

Where I Must Go: A Novel

Angela Jackson

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Where I Must Go, the first novel by the winner of the 1993 *Chicago Sun-Times* Book of the Year Award in Poetry and the 1994 Carl Sandburg Award for Poetry, delivers a historic and engaging narrative of a young black woman during the American Civil Rights movement of the late 1960s. The account follows an artistic student from a large nurturing family as she goes away to college and discovers empowerment through activism.

In the comparative safety of her childhood home, Magdalena Grace has always known that black people do not have the freedoms that whites assume as their American birthright. Her father worries, "...trouble was coming to us the day we were born. Like a fist directed at a dark face, you know it's coming so you damn well better duck." Her family escorts her to college with mixed feelings: pride, resentment, joy, and sadness. She notices that the white people on campus are afraid of her family—the family knows it, and Magdalena hurts, seeing their apologetic smiles.

Jackson explores the awakening of this sheltered girl, who has won several scholarships, and who has an ambition to "know things." On campus she sees oppression close-up: white police stop her friend's car for no reason; the waitress at the café sneers and mumbles "you people"; a young black man escorts two female friends to a dorm and is forced off the street by a white student. Magdalena remarks, "I think Whitepeople go to school where they teach them how to act White and how to treat Blackpeople."

These hurtful events and her study of history lead Magdalena toward increasing activism. Her shy passivity transforms to a quiet but determined leadership. After the attempted rape of one her friends, the judge sentences the white assailant to only probation. The blacks' anger ignites and spreads. "There's a mood, not whimsical, but deeply profound in Black students across the country, who find ourselves disgruntled with begging and outsidersness."

Jackson's writing gives a sense of immediacy and urgency, even to scenes from the past. In the mode of Toni Morrison, the author brings the reader into her narrator's memories, thought process, and emotional life; thus the reader understands Magdalena's changing perceptions. Jackson's poetic description and authentic, street-smart dialogue engage and enchant. The flavor of the '60s' mindset and campus revolt is enhanced by the reminiscences of childhood chants and games, like "Rain, rain, go away," and the song lyrics of the Supremes, Sam Cooke, Aretha Franklin, and Smokey Robinson.

These games and songs resonate in several love stories: young people attracted to one another; the closeness of friends, male and female; the love of long-standing couples like Magdalena's parents; and the neighborhood parents who exhibit love for their children. These demonstrations of real love are what bring Magdalena back to education and to rejoin her family for a peaceful, hopeful existence.

Where I Must Go is a noteworthy study in black—white relations—informative and a wonderful read from a significant writer.

MARY POPHAM (September / October 2009)

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