

Anywhere But South

An Epic Account of the Great Migration North by African Americans in the Mid-20th Century

The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration

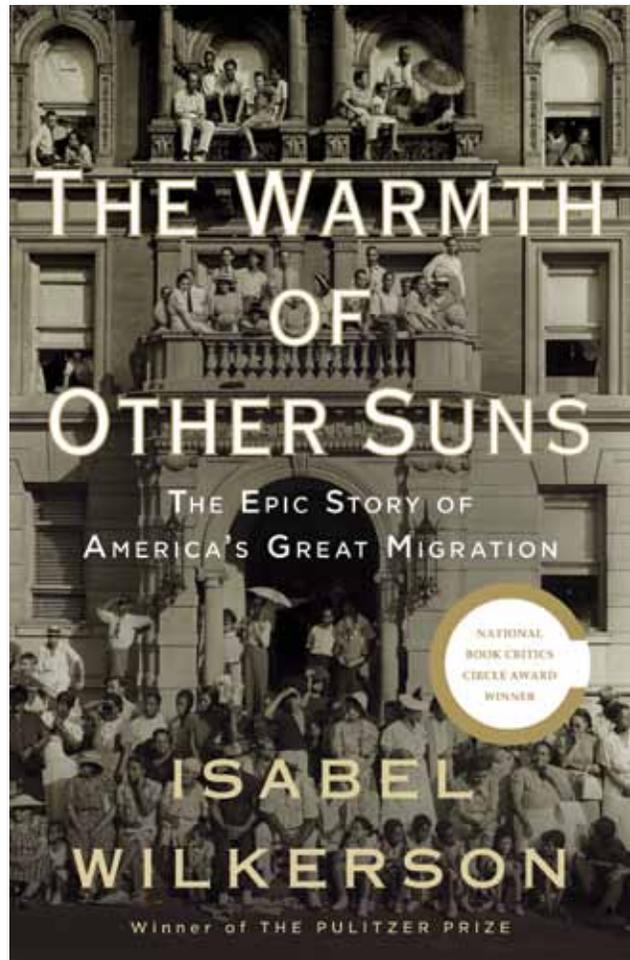
Written by Isabel Wilkerson

543 pages

\$30, Random House Publishing Group

It's not often that a book changes the way one views a slice of history, but *The Warmth of Other Suns* by Isabel Wilkerson is such a book. This thoughtful work details the Great Migration north of African-Americans in the middle part of the 20th century, when more than 2 million blacks left the South and moved to the Northeast, West and Midwest because of the harsh racial conditions in the South. This book details the reasons for this mass migration in a tone that is matter of fact and, at times, lyrical. While the book is a somewhat daunting 543 pages, it reads as if were fiction, and is hard to put down.

Wilkerson, who is the first African-American woman to win a Pulitzer Prize for individual writing, recently won the National Book Award for this book. She uses the voices of three different people, symbolic of the three migration patterns, from Florida to New York, Mississippi to Chicago and Louisiana to California, to tell her story. She alternates among the lives of of Ida Mae Gladney, a blue-collar worker who migrated from Mississippi to Chicago; Robert Forster, a California doctor who was raised in Louisiana; and George Starling, a train worker who fled to New York from Florida. While the jumping around from person to person is initially distracting, the power of these stories is so strong that this becomes only a minor nuisance. The author spent years with each person, and lets the reader feel their individual pain and the price that racism exacted upon them and others in the black community.



The Migration began in 1915 and lasted into the 1970s. It is almost simplistic to say that it was fueled by racism, but the magnitude of the racism and its impact on daily life is what is so stunning. The South in the early part of the 20th century was still an agrarian society and very much dependent upon black labor. Wilkerson tells somewhat familiar stories about how difficult it was for sharecroppers to make a living, but emphasizes that unlike poor whites, any black person who questioned the landowner was subject to consequences that now seem

unthinkable - from harassment and arrest to lynching. She suggests that it took two generations from slavery for the racial construct in the South to begin to break down. This was because, in her words, blacks and whites then no longer had "the contrived intimacy that once bound the two races." Younger blacks were no longer willing to accept the same indignities that earlier generations had; and younger whites had become increasingly hostile toward blacks once the formal structure of slavery was gone. The result was an inevitable clash that resulted in a movement of people that

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could not be stopped.

The journey of each of the three people profiled shows that regardless of the path that one took to the north, it was hard to get there, both literally and figuratively. One of the most surprising revelations in the book is that laws were passed to prevent blacks from leaving the South. Those who left often sneaked away to another town where they could catch a night train North. Plans to leave were made carefully and quietly because those who were caught trying to leave were either brutally beaten or killed. Dr. Forster described how, once he made the decision to go to California, he literally had to drive in 1,000-mile chunks of time as there were so few places between El Paso and California where he was allowed to sleep.

Just as with other migrations in history, one cannot help but be struck by the courage that it took for so

many people to leave their homeland. Wilkerson tells the story of one black man in the 1930s who had a “good job” as a driver/house worker for a white man. Their relationship was close enough that the white man often let his driver use the car when he wasn’t working. However, one day when the young man was putting clothes away in his boss’ drawer he came across a Klan hood and hat. He was so shocked and betrayed that he slammed the drawer shut and made plans to leave the South the next day. The realization that his boss was also a member of the Klan made it impossible for him to continue as if nothing had happened. This is but one example given by the author, but it is emblematic of many of the stories that she tells.

What makes this book different from others is that it makes one rethink racism in its current form and perhaps

appreciate, in a different way, the quiet dignity and grace with which black people led their lives during this time. Black people almost always view the world through the prism of the racism. This book helps to explain why that is. It begs the question of whether racism is better served up neatly and institutionally or if it is preferable to deal with its ugliness on a more personal level. Wilkerson certainly makes you think about those questions, and about how dastardly a system had to be to cause the relocation of so many people. Wilkerson’s National Book award is well deserved, and this book should be assigned reading for everyone. ■

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