

★ **Light Skin Gone to Waste: Stories**

Toni Ann Johnson

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The weight of trauma and secrets brings a family to their breaking point in the connected short stories of Toni Ann Johnson's *Light Skin Gone to Waste*.

The Arrington family has high aspirations. Phil, a psychologist, wants to have a successful private practice. Velma, his wife, wants to be a good wife and mother. Livia, Phil's eldest daughter, wants to spend more time with her father. Maddie, his youngest, wants to live in a neighborhood where she is not the only Black girl. One of those dreams comes true, and it isn't the heartfelt wish of a teenager. Across three decades, the Arringtons crumble under the pressures of their individual needs, collective pain, and social acrimony.

The collection's arc encompasses the entire Arrington family, with stories that center each member. As she grows up, Maddie becomes the most frequent protagonist, as both an active presence and an observer. As her understanding of herself and the world becomes more complex, the stories allow more room for others to exist in all their messy humanity. Phil's philandering ways become more obvious; Velma's pettiness and anger become more strident.

Focusing on moments that mark turning points for the Arringtons, the stories hopscotch through time, revealing the small and large assaults on each characters' personhood. Moving to an all-white neighborhood is an exercise in restraint. A family trip to West Africa, and a subsequent trip to a child psychologist, unearths the fault lines in Phil's and Velma's approaches to parenting. An impromptu visit to her father's office offers adult Livia an unflattering glimpse into his life. Though each story can stand on its own, the impact of the whole is a gut punch.

Light Skin Gone to Waste is a tender and unflinching novel about a family in crisis.

DONTANÁ MCPHERSON-JOSEPH (November / December 2022)

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