a crime ridden area that was inhabited by drug dealers, prostitutes and gangs. George’s son became a drug addict and dealer. He

blamed Harlem for his son's addiction and life of crime and wondered if his son would have had a better life had he not fled from Florida so many years before.

Las Vegas

Pershing Foster was the most erudite of the three individuals who were focused upon in The Warmth of Other Suns. Perhaps it was partially his advanced education that also made him the most bitter of the three over the treatment of blacks in the Jim Crow South. In Los Angeles he became a staff physician in a major hospital which he was never able to do in Louisiana or anywhere else in the South. The white doctors on staff often spoke about their visits to Las Vegas. Their talk angered Pershing because he couldn't go there. Blacks were not allowed to stay at any casinos or hotels in Vegas.

Vegas opened up to black visitors eventually and Pershing was one of the first to take advantage. Vegas was a symbol to Foster of living free like a white man – a goal he'd had for decades. He was a frequent visitor to Vegas and became addicted to gambling. He lost thousands of dollars in Vegas but it remained an emblem of personal freedom to Pershing for the entirety of his life.

The Black Vote

Still a huge factor in modern elections, the black vote was crucial in many elections in the 40s and 50s. In some very important elections, the black vote became in the swing vote. In November 1940, FDR was in a tight re-election against his opponent Wendell Wilkie. World War II was raging and the Depression still had its impact. Ida Mae and other blacks on Chicago's South Side were being tutored by activists on voting. This was new for Ida Mae; no one in her world talked about elections and voting in Mississippi. Her governor, Theodore Bilbo, was an admitted Klansman. His speeches were openly biased toward his white constituents. Like most black migrants from the South, Ida Mae had known nothing about the politics or politicians back home. Illinois was crucial to Roosevelt's reelection and to the Democratic Party. They were recruiting the votes of the black community including the new migrants because they were relying on them. It was all new to her but Ida Mae successfully voted for the first time in her life. The votes of Ida and George and all the other southern blacks helped put Illinois in the win column for FDR.

The Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

In a sense, black migrants from the South probably felt the least connection to Martin Luther King, Jr., and his quest to pass civil rights legislation that would be the final step in officially making blacks equal to whites. The black migrants had come from the oppressive south where thoughts of politics and elections were overwhelmed by the struggle for mere survival. After their migration, the southern blacks felt a disconnect from northern blacks. They had both suffered from racism but in greatly different ways.

On April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated in Memphis. George Starling didn't hear about it until he got home from work that night. Ida Mae heard it from TV news. She prayed for his soul, a man she so admired. Riots broke out in many of the large migration cities including Chicago. A commission later concluded that more black northerners rioted than did black migrants. Some of the angriest were the children of migrants.

Pershing's office was at a safe distance from the rioting in Los Angeles. He was devastated by the assassination but angered by the rioting. To Pershing, the way to better one's lot in life was through hard work not protests and riots.

George Starling was socializing with his friends and only realized the devastation that was befalling Harlem when he headed home and saw the night sky lit up in flames. George was more emotional over the assassination of President Kennedy than he was the killing of King. Kennedy was the new hope that was taken from blacks. George was more cynical when King died. After King's death, President Johnson signed the Fair Housing Act of 1968.

Themes

The Great Migration

Historians called the migration of southern blacks to northern and western urban areas the Great Migration. Many consider it the most under-reported story of the twentieth century. During the Great Migration of 1915-1970, blacks fled the South as though escaping from a curse. Included in that migration were Ida Mae Gladney, George Starling and Dr. Robert Pershing Foster – none of whom could bear living under the cruel restrictions of the Jim Crow south. Over the six decades when the Migration was at its most robust, some six million black southerners headed North and West to look for a better life – to live the American dream. This mass migration would out-number those heading west for the California Gold Rush and those fleeing the Dust Bowl in Oklahoma.

These black Americans set out on a venture of the unknown. Many had no plans beyond escaping but for the three Americans that the story focuses on and for many millions like them, there was no option. They could no longer stand the cruelty, unfairness, and oppression of the Deep South. However, they quickly learned after their arrival in their destinations of choice that not all was wondrous in the New World. The cities in the North were big and frightening. They were crowded with fast-talking people with different accents. There were better wages but higher costs in rent and other expenses. And probably worst of all, racism and bigotry was just as strong in the North – there just weren't any blatant rules allowing it.

Southern blacks were often not welcomed by northern whites. There were warnings against violence of white landlords who rented to blacks. White residents of Harlem banded together to fight the influx of blacks. Property owners had a covenant not to rent or sell to blacks. These tactics didn't work long because landlords were interested first in making money and would rent to whomever could pay. The diverse immigrant population helped to open Harlem up to blacks. By the time George Starling arrived, Harlem was a center of black culture. Famous black artists like Duke Ellington and Duke Ellington lived in the exclusive Sugar Hill section of Harlem. George spent a lot of time in the Savoy Ballroom who featured artists such as Ella Fitzgerald and Benny Goodman.

Northerners believed that the black migrants were illiterate and untrained. They had overcome many obstacles but unlike most migrants from other regions they were ill-prepared and undereducated. Still, the conditions in the South were so egregious that the vast majority would do whatever it took to never return. However, later census reports indicated that the sophistication level of the black migrants was higher than first thought since the majority did not come from cotton fields – they came from urban areas a trend that continued during the entire migration. Many achieved higher levels of education than many northern whites. Sociologists attributed the ability of black migrants to rise above poverty levels to their resiliency, their hard work ethic and their

survivor mentality. They were a determined lot and had a “migration advantage.” But stereotypes persisted. Black children were called “retarded” and grouped on one side of classrooms.

Migrants faced racism which made it difficult for them to find decent living quarters. With several thousand new arrivals each month, there weren’t enough places for them to live. Landlords took advantage of the situation and overcharged them for apartments that were rundown and unattended to. There were hardly any complaints – people were just glad to have a place to live. These overcrowded conditions existed in many large cities and later devolved into ghettos. Like many migrants, Ida Mae and her family moved a lot always looking for a better place to live.

By the mid-century, the cities receiving the vast majority of black migrants from the South were bursting at the seams. The black areas were jammed up next to white neighborhoods who were putting up more and more barriers to keep the blacks out. Chicago was discouraging continued migration. The Chicago city council made a proposal that a segment of housing in the black area be limited to families who had been residents for two years or more. But it was inevitable that the efforts that the whites were making to keep the blacks out would collapse.

European immigrants had faced biases and prejudices. But they fared better than blacks because they could change their last names. With the stroke of a pen, they began to blend in and were no longer “different.” Blacks didn’t have that option. The white immigrants had initially faced biases but no one ever made them give their seats up for other people and they were able to live anywhere they could afford. There was an unwritten credo that blacks needed to stay in their places. In order to afford the increased cost of living in the North, blacks controlled their birth rate. As a result, they had fewer children than did white immigrants. Fertility among black women was reduced. Most of their employment opportunities were confined to low paying jobs. Black migrants had more of an uphill pathway to success than white immigrants.

The impact of the migration was one that changed American society, racial demographics and politics forever. It fostered in the language and music of black urban America a phenomenon that caught on and remains in modern times. James Baldwin, Michelle Obama and Denzel Washington are all children or grandchildren of these brave migrants. The migration didn’t slow or stop until the 1970s when the “whites-only” signs and other symbols of discrimination disappeared in the South.

Jim Crow South

The US Supreme Court ruling in Plessy v. Ferguson in the late nineteenth century made way for the Jim Crow south. Homer A. Plessy had challenged a Louisiana state law that prohibited black people from riding in the white compartments of trains. He was arrested for sitting in a white compartment and refusing to leave. The Supreme Court took the side of the South and issued a ruling that had devastating ramifications for southern blacks for the next seventy-five years. Black citizens of the Deep South would suffer

from racism and the vitriol of white supremacists and what essentially was a caste system established throughout the South known colloquially as Jim Crow laws. Southern officials based their laws on the court's ruling that "equal but separate" conditions or laws were constitutional.

After being emancipated following the Civil War, blacks had lived as free men for more than thirty years. During Reconstruction federal authorities made sure that southern states were complying with the outcome of the war – slavery had ended once and for all and had been brought about by the Confederate defeat in the Civil War. After federal authorities ceased to monitor the southern states, sprouts of racism and abuse began to dot the southern countryside. However, officially the Union's victory in the war had freed black people from slavery and had entitled them to all the rights that white citizens enjoyed. But Plessy changed all that.

The Deep South took the Supreme Court ruling as a green light to enact laws that re-established a segregated society and that made black people second-class citizens and whites their overlords. In essence, it was the U.S. Supreme Court that created the Jim Crow south. Without that ruling life would have been very different for southern blacks. That doesn't mean that there wouldn't have been prejudice and hatred in the hearts of white southerners for blacks but there wouldn't have been formal laws that sanctioned and supported that acrimony. Jim Crow laws made the mistreatment and abuse of black citizens legal. While they couldn't own blacks as slaves, the laws were so slanted against black freedom and in favor of white goals that blacks were essentially slaves again – they were officially free men but it was in name only.

Black Sharecroppers

Black sharecroppers toiled in cotton fields all year to often be told at the end of the year by their white landowners that they were "even" -- that the black sharecroppers had nothing coming. They earned no money after working from dawn to dusk in the cotton fields all day, picking their quota of 100 pounds of cotton each day. One veteran cotton picker compared amassing 100 pounds of cotton like collecting 100 pounds of feathers. Sometimes the black sharecropper would be told the really bad news when he settled up after a year of hard labor – that he OWED the landowner money. During the era of the sharecropper, slavery had officially been vanquished and blacks were proclaimed to have the same rights as whites but in the world of the sharecropper, a form of slavery still existed.

Working in the hot and humid south in the field all day took its toll on the black sharecroppers and their wives and kids who helped in the field. The height of the cotton picking season was during the dog days of summer in August. It was amazing to watch some cotton pickers who could rush down row after row and pick cotton at lightning speed. Huge sacks were strapped over the heads of the sharecroppers – man, woman or child – and dragged behind them during their work. As the sack filled up, there was more bulk and weight to shift around. There were untenable conditions but there was no one to complain to or no one who cared.

The cotton fields were flat and unbroken. The cotton pickers would develop a rhythm and motion during which they were often mesmerized, in fact almost hypnotized, by the mind-numbing task. The fast pickers would be way ahead of the slower folks by the end of the day. The heat would be so oppressive at a hundred degrees or more that some of the pickers began to hallucinate, seeing old friends or relatives return from the grave. Perhaps the pickers subconsciously wished they were dead in order to escape a life that was consumed with picking cotton that gave them virtually nothing to show for it. The end of the shift was often the most tense moment of the day. If a picker didn't have enough cotton at the weigh station, he was subject to a vicious reaming out if he was lucky and a beating if he wasn't as fortunate that day.

The Railroad

Railroads held an important spot in the hearts and minds of black people, especially the millions in the Deep South who would leave their homelands behind by taking a train that was heading for a better life in the north. Blacks had shared a long history with the railway system in America.

Prior to the Great Migration and a lead up to it, the Underground Railroad had transported hundreds of slaves out of the Deep South before the Civil War. During the Great Migration between 1915 and 1970, the train was the top transportation choice for migrants leaving the South for the North and West. Ida Mae Gladney and her family boarded an old train dubbed The Rebel that would take them to Milwaukee. They changed trains in Jackson, Tennessee, to catch the Illinois Central Railroad. It was a legendary railway system that had taken more than a million migrants from the Deep South to the northern Midwest of America.

The populations of northern urban areas skyrocketed thanks in large part to the railway delivery system. Even though Ida Mae and her family had to sit in the "colored" area, Ida Mae felt a sense of elitism because she was riding on a train and leaving her miseries behind her. So many other blacks during the Great Migration would experience those same emotions.

On the night as Ida Mae rode through the darkness toward an unknown future, she was probably not aware of the historic nature of the railway. The Illinois Central along with the Atlantic Coast Line and Seaboard Air Line railroads had been part of the Overground Railroad for the grandchildren of slavery. These trains took the same route as the legendary Underground Railroad which was a secret network leading to the North and to freedom for slaves escaping from the Deep South.

George Starling hightailed it out of Florida when he feared a lynching on a train heading for New York City. Once he arrived in New York, he found work immediately on the Seaboard Air Line railroads as a coach attendant. He helped passengers with their luggage and other needs. He enforced the railroad's segregated seating. The company changed its regulations and allowed blacks to sit anywhere while the train was on northern ground. However, any black sitting in a white area when it crossed the Mason

Dixon Line had to vacate their seat and move to the colored area. George noticed the difference in the demeanor of the blacks coming north from those traveling back down south. The former were elated while the latter were subdued. Those traveling north tried to bring the South with them. He found cut up chickens that bled from the overhead and watermelons and potatoes that rolled all about.

George loved his job but things didn't always go smoothly. A white conductor got it in for George and shoved him into the seats and almost on top of a white woman. The woman saw the whole thing and was upset about it. George told her to write the company and file a complaint. The conductor was suspended for sixty days. When the conductor and his friends found out that George had a hand in the suspension, they were after him. He wisely changed routes to avoid getting a beating or worse. Years later when segregated seating was unlawful throughout the entire country, George had to quietly urge blacks not to move out of white areas as new passengers boarded. Some remained in their seats but others were afraid of repercussions and moved to what was formerly the colored area.

George remained in his job for twenty-five years without changing duties or advancing. He loved the railroad; for him it was a way to be free and put distance between him and an unhappy marriage. George was a bright man with two years of college. He was never able to complete his education and knew that he could have gone much further in life had he been white.

The Great Disappointment

The grass is always greener on the other side… until you're on the other side. Things were much better for the migrants in many ways in their new homes in the North and West compared to their miserable existences in the Deep South. The migrants had naturally fantasized about their lives and opportunities in their new destinations and how they could achieve the American dream. However, the migrants were disillusioned to find that bitter racism and white vitriol existed in the North. There weren't formal edicts or enacted legislation that made them second-class citizens like in the Deep South. But racism was alive and well in the North and their presence was not welcomed by northern whites who didn't want them in their neighborhoods. Northern blacks weren't exactly thrilled with their presence either. They were poised to take the low-paying jobs that they had fought for away from them.

Leaving one's hometown wasn't easy and without regret even with the promise of a better life. The migrants left people behind that they'd probably never see again. There were always things to remind them of their other lives, what they left behind and what was no more. They thought of their neighbors and the flowers that bloomed in the spring and summer that they no longer tended to. Most did maintain their cooking skills and prepared the southern dishes they loved. They also resisted acquiring a northern accent and held on to expressions that were indigenous to southern black culture. Religion and church remained important and in their lives. Clubs were created where black

southerners could gather to build mutual strength and to reminisce about their homelands. Most early migrants sent money home to their families.

The Depression, of course, made matters worse. The old-time blacks that already live in the large cities resented the migrants because of the scarcity of jobs. Chicago was still recovering from a horrific race riot that occurred several decades before. It had caused a deeper division of the races. Thirty-eight people were killed and hundreds were injured. Southern whites also migrated north looking for a better life. Their presence added another layer of difficult atop the growing pile of barriers that kept black migrants from the good life they had dreamed of.

The Southern blacks who were already in the cities, had established their own community and were not thrilled with newcomers. The black community helped the economy. Physicians greatly increased their clientele. New restaurants opened that served southern food. Landlords were able to rent spare rooms and garages to people desperate for a place to live. Churches in these areas opened by ministers from the South also flourished.

The influx of large numbers of migrants created an environment that was exploited by slumlords. Black professionals found themselves living by sharecroppers. The majority of middle class blacks viewed the newcomers in a negative light and sought a way out but had few options because of the invisible “color line.” Others had more empathy and looked at the new arrivals as heroes for getting out of the Jim Crow south and providing a better future for their children.

Things got tough financially for Ida Mae’s family in Chicago during 1939-40. Ida Mae would have to find work if they were going to make it. It was more difficult for black women to find work than any other ethnic group. The playing field was not only “not even” for blacks, in many cases they weren’t even allowed onto the field. Some employers “required” a college education for menial work. Other voice-tested women to weed out those with heavy southern accents. There were two levels of domestics: those hired by families and those who waited on streets corners for day work, the latter being referred to as the slave market because of the law wages associated with it. Many black migrants had no choice but to wait on the street and hope for the best.

There wasn’t as much raw bias in the West as there was in northern urban areas. However, white families in the West were not reluctant to exploit an economic advantage when presented with one. Wealthy families in Los Angeles were found to have paid as little as $5 a week for a domestic. In some cases, the sons and husbands of families that hired domestics expected more from the women. It seems that some white men in the West as well as the North weren’t against a little sexual exploitation either.

Gladys took a temporary job working as a domestic for a wealthy couple in North Chicago. It took her an hour on the street car to get there. As soon as she arrived the man of the house told her to get into bed with him. He’d do the cleaning later. Ida Mae held her ground and the man backed off. She noted one difference in the experience. In

the South she would have been impudent for refusing the man and would have been punished and beaten.

There were thousands of examples of the unfair treatment of migrant blacks in the North. Harvey Clark and his wife were both college educated and could afford to get out of the crowded migrant area. They decided to move to Cicero, southwest of Chicago. But when their moving ban arrived they were met with protestors who told them to get out. They would not be allowed to move into the apartment building. They would be met with bullets if they came back. Each time they tried to move in, there were protestors and death threats. After they moved their furniture in, the apartment was stormed and all their possessions were destroyed. The next day a full riot broke out. The National Guard was called in. City officials didn't blame the white rioters; they blamed the Clarks for trying to move in where they didn't belong. The Cicero riot was news around the world. It sparked investigations about housing and employment discrimination and it was remembered for years.

It was perceived by many that blacks moving into a neighborhood caused property values to decline. Sociologists saw it differently: the drop in prices was due to the tension and anticipation of integration. The situation made neighborhoods vulnerable to speculators who would snatch up houses at low costs and then resell them for profit. It seemed that in those early days of migration everyone had the opportunity to prosper except the migrants who were only looking for a better life and willing to work hard for it.

Styles

Structure

The Warmth of Other Suns by Isabel Wilkerson is structured into five main parts. Within each section are sub-sections that are titled but not numbered. She designates no actual chapters per se. Part One, “In the Land of the Forefathers” the three migrants that the story focuses upon, Ida Mae Gladney, George Starling and Pershing Foster are introduced. Wilkerson also describes her personal connection to the Great Migration. Her grandmother was among the six million black who fled the Deep South to escape the oppression that existed there.

Part Two, “Beginnings” provides a more in-depth look at the lives of the three principles with anecdotes about the suffering of other blacks and blacks in general in the South. The events and incidents that compelled these people to flee the South are described. In Part Three, “Exodus” the details of the migration effort are covered.

Part Four: “The Kinder Mistress” describes life in the new destinations of the three migrants. In many cases, their new “mistress” didn’t live up to expectations but it was “kinder” than their former mistress. The use of the word “mistress” implies that the black migrants were still under the thumb of a society that favored whites. Part Five: “Aftermath” contains the final interviews that Wilkerson conducted with the three migrants. They were old and near the end of their lives and reflected on the choices they made.

Following the last part of the book are an Index, Notes Section and Acknowledgments.

Perspective

The Warmth of other Suns by Isabel Wilkerson is a non-fiction chronicle of the Great Migration – the movement of southern blacks away from the Jim Crow south to large urban areas of America in the North and West that promised to offer a better life for black southern who were treated as secondary citizens under Jim Crow laws that essentially established a caste system in the South. Like many African-Americans in the United States, the author is a second generation descendent of a southern migrant. Her grandmother was among the six million plus blacks who fled the South for the North and West for a chance to live the American dream. In a sense, the perspective is the author’s since she heard many stories over the years from her grandmother about the oppressive south and how the destinations away from Jim Crow contained challenges that they naively thought would be erased by their change of address.

Actually, the author is the medium that allows the migrants to speak through her. Wilkerson takes up the lives of three black Americans that actually took the journey from the Deep South to points north and west. She follows their lives from their birth, through their misery they were made to suffer in the South to their journey to a new life for

themselves and their families. She also describes the disappointments and disillusionment they had for their new cities.

There were no Jim Crow laws but the migrants met racism and prejudice and hatred emotions that were just as strong as in the South only – its strength came from its stealth nature. There were unwritten laws and agreements not to rent or sell to blacks and to not waste good jobs on them. The black migrants had trouble finding jobs and housing that was available to them. They had left behind one struggle for another. One major advantage their new destinations had over their southern homeland – the possibility of lynching was not a viable one.

Wilkerson tells the poignant and compelling life stories of three migrants of the Great Migration: Ida Mae Gladney left Chickasaw County Mississippi, and its cotton fields behind for Chicago. George Swanson Starling left the little town of Eustis, Florida, and its citrus farms in his dust as he escaped to the North and a possible lynching. Dr. Robert Pershing Foster was devastated that the South refused to allow him to be an on-staff surgeon in any hospital and left for California so he could pursue his career and earn the respect that was due him.

In the retelling of the stories of these three migrants, The Warmth of Other Suns tells the story of millions more who endured the oppression of the South only to face more barriers and hardships in their quest to earn livings and take care of their families.

Tone

The Warmth of Other Suns by Isabel Wilkerson is written in a tone that is crisp and clear and without bias. Although Wilkerson is the descendent of a black grandmother who abandoned the South for the north during the Great Migration, Wilkerson presents the facts as she found them and brought no personal biases into the account. She doesn't demagogue the plight of the blacks during the Jim Crow south. She relays in a straightforward, matter-of-fact manner the many egregious incidents of the mistreatment and abuse that southern blacks suffered before the Civil Rights Act of 1968 and the subsequent vanquishing of the caste system in 1970.

Although there are episodes in this chronicle of the Great Migration which lasted from 1915 through 1970, that are shocking and abhorrent, Wilkerson lets the facts impact the reader rather than using words intended to evoke sympathy or passion or anger. In tracing the life stories and migration of the three individuals on which she focuses, Wilkerson describes the interviews she conducted with each of them. They were advanced in years by the time she interviewed them and were able to look back at their lives and their decision to leave the South behind with the wisdom of experience and the passing of time.

Wilkerson gifts the reader with an honest retelling of the lives of the three migrants she focuses upon. She includes the good and the bad and the ups and downs experienced by these three individuals. For instance, she shares George Starling's disappointment in

how his son turned out. He, at least in part, blamed his migration to Harlem for his son's drug addiction. He was conflicted with guilt and regret and wondered if his son would have been better off raised in his small hometown in Florida. Wilkerson shares with the reader Ida Mae's difficult adjustment to the North and later her angst in having to deal with drug addicts making deals in front of her house. Dr. Pershing Foster was a brilliant surgeon and had a robust practice in Los Angeles but there was always a piece of him that remained in Monroe, Louisiana. He could never get over the hurt he experienced in his hometown but used Vegas, gambling and drinking to try to make him forget.

Quotes

Over the course of six decades, some six million black southerners left the land of their forefathers and fanned out across the country for an uncertain existence in nearly every other corner of America.
-- Author (Part 1 paragraph Page 9)

Importance: This quote captures the vastness of the migration from blacks from the North to the South. It underscores how miserable life in the South for blacks had been for so many to flee their homelands.

Colored people had to step off the curb when they passed a white person in town, and if the minutest privilege could be imagined, the ruling class claimed it.
-- Author (Part 2 paragraph Page 31)

Importance: This quote exemplifies the harsh treatment of blacks as secondary citizens in the deep south prior to 1970.

Florida went farther than some other slave states in the creativity of its repression: Slaves could not gather together to pray. They couldn't leave their plantations, even for a walk, without written permission from their owner. If they were accused of wrongdoing, 'their hands were burned with a heated iron, their ears nailed to posts,' or their backs stripped raw with seventy-five lashes from a buckskin whip.
-- Author (Part 2 paragraph Page 58)

Importance: This quote captures the cruel behavior that black southerners were subjected to. The comment was made that the farm animals of the landowners were treated better than their black field workers.

Violence had become such an accepted fact of life that, in 1950, the Florida governor's special investigator, Jefferson Elliott, observed that there had been so many mob executions in one county that it 'never had a negro live long enough to go to trial.
-- Jefferson Elliot/Author (Part 2 paragraph Page 62)

Importance: Florida's treatment of its black citizens was among the worst in the Deep South. It was mob rule and the authorities generally turned their heads because they advocated the actions of the vigilantes.

If these Negroes become doctors and merchants or buy their own farms," a southern woman told the celebrated journalist Ray Stannard Baker, "what shall we do for servants?
-- White Southern Woman (Part 2 paragraph Page 87)

Importance: This was part of the reasoning that white residents and educators in the Deep South had about the undesirability of blacks being educated.

Resentments ran deep, especially when it came to a colored boy getting to go when some southerners were still debating whether colored people were worth educating at all. Too many educated colored people, and it would upset the whole balance of power in the caste system and give other colored people ideas.
-- Author (Part 2 paragraph Page 117)

Importance: Keeping blacks uneducated was important in the Deep South. Whites felt it kept them at the advantage to repress the education of the blacks. This revealed the deep-seated lack of self-worth that the whites had about blacks. Although they didn't express the matter in specific terms, they feared that the blacks could compete with them if a level playing field were allowed.

World War II had set off a virtual stampede. In all of California, there had been only 124,306 colored people in 1940, before the United States entered the war. But during the rest of that decade, the population almost quadrupled – 337,866 more hopeful souls flooded into California.... More colored people migrated to California in the 1940s than had come in all the previous decades put together.
-- Author (Part 3 paragraph Page 187)

Importance: The impact of the Great Migration was seen in the explosion of the black population in California despite the fact that the state was considered the most difficult destination for poor black migrants because of the sheer distance from the Deep South.

Maybe we can start again, in the new rich land – in California, where the fruit grows. We'll start over." ~ John Steinbeck, Grapes of Wrath
-- John Steinbeck (Part 4 paragraph Page 230)

Importance: This quote about the migrants from the Oklahoma Dust Bowl captures the same feeling of hope that Pershing Foster felt for California when he arrived there during the Great Migration.

… Riots were often carried about by disaffected whites against groups perceived as threats to their survival. Thus riots would become to the North what lynchings were to the South, each a display of uncontained rage by put-upon people directed toward the scapegoats of their condition. Nearly every big northern city experienced one or more during the twentieth century.
-- Author (Part 4 paragraph Page 273)

Importance: It is the author's contention that societal pressures had compelled northern whites to repress their anger and hatred for blacks. Whites provoked race riots that they could blame on blacks and that took the place of hangings.

In the North, Myrdal wrote, 'almost everybody is against discrimination in general, but, at the same time, almost everybody practices discrimination in his own personal affairs' – that is, by not allowing blacks into unions, or clubhouses, certain jobs, and white neighborhoods, indeed, avoiding social interaction overall.
-- Gunnar Myrdal/Author (Page 387 paragraph Part 4)

Importance: Gunnar Myrdal pointed out what he called the Northern Paradox. Although there were no blatant Jim Crow laws like in the South, there was a silent discrimination that was understood and practiced by whites. The result was that blacks were not treated equally and repressed and denied their right live free and up to their highest potential.

He pauses and considers the effect of his migration had on how he lived out the rest of his life and how he raised his daughters. He had demanded more of them than might have been necessary. He became obsessed with appearances and spent a fortune on their clothes and breeding so that there would be no reason for them to be rejected as he had been.
-- Author (Page 489 paragraph Part 5)

Importance: Dr. Pershing Foster was better educated than most people – white or black – but he suffered from rejection because of the color of his skin when he tried to begin a medical practice in the South. He was not allowed to join the staff of any hospital and he had been so hurt and angered by his treatment that he decided he could not stay in the Jim Crow south. He is emphasizing that he was hard on his daughters because he wanted them to be perfect – if they were perfect they wouldn't be rejected like he was.

She [Ida Mae] jumps out and heads into the field. She hasn't picked cotton in sixty years. It's as if she can't wait to pick it now that she doesn't have to. It's the first time in her life that she can pick cotton of her own free will.
-- Author (Part 5 paragraph Page 517)

Importance: Sixty years after Ida Mae left Chickasaw County, Mississippi, she returns triumphantly as a free woman. She picks a few bolls of cotton just because she can and just because she doesn't have to. It was a way for her to finally let go of the hurt from the past.

Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Discuss the specific reasons that led Ida Mae Gladney, Roscoe Colton and Robert Joseph Pershing Foster to leave the South. What was the Jim Crowe south?

Topic 2

Why did George Starling marry Inez? Describe their relationship over the years? What regrets did George have?

Topic 3

Describe the dynamism between Pershing Foster and his father-in-law Rufus Clements. Why did Pershing and his wife Alice spend so much time apart?

Topic 4

What did George Starling do to upset the citrus growers in Florida? Why did he make a snap decision to leave for New York City?

Topic 5

What was reconstruction and why did it fail? Describe Plessy v. Ferguson and how it laid the groundwork for Jim Crow laws.

Topic 6

What were Ida Mae Gladney's first impressions of Chicago? Why did the family move from Milwaukee where they first arrived to Chicago? What was the draw of Beloit, WI?

Topic 7

What is Emmett Till's story? Why did his mother insist on an open casket at his funeral?

Topic 8

Contrast the life and environment of Chickasaw County, Mississippi, where Ida Mae was born and raised with the Chicago that she wound up living the rest of her life in. What were the pros and cons of each location?

Topic 9

What is the “migrant advantage?” Provide samples of migrant success stories and migrants who failed to adjust to their new world.

Topic 10

Of the three individuals who are the focus of The Warmth of Other Suns who was the most successful and describe why? What are the different ways that success can be measured?