



## Beginning with Cannonballs: A Novel

**Jill McCroskey Coupe**

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*Beginning with Cannonballs is an encouraging novel about a friendship that endures despite time and challenges.*

Jill McCroskey Coupe's historical novel *Beginning with Cannonballs* tracks the ups and downs of an interracial friendship that begins in the Jim Crow South.

Gail, the white daughter of Bessie, a university professor, and Hanna, the daughter of Sophie, Bessie's African American live-in housekeeper, first meet in the crib, where they sleep together as babies in 1940s Knoxville, Tennessee. The girls grow up as best friends who love listening to Billie Holiday and doing cannonballs off the diving board into Gail's family pool. Due to segregation, they attend different schools. Later, Hanna and Gail live in different houses, and their lives diverge.

Hanna becomes aware of class differences and the divisions wrought by skin color. When Sophie and Hanna move away, the girls vow to keep in touch by mail. Hanna writes to Gail, but Bessie, thinking it for the best, confiscates the letters, leading to hurt and confusion. While Gail, who has a hard time making new friends, remains loyal, Hanna sometimes resists. For instance, on the evening of Martin Luther King Jr's assassination, when she finds herself with Gail, it occurs to her that "she shouldn't be sharing this tragic night with white people."

The story spans decades, as well as territory, moving from Tennessee to Virginia, where Gail attends university, and into Pennsylvania, where Hanna's parents wind up, with a brief detour to Haiti, where Hanna becomes pregnant. Some of its events occur off of the page. Perhaps the central incident to the story is the disappearance of Hanna's son, P.J., and its aftermath, which is discussed at a remove of some years; Hanna's strength and perseverance are more remarkable than the sadness. The friendship between Hanna and Gail remains at the heart of the novel.

Major historical events, including the 1985 MOVE bombing in Philadelphia, Arthur Ashe's Wimbledon win, and the explosion of the Challenger space shuttle in 1986, serve as textual markers, showing how race relations changed over time and moving the story ahead.

Written in clear, direct prose and told in brief chapters, this novel is episodic but cohesive. The endurance of Hanna's and Gail's friendship is optimistic and hopeful. The story begins with cannonballs of one kind, follows the characters through changes in technology and race relations, and comes full circle to end with cannonballs of another sort.

Racial tensions and national tragedies are present in the historical novel *Beginning with Cannonballs*, but the story is most of all a hopeful account of a friendship across time.

SUZANNE KAMATA (June 5, 2020)

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