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Alligator Bayou



Synopsis

An unforgettable novel, based on a true story, about racism against Italian Americans in the South in 1899. Fourteen-year-old Calogero, his uncles, and his cousins are six Sicilians living in the small town of Tallulah, Louisiana, miles from any of their countrymen. They grow vegetables and sell them at their stand and in their grocery store. Some people welcome the immigrants; most do not. Calogero's family is caught in the middle of tensions between the black and white communities. As Calogero struggles to adapt to Tallulah, he is startled and thrilled by the danger of midnight gator hunts in the bayou and by his powerful feelings for Patricia, a sharp-witted, sweet-natured black girl. Meanwhile, every day, and every misunderstanding between the white community and the Sicilians, bring Calogero and his family closer to a terrifying, violent confrontation. In this affecting and unforgettable novel, Donna Jo Napoli's inspired research and spare, beautiful language take the classic immigrant story to new levels of emotion and searing truth. Alligator Bayou tells a story that all Americans should know.

Book Information

Lexile Measure: 430L (What's this?)

Paperback: 288 pages

Publisher: Wendy Lamb Books; 1 Reprint edition (May 11, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0553494171

ISBN-13: 978-0553494174

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.6 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 8.5 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars See all reviews (10 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #249,089 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #21 in Books > Teens > Literature & Fiction > Social & Family Issues > Emigration & Immigration #111 in Books > Teens > Historical Fiction > United States > 19th Century #143 in Books > Children's Books > Geography & Cultures > Where We Live > Country Life

Age Range: 12 and up

Grade Level: 7 and up

Customer Reviews

Summer reading has been hit-and-miss. Alligator Bayou was a read for my summer book club, and would otherwise not be my standard fare. What a wonderful surprise, then, to enjoy it so much.

Set in 1899 Louisiana, the story revolves around a family of Sicilian immigrants who are attempting to live the "American dream," part of the immigration story that is so often romanticized. But this is the Deep South, just one year after the Plessy decision and in the midst of one of the nation's worst depressions in a quarter century. To boot, the Sicilians are unaware of the racial - and economic - boundaries in their adopted country. Told through the eyes of 14 year-old Calogero Scalise, Napoli does a top-notch job in showing the complexities of the Jim Crow South as well as the challenges immigrants face as they seek to make their way in America. The book is written for younger (ages 9 - 13) readers given the complexity of the sentence structure and plot - but Napoli (a linguistics professor by trade) also shows a mastery of AAVE (African-American Vernacular English) and Italian in the dialogue, and clearly - brutally - brings to light what life was like in the South at the start of the last century. What is perhaps most shocking, however, is that the story she has written here - of Sicilians not seen as "colored" (to use the term of the day) nor as "white" (thereby not granted the social status of "Americans") and the persecution they suffered is based largely on real-life events. At issue, of course, is not so much "race" as the maintenance of power (particularly economic power) by the elite. Power that was held and perpetrated by dividing the poor along "racial" lines (poor whites over poor African-Americans, poor immigrants somewhere in the middle ... divide and conquer, let them fight among themselves in order to preserve the status quo at the top of the social and economic hierarchy.) This is the sort of story I wish was taught more to our youth at an earlier age. Of special interest for older (older than 13) readers is the bibliography Napoli provides at the end of the story, outlining the real events that inspired the story, as well as a list of articles and websites for readers to delve more deeply into the story. It's a short read - maybe a lazy afternoon (or weekend) - but certainly worthy of attention.

It is the year 1899. Calogero, a 14-year-old Sicilian immigrant, lives in Tallulah, Louisiana, with his uncles and cousins. They have all come to America seeking a better life. They do well for themselves, selling fruits and vegetables from a corner grocery store. They do not seek out trouble, but it always has a way of finding them. Calo and his family do not discriminate between blacks and whites. They sell to anyone who will buy their produce. Members of the town find this behavior reprehensible and disgusting. It is only a matter of time before the white citizens of Tallulah turn their backs on Calo and his family, and destroy every possible hope they had of leading quiet, normal lives. Donna Jo Napoli has done extensive research for this novel. The afterword explains that Napoli came across an article about five Sicilian grocers in Tallulah, Louisiana, who were lynched because they served a black customer before a white one. The article moved Napoli, and

she felt a story must be told about these men. Napoli based her characters on those people who testified or were talked about in the testaments taken after the Tallulah lynching. The time and effort Napoli has put into her research makes the story more genuine, more affecting. It is a tragic story that ends with a glimmer of hope. Read this novel - it is a horrific reminder of what can happen when prejudice prevails and mob mentality rules over all. Reviewed by: LadyJay

Calogero is a 14-year-old immigrant to Louisiana from Sicily, and he lives in the small town of Tallulah where his cousins and uncles sell groceries and produce. The year is 1899, and the small band of Sicilians find the constraints that won't let them mingle with whites because their skin is dark also keeps them from socializing with blacks. Calogero and his 13-year-old cousin Cirone are lonely and want to fit in: they work to learn English, eat American food and try to learn the customs of their new country. But tight economic times lead to tension between the white Louisianans and the Sicilians, who the whites see as taking business away from them. When Calogero and his relatives become friends with blacks, tensions escalate. Based on a true event, Alligator Bayou by Donna Jo Napoli brings this powerful clash of cultures to life with tales of alligator hunts in the bayou, Italian immigrant communities, picking cotton, selling watermelons, cooking sweet potatoes and eating alligator. This tale reminds us that the immigrant story in the U.S., like the story between whites and blacks, was and is often wrought with difficulties. The story was particularly poignant for me, because I grew up in Louisiana amongst many long-established Italians, and I had no idea of the hardships many of their ancestors endured so their descendants could one day become part of the accepted American community. Napoli understands the time period she writes of well, and there are references to the all-but-gone Tunica tribe of Mississippi and Louisiana and the 1890 U.S. Census, in which some blacks found out for the first time they were free from slavery. It's truly amazing to look back on the time and issues that dominated the day: Jim Crow laws, the relationship between whites and blacks, and the threat immigrants posed to the normal routine of life.

Not many people realize the lynchings of Italians were just as prevalent as lynchings of Africans in America. In fact, the greatest lynching America was the lynching of Italians. In this coming of age tale set in Louisiana, we see the roots of prejudice in the South. It's all about money and power. It is a blight on our country that is still there today with those that want to deny others what they received so that they do not give up their perks. Christian country, my ass.

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