

## The Marching Ant: A Novel Inspired by True Events

**Allyson Chapa**

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*The captivating historical novel The Marching Ant follows a young woman as she gets to know her hero—her grandmother—from the inside out.*

In Allyson Chapa's autobiographical novel *The Marching Ant*, a grandmother's and granddaughter's tales of overcoming adversity dovetail.

Annie's father blames her for her mother's death in childbirth. Instead of sending her to school, he sends her to work at age eight and mistreats her at home. She distinguishes herself as a top cotton picker and a sunny, ingenious worker, despite her cruel boss.

As a teenager, Annie escapes to a beach town where she waitresses and meets Art, the sailor who becomes her husband. They have three children together. Living with Art triggers bad memories of living with her father, though. Annie begins to have nightmares, which continue for the rest of her life. She works as a janitor in her granddaughter Alice's school; Alice gets to know her grandmother as a model employee and provider. Alice becomes the first in her family to attend college.

Weaving back and forth between Annie's and Alice's lives, the book draws out parallels between the two women. Its first part focuses on Annie, its second part on Alice; the last parts combine their stories. Each woman's story is shared via defining scenes at work and at school; these are vibrant and interactive. The setting is captured through regional dialects and casual, inviting settings, and the women's conversations reveal deep connections with their friends. Shopping excursions, coffee dates, and spontaneous visits make this woman-centered world one of levity and buoyancy, even in fraught circumstances. The two characters develop in tandem in Annie's use of Spanish language and frequent swearing connect to her gritty, hard-scrabble youth.

The final centering of Annie and Alice's relationship fleshes out the friction that's at the heart of the novel. Annie's life is defined by her grueling work in low-paying jobs and her home life, spent battling nightmares. But what Alice first sees in her grandmother is an admirable work ethic: she's a marching ant, always serving others. When she learns that Annie can't read or write, she questions these perceptions. A pivotal moment comes when Alice's classmates expect Annie to clean up a mess they made: in standing up for Annie, Alice begins to come into her own.

A realistic, captivating portrayal of complex and all-encompassing women's friendships, the historical novel *The Marching Ant* follows a young woman as she gets to know her hero—her grandmother—from the inside out.

MARI CARLSON (October 29, 2021)

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