

## Love's Affliction

**Fidelis O. Mkpuru**

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*This subdued, bittersweet novel explores themes of racism and romance.*

*Love's Affliction* by Fidelis O. Mkpuru tells the story of a troubled romance, with young lovers Joseph and Wendy not so much star-crossed as race-crossed. Set in the late 1970s at a North Carolina college, the novel casts an eloquent and shameful spotlight on Southern attitudes toward interracial involvement.

The backstory of the Nigerian-born protagonist, Joseph, lends sympathy and earnestness. He is a survivor of the Nigerian Civil War who arrives in North Carolina at the age of seventeen, prepared to work hard and achieve academic excellence. Thousands of miles from his family, Joseph opts to experience American culture and to take advantage of America's diverse educational resources. His hopes are high and his heart is open, but he finds himself in a part of the United States where racism still hangs as heavily as the humid Carolinas air.

When Joseph becomes involved with beautiful, blond Wendy Crane, the racial antipathy toward him increases, both on and off campus. A premed student like Joseph, Wendy is expressive, vivacious, and connected to a locally prominent family. While her mother is more liberal and welcoming toward Joseph, her father is hostile toward his daughter's new boyfriend. Mr. Crane's contempt reaches beyond verbal abuse—as chairman of the college's board of trustees, he is capable of blackballing Joseph, taking away his scholarship and sabotaging his future academic career.

The careful, sometimes overly observant prose of *Love's Affliction* matches the thoughtfulness and intelligence of its narrator. Joseph endures numerous racial taunts and threats, particularly whenever he's seen publicly with Wendy—or any white woman, for that matter. The civil rights battles of the 1960s seem to have had little effect on the college, and when Joseph is called a "runaway African Monkey" that needs to be returned to the zoo, the dean shrugs it off as a "misguided joke." Though the novel's time frame is the liberated 1970s, with disco and freer morals loosening up mainstream America, *Love's Affliction's* Southern backdrop features still-revered Confederate landmarks and memorials, and pervasively reactionary mindsets.

Joseph and Wendy's stormy relationship is also affected by her possessiveness and his occasional evasiveness, a polarity common to many couples, regardless of skin tone. This adds a kernel of truth to their affair, as does the novel's ugly, garden-variety racism. "In North Carolina, I experienced both love and hate," Joseph reflects sagely, "But I left that paradise with only love, because of Wendy."

A subdued, bittersweet ending makes *Love's Affliction* a strong reminder that it is sometimes better to have loved and lost.

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