

Independence Blues

W. B. Garvey

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In W. B. Garvey's expressive novel *Independence Blues*, a boy and his parents travel through southern America in the 1960s, encountering racism and exclusion on repeat.

Madeline and Emerson are Jamaican immigrants; their son was born in Los Angeles. As they travel, Madeline and Emerson are prompted to remember earlier experiences, too: their vibrant courtship is detailed with warmth, including their wedding in Jamaica, with a "banquet fit for kings." And during Emerson's time as a pre-medical student in New Orleans, they met Aunt Jamesie, whose boardinghouse simmered with music, laughter, jambalaya, and occasional mayhem.

These memories contrast with the couple's troubles as they drive from California to Florida: their car is forced into a ditch by rednecks in a pickup truck; stopping for gas or food brings a sense of anxious uncertainty; motel clerks and waitresses either refuse them service or offer minimal hospitality.

A vegetarian and pacifist, Emerson prefers the teachings of Gandhi to outright protest. His reflective nature is challenged, however, by the prejudice he's experienced in the United States and Canada. Madeline is attractive and shrewd, often using her looks and wiles to circumvent racism. Emerson wants the family to return to Jamaica, but Madeline feels compelled to remain in the US and join the fight for equality.

As the novel's primary voice, the couple's unnamed nine-year-old son is a perceptive and endearing musical prodigy. On their pivotal trip, he begins to realize that his skin color makes him a less valued member of society. He witnesses the corrosive effects of racism on his parents' marriage and his father's medical career, too.

With its expressive flow of people's stories with history, *Independence Blues* is an eloquent novel in which a distinctive family travels a country on the cusp of integral change.

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