

## Legacy

### Carolyn Westergren

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*Legacy is a moving historical novel in which a multiracial woman faces a bevy of challenges.*

In Carolyn Westergren's compelling historical novel *Legacy*, a woman of mixed ancestry struggles to establish herself in an era that's tainted by racism.

Born to a white plantation owner and a black woman in 1871, Felice lives a privileged life. When her father dies in the devastating floods that hit their Mississippi plantation, Felice is educated at a convent school. Her family's plantation is sold to offset accumulated debt, and Felice later works as a governess in Louisiana.

After a humiliating breakup, Felice leaves for New Orleans, where she works in a brothel. There, she's disguised as a woman of only white ancestry. Determined to acquire wealth, she starts her own brothel and becomes an astute businesswoman. She also begins a relationship with Neville, who is unfaithful and violent; Luke, who's smitten with her, conflicts with Neville in drawn out scenes.

Opening with the twin tragedies of Felice's father's death and a widespread yellow fever epidemic that kills much of her family, the difficulties of Felice's story are immediately apparent; they continue into her adulthood. She has big dreams of making something more of her life than growing cotton; to do so, coming to terms with her losses and starting from scratch are essential.

Its organization chronological and careful, grouped chapters trace different stages of Felice's life: the years between 1871 and 1892 constitute its first part; the second focuses on two years in New Orleans. The second part of the novel is its slowest, and Felice's work with running her own venture is less absorbing than the novel's early portions.

Though numerous minor characters appear in the novel, their roles are well defined. They are useful in developing Felice's story and include Dora, who employs Felice in her brothel but later throws Felice out; and Felice's half-sister, Emerald, with whom she shares a close bond, even as Emerald remains in Mississippi. Discriminatory social ideologies help to establish the time period.

Felice's calm nature balances the book's animated scenes, and her success in establishing herself makes her inspiring. Her struggles serve as a microcosm of racial discrimination, which is shown to be extended to multiracial individuals; to combat this, Felice conceals her black ancestry, both in the work and in the course of her love affair, which ends when her racial background is discovered. Many parts of her story are devastating, but she remains of strong will, working to turn her challenges into opportunities.

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EDITH WAIRIMU (February 3, 2020)

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