The Warmth of Other Suns

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ISABEL WILKERSON

Isabel Wilkerson identifies as "a Southerner once removed" because her parents both participated in the Great Migration. Her father was from Petersburg, Virginia and served in World War II as one of the Tuskegee Airman (a prominent cohort of Black pilots). Wilkerson's mother grew up in Rome, Georgia, and Wilkerson tells part of her migration story in *The Warmth of Other Suns*. Thanks to her parents' decision to migrate, Wilkerson grew up in multicultural, integrated Washington, D.C., where she discovered a passion for journalism in high school. She then attended the nearby Howard University for the express purpose of working on the university newspaper. She would eventually become its editor-in-chief and take internships at papers like the *Washington Post*. After graduation, she spent a decade working at *The New York Times*. She won the 1994 Pulitzer Prize in Feature Writing for her work on the Great Flood of 1993 and in-depth profile of a Chicago fourth grader. This made her the first Black woman reporter to win journalism's most prestigious award. Shortly thereafter, Wilkerson began her research for *The Warmth of Other Suns*, thanks largely to a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation fellowship. For the next decade and a half, she continued her research while taking academic positions at Harvard University, Emory University, Boston University, Princeton University, Northwestern University, and Columbia University. *The Warmth of Other Suns* was a national bestseller and won numerous national prizes, including the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Heartland Prize for Nonfiction. Wilkerson spent the 2010s working on her next book, *Caste: The Origin of Our Discontents*. When she published it in 2020, *Caste* was also an instant success. Notably, the book also came out during the broad wave of nationwide anti-racism protests following the death of George Floyd. This contributed to its popularity and its public relevance. In fact, *Caste* has arguably been even more influential than *The Warmth of Other Suns*—for instance, after choosing the book for Oprah's Book Club, Oprah Winfrey declared that it was the most politically significant work she had ever featured. Beyond her book research, Wilkerson continues to write for and appear in the popular media. In fact, she is widely considered one of the most important journalists and Black intellectuals working in the U.S. today.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In *The Warmth of Other Suns*, Isabel Wilkerson covers the history of the Great Migration, the mass migration of Black Americans from the U.S. South to the North and West between 1915 and 1970. While she primarily presents the Great Migration through the lens of three specific people's migration stories, she also pays special attention to its historical causes and effects. The most important factor behind the Great Migration was Jim Crow, the system of rigid segregation and coerced labor that plagued the South for a century after the Civil War technically put an end to slavery. After the end of the war, during the 12-year period commonly known as Reconstruction, Black citizens briefly exercised the same civil rights as white citizens in the South. There were hundreds of Black state legislators and more than a dozen Black congresspeople. In 1877, an agreement between the Democrats and Republicans put Reconstruction to an end and allowed Southern states to establish white supremacist governments and pass Jim Crow laws that severely restricted Black people's economic and civil rights. Over the next 40 years, racism and all its manifestations—including segregation, lynching, and voting restrictions—reached their peak. The Great Migration took off during World War I, when the North faced a sudden labor shortage (particularly in manufacturing) and decided to fill it by inviting Black workers to migrate from the South. After moving north, many migrants realized that, beyond receiving far higher wages, they also had rights and freedoms that they were denied in the South. So many of them stayed and then helped their friends and family members make the same trip. Wilkerson notes how the Great Depression, World War II, and the violent backlash to the civil rights movement also encouraged migration over the following decades. The Great Migration ended when the civil rights movement's major policy achievements made life far more hospitable for Black people in the South. In fact, the tendency has reversed: since 1970, many more Black Americans have moved from the North to the South than vice-versa. Fittingly, social scientists have named this trend the New Great Migration.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Isabel Wilkerson's second major book is *Caste: The Origin of our Discontents* (2020), which argues that racism in the U.S. is really part of an entrenched, hierarchical caste system similar to those in India and Nazi Germany. But her reporting also features in several anthologies, including *Written into History: Pulitzer Prize Reporting of the Twentieth Century* (2002, ed. Anthony Lewis). Besides her extensive interviews, *The Warmth of Other Suns* relies on prominent scholarly works since the beginning of the 20th century. Some of the earliest include Ray Stannard Baker's Following the Color Line (1908), the Chicago Commission on Race Relations's landmark report *The Negro in*

Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot (1922), and Arthur F. Raper's *The Tragedy of Lynching* (1933). More recent works include Nicholas Lemann's *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (1991), James R. Grossman's *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (1989) and James N. Gregory's *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (2005). Wilkerson also emphasizes the Great Migration's central role in Black American literary history. Landmark novels about the Great Migration include Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). Wright's memoir *Black Boy* (1945), James Baldwin's essay collection *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), the novels of Toni Morrison, and the varied scholarly and literary work of Zora Neale Hurston also emerged from the Great Migration.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration
- **When Written:** 1995–2010
- **Where Written:** Across the U.S.—particularly California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Mississippi, New York, Tennessee, Wisconsin
- **When Published:** September 2010
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Black History, Biography, Popular Sociology, Oral History, Narrative Nonfiction
- **Setting:** Throughout the United States from 1915 to 2002—mainly Mississippi, Chicago, Louisiana, and Los Angeles
- **Climax:** The protagonists leave the South and then, in old age, struggle with regret and assess the broader significance of their decision to migrate.
- **Antagonist:** Jim Crow segregation, the Northern color line, poverty, social alienation, poor life decisions
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Rigorous Research. Isabel Wilkerson is recognized for her famously thorough research—she interviewed more than 1,200 people for this book before choosing to focus on Ida Mae Gladney, George Starling, and Robert Foster's stories. She became a dear friend to her subjects during their final days, and she went to Los Angeles to accompany Robert Foster to important medical appointments. She even spent days recreating Foster's road trip from Monroe, Louisiana to Los Angeles.

PLOT SUMMARY

In *The Warmth of Other Suns*, renowned journalist Isabel Wilkerson captures the personal drama and historical significance of the Great Migration, in which more than six million Black Southerners moved to the North and the West between 1915 and 1970. The book looks at the Great Migration by following three of its participants from childhood to the grave: Ida Mae Brandon Gladney, George Swanson Starling, and Robert Joseph Pershing Foster.

The three protagonists represent both the remarkable diversity within the Great Migration and the common desires, experiences, and sorrows that all of its participants shared. Before migrating, Ida Mae was a plantation sharecropper with little education, Robert was a brilliant surgeon who married into one of Black America's most elite families, and George was a star student from a small town who became a fruit picker when he couldn't afford to finish college. They followed different routes in different decades: Ida Mae moved up the middle of the country, from Mississippi to Chicago, in the 1930s; George traveled up the East Coast, from Florida to New York, in the 1940s; and Robert migrated west, from Louisiana to California, in the 1950s. Yet all three left the South after frightening brushes with the violence of Jim Crow, all three followed friends and family elsewhere in pursuit of a better life elsewhere, and all three struggled to adapt to their destination cities, though they ultimately made these cities their new homes.

Wilkerson opens Part One of her book by describing the dizzying mix of anxiety and hope that Ida Mae, George, and Robert feel when they begin their perilous journeys out of the South. Then, she explains how the Great Migration has profoundly shaped the U.S.—for instance, it explains why cities like Detroit, Baltimore, and Oakland have such high Black populations today, and why so many Black musicians, artists, and writers rose to national prominence in the 20th century. Wilkerson spent 15 years interviewing more than 1,200 people and writing this book in order to tell the underappreciated and "distinctly American" story of how so many—including her own parents—left the South in pursuit of freedom and happiness.

In Part Two: Beginnings, Wilkerson portrays her protagonists' early lives in the South and explains why they decided to migrate. Ida Mae grows up on a plantation in rural Chickasaw County, Mississippi. Her father dies when she is a child, leaving her family destitute, and she marries the sharecropper George Gladney as a teenager. The Great Migration has been ongoing for more than a decade, ever since northern manufacturers started recruiting thousands of Southern Black workers to fill labor shortages during World War I. Working in the North presents an appealing alternative to life in the South, where Black people are stuck using low-quality, segregated services and subject to deadly violence when they break the unwritten

rules of Jim Crow (such as always obeying and deferring to white people). They're also stuck in poverty by design. For example, every year, the plantation owner tells George Starling's sharecropper grandfather, John, that they "broke even"—meaning that John never gets paid. Many sharecroppers face worse situations and end up mired in ever-deeper debt. George wants out of this system. He's mischievous but also brilliant, and he finishes two years of college—at which point his father can no longer afford tuition and makes him drop out. George marries his girlfriend Inez just to spite his father (who decides *never* to send him back to school) and starts working in the local citrus groves. Finally, Robert Foster grows up in Monroe, Louisiana, where his parents are poor but highly respected teachers and community leaders. Everyone calls him by his middle name, Pershing. He loves going to the movie theater, even though he's stuck in the filthy, segregated Black section, and he dreams of having the same rights as his white neighbors.

Eventually, adverse circumstances drive Ida Mae, George, and Pershing (Robert) out of the South. Ida Mae struggles to weather the backbreaking life of a **cotton** picker and housewife, and her eldest daughter dies in infancy. When her neighbor's turkeys go missing, the plantation owner Edd Pearson blames, kidnaps, and tortures her husband's innocent cousin, Joe Lee. In 1937, Ida Mae and her husband decide to leave Mississippi and follow Ida Mae's sister, Irene, to Milwaukee. Later, during World War II, George Starling briefly works at a factory in Detroit, but race riots break out there, so he returns to Florida to pick citrus. He also starts organizing informal labor unions at the groves. This wins better wages for the workers, but also infuriates the grove owners, who start planning to lynch him. He decides to escape to New York. Meanwhile, Pershing attends the elite Morehouse College, where he starts dating Alice, the daughter of Rufus Clement, the President of Atlanta University and an eminent leader in the Black community. Their wedding is "the social event of the season." Pershing goes on to medical school in Nashville and joins the Army as a surgeon on a base in Austria. The other soldiers look down on him, but at least it's better than segregated Monroe, where his brother Madison—also a doctor—has few resources and isn't even allowed to enter the hospital. After leaving the Army, Pershing decides to move to sunny California.

In the brief Part Three: Exodus, Wilkerson describes how Ida Mae and George travel to Milwaukee and New York by **train**, while Pershing—who decides to start going by Robert—drives out west toward California. He spends the first night with a friend in Houston, but on the second night, in legally integrated Arizona, several hotels refuse to give him a room. Disappointed, he has no choice but to drive straight through the night.

In Part Four: The Kinder Mistress, Wilkerson describes her protagonists' new lives in their destination cities. Ida Mae ends up staying in "the great belching city" of Chicago, where her husband eventually finds steady work at the Campbell Soup factory, and she gets a job as a hospital aide. But they are stuck living on the overcrowded, all-Black side of town, where they pay exorbitant rents to live in dilapidated shacks. When Black families try to move elsewhere, white neighbors bomb their houses or start riots. The same happens in New York, but George Starling has savings and uses them to buy a brownstone in the poorer section of Harlem. He gets hired as a porter on the same train that he took to New York, and so he spends his days helping the next generation of migrants move north. Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, Robert (Pershing) spends a few years at a dreary job doing checkups for an insurance company before starting his own private practice. He struggles to find patients, but eventually, he becomes popular among fellow Southern migrants and even starts treating Black celebrities like Ray Charles. He buys a mansion and starts performing surgeries in a local hospital, where he hears the other doctors brag about their trips to Las Vegas. He decides that he must go, and even though most Vegas hotels don't accept Black guests, a friend of a friend helps him get a room.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Ida Mae, George, and Robert build their family lives. George's marriage is rocky, he has an affair and ends up having another son, and his other children fall victim to the vices of the North—his son Gerard becomes a drug dealer, and his daughter Sonya gets pregnant at age 13. (Ironically, they both move back to Florida.) Robert's wife and daughters struggle to adapt to their new life in Los Angeles, and he spends more and more of his time gambling. But Ida Mae's marriage is stable, and her children are loyal and responsible. Her family works together to buy a house in a beautiful neighborhood—until white families leave the area, the city stops investing in it, and crime skyrockets. All three protagonists help friends and family migrate after them, too. But they don't visit home very often, and they have mixed feelings whenever they do return.

Meanwhile, the protagonists also play witness to the growing civil rights movement. Ida Mae attends famous lynching victim Emmett Till's funeral and sees Martin Luther King, Jr. speak in Chicago, but when her coworkers strike at the hospital, she chooses not to join. George works tirelessly to raise money and support Southern protestors, and he risks losing his job by encouraging Black train passengers to stay in integrated cars in the South. But Robert mostly avoids politics, preferring to throw extravagant parties—he spends a whole year planning the perfect one for his own birthday.

Part Five: Aftermath picks up in 1970, when conditions have improved in the South and the Great Migration has ended. The book's three protagonists are aging and well-integrated into their communities, but after their spouses die, they take stock of their life decisions and regrets. Ida Mae is truly happy: she's surrounded by a loving family, deeply connected to God, and

grateful for every day of her life. Robert is successful and highly popular, but he still feels anxious all the time and gambles compulsively. He leaves private practice to work in a hospital, but the administration sidelines him, and he furiously sues them before accepting retirement. Finally, George feels he wasted his life by never finishing college and spending his entire career as a railroad porter. He deeply regrets his failed marriage and feels profoundly disappointed in his children. Yet, like Ida Mae and Robert, he knows that leaving the South was the right decision.

In the 1990s, near the end of their lives, the three protagonists meet Wilkerson and tell her their stories. She grows close to all three: she drives Robert to medical appointments, visits George when he's dying in the hospital, and accompanies Ida Mae on her first trip back to Chickasaw County in decades. Their stories will live on forever in this book, even though none of them survive to see it get published.

In her Epilogue, Wilkerson contrasts the conventional assumptions about the Great Migration with social science research showing that it allowed migrants to achieve higher levels of income, education, health, and freedom. She concludes that the Great Migration represents another crucial step in the long American tradition of migrating for freedom and to "pursue some vision of happiness."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Ida Mae Brandon Gladney – Ida Mae Brandon Gladney is the first of the three people whose stories Isabel Wilkerson tells in *The Warmth of Other Suns*. She is born and raised in poverty in rural Mississippi, where she marries the sharecropper George Gladney and endures a brutal life picking **cotton**, caring for her family, and coping with the violence of Jim Crow. In 1937, she and George decide to leave Mississippi with their young children, James and Velma, and join her sister Irene in Milwaukee. Instead, they end up settling in Chicago, where they work in humiliating conditions and pay exorbitant rents to live in the dilapidated, effectively segregated Black neighborhood. But it's still better than their life in Mississippi. Ida Mae finds a stable job as a hospital aide, and her family eventually buys a house. Over the decades, she watches the civil rights movement transform Black America, but she also sees white families flee her neighborhood, the government stop investing in it, and poverty and crime explode in the area. While Chicago becomes her home, she never lets go of her Southern traditions, values, or identity. She builds a strong, supportive community of family, neighbors, and fellow migrants, and as a result, she is by far the happiest of the three protagonists by the end of the book. Wilkerson befriends her in the late 1990s, and they even travel back to Mississippi together before Ida Mae dies in 2002. Ida Mae's story demonstrates the remarkable opportunity that the Great Migration offered to the poorest, least educated segment of the Black Southern population: the chance to trade rural poverty for a modest but dignified life in a place where basic rights and freedoms were protected.

George Swanson Starling – The second of Isabel Wilkerson's three protagonists, George Swanson Starling is a brilliant, socially conscious working-class man from the small central Florida town of Eustis. He moves to New York in 1945. When George is a young man, his father forces him to drop out of college for financial reasons, and he reacts by impulsively marrying his girlfriend Inez—ruining any chance of ever finishing his education. He briefly works in a Detroit factory during World War II, then takes up the only steady work available to Black men in Eustis: picking fruit in the citrus groves. But when he starts organizing with the other workers to demand better wages, the white grove owners start plotting to kill him, so he flees to Harlem in New York (where his aunt and many of his friends live). He manages to buy a house and get a stable job working on the same **train** that brought him north, which allows him to watch the Great Migration in action over the course of several decades. He does what little he can to support the civil rights movement, raising money for protestors and encouraging his passengers to integrate the train. Yet he deeply regrets many of his decisions: he always feels that he has fallen far short of his potential, his relationship with Inez is never particularly happy, and his children Gerard and Sonya make poor decisions that ruin their lives. Still, he always loves Harlem and never regrets his decision to leave the South. He dies in 1998. His story captures the dangers of life under Jim Crow, the role that ordinary people played in the civil rights movement, and the bittersweet side of the Migration, which created a new set of problems for its participants—like disconnection, loneliness, and the vices of urban life—even as it resolved the earlier, deeper issues they faced in the South.

Robert Joseph Pershing Foster – Robert Joseph Pershing Foster, a surgeon from Monroe, Louisiana who migrates to California in the early 1950s, is the book's third protagonist. He grows up in a well-respected family in Monroe, where his parents are schoolteachers and community leaders, but he feels profoundly limited by the Jim Crow laws that prevent him from exercising the same rights and accessing the same services as white people. He always dreams of escaping the South. He attends the prestigious Morehouse College in Atlanta, where he meets and marries Alice Clement—the daughter of Rufus Clement, the famous president of Atlanta University. Then, he goes to medical school in Nashville, joins the U.S. Army as a surgeon in Europe, and briefly practices alongside his brother, Madison, back home in Monroe. However, he's still set on leaving, so in 1953, he decides to

move to California. After a perilous journey—during which he has to drive through the night because no hotel will lodge Black people—he reaches Los Angeles. He does checkups for an insurance company, then transitions into private practice, where his attentiveness, generosity, and cultural understanding make him extremely popular among fellow Black Southern migrants. He also starts treating several celebrities, including the singer Ray Charles, and becomes a fixture of the Los Angeles social scene. Nevertheless, he's too much of a perfectionist to ever be satisfied, his marriage is unhappy, and he develops a compulsive gambling habit. By the end of his life, he's extraordinarily popular but also deeply lonely, highly personable but also extremely bitter. On paper, he's a Great Migration success story—he thrived professionally only because he was able to leave the segregated South. But his enduring sense of never being good enough also shows how segregation and racism can profoundly shape people psychologically, as well as how the Great Migration's promise of material success could also distract people from the human connections that would truly make them happy.

Alice Clement – Alice is Robert Foster's wife and Rufus and Pearl Clement's daughter. She and Robert meet when they are both in college, and after they marry, they have two daughters but live apart for several years because of Robert's frequent moves. Alice and the girls finally move in with Robert when he sets up his practice in Los Angeles, but they still remain closer to Alice's family than to Robert. In fact, Alice is so used to living in an elite bubble that she often disapproves of Robert's conventional manners. They find common ground in their shared love for extravagant parties, but they never truly see eye-to-eye about anything else. She dies at just 54 years old in 1974.

Babe Blye – Babe Blye is Reuben Blye's younger brother and one of George Starling's closest lifelong friends. As foremen in the 1930s and 1940s, he and Reuben help George negotiate better wages for the citrus pickers. In New York, he works at a car-painting factory and lives upstairs from George for several years. They organize poker parties together, but Babe keeps losing their money and George eventually catches him cheating. Babe later returns to Florida, where he dies in 1976.

Reuben Blye – Reuben Blye is Babe Blye's older brother and one of George Starling's dearest friends. After a traumatic childhood in Jim Crow-era Eustis, Florida, he moves to New York, where he works a series of heavy manufacturing jobs, then returns to Eustis to become a citrus grove foreman. He helps George Starling negotiate higher wages when they're young and frequently visits George and Babe in New York when they're in middle age. He relives old memories with George when he returns to Florida at the end of his life.

Ray Charles – Ray Charles, the renowned soul musician, is one of Robert Foster's most famous (and most loyal) patients in Los Angeles. After Ray nearly cuts his hand off in an accident, Robert saves it through emergency surgery and then follows Ray on tour to facilitate his recovery. Robert and Ray stay close friends for the rest of their lives—Ray even writes a song about Robert and visits him when he gets discharged from the hospital.

Rufus Clement – Rufus Clement, Alice Clement's father and Robert Foster's father-in-law, is the president of Atlanta University and a major Black social and political leader of the mid-20th century. In 1953, he's elected to the Atlanta Board of Education, making him the first Black state official since Reconstruction. He frequently clashes with Robert because he disapproves of Robert's less-than-elite family, decision to leave the South, and failure to build close relationships with his daughters. He dies in 1967.

Inez Cunningham – Inez is George Starling's wife and Sonya and Gerard Starling's mother. Her parents die when she is young, and she grows up with her religious fanatic aunt in the backwoods near George's hometown of Eustis, Florida. Since Black people from the backwoods are even poorer than Black people who live in town, George's father doesn't approve of his son dating Inez when they're teenagers. When George comes home from college for spring break in 1939, he impulsively drives Inez to the nearest courthouse and asks her to marry him. She's shocked, but she agrees. Their marriage is troubled from the start: Inez is always angry about George working long hours and spending long periods of time away from home. He saves up to send Inez to beauty school and even help her start a salon, but after moving to New York, she decides to become a nurse instead. As she ages, she grows more isolated and bitter—both of her children make terrible life choices and move back to Florida, while George has a daughter with another woman. She even kicks her niece Pat out of the house after her sister dies. Inez dies of cancer in 1978, and George forever regrets his decision to marry her.

Madison Foster – Madison Foster is Robert Foster's older brother. He's a role model for Robert growing up, especially because he's also a doctor. But unlike Robert, Madison chooses to continue practicing in their segregated hometown of Monroe, Louisiana. He's the only Black doctor in town, and he spends much of his time treating Black patients in the poor areas around town. He's not allowed to treat most white patients or even enter the local hospital, where the medical staff is completely white, and he simply avoids entering segregated establishments—including most stores, theaters, and restaurants in town. The contrast between Madison and Robert represents the dilemma many Black Americans faced in the 20th century: whether to migrate and contribute to the community from afar (like Robert) or stay in place, work hard, and weather the humiliation of Jim Crow (like Madison). Tragically and ironically, after Robert convinces Madison to get an important gall bladder surgery in Los Angeles, Madison dies of an unpreventable blood clot. His son, Madison, Jr., leaves the

South and has a close but occasionally contentious relationship with his uncle Robert.

Madison Foster, Jr. – Madison Foster, Jr. is Robert Foster's nephew (his brother Madison Foster's son). He grows up in the South and then moves to the North to complete a doctorate in sociology. He always admires his uncle Robert but also finds his incessant perfectionism frustrating—Robert finds fault in him no matter how hard he tries to impress him.

Professor Foster – Robert Foster's father, whom everyone calls "Professor Foster," is the well-respected principal of the only Black high school in Monroe, Louisiana and a prominent preacher at the local church. As a result, all the Black people in town know who he is—and that Robert is his son. However, many families in Monroe also hold grudges against him. He long asks for better working conditions and more funding from the state government, but to no avail. Yet eventually, Henry Carroll, one of the teachers at the school, uses his political connections to become the new principal and forces Professor Foster into retirement. Worse still, Carroll finally convinces the Governor to build a new Black high school in Monroe—and name it Carroll High School. Professor Foster, who has dedicated his entire life to educating the Black youth of Monroe, only to be forgotten, grows bitter and despondent.

George Gladney – George Gladney is Ida Mae's husband. He is stoic, honest, generous, wise, and extremely hardworking—his marriage to Ida Mae is far more loving and supportive than George Starling and Robert Foster's marriages. After falling in love with Ida Mae, he walks miles to visit her every Sunday until she agrees to marry him. She moves in with him at the Pearson plantation, where he lives and works as a sharecropper. They pick **cotton**, farm vegetables, and raise animals, until Pearson nearly kills George's cousin Joe Lee and George decides to move to the North. In Chicago, he starts delivering ice, but he eventually settles into a stable—if monotonous and physically demanding—job at the Campbell Soup factory. He is a loyal husband and father, and he dies after a series of heart attacks in 1975.

James Gladney – James is Ida Mae and George Gladney's third child and eldest son. At age three, he migrates north with his parents and his sister Velma. And as an adult, he works as a bus driver and lives downstairs from Ida Mae along with his wife and their four children. Like his mother, he's honest, responsible, and active in his community. At the very end of the book, he becomes a grandfather.

Joe Lee – Joe Lee is George Gladney's cousin, who lives near Edd Pearson's plantation in Mississippi. He has a reputation for stealing things, so when his neighbor Addie B. loses her turkeys, she blames him. In response, Pearson and another planter named Willie Jim abduct, torture, and nearly kill Joe Lee—even though he's actually innocent. This incident convinces George to move north with Ida Mae.

Willis V. McCall – Willis V. McCall is the sheriff of Lake County, Florida (where George Starling's hometown of Eustis is located). He is a notorious racist and segregationist, and he frequently abuses and murders Black suspects throughout his long tenure (1944 to 1972). In the 1940s, he uses a vagrancy law as an excuse to arrest, fine, and torture Black men at random, and in 1949, he becomes nationally famous for killing two Black rape suspects in cold blood. Later, he goes to extreme lengths to oppose federal school integration laws, and he manages to keep many services segregated into the early 1970s—among the latest in the nation. He gets investigated for misconduct 49 times, but he never faces any legal consequences for his actions. He finally loses reelection in 1972, after kicking a developmentally disabled Black man to death. His reign of terror epitomizes not just the brutality of Jim Crow, but also the way that the state officially sanctioned and sustained it.

David McIntosh – David McIntosh is one of the two men, along with George Gladney, who falls in love with Ida Mae when she's a young woman in Mississippi and visits her every Sunday in an attempt to woo her. She ends up choosing George, but at the end of her life, she visits David on her trip back to Mississippi with Wilkerson.

Harry T. Moore – Harry T. Moore was an early civil rights leader, largely forgotten today, who served as the head of the NAACP in Florida. He fought tirelessly to improve conditions for Black workers and investigate lynchings. George Starling briefly joined Moore's campaign to improve working conditions for Black teachers in the 1930s. The KKK murdered Moore and his wife by bombing their house in 1951, but nobody was ever brought to justice for his murder.

Pat – Pat is Inez Cunningham's niece. After her mother dies, Pat moves in with Inez and George. While Inez treats Pat terribly and kicks her out of the house, George becomes a distant but reliable father figure to her. George and Pat never grow very close, but they both appreciate their relationship because Pat has no parents left and George has no relationship with his actual children, Gerard and Sonya.

Edd Pearson – Edd Pearson is the Mississippi planter for whom Ida Mae and George Gladney sharecrop in the 1920s and 1930s. Compared to other planters, Pearson is relatively just and humane—for instance, he keeps fair balance sheets instead of cooking the books to force sharecroppers into unrepayable debt. However, he's still willing to use terror and violence to get his way: he leads the mob that tortures innocent Joe Lee after Addie B.'s turkeys wander away. When George and Ida Mae decide to move to the North, he doesn't fully understand why—he isn't capable of seeing the world from their perspective—but he also doesn't try to manipulate them into staying.

George Starling's Father – George Starling's father is a

troubled Florida sharecropper and construction worker who frequently clashes with his son. He drinks and beats George's mother before their divorce, and later, he discourages George from going to college because he doesn't see any value in it. However, his neighbors convince him to save up for George's education—until George suddenly marries his girlfriend Inez just to spite him. George regrets this decision for the rest of his life, and even though he hopes that moving to New York will offer his children a better future, his relationship with them ultimately falls into the same tumultuous pattern as his relationship with his own father.

Gerard Starling – Gerard is George and Inez's son. To his parents' disappointment, he lets the vices he finds in Harlem get the better of him: he starts doing drugs and stealing as a teenager, and then he moves to Miami to become a full-time drug dealer. Eventually, his addiction ruins his health. After he visits his dying father, who's in a coma after a nasty fall, Gerard becomes so distraught that he stops going to his own medical appointments and dies within a matter of days. His fate, like his sister Sonya's, demonstrates how the poverty and violence in Northern Black neighborhoods often undermined migrants' hopes that their children would have better opportunities and lives than they did.

Wilkerson's Mother – Isabel Wilkerson's mother Rubye was a Black schoolteacher who migrated from rural Rome, Georgia to Washington, D.C. in the 1950s. Wilkerson traces her initial curiosity about the Great Migration to seeing a **photo** of her mother and learning her story, and she occasionally supplements Ida Mae, George, and Robert's stories with brief vignettes from her mother's memories.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Robert Foster's Mother – Robert Foster's mother, a strict, high-minded socialite from New Orleans, works alongside his father as a schoolteacher in Monroe. In fact, she's Robert's seventh grade teacher. Robert looks forward to impressing her by finishing medical school and succeeding as a doctor, but she dies of cancer before he graduates.

Eleanor Gladney – Eleanor is Ida Mae and George Gladney's fourth child. Ida Mae is pregnant with Eleanor when she, George, James, and Velma migrate north—but she chooses to give birth in Mississippi. As an adult, Eleanor lives with Ida Mae in the family's three-floor bungalow.

Velma Gladney – Velma is Ida Mae and George Gladney's second daughter (after Elma, who dies as an infant). She is six years old when the family migrates north. She grows up in Chicago and becomes a teacher, but then she dies tragically in a car crash.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – Dr. King, the renowned Black minister who led the civil rights movement, speaks in Ida Mae's neighborhood in Chicago in 1966 and gets assassinated in Memphis in 1968 (which sparks protests and riots around the U.S.).

John Starling – John Starling, George Starling's grandfather, is a moody sharecropper who grew up in the Carolinas, allegedly murdered his abusive boss, and then moved to Florida.

Sonya Starling – Sonya is George and Inez's daughter. To George's dismay, she gets pregnant at age 13 on a trip to Eustis and then moves there permanently. She and George never have much of a relationship, and she dies very young in a car crash.

Miss Theenie – Theenia Brandon, whom everyone calls "Miss Theenie," is Ida Mae's mother. She is distraught when all of her children leave Mississippi for the North, but she passes her generosity and staid moral values on to them, and this helps them succeed in their new cities.

Isabel Wilkerson – The author of *The Warmth of Other Suns* is an influential, Pulitzer Prize-winning American journalist. She spent more than a decade researching and writing this book—her first—in an effort to show the public how the Great Migration transformed Black life in the U.S.

Addie B. – Addie B. is Ida Mae's neighbor on the Pearson plantation in Mississippi in the 1930s. She falsely accuses Joe Lee of stealing her turkeys.

Barbara – Barbara is Robert Foster's live-in nurse at the end of his life in the 1990s.

Dr. William Beck – William Beck is the prominent Black doctor and medical school professor who helps Robert Foster, his former student, settle into life in Los Angeles in the 1950s.

Irene – Irene is Ida Mae's sister. She and her husband migrated from Mississippi to Wisconsin during World War I, then settled down in Milwaukee. She helps Ida Mae and George Gladney move north.

Pearl Clement – Pearl Clement is Alice Clement's mother, Rufus Clement's wife, and Robert Foster's mother-in-law. After Rufus and Alice die, she moves in with Robert, but they can't stand each other, so she eventually moves out.

Joseph Brandon – Joseph Brandon is Ida Mae's father. He dies during her childhood.

TERMS

Great Migration – The Great Migration, the primary subject of this book, was the extended process in which about six million Black Americans moved from the South to cities in the North and West between 1915 and 1970.

Jim Crow – Jim Crow laws were the policies in the South that established racial segregation and restricted Black citizens' civil rights (especially with respect to voting) from the 1870s until the late 1960s and early 1970s. The name "Jim Crow" comes from a racist blackface minstrel show commonly performed in

the early 1800s.

Sharecropping – Sharecropping was a labor system implemented in the South after the end of slavery, in which landowners would rent their land to farmers in exchange for a portion of what they produced (usually half). However, by manipulating the prices for crops and materials, landowners kept Black sharecroppers in perpetual debt and effectively enslaved, even as late as the 1960s.

The Chicago Defender – *The Chicago Defender* is a prominent Black newspaper based in Chicago that spoke out against Southern segregation and encouraged Black people to migrate to the North. During the Jim Crow Era, it was banned but widely read in the South, where railway porters distributed it in secret. (As of 2022, the newspaper is still active, although in an online-only format.)

Civil Rights Act of 1964 – The Civil Rights Act of 1964, which Congress passed in response to the civil rights movement, outlawed segregation and most forms of identity-based discrimination.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

MIGRATION AND FREEDOM

In *The Warmth of Other Suns*, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Isabel Wilkerson tells the story of the Great Migration—when millions of Black Americans moved from the South to the North and West between 1915 and 1970—through the eyes of three representative protagonists. Ida Mae Brandon Gladney grows up as a sharecropper on a Southern plantation and moves to Chicago in 1937. George Swanson Starling is a Florida citrus picker who flees to New York in 1945 after he organizes an informal labor union and learns that his bosses are plotting to lynch him. And Robert Joseph Pershing Foster is an accomplished army surgeon who moves to Los Angeles in 1953 because he isn't allowed to practice medicine in his segregated hometown of Monroe, Louisiana. Like everyone who participated in the Great Migration, Wilkerson's protagonists face distinct, specific challenges and choose to leave the South for different, highly personal reasons. Yet the underlying logic behind their decisions is the same: they leave the South to seek freedom and a better life elsewhere. They recognize how Jim Crow, the South's authoritarian system of racial segregation, profoundly constrains them. And they decide that the best way to recover their dignity, advance socioeconomically, and pursue happiness is by leaving. As Wilkerson once put it, they realized that they had to "act like immigrants to be recognized as citizens."

The Warmth of Other Suns argues that, at its core, the Great Migration was simply a massive, coordinated quest for freedom. Migrants sought freedom from Jim Crow by leaving the South, but just as importantly, *simply deciding to leave* was also their way to exercise the freedom that slavery and its lingering effects had so long denied them. Wilkerson argues that, in this way, the Great Migration is really a perfect example of the classic American migration story: people left behind their homes and moved thousands of miles away in pursuit of a better, freer life. In fact, Wilkerson also views the Great Migration as evidence that human beings will *always* stubbornly seek to free themselves from oppression, and that migration always has been and always will be an essential tool for doing so.

HISTORY, MEMORY, AND IDENTITY

At the beginning of *The Warmth of Other Suns*, Isabel Wilkerson argues that the Great Migration is "perhaps the biggest underreported story of the twentieth century." Even though it affected virtually every American, most Americans know very little about it—if they have even heard of it at all. Historians have studied sub-branches of it in detail, but there is no accessible, well-researched work about it as a whole. This is why Wilkerson spent 15 years interviewing over 1,200 migrants and writing this book: she wanted to capture the stories of the remaining migrants before it is too late, hoping to alert Americans to a crucial but overlooked episode in their own national history. In fact, Wilkerson argues that people's sense of identity depends entirely on what they remember about themselves, their communities, and their nations. So, just as Ida Mae, George, and Robert's memories of migration have become essential parts of who they are as individuals, the Great Migration has become an inextricable part of the U.S.'s identity as a nation. Indeed, Wilkerson concludes that history is always central to a nation's sense of identity, so if Americans fail to learn about the Great Migration, then they will fail to truly understand themselves.

THE LEGACY OF THE MIGRATION

Isabel Wilkerson narrates the Great Migration through the eyes of three particular migrants in order to make history tangible for her readers and emphasize the profound emotional drama involved in the decision to migrate. However, she also recognizes that limiting her book to these specific narratives would mean muddling the bigger picture of the Great Migration. This is why she juxtaposes Ida Mae, George, and Robert's stories with a clear sociological analysis of the Great Migration's causes and effects. In particular, she points out how the Great Migration

has transformed American society in enduring ways. It has left a *cultural* legacy. For instance, it spurred the Harlem Renaissance, educated intellectuals like Toni Morrison and August Wilson, and gave birth to jazz, Motown, and hip-hop. It also transformed U.S. *politics* by creating a large class of enfranchised Black Northerners in the first half of the 20th century and helping the civil rights movement spread across the nation. *Economically*, the Great Migration improved conditions not only for migrants themselves, but also for their families back in the South, the cities they went to, and the nation as a whole. And *socially*, the Great Migration helps explain the pattern of white flight, urban disinvestment, and residential "hypersegregation" that characterizes American cities today. It also gives important historical context to alarmist stories about the concentration of poverty, violence, and drug use in many Black urban neighborhoods since the end of World War II. And it has transformed the experiences of other groups, like the Asian and Latin American immigrants who came to multiracial U.S. cities in the late 20th century. By exploring these varied effects, Wilkerson argues that the Great Migration can provide valuable insight into Black America (and the structure of U.S. society as a whole) in the 21st century and beyond.

THE ECONOMICS OF RACISM

For a century after the Civil War, Southern state governments devoted vast resources to creating the elaborate system of legal segregation commonly known as Jim Crow. Its purpose was to keep Black people subordinate to white people in every sphere of life. Its creators were zealous racists, but mere prejudice wasn't their primary motivation. One telling episode makes this clear: when hundreds of thousands of Black workers started migrating north, white Southerners actually launched huge protests begging them to *stay*. In reality, Jim Crow's true purpose was *economic*. Its basic goal was the same as slavery's: to make the greatest possible profit off of exploiting Black labor. If segregation laws could successfully prevent Black people from getting an education, claiming their civil rights, and working in anything but sharecropping and manual labor, then the Southern elite would have a constant supply of cheap, compliant workers for its factories and plantations.

Many Black Southerners eventually recognized this pattern and left the South in search of better economic opportunities elsewhere. Yet this by no means implies that they achieved economic equality in their destination cities. On the contrary, wherever they went, Black migrants were *also* stuck working the longest hours, in the worst jobs, for the lowest pay. In other words, they migrated north only to find that, once they arrived, they were treated as a pool of cheap labor once again, particularly for wartime factories, domestic work, and suppressing wages and putting down strikes by white workers. Meanwhile, landlords and real estate agents profited from racism in a different way: they charged Black tenants and buyers far higher prices. Even though Northern cities weren't segregated by law, they were still sharply divided by informal color lines—which meant that Black people were confined to a few overcrowded neighborhoods and had to pay far more than whites for a decent home. (When they tried to live elsewhere, white neighbors often bombed or burned down their houses.) Thus, although migrants in the North and West generally fared better than their non-migrant counterparts back home in the South, in their destination cities, they still faced a similar kind of racism—which, to this day, continues largely because it's profitable for the people who discriminate against Black people. Based on this similarity, Wilkerson concludes that economic forces provide the best explanation for the pervasiveness of racism in the U.S.

LOVE AND FAMILY

American migration stories are often framed in individualistic terms, but the Great Migration was fundamentally a family affair. Family connections determined when, where, and how people migrated—in the era of the Great Migration, almost every Black American in the South had family in the North, and vice versa. So it's only logical that, when Wilkerson's protagonists choose to leave the South, they decide as families and for their families' sake. On the one hand, migrating means leaving loved ones behind. In an era before digital communication, this meant not seeing one's parents, siblings, and community for years or even decades. Yet on the other hand, such a decision was often essentially an expression of love. Migrants' primary motivation was usually their desire to provide a better life for their families—and especially to give their children opportunities that they could never have in the Jim Crow South. In fact, Wilkerson points out that many of the most prominent Black leaders of the last century—from writers like Toni Morrison and musicians like John Coltrane to athletes like Jesse Owens and political icons like Michelle Obama—may have never had the resources to flourish if their audacious parents hadn't joined the Great Migration. Indeed, by the end of their lives, Wilkerson's protagonists care about nothing more than family: Ida Mae is the happiest of the three because she maintains a strong family network in Chicago, while Robert deeply regrets not playing a more active role in raising his daughters, and George is devastated to watch his family slowly collapse before his eyes. Thus, this book is both a testament to the power of family and a warning against taking family for granted. Through her portrait of the Great Migration, Wilkerson shows how love and sacrifices bind families together, and she suggests that these family ties are often people's greatest resource, both practically and spiritually, in the universal human pursuit of happiness.

DECISION, CONSEQUENCE, AND REGRET

The Warmth of Other Suns, like the lives of its protagonists, hinges on a single dilemma: whether to stay or to go. Isabel Wilkerson spends the first half of the book exploring how Ida Mae Gladney, George Starling, and Robert Foster made the agonizing decision to leave the South behind forever. And in the second half, she describes how this decision completely transformed the rest of their lives, both for better and for worse. By following all three main characters from childhood to the grave, Wilkerson shows how people's lives are often defined by a few key decisions, but they can never fully understand the consequences of these decisions when they have to make them. Instead, they only understand them years later, in retrospect. For instance, in her eighties, Ida Mae realizes that she easily could have married a different man, stayed in Mississippi all her life, and never even seen a city like Chicago. Meanwhile, George never regrets his decision to move to New York, but he *does* believe that he ruined his own life and wasted his own potential by impulsively marrying his girlfriend Inez as a young man, just to spite his father. Of course, by showing the book's elderly protagonists cope with the consequences of the decisions they made when they were young, Wilkerson encourages her readers to make wise choices (much like George tells the young people in his neighborhood not to make the same mistakes as him). But Wilkerson's more fundamental point is that true freedom is bittersweet—it means having the power to choose one's own future, but also living with the consequences of that choice. Some of these consequences are foreseeable, but most are not. Liberation and regret thus go hand-in-hand: truly making free life decisions also means recognizing that we are stuck with our choices and fully responsible for them.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

TRAINS

Trains represent the Great Migration itself, the human quest for freedom, and migration's power to reshape society. Like most Black migrants in the 20th century, two of Wilkerson's protagonists—Ida Mae Gladney and George Starling—moved from the South to the North on trains. Even if the trip is daunting and the cabins are still segregated, the train journey north is the best way to escape Jim Crow, and so even seeing a train is exciting to many Black Southerners—like Wilkerson's mother, who dreams of moving north when she watches the train pass through town as a young girl.

After he moves to New York, George Starling finds work as a porter on the Silver Meteor, the same train that took him there, and he stays in this job for more than 30 years. He becomes one of "the midwives of the Great Migration," helping other Black migrants load their luggage, make their way to their family members in the North, and ultimately find freedom. After the Civil Rights Act of 1964 passes, George even helps his passengers integrate the trains (which were previously segregated as soon as they crossed into the South). He sees how the migrant population changes over time, until the original migrants age and their children start taking journeys South. Indeed, many of these migrants are from the same part of Florida as him, so he sees how the availability of train routes deeply shapes who migrates where. Indeed, rail lines can help researchers today understand why, for instance, so many Black Chicago residents have roots in Mississippi or so many Black New Yorkers' parents and grandparents came from Florida.

PHOTOGRAPHS

Photographs—and particularly Wilkerson's old photo of her mother—represent history's power to enrich the present. When they reach the North, Wilkerson explains, migrants generally have their photos taken. It's like a routine of welcoming them to their new homes. When Wilkerson finds the photo that her mother originally took when she reached Washington, D.C. from Georgia in the 1950s, she begins wondering about her parents' experiences during the Great Migration, and she starts investigating why so many migrants choose not to share their stories with their children and grandchildren. Most of all, she wonders how her life—and the U.S. as a whole—would look today if the Great Migration had never happened. Just like the photos that Ida Mae, Robert, and George show her when they recount their stories, the photo of Wilkerson's mother reveals the stakes of understanding history and the power of individual decisions, in aggregate, to shape the world forever.

COTTON

For Ida Mae Gladney, cotton transforms from a sign of poverty, Jim Crow, and repression into a symbol of freedom and her own identity. In her youth, she works as a sharecropper picking cotton, and so the plant defines her life in many ways. She needs to pick 100 pounds per day, a nearly impossible quantity for her, in order to keep afloat. Little known to her, cotton is the foundation of the Southern economy. Indeed, the need to produce it helps explain the longevity of slavery in the South—as well as the slavery-like labor system of sharecropping. Thus, at the beginning of the book, cotton represents the lack of true freedom in Ida Mae's life.

But at the end of the book, when Ida Mae returns to her native Chickasaw County with Isabel Wilkerson, cotton comes to

represent just the opposite. At one point, Ida Mae asks Wilkerson to pull the car over so they can pick a few buds of cotton—just for fun. Wilkerson realizes that Ida Mae isn't picking the cotton just to relive her youth, but also to show herself what she has overcome. She has come full circle: she managed to leave and live a better life so that now, when she returns to Mississippi, she can pick cotton for pleasure and not for work. In fact, cotton blankets the Mississippi landscape—just like snow in Chicago—and so Ida Mae's cotton picking also comes to represent her ability to maintain social, emotional, and spiritual ties with her home even as she pursues better opportunities elsewhere.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *The Warmth of Other Suns* published in 2011.

Part One: Leaving Quotes

I was leaving the South
To fling myself into the unknown....
I was taking a part of the South
To transplant in alien soil,
To see if it could grow differently,
If it could drink of new and cool rains,
Bend in strange winds,
Respond to the warmth of other suns
And, perhaps, to bloom.
—Richard Wright

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson , Ida Mae Brandon Gladney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

Isabel Wilkerson titles her book (and several of its chapters) after this poem by Richard Wright, the most famous novelist of the Great Migration. Like one of Wilkerson's protagonists, Ida Mae Gladney, Wright grew up as the son of sharecroppers in Mississippi and received virtually no education, then moved to Chicago in young adulthood. This poem, which compares migration to transplanting a tree or flower, captures the sense of possibility that migrating to the North opened up for young people like Wright and the book's protagonists. Specifically, Wilkerson takes the title *The Warmth of Other Suns* from a line that suggests that the freedom of life in the North made it possible for migrants to achieve their full potential.

Other lines from the poem speak to other core experiences that Wilkerson describes throughout their book. She explores the leap of faith required for migrants to decisively "fling [themselves] into the unknown." She chronicles their struggle to make themselves at home in the North, which often feels like "transplant[ing a part of the South] in alien soil." And, above all, she celebrates the way her protagonists bloom in the North—or achieve a tenuous but unmistakable kind of stability, autonomy, and purpose that they may never have been able to find in the South.

Wilkerson also begins with Wright's quote because her book, unlike most academic literature on the Great Migration, seeks to take on a personal perspective and center the harrowing experience of migrating to the North. Similarly, Wilkerson cites Wright to pay tribute to his generation of artists, who found success, advanced political change, and helped forge a collective Black American consciousness in the 20th century only because they were able to move to the North.

Part One: The Great Migration, 1915–1970 Quotes

They fled as if under a spell or a high fever. "They left as though they were fleeing some curse," wrote the scholar Emmett J. Scott. "They were willing to make almost any sacrifice to obtain a railroad ticket, and they left with the intention of staying."

From the early years of the twentieth century to well past its middle age, nearly every black family in the American South, which meant nearly every black family in America, had a decision to make.

[...]

Historians would come to call it the Great Migration. It would become perhaps the biggest underreported story of the twentieth century. It was vast. It was leaderless. It crept along so many thousands of currents over so long a stretch of time as to be difficult for the press truly to capture while it was under way.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8-9

Explanation and Analysis

In her second chapter, Wilkerson gives her readers a

general introduction to the Great Migration. She emphasizes its intensity and especially its breadth: its long timeline, its universality in the South, and the impact it made on every Black American family. During generations of enslavement, only a select few Black people had the audacity, opportunity, and good fortune to escape to the North. But from World War I onwards, migration suddenly became a viable option for everyone, whether they were sharecroppers like Ida Mae Gladney, small-town laborers like George Starling, or educated professionals like Robert Foster.

In addition to just introducing the Great Migration in this passage, Wilkerson also takes the opportunity to explain why she has dedicated more than a decade of her life to researching and writing about it now, in the early 21st century. The Migration has long since ended, she explains, but unlike the vast waves of European migration to the U.S. in the 20th century, it still hasn't taken its rightful place in Americans' understanding of their own history. Many Americans might have heard of it, but they seldom understand the way it transformed the U.S. forever, and—with the exception of its sons and daughters—they almost never appreciate the courage, faith, aspiration, and uncertainty involved in each family's decision to migrate. Thus, Wilkerson's book is an attempt to correct the record and capture the memories of some of the last remaining migrants before it is too late.

Part Two: The Stirrings of Discontent Quotes

❝ Not unlike European Jews who watched the world close in on them slowly, perhaps barely perceptibly, at the start of Nazism, colored people in the South would first react in denial and disbelief to the rising hysteria, then, helpless to stop it, attempt a belated resistance, not knowing and not able to imagine how far the supremacists would go. The outcomes for both groups were widely divergent, one suffering unspeakable loss and genocide, the other enduring nearly a century of apartheid, pogroms, and mob executions. But the hatreds and fears that fed both assaults were not dissimilar and relied on arousing the passions of the indifferent to mount so complete an attack.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

It's impossible to understand the Great Migration without first learning about the political history of Reconstruction and Jim Crow, which made leaving the South such a promising opportunity for Black Southerners in the early 20th century. In a story nearly as underappreciated as the Great Migration, Southern states extended full political rights to Black citizens in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War—until white supremacists retook Southern state governments and set up a system of extreme segregation that kept the region's Black population in the same unfree, subservient role they had occupied for centuries. From the late 1870s through roughly the 1910s, conditions for Black people steadily worsened in the South—and they didn't much improve until the 1960s. The six million Southerners who moved north and west during the Great Migration were specifically fleeing this situation, in which their rights were gradually eroding as a racist government entrenched its power.

Wilkerson compares Jim Crow to Nazi Germany not as a metaphor or for shock value, but rather because it's the closest parallel to Jim Crow that most Americans are likely to understand. While American education often fails to cover Jim Crow, it does give students an accurate sense of the horrors of the Nazi regime, and so imagining how Europe's Jewish population felt in the early years of Hitler's rise could help them grasp how it felt to be a Black person in the Jim Crow South—and why leaving started to look like such an attractive option.

Part Two: Robert Joseph Pershing Foster Quotes

❝ They and Ida Mae and George and Pershing and children all over the South were growing up, trying to comprehend the caste they were born into, adjusting or resisting, lying in bed at night and imagining a world that was different and free, and knowing it was out there because they had seen it in the casual airs, the haughtiness even, and the clothes and the stories of the people from the North. Now nothing around them made sense, and everything that happened to them imprinted itself into their psyches and loomed larger because they had glimpsed what was possible outside the bars of their own existence.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker), Ida Mae Brandon Gladney, George Swanson Starling, Robert Joseph Pershing Foster

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

After she introduces her three protagonists, Wilkerson sums up the key lessons that readers can glean from their respective childhoods in the South. Unlike the generations before them, who scarcely had the chance to learn about lives any different from the unfree ones that they were forced to live, Ida Mae, Robert, and George had the good fortune to meet people who had freed themselves from Jim Crow by moving north and west. They certainly didn't have perfect information about life elsewhere—the most they could hope for, besides a visit, was an occasional letter. But they did have people's stories, resources like the *Chicago Defender*, and their own imaginations.

In short, the migration grew through a snowball effect. Much like movies about the big city can do for people living in small towns today, other migrants planted a seed in the minds of people like Ida Mae, Robert, and George, showing them what they stood to gain by leaving the South. Wilkerson dwells on this detail because it highlights how social networks were crucial to keeping the Great Migration going for so many decades. Indeed, Wilkerson suggests that having friends, family, or even acquaintances who migrated was probably the greatest factor that encouraged others to follow in their footsteps.

Part Two: A Burdensome Labor Quotes

❝ Above her was an entire economy she could not see but which ruled her days and determined the contours of her life. There were bankers, planters, merchants, warehouse clerks, fertilizer wholesalers, seed sellers, plow makers, mule dealers, gin owners. A good crop and a high price made not much improvement to the material discomforts of Ida Mae's existence but meant a planter's wife could "begin to dream of a new parlor carpet and a piano." […] On Wall Street, there were futures and commodities traders wagering on what the cotton she had yet to pick might go for next October. There were businessmen in Chicago needing oxford shirts, socialites in New York and Philadelphia wanting lace curtains and organdy evening gowns. Closer to home, closer than one dared to contemplate, there were Klansmen needing their white cotton robes and hoods.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker), Ida Mae Brandon Gladney

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 97-98

Explanation and Analysis

Wilkerson helps the reader understand Ida Mae Gladney's migration experience by describing the dreadful conditions under which she worked as a sharecropper, picking cotton on a Mississippi plantation just a stone's throw from the other plantation where she grew up. The work was quite literally backbreaking, and Ida Mae physically could not do it at the level required to make a living. She often couldn't afford shoes or basic clothing. And, compared to most sharecroppers in the Jim Crow South, she was actually relatively lucky: her plantation owner didn't assault, extort, or shortchange her and her husband.

But in addition to describing what plantation work was like for Ida Mae, Wilkerson also gives her readers another crucial, complementary piece of context: the Southern plantation economy was actually the foundation for a crucial industry and, for a long time, the backbone of the American economy. Ida Mae's labor was making middlemen, financiers, and property owners rich. This fact is absolutely essential to understanding Jim Crow. Without recognizing plantation labor's role in the broader economy, many Americans assume that Southern white people didn't want Black people around and would be happy to see them migrate North—after all, on the whole, the South was profoundly racist. But the reality is very different: the Southern white elite depended directly on Black labor for its wealth, and its racism and violence were actually designed to *prevent* Black people from leaving or moving up in society. Put differently, the U.S.'s vast textile economy shows that racism didn't create slavery and the Jim Crow economic system: instead, slavery and Jim Crow created racism, which proved to be a convenient excuse for the exploitation at the heart of the Southern economy.

❝ Morehouse was a heavenly place. Colored boys racing straight-backed and self-important in their sweater vests, hair brushed back with a hint of a center part. Arriving at chapel to sit with their respective fraternities and daring not take the wrong row. There was a sister school, Spelman, the women sealed off in their cloistered dormitories and emerging in fitted dresses and gloves to be paired with Morehouse men, who were the only men worthy of them. There was the graduate school, Atlanta University, where the brightest of both schools were expected to go to take their master's and doctorates. It was all too perfect for words.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker), Robert

Joseph Pershing Foster

Related Themes:

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

Wilkerson describes the feeling of excitement and liberation that Robert Foster felt when he started at Morehouse College, one of the most storied Black institutions in the U.S. Throughout his childhood, Robert was determined to escape his hometown of Monroe, Louisiana, which he viewed as suffocating and backwards. He dreamed of living the grand, glamorous life that he saw in the movies and escaping the humiliation of living as a second-class citizen when he knew he was just as good as the white people who lorded over him.

In short, Robert wanted an equal playing field, and he found a version of it for the first time at Morehouse. Of course, the college was all-male, all-Black, and located in the segregated South, so it didn't give Robert the chance to live as an equal to his white neighbors. (But this wasn't really possible *anywhere* in the U.S. in the 1940s and 1950s.) What Morehouse *did* give Robert was a sense of freedom and self-worth because, for the first time, the people around him defined him based on his personal traits and strengths, and not merely his race. Of course, as this passage shows, he also appreciated finally getting to have all of the beautiful, expensive things that he was used to seeing reserved for white people—and that he dedicated much of the rest of his life to pursuing. Indeed, his extravagant Los Angeles parties later in life were in no small measure an attempt to reproduce the atmosphere that Wilkerson describes in this passage.

Part Two: The Awakening Quotes

❝ Thousands of colored soldiers had preceded him overseas during the two great wars—more than a million in World War II alone—and that service had been a defining experience for many of them. They were forced into segregated units and often given the most menial tasks or the most dangerous infantry tours. But they also experienced relief from Jim Crow in those European villages, were recognized as liberating Americans rather than lower-caste colored men, and felt pride in what their uniform represented.

They returned home to a Jim Crow South that expected them to go back to the servile position they left. Most resented it and wanted to be honored for risking their lives for their country rather than attacked for being uppity. Some survived the war only to lose their lives to Jim Crow.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker), Robert Joseph Pershing Foster

Related Themes:

Page Number: 145

Explanation and Analysis

Although Robert Foster decides to leave the South very early on in life and goes to medical school with this eventual goal in mind, his time as a military surgeon still transforms him forever. It shows him that he can hold his own outside the South, but it also tempers his expectations for life elsewhere, because he faces far more racism than he expected to. This experience contributes to his eventual decision to move to California. And in this passage, Wilkerson connects Robert's experience to a crucial piece of broader historical context: over a million Black men served in the U.S. military during World War II, and they had contradictory experiences similar to Robert's. They helped free Europeans from an oppressive, racist regime all too similar to the one they suffered from at home. Very few of them stayed in Europe, but many of them returned home with a new sense of possibility. Put differently, they recognized that they deserved better than they were getting in the South, and they resolved to do something about it. Thus, it's no surprise that these veterans and their families disproportionately joined the Great Migration.

> On the drive back home, George searched himself, hard and deep. This wasn't the first beating, and it wouldn't be the last. Joe Lee had lived, but he just as easily could have died. And there was not a thing anybody could do about it. As it was, Ida Mae felt George was in danger for asking Mr. Edd about it at all. Next time, it could be him. George had a brother in Chicago. Ida Mae's big sister, Irene, was in Milwaukee and had been agitating for them to come north.
>
> He made up his mind on the way back. He drove into the yard and went into the cabin to break the news to Ida Mae.
>
> "This the last crop we making," he said.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker), Ida Mae Brandon Gladney, George Gladney, Joe Lee, Edd Pearson, Irene, Addie B.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

George and Ida Mae Gladney decide to leave the South forever after a particularly shocking turn of events: their neighbor Addie B. loses her turkeys, and Addie B. and the plantation owner Edd Pearson blame George's cousin Joe Lee for their disappearance. Pearson and a group of his cronies kidnap, torture, and nearly kill Joe Lee—who turns out to have been innocent all along. George retrieves the bloodied Joe Lee from the jail cell where Pearson has left him, and on his way back, he decides once and for all to leave the South. Even though George considers Pearson a generally honest plantation owner—which isn't saying much—he concludes that, as long as he stays in the Jim Crow South, his life will constantly remain under threat. So he makes the fateful decision that brings him and Ida Mae to Chicago, changing their lives forever.

George's process of doubt and reflection embodies the way that, according to Wilkerson, most migrants ultimately reach the difficult decision to leave the South. Specifically, they do so when acute factors layer on top of chronic ones. In other words, they face longstanding troubles like poverty and discrimination (chronic factors), and then specific challenges and conflicts (acute factors) serve as the straw that breaks the camel's back, convincing them to leave.

> A series of unpredictable events and frustrations led to the decisions of Ida Mae Gladney, George Swanson Starling, and Robert Pershing Foster to leave the South for good. Their decisions were separate and distinct from anything in the outside world except that they were joining a road already plied decades before by people as discontented as themselves. A thousand hurts and killed wishes led to a final determination by each fed-up individual on the verge of departure, which, added to millions of others, made up what could be called a migration.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker), Ida Mae Brandon Gladney, George Swanson Starling, Robert Joseph Pershing Foster

Related Themes:

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

Wilkerson summarizes the central idea of Part Two of her book: the three protagonists all grow up knowing that migrating to the North is a possibility, then decide to actually do it when they get fed up with "unpredictable events and frustrations" in the South. Ida Mae and George Gladney leave Mississippi after the owner of the plantation where they sharecrop nearly beats George's cousin to death. George Starling leaves Florida when he learns that exactly the same thing is about to happen to him. And Robert Foster leaves Louisiana as early as he possibly can—for college—before making a permanent move to California when he reaches the right juncture in his career.

Wilkerson takes extra care to balance two complementary perspectives: the individual's and society's. Specifically, she tries to present the Great Migration both as an intrepid decision that her protagonists make as individuals and as a broad sociological phenomenon that changed the U.S. as a whole. It's both things at once, a flood of individual decisions that turns into a nationwide movement. This emphasis is important because, as she points out repeatedly throughout the book, the social perspective on the Migration often dominates in popular narratives, to the exclusion of the individual one. After all, this is why Wilkerson chose to portray the Migration through the life histories of its participants and not merely through a dry scholarly analysis.

Part Two: Breaking Away Quotes

George could have left after settlement without saying a word. It was a risk to say too much. The planter could rescind the settlement, say he misfigured, turn a credit into a debit, take back the money, evict the family or whip the sharecropper on the spot, or worse. Some sharecroppers, knowing they might not get paid anyway, fled from the field, right in midhoe, on the first thing going north.

The planters could not conceive of why their sharecroppers would want to leave. The dance of the compliant sharecropper conceding to the big planter year in and year out made it seem as if the ritual actually made sense, that the sharecropper, having been given no choice, actually saw the tilted scales as fair. The sharecropper's forced silence was part of the collusion that fed the mythology.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker), George Gladney, Edd Pearson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 167-168

Explanation and Analysis

After George Gladney decides that he and Ida Mae will leave Edd Pearson's Mississippi plantation to move north, he faces the perilous task of settling his accounts with Pearson for his final year's harvest. This is so dangerous because Southern states have enabled white landowners to effectively enslave Black sharecroppers through debt: if a sharecropper still owns the landowner money at the end of the year, they can't legally leave the plantation until they pay it off (which many do). There's no way to independently verify plantation owners' accounts, and the government always believes them over their Black workers, so many plantation owners invent debts to keep their sharecroppers working forever—especially when they decide to migrate north.

This explains why many sharecroppers try to escape with no prior notice. As Wilkerson points out here, many plantation owners are completely incapable of imagining how their sharecroppers feel: they assume that the sharecropping system is fair, even when they distort their accounts. This strikes close to home for George and Ida Mae. George knows that, while Pearson has never cooked his books in the past, he could absolutely do so now. George would have no way to stop him, and he and Ida Mae would either have to escape or remain in the South forever. But he decides to tell Pearson the truth, and fortunately, Pearson gives him his blessing to leave.

The Great Migration ran along three main tributaries and emptied into reservoirs all over the North and West. One stream, the one George Starling was about to embark upon, carried people from the coastal states of Florida, Georgia, the Carolinas, and Virginia up the eastern seaboard to Washington, Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and their satellites. A second current, Ida Mae's, traced the central spine of the continent, paralleling the Father of Waters, from Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, and Arkansas to the industrial cities of Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, Milwaukee, Pittsburgh. A third and later stream carried people like Pershing from Louisiana and Texas to the entire West Coast, with some black southerners traveling farther than many modern-day immigrants.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker), Ida Mae Brandon Gladney, George Swanson Starling, Robert Joseph Pershing Foster

Related Themes:

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

Wilkerson emphasizes that, while the Great Migration was fundamentally the sum of countless individual decisions, it also followed consistent general patterns. Here, she summarizes its overall geographical trajectory, with a focus on the sustained links between certain home regions in the South and certain destinations in the North and West. The three main lines of migration, as she points out, parallel her three protagonists' journeys: George Starling's trip up the Eastern Seaboard, Ida Mae's up the Mississippi River, and Robert Foster's westward to California. Of course, Wilkerson chose these protagonists on purpose to represent the Great Migration's geographical diversity (as well as its diversity in terms of time, class, and outcomes).

To understand these patterns, it's helpful to think from a migrant's perspective: it's far less risky and daunting to move where one already has friends and family than a completely unfamiliar city. Thus, unlikely enclaves pop up around the country—for instance, most sharecroppers from the small town of Chickasaw County (where Ida Mae grows up) end up in Beloit, Wisconsin. Such geographical links have shaped the demography of Black America for generations.

"The bulk of migrants prefers a short journey to a long one," he wrote. "The more enterprising long-journey migrants are the exceptions and not the rule." Southern blacks were the exception. They traveled deep into far-flung regions of their own country and in some cases clear across the continent. Thus the Great Migration had more in common with the vast movements of refugees from famine, war, and genocide in other parts of the world, where oppressed people, whether fleeing twenty-first-century Darfur or nineteenth-century Ireland, go great distances, journey across rivers, deserts, and oceans or as far as it takes to reach safety with the hope that life will be better wherever they land.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis

Wilkerson quotes the influential geographer E.G. Ravenstein, whose work from the late 1800s provides the foundation for virtually all contemporary theories of migration. Ravenstein argues that most ordinary migrants prefer to stay close to home—for instance, they will go to the closest major city instead of moving to the other side of their country or continent. But Wilkerson points out that the Great Migration defies this theory: Black Southerners go much further than the nearest city; many, like Robert Foster, travel thousands of miles to their new homes.

In this sense, Wilkerson argues, people like Ida Mae, George, and Robert are more like refugees than ordinary economic migrants. She doesn't mean that they face crises as acute as the Irish Potato Famine or the war in Darfur—although some arguably do—but rather that their migration decisions don't make sense except in the context of politics. They want to move far from home, not stay close to it, because they are leaving for political reasons as well as economic ones: if they stay in the South, they will still have to live under Jim Crow. So unlike migrants who move to cities for jobs and eventually hope to return home, the Great Migration's participants largely expect to leave the South forever.

Part Three: Crossing Over Quotes

"I came all this way running from Jim Crow, and it slaps me straight in the face," Robert said. "And just think, I told my friends, why did they stay in the South and take the crumbs? '*Come to California.*'"

Related Characters: Robert Joseph Pershing Foster (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 210

Explanation and Analysis

On his drive from Louisiana to California, Robert Foster expects that everything will change as soon as he formally exits the South by crossing the state line from Texas to New Mexico. On the third day of his trip, he looks for a place to spend the night in the desert outside Phoenix, Arizona. But he's shocked and disappointed when four hotels on the same stretch of road all refuse to give him a room because he's Black. He thought that he wouldn't have to deal with the humiliation and inconvenience of segregation outside the South. So he pulls into a local gas station, exhausted and flustered, and vents to the sympathetic owner. As he points out here, he feels like his world has suddenly turned upside-down: he has pinned his entire life on his belief that the West would be different from the South, and he made a big show out of telling everyone else in his hometown about his plans. But one of his first experiences in the West resolutely showed him that it wasn't all that different from Louisiana. Robert can't help but wonder if California will be any better—and if his boundless faith in the West has been misplaced. His setback reflects not only the challenges that migrants face on their journeys, but also the bitter truth that the North and West are still deeply racist and unequal.

Part Four: Chicago Quotes

In the end, it would take multiple trains, three separate railroads, hours of fitful upright sleep, whatever food they managed to carry, the better part of two days, absolute will, near-blind determination, and some necessary measure of faith and just plain grit for people unaccustomed to the rigors of travel to make it out of the land of their birth to the foreign region of essentially another world.

The great belching city she passed through that day was the first city Ida Mae had ever laid eyes on. That first glimpse of Chicago would stay with her for as long as she lived.

"What did it look like at that time, Chicago?" I asked her, half a life later.

"It looked like Heaven to me then," she said.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson , Ida Mae Brandon Gladney (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 226

Explanation and Analysis

In this brief chapter, Wilkerson describes Ida Mae's journey with her family from Mississippi to Chicago. Ida Mae has never left Chickasaw County in her entire life. The train ride itself is taxing—even if it's nothing compared to picking cotton—but arriving in "the great belching city" is a thrill that Ida Mae never forgets. Wilkerson encourages her readers to imagine making such a journey, leaving home forever for an unfamiliar city that is like nothing they have ever seen before. Clearly, making such a decision requires a remarkable level of "faith," "grit," and "determination"—especially for people like Ida Mae, who have virtually no alternative. Yet these qualities are the precise reason why people like Ida Mae manage to seriously improve their lives through migration. After all, Ida Mae's reaction to arriving in Chicago shows that migration is as rewarding and inspiring as it is risky and uncertain.

Part Four: The Things They Left Behind Quotes

❝ Perhaps the greatest single act of family disruption and heartbreak among black Americans in the twentieth century was the result of the hard choices made by those on either side of the Great Migration.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 238

Explanation and Analysis

The Great Migration enabled generations of Black Americans to flourish by giving them the resources, freedoms, and civil rights that they were denied in the South. But it also tragically tore families apart by scattering their members across the country. Leaving the South usually meant leaving family members behind, and so migration almost always represented a trade-off between two priceless things: people's livelihoods and their loved ones. Ida Mae leaves her mother and much of her extended family behind in Mississippi, just like her sister did before her; George leaves his parents and community in Florida; and Robert leaves his entire family behind in Monroe and Atlanta when he moves from city to city early in his career. All of them struggle to hold their families together and build new communities in the North and West. Ida Mae clearly succeeds, while George does not. The older he gets, the more isolated and jaded he becomes. Meanwhile, Robert grows distant from his family and has few close friends, but his circle of friends and acquaintances is wide enough to keep him occupied. So while the heartbreak involved in migration is not completely insurmountable, it is all but inevitable, and it often scars migrants for life. Wilkerson includes this crucial detail to help her readers empathize with her protagonists' difficult decision to leave the South.

Part Four: Transplanted in Alien Soil Quotes

❝ The posted concessions, addressed to white neighbors with a sense of defeat and resignation, offered a glimpse into the differences between the North and South. The South, totalitarian and unyielding, was at that very moment succeeding at what white Harlem leaders were so desperately trying to do, that is, controlling the movements of blacks by controlling the minds of whites.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker), George Swanson Starling

Related Themes:

Page Number: 250-251

Explanation and Analysis

Wilkerson introduces the history of Harlem, the storied Black neighborhood in New York where George Starling makes his home, by explaining how white New Yorkers responded to the first wave of migrants in the 1910s. In a nutshell, they weren't happy: they turned against the newcomers, rioted, and pushed them into Harlem, where property owners and real estate agents tried their hardest to keep them out, too. But after some time, Wilkerson explains, landlords realized that migrants actually represented a spectacular business opportunity. They had so few housing options that they were willing to pay much more for much less, as compared to white people. So they posted signs—the "concessions" that Wilkerson describes here—announcing that they were going to rent to Black tenants.

This story underlines the unfortunate, often-forgotten fact that Northerners were almost as resistant to integration as Southerners. But it also points to the key difference that Wilkerson details in this passage: while Northerners imposed segregation on society through informal means,

including everyday discrimination, mob violence, and market forces, Southerners also did so through the centralized power of the state (in addition to these informal tactics). This meant that racism was ultimately negotiable in the North—and that Black migrants, in large enough numbers, could actually change the structure of Northern society.

Part Four: Divisions Quotes

There appeared to be an overarching phenomenon that sociologists call a "migrant advantage." It is some internal resolve that perhaps exists in any immigrant compelled to leave one place for another. It made them "especially goal oriented, leading them to persist in their work and not be easily discouraged," Long and Heltman of the Census Bureau wrote in a 1975 report. In San Francisco, for instance, the migrants doubled up like their Chinese counterparts and, as in other cities, tended to "immigrate as groups and to remain together in the new environment for purposes of mutual aid," wrote the sociologist Charles S. Johnson.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 264-265

Explanation and Analysis

As Wilkerson explained at the beginning of her book, one of her primary motivations for studying the Great Migration was her desire to understand and challenge the racist stereotypes that so often emerged in response to it. In this chapter, she addresses these stereotypes in more depth. Contrary to the common notion that migrants were unclean, uneducated, and unsuited for life in the North, the empirical evidence suggests that they actually had a "migrant advantage." They were better educated, more ambitious, and harder working than native Black Northerners.

Similarly, contrary to the idea that urban Black neighborhoods grew poor and violent because poor, violent migrants from the South moved to them, in reality, these migrants were far *less* likely to be poor, commit crimes, or see their families collapse than their Northern-born counterparts. In fact, as Wilkerson shows in later chapters chronicling the fate of Ida Mae's neighborhood in Chicago, employment discrimination, housing discrimination, and government disinvestment all explain the challenges that Black neighborhoods have faced since the beginning of the Great Migration. Stereotypical explanations, which blame Black culture for Black poverty, have no foundation in reality. In fact, they reinforce the discriminatory, exploitative policies that have truly caused the problem.

The story played out in virtually every northern city—migrants sealed off in overcrowded colonies that would become the foundation for ghettos that would persist into the next century. These were the original colored quarters—the abandoned and identifiable no-man's-lands that came into being when the least-paid people were forced to pay the highest rents for the most dilapidated housing owned by absentee landlords trying to wring the most money out of a place nobody cared about.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker), Ida Mae Brandon Gladney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 270-271

Explanation and Analysis

Wilkerson emphasizes the direct link between the Great Migration, the Northern backlash to it, and the challenges that Black city-dwellers face in the U.S. today. In cities throughout the North and West, the same pernicious pattern has repeated itself: Black migrants have moved in, white city-dwellers have fought to segregate them in particular neighborhoods, and then landlords, financial institutions, and the government have purposefully pulled resources out of those neighborhoods, impoverishing their residents in the process. Indeed, Ida Mae Gladney and George Starling watch this process happen firsthand in their own neighborhoods. This trend explains why many of the storied neighborhoods of the Great Migration have fallen into decline since the mid-20th century—most famously Harlem, which was once the unquestioned capital of Black America and home to much of the nation's Black elite.

By offering this essential context, Wilkerson fights another common, pernicious racist stereotype: the idea that urban Black neighborhoods are disproportionately poor because there's something inherently wrong with the people who live there. Indeed, by giving this essential background information, Wilkerson shows why it's impossible to address the problems that Black Americans face today without first understanding the history that has brought them here—including, of course, the Great Migration.

Contrary to modern-day assumptions, for much of the history of the United States—from the Draft Riots of the 1860s to the violence over desegregation a century later—riots were often carried out by disaffected whites against groups perceived as threats to their survival. Thus riots would become to the North what lynchings were to the South, each a display of uncontained rage by put-upon people directed toward the scapegoats of their condition. Nearly every big northern city experienced one or more during the twentieth century. Each outbreak pitted two groups that had more in common with each other than either of them realized.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker), Ida Mae Brandon Gladney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 273

Explanation and Analysis

Wilkerson addresses another popular but dangerous stereotype about the Great Migration and its legacy: that urban Black Americans in the North have historically started race riots. This stereotype is rooted in the way that the public and media tend to assume white people's perspectives when talking about racial conflict—in other words, when Black and white city-dwellers attack each other, most Americans simply assume that Black people were the aggressors and white people the victims.

But the historical record shows otherwise. As Wilkerson explains here, most 20th-century race riots were specifically white campaigns to maintain informal systems of segregation. Generally, working-class white people rioted because they feared that Black newcomers would erase their precarious economic success, but they thought that violence would keep those newcomers away. And stereotypes about Black criminality gave them a convenient excuse to blame the victim. This is why Wilkerson compares race riots to lynching: both were designed to terrorize Black people into accepting racial hierarchies that put them at the bottom.

Part Four: To Bend in Strange Winds Quotes

It was his tap on the shoulder that awakened them as the train neared their stop and alerted them to their new receiving city. He and other colored porters were men in red caps and white uniforms, but they functioned as the midwives of the Great Migration, helping the migrants gather themselves and disembark at the station and thus delivering to the world a new wave of newcomers with each arriving train.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker), George Swanson Starling

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 294

Explanation and Analysis

After he settles in New York, George Starling finds a stable but low-level job working on the Silver Meteor train, the same one that originally brought him there. He ends up staying in this job for the rest of his career, more than 30 years. This gives him a front-row seat to the Great Migration—as well as the opportunity to facilitate it by helping migrants make the nerve-wracking journey north. This is why Wilkerson compares him to a midwife. For many migrants, moving north is a kind of metaphorical rebirth, an opportunity to start over again and become the people they truly want to be. And they enter their destination cities like a wave of newborns, confused and naïve about their surroundings but eager to learn. Of course, as the migration goes on, Northern cities experience a rebirth of their own: newcomers grow the population and revitalize the culture. In these ways, George's job makes him a small cog in the vast machine that has produced Black America as we know it today.

Part Four: The Other Side of Jordan Quotes

Overall, however, what was becoming clear was that, north or south, wherever colored labor was introduced, a rivalrous sense of unease and insecurity washed over the working-class people who were already there, an unease that was economically not without merit but rose to near hysteria when race and xenophobia were added to preexisting fears. The reality was that Jim Crow filtered through the economy, north and south, and pressed down on poor and working-class people of all races. The southern caste system that held down the wages of colored people also undercut the earning power of the whites around them, who could not command higher pay as long as colored people were forced to accept subsistence wages.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker), Ida Mae Brandon Gladney, George Gladney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 317

Explanation and Analysis

Like many Black migrants, Ida Mae and George Gladney struggle to find dignified work in Chicago. Besides a select few professionals, very few of the migrants have any marketable skills, and so most end up seeking out stable but menial working-class jobs, like the job that George lands at the Campbell Soup factory. However, this creates a problem: there are already thousands of European immigrants working these jobs, and they don't want to give them up. As it happens, they also have a near monopoly on trades and clerical jobs, to which most Black migrants can only aspire. So they begin to feud with the newcomers in an effort to hold onto their earning power.

Contrary to popular assumptions, Wilkerson argues, this is the real root of the persistent racial conflict in cities like Chicago: white workers see racism as economically advantageous to them. Of course, in reality, it isn't—instead, it really benefits wealthy business owners. When white and Black employees are fighting against each other, they won't band together to demand better wages and working conditions. So racism is an effective way to divide and conquer the labor force, and it becomes a staple of Northern politics from the earliest days of the Great Migration onward.

❝ They waited for hours to see him. Many were people who back in Texas or Louisiana or Arkansas might have only rarely seen a physician, who were used to midwives and root doctors and home remedies they handed down and concocted for themselves. Here was a doctor who was as science-minded and proficient as any other but who didn't make fun of their down-home superstitions and knew how to comfort them and translate modern medicine into a language they could understand.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker), Robert Joseph Pershing Foster

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 328

Explanation and Analysis

Robert's Los Angeles medical practice takes off when he finally finds the right clientele: fellow Southern migrants, who trust one of their own far more than they would ever trust a native Californian doctor. If George Starling's job on the Silver Meteor train makes him one of the Great Migration's midwives, then Robert is quite literally its doctor. As Wilkerson explains here, Robert's greatest strength is his ability to connect with his patients on the basis of their shared Southern culture. In the process, he shows them the value in getting medical care, which they may not have sought out otherwise. So he isn't just treating patients who have chosen him over other doctors: rather, many of his patients wouldn't go to the doctor at all if he weren't around. This is why Robert's contribution to his community is so significant, and why it leaves such a lasting effect. He helps the other migrants heal not only by treating their physical ailments, but also by giving them the opportunity to shed the fear, alienation, and suspicion that California often inspires in them. He and the community that surrounds him welcome new migrants to their new home—and show them that they truly can fulfill their dreams there.

Part Four: The Prodigals Quotes

❝ They had gone off to a new world but were still tied to the other. Over time, the language of geographic origin began to change; the ancestral home no longer the distant Africa of unknown forebears but the more immediate South of uncles and grandparents, where the culture they carried inside them was pure and familiar.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker), Wilkerson's Mother

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 366

Explanation and Analysis

Wilkerson describes one of her mother's trips home to Rome, Georgia after she migrates to Washington, D.C. Such visits give migrants a chance to show off their new lives in the North, she explains, and inspire their Southern relatives to follow in their footsteps. As Wilkerson points out here, the Great Migration fundamentally changes Black Americans' geographical frame of reference. Instead of looking back from the South to Africa, they now look back from the North to the South—or forward, from the South to the North. This new frame of reference is actually transformative. For one, it gives people a greater sense of liberty and control over their lives, as they start to base their identities on a migration of their own choosing. Similarly, migrants and their children living in the North can connect with their roots (in the South) in a way that Black

Southerners never can (in Africa). Put differently, the Great Migration helps Black Americans understand themselves and their history in a new way, which advances their pursuit of freedom even further.

Part Four: Revolutions Quotes

❝ Yet the very thing that made black life hard in the North, the very nature of northern hostility—unwritten, mercurial, opaque, and eminently deniable—made it hard for King to nail down an obvious right-versus-wrong cause to protest.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker), Ida Mae Brandon Gladney, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 386

Explanation and Analysis

When Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. comes to Chicago in 1966, after leading the civil rights movement to its most important victories in the South, Ida Mae attends his rally. He speaks about the difficult path forward that Black people in the North—particularly migrants and their children—face in order to achieve equity with their white neighbors. In a sense, fighting segregation in the South was straightforward: it meant proposing a clear remedy (federal legislation) to take down a clearly-defined target (Jim Crow laws).

But in the North, racism is harder to address because it's mostly informal: it isn't written down anywhere in any specific policy. Instead, it's more like a social norm, a broad agreement among white people in general, and norms are far harder to change than laws. So achieving equality in Northern cities is a much more complicated proposition. It means undoing housing discrimination and winning better opportunities for Black people, building political power in Black communities and preventing institutions from divesting from them. In this sense, it looks more like governing than activism. This means that it will require more sustainable long-term solutions, as opposed to a simple campaign to overthrow oppressive laws. Of course, Wilkerson also points out this distinction with an eye to the situation today, which is in many ways unchanged—and which calls for many of the same solutions that the civil rights movement struggled to implement in the 20th century.

❝ The discontent of the young people unsettled the migrant parents who had fled the violence of the South. They could do little to dissuade their children from whatever role they might play in the outburst. It was too late to try to get them jobs at now-closed factories or the education they missed if they gave up on school, or, maybe most of all, the grounding and strength they themselves had acquired after having endured so much. The parents had come from the Old Country, had been happy to have made it out alive and make a few dollars an hour. *What did they know of the frustration of the young people who had grown up in the mirage of equality but a whole different reality, in a densely packed world of drugs and gangs and disorder, with promises that seemed to have turned to dust?*

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 409

Explanation and Analysis

One of the Great Migration's most pernicious, frustrating, and unexpected consequences is the unrest that it raises in the second generation. Of course, this is a classic, recurring theme in virtually all migration stories. Southern migrants' children grow up in the tumultuous urban North, not the rural Jim Crow South, and they don't have the same frame of reference as their parents—who, as Wilkerson explains here, are often just "happy to have made it out [of the South] alive." Instead, these children of the Migration grow up amidst racial discrimination, informal segregation, poor services, and a pattern of violence and poverty that simply doesn't exist in comparable white neighborhoods. They have few economic opportunities—unlike their parents, they can't just automatically improve their social status by just migrating somewhere else. And so they take to expressing their anger in the way that oppressed and discontented people always have throughout history: through protest. At particularly significant historical moments, like after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., these protests take the form of violent riots, which baffle the original migrants (like this book's three protagonists) and often feed into an escalating cycle of police violence and repression over time.

Part Four: The Fullness of the Migration Quotes

The hierarchy in the North "called for blacks to remain in their station," Lieberson wrote, while immigrants were rewarded for "their ability to leave their old world traits" and become American as quickly as possible. Society urged them to leave Poland and Latvia behind and enter the mainstream white world. Not so with their black counterparts like Ida Mae, Robert, and George.
"Although many blacks sought initially to reach an assimilated position in the same way as did the new European immigrants," Lieberson noted, "the former's efforts were apt to be interpreted as getting out of their place or were likely to be viewed with mockery." Ambitious black migrants found that they were not able to get ahead just by following the course taken by immigrants and had to find other routes to survival and hoped-for success.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker), Ida Mae Brandon Gladney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 417

Explanation and Analysis

After she describes how the Great Migration ended around 1970, Wilkerson turns to a telling question: how did its participants fare, as compared to the millions of European immigrants who moved to the U.S. over the same time period? On the surface, she points out, the two groups were exactly alike: both groups came from rural hinterlands to American cities like Chicago, where both groups were essentially foreigners, both groups lived primarily in homogenous ethnic enclaves, and both groups generally ended up in the worst available jobs. But after a generation, these similarities disappear, because—as Wilkerson explains here—white immigrants' children could seamlessly assimilate into white mainstream culture, whereas the children of the Great Migration could not.

In other words, white and Black migrants arrived in U.S. cities in essentially the same condition, but then, solely because racial discrimination is so pervasive throughout U.S. society, the white migrants came out on top. This analysis definitively disproves the harmful stereotypes that attribute this disparity to the idea that there is something socially, culturally, or intellectually wrong with Black migrants. And it also demonstrates why fighting discrimination remains an absolutely crucial political challenge today. Of course, Wilkerson's way of doing so is by writing books like this one and contributing to the public understanding of Black history.

Part Five: More North and West Than South Quotes

The Great Migration had played out before his very eyes. Now it was coming to a close from a demographic, macroeconomic point of view. […] Many of his passengers were born and raised in the North and were making their first visits to the South, rather than returning to a place they had known.

He could tell the original migrants. They were requiring more help getting up the steps, beginning to need canes, many still speaking in their southern accents. […] Mean and ornery as it may have been, the South was still the Old Country, the land where their fathers and mothers were buried, and these original migrants were heading home to it, at least for now.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker), George Swanson Starling

Related Themes:

Page Number: 459

Explanation and Analysis

In the late 1970s, George Starling is still working the same railroad job he started in the 1940s, as a porter on the Silver Meteor. He has watched and facilitated the Great Migration for more than three decades, and in this passage, Wilkerson depicts its breadth and evolution through his eyes. He has seen migrants of his own generation grow old and take their children and grandchildren down to visit the South. He has watched the South change through the eyes of these original migrants when they go to visit and find it more hospitable and tolerant than before—after all, he has seen many of his own friends move back to Florida. And he has seen the cultural heart of Black America shift north, as migrant communities in cities like New York each develop their own special character and identity. Ultimately, for Wilkerson, George's observations are like the Migration looking at itself in the mirror, making sense of what it has done for its participants and its country over the better part of a century.

Part Five: Redemption Quotes

❝ He had once seen a black man and a white woman walking down the street in downtown Tavares, the county seat and the domain of old Willis McCall. George was having a hard time getting used to seeing what could have gotten him killed in his day.

"I never thought I'd see the day when a black man would walk down the street holding hands with a white woman," he said. "It amazes me when I see the intermingling. When I was a boy down here, when you went through the white neighborhood you had to be practically running. Now black people are living in there. They all mixed up with the whites right there in Eustis."

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson , George Swanson Starling (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 474

Explanation and Analysis

More than 50 years after he leaves his hometown of Eustis, Florida, George Starling returns to visit for the first time. He has stayed away for so long because of the circumstances under which he left: powerful local landowners, the kind of people who hold very long grudges, were trying to kill him. But by the time he reaches old age, those former enemies are long gone, and it's finally safe to visit.

Here, Wilkerson describes George's delight at how integrated and even tolerant the South has become. As he explains here, in his day, Black people like him couldn't interact with white people or even walk through a white neighborhood without risking their safety. But now, that kind of behavior is so normal as to be unremarkable. Despite all of George's other frustrations and failures in life, this experience gives him hope because it shows him that, slowly but steadily, society really can transform for the better. He has spent his whole life doing his best to fight for racial justice in whatever limited way has been available to him, and what he sees in Eustis shows him that his efforts were worth it all along.

Part Five: And, Perhaps, to Bloom Quotes

❝ The rain beats down in sheets. Cars are having to slow to a crawl, and you can barely see ahead of you. The trip is going to take much longer than expected.

This will cut into the time she will have to take care of things.

"It's really coming down," I say. "Of all days. I hope it won't be like this all day long."

This sets off an automatic response in Ida Mae, and she reframes the moment for everyone.

"Now, we ain't got nothing to do with God's business," she says, sitting back in her seat.

She adjusts herself and straightens her scarf, contenting herself with whatever the day has in store.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson , Ida Mae Brandon Gladney (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 485

Explanation and Analysis

During on one of her visits to Chicago, Wilkerson agrees to accompany Ida Mae to visit her sister in Milwaukee. As she explains in this passage, they get caught in the rain on the way. Wilkerson starts to fret, but Ida Mae doesn't let her: she "reframes" the situation by declaring that the weather is "God's business" and that they have to respect it. In other words, she says that people shouldn't worry about things they can't control. This has been Ida Mae's mantra from the beginning of her life, and it has strengthened her by allowing her to tackle challenges with grace and focus her energy on the things she actually *can* control—like migrating and adapting to life in Chicago. Indeed, this approach to life, which is rooted above all in faith, is Ida Mae's secret to happiness (or what Wilkerson later calls her *spiritual success*). It's why, despite facing by far the worst poverty, harshest discrimination, and deepest uncertainty of the book's three protagonists, she is the happiest and has the fewest regrets by the end of her life.

Part Five: The Winter of Their Lives Quotes

❝ As hard as the going has been up in Harlem, [George] has been free to live out his life as he chooses, been free to live, period, something he had not been assured of in Florida in the 1940s. He has made his mistakes, plenty of them, but he alone has made them and has lived with the consequences of exercising his own free will, which could be said to be the very definition of freedom.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker), George Swanson Starling

Related Themes:

Page Number: 492

Explanation and Analysis

George Starling suffers from terrible luck throughout adulthood: his marriage falls apart, his son becomes addicted to drugs, his daughter dies tragically, he never gets the chance to finish his education or move up at work, and he starts to grow isolated and bitter in old age. He's full of regrets—but he never regrets joining the Great Migration. Not only did migration save him from certain death in Florida, but it also simply gave him opportunities that he never would have had otherwise.

Wilkerson analyzes George's life's trajectory in terms of her central message in the book: that the Great Migration was Black Americans' way of claiming the freedom that had been denied to them for so many generations. Moving north meant freeing oneself and one's descendants from Jim Crow, but perhaps more importantly, as Wilkerson points out here, the very decision to leave the South was also a way for migrants to claim their freedom. For the first time, Black people could decide what they wanted, then do it—and, like George, live with the consequences of the mistakes, in the full knowledge that they were the ones who made them. Thus, migrants' regrets are also proof of how they used their own free will to free themselves from the oppression of life in the segregated South.

Part Five: The Emancipation of Ida Mae Quotes

We cross a gravel road with cotton on either side of it. "That cotton's loaded," Ida Mae said, her eyes growing big. "Let's go pick some."

"You sure that's alright?" I ask. "That's somebody's cotton. What if they see us?"

"They not gon' mind what little bit we pick," she says, pushing open the passenger door.

She jumps out and heads into the field. She hasn't picked cotton in sixty years. It's as if she can't wait to pick it now that she doesn't have to. It's the first time in her life that she can pick cotton of her own free will.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson , Ida Mae Brandon Gladney (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 517

Explanation and Analysis

After George Starling and Robert Foster's deaths, Wilkerson accompanies Ida Mae Gladney on a visit back to her native Mississippi. As they drive down the road, Ida Mae notices a cotton field in full bloom and asks Wilkerson to pull over. Ida Mae picks some of the cotton, just because she can, and thinks back to her difficult youth as a sharecropper. But she's jubilant, because now, picking cotton represents the freedom that she has achieved through the Great Migration: she was once forced to pick cotton, but now, she can do it on her own terms. By moving to Chicago, she took control of her own life: she escaped the tyranny of Mississippi cotton and Jim Crow. And now, the cotton doesn't rule her days anymore—so when she picks it, it no longer represents her poverty or subjugation, like it did before. She can truly appreciate its beauty for the first time. Indeed, she can enjoy her entire visit to Mississippi, the place where she grew up anything but free, only because she freed herself from it so long ago.

Ida Mae Gladney, Robert Foster, and George Starling each left different parts of the South during different decades for different reasons and with different outcomes. The three of them would find some measure of happiness, not because their children had been perfect, their own lives without heartache, or because the North had been particularly welcoming. In fact, not a single one of those things had turned out to be true.

[…] Each found some measure of satisfaction because whatever had happened to them, however things had unfolded, it had been of their own choosing, and they could take comfort in that. They believed with all that was in them that they were better off for having made the Migration, that they may have made many mistakes in their lives, but leaving the South had not been one of them.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker), Ida Mae Brandon Gladney, George Swanson Starling, Robert Joseph Pershing Foster

Related Themes:

Page Number: 524

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of her book's final chapter, Wilkerson summarizes how her three protagonists' stories represent the Great Migration as a whole. Their experiences were both varied and consistent: on the one hand, the differences in their stories serve to capture the breadth of the Migration, but on the other, their experiences share the set of common elements that Wilkerson views as the essential story at the heart of the Migration.

By offering three stories of migrants from different time periods and social classes who have dramatically different personalities and kinds of luck, Wilkerson emphasizes that the Great Migration really was a vast nationwide phenomenon that affected everybody—including the roughly half of Black Southerners who chose not to migrate, the millions who lived in the cities where migrants moved, and even the late-20th century immigrant populations who hadn't yet arrived in the U.S. And yet, by pulling out the core narrative that they all share—including their aspirations, disappointments, and unshaking faith in their right and ability to lead lives of their own choosing—Wilkerson conveys what the Migration truly meant. Through these elements, she captures the collective experience of the generations who migrated, but she also demonstrates what the Migration should mean to all Americans who want to understand their nation's history and present.

Part Five: Epilogue Quotes

❝ Ida Mae Gladney had the humblest trappings but was the richest of them all. She had lived the hardest life, been given the least education, seen the worst the South could hurl at her people, and did not let it break her. She lived longer in the North than in the South but never forsook her origins, never changed the person she was deep inside. […] She took the best of what she saw in the North and the South and interwove them in the way she saw fit. […] She lived in the moment, surrendered to whatever the day presented, and remained her true, original self. Her success was spiritual, perhaps the hardest of all to achieve. And because of that, she was the happiest and lived the longest of them all.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker), Ida Mae Brandon Gladney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 532

Explanation and Analysis

In the Epilogue to *The Warmth of Other Suns*, Wilkerson summarizes how her three protagonists' experiences represent varied dimensions of the Great Migration. In this passage, she explains why Ida Mae turned out to be the happiest of the three, despite living her whole life in far worse conditions than George or Robert. In a nutshell, Ida Mae built a tight-knit network of friends and family in Chicago, stuck to her traditions without ever growing ashamed of her Southern heritage, and maintained a steadfast faith that helped her cope with setbacks. She avoided the isolation, vices, and doubt that plagued the book's other two protagonists, Robert and George. In this sense, her life represents the best of the Great Migration: an open invitation to a struggling, oppressed people to settle elsewhere and remake their lives and identities according to their own free will. In old age, Ida Mae has no doubts that moving to Chicago was the right decision—even if many aspects of her life didn't go according to plan—and she is eternally grateful for the opportunities that life in the North has given her. This is why Wilkerson describes her success as *spiritual*: the Great Migration set her free.

❝ A central argument of this book has been that the Great Migration was an unrecognized immigration within this country. The participants bore the marks of immigrant behavior. They plotted a course to places in the North and West that had some connection to their homes of origin. They created colonies of the villages they came from, imported the food and folkways of the Old Country, and built their lives around the people and churches they knew from back home. They took work the people already there considered beneath them. They doubled up and took in roomers to make ends meet. They tried to instill in their children the values of the Old Country while pressing them to succeed by the standards of the New World they were in.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 536

Explanation and Analysis

In her Epilogue, Wilkerson explicitly lays out an argument that she has hinted at repeatedly throughout her book: Americans should understand the Great Migration as another of the numerous immigrant narratives that they

view as central to their national identity. Even if Black migrants didn't technically cross a national border, she explains here, they might as well have—not only was the South profoundly different from the North, but they were also treated as foreigners, and the distances they traveled were comparable to those covered by international migrants in other regions around the globe. So, for all intents and purposes, they were immigrants.

Wilkerson's analysis of the Great Migration as an immigration story is crucial because it points to the broader social transformation that she hopes to help achieve with this book. She points out that the Black migration story she has told here is, in its most significant respects, exactly the same as the famous white migration stories about pilgrims escaping persecution and huddled masses of immigrants escaping poverty. So why has it been sidelined for so long? Needless to say, this fact reveals how deeply racism and discrimination still shape American society today: the most common concepts of American identity are bounded by race. By emphasizing the similarities between the Great Migration and white immigration, Wilkerson asks her readers to consider who gets to count as the typical American and why—and she also makes a significant contribution towards moving the needle on this issue.

❝ Over the decades, perhaps the wrong questions have been asked about the Great Migration. Perhaps it is not a question of whether the migrants brought good or ill to the cities they fled to or were pushed or pulled to their destinations, but a question of how they summoned the courage to leave in the first place or how they found the will to press beyond the forces against them and the faith in a country that had rejected them for so long. By their actions, they did not dream the American Dream, they willed it into being by a definition of their own choosing. They did not ask to be accepted but declared themselves the Americans that perhaps few others recognized but that they had always been deep within their hearts.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 538

Explanation and Analysis

At the very end of *The Warmth of Other Suns*, Isabel Wilkerson sums up her project's key message about the Great Migration's place in American history—and, perhaps even more importantly, in Americans' understanding of their history. She emphasizes that most books and media about the migration address it from impersonal, objective-sounding angles that actually obscure the most important parts of the story. For instance, sociologists have long debated "whether the migrants brought good or ill to the cities they fled to"—which is really a way of asking whether those cities' white residents benefited from the influx of Black newcomers, and whether those migrants are to blame for the often impoverished conditions in which they ended up living. Similarly, questions about the factors that "pushed" migrants away from home or "pulled [them] to their destinations" often present migrants as passive, as though they were simply swept up by a wave that was out of their control. But in reality, they *were* the wave: they created it, through the sum of their individual decisions.

This is why Wilkerson believes that the most important truths about the Great Migration lie in migrants' personal stories. Rather than thinking of the Migration as a bland sociological phenomenon, she contends, Americans should learn to think of it from the perspective of the intrepid migrants, like George, Ida Mae, and Robert, who dared to trade their familiar but limiting lives in the South for a completely uncertain future in the North or West. In this sense, she argues that Black migrants deserve the same dignity and recognition as the English pilgrims and European immigrants whose stories are so central to U.S. identity—and generally told from the first person. Indeed, learning to tell stories like that of the Great Migration from the perspective of the minority groups that actually lived them is a crucial step towards achieving true racial justice in the U.S. After all, as Wilkerson argues in her closing lines, the story of Great Migration and the story of the American Dream are one and the same. But the color line has obscured this truth for far too long.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART ONE: LEAVING

1. Chickasaw County, Mississippi, Late October 1937. Ida Mae Brandon Gladney leaves Chickasaw County on an autumn night. She is nervous: she hasn't ridden a **train** or left the county before, and her young children, six-year-old Velma and three-year-old James, don't understand what's happening. Ida Mae's mother, Miss Theenie, didn't want her to leave, like four of her siblings did. Miss Theenie prays for their safety and then says goodbye. Ida Mae's brother-in-law drives her and her kids to the train station, where they meet her husband.

Wilkerson begins with portraits of her three protagonists at the precise moments when they left the South forever. She emphasizes how this single decision permanently changed the lives of migrants and their families, and she demonstrates what it looks like to incorporate the story of the Great Migration into our understanding of American identity. For Ida Mae, migration meant trading the small, self-contained universe where she had spent her entire life for a totally unknown future—which she could only hope would be better for herself and her children.

2. Wildwood, Florida, April 14, 1945. George Swanson Starling boards a northbound **train** in central Florida. Even the stairs to board the train are segregated, but George scarcely minds: all that matters is that he's alive. He didn't have time to tell everyone goodbye, but news of his departure travels fast in his small town, Eustis. He's in trouble with the town's powerful white citrus growers, so he's fleeing to New York. He hopes that Inez, his wife, will eventually join him.

For George, like for Ida Mae, migrating to the North meant starting a whole new life. But whereas Ida Mae travels with her whole family and is anxious about leaving home, George migrates alone and is eager to get out of town as soon as possible. His experience reflects the terror that Black people faced in the rural South at this time, as well as the promise of freedom and anonymity that awaited them in Northern cities.

3. Monroe, Louisiana, Easter Monday, April 6, 1953. The doctor Robert Joseph Pershing Foster bids his father and brother farewell and then drives out of town. He passes the segregated hospital—where he's not allowed to work even though he's a talented surgeon—and heads two thousand miles west for California. He has no idea what he'll do once he arrives, or whether his wife and daughters will ever join him.

Robert's story further enriches Wilkerson's portrait of the key similarities and differences between migrants. He's a well-to-do professional, driving his own car and seeking success rather than just survival. But he also feels the same sense of limitation in the segregated South and the same intoxicating mix of hope and fear about moving elsewhere.

PART ONE: THE GREAT MIGRATION, 1915–1970

From World War I through the 1970s, Black families in the South face a dilemma: should they stay in place and try to succeed despite segregation, or should they leave in search of better opportunities? In what historians have labeled the Great Migration—and what Wilkerson calls "perhaps the biggest underreported story of the twentieth century"—about six million people choose to leave. Their migration transforms the Southern communities they come from, the cities where they end up, and the entire nation's social, economic, and political fate.

Wilkerson gives her readers the context they need to understand both the vignettes that she presented in the first chapter and her motives for writing this book. She explains the scale of the Great Migration to counterbalance the personal, individual lens that she uses throughout the rest of the book. And she explains why it's such an important story to tell by highlighting the contrast between its historical significance and its invisibility in American public life.

Specifically, migrants choose to trade the South's Jim Crow caste system for greater freedoms and higher wages elsewhere. But, like the European immigrants who pass through Ellis Island, they also face crowded cities, inflated rents, and unfamiliar customs. The Great Migration can help us understand urban inequalities in American cities today, as well as the rise of the urban language, music, and art that dominates U.S. pop culture today. After all, before the Great Migration, 90 percent of Black Americans live in the South, but by its end, barely half do. Perhaps most importantly, Wilkerson argues, the Great Migration allows Black Americans to assert their independence and take their fate into their own hands.

The contrast between the Great Migration and European immigration through Ellis Island is telling. Both happened around the same time and on the same scale, their participants migrated for similar reasons and faced similar experiences in their destination cities, and both forever shaped U.S. society. But despite all these similarities, Ellis Island is now central to the U.S.'s national identity, whereas the Great Migration has largely been forgotten. As Wilkerson will later explain, this is largely because the U.S.'s system of racial hierarchy made assimilation into the mainstream culture possible for white immigrants, but not for native-born Black citizens. This underlines the importance of Wilkerson's work: racist assumptions about who truly counts as American continue to shape the nation's understanding of its own history.

In rural Rome, Georgia, a young Black girl waves to the people on the **train** whenever it passes her school. Later, in adulthood, she rides the same train north to Washington, D.C., where she sleeps on a distant cousin's sofa and gets her **photo** taken. This woman is Isabel Wilkerson's mother, and years later, Wilkerson finds this first photo. Wilkerson wonders what her mother was thinking when she left Georgia, what might have happened if she had stayed behind, and how the South would be today if the Great Migration never occurred.

Wilkerson's personal connections to the Great Migration sparked her initial interest in the subject. Wilkerson feels that she cannot truly understand herself until she understands her parents' journey, which shows how memory and history are crucial to people's sense of identity. And Wilkerson also uses her mother's photo to represent her broader goal in this book: to help her readers empathize with migrants by understanding the difficult circumstances and decisions that they faced.

The Great Migration produces numerous writers and artists, from Toni Morrison to Tupac Shakur. Its best-known chronicler is Richard Wright, who writes in his autobiography, *Black Boy*, that he traveled north to feel "the warmth of other suns." Yet no historian has written a comprehensive study of the Great Migration. This book's purpose is to help fill this gap.

The Great Migration was the origin of 20th-century Black American culture. Wilkerson's readers will likely know many of the cultural figures she lists here, but they may not recognize that the Great Migration made their work possible by giving them the resources, education, and freedom necessary to produce great art. Thus, Wilkerson uses this list to help her readers appreciate how influential the Great Migration was and recognize that it has been wrongly forgotten.

Wilkerson interviews over 1,200 people during her research, but she chooses to focus on three: Ida Mae Brandon Gladney, George Swanson Starling, and Robert Joseph Pershing Foster. She hopes that their stories will capture "larger emotional truths" about the Great Migration and help correct racist myths about Black culture and poverty. Their experiences are "both universal and distinctly American" because they responded to the uniquely American history of slavery and Jim Crow by turning to the same solution that humans have chosen for centuries: migrating in search of freedom.

Readers may be surprised to hear that Wilkerson conducted such extensive research yet chose to tell just three stories in her book. But this contrast only underlines her point: academic studies and statistics can never capture the "larger emotional truths" of the migration in the way that a few in-depth stories can. Thus, while she incorporates data and historical analysis, she focuses on the stories. She chose Ida Mae, George, and Robert not only because of their stories' emotional poignancy, but also because they represent a diverse range of migration experiences. They migrate from different places to different places in different decades, and they also belong to different social classes and end up living dramatically different lives after they migrate. At the same time as these three protagonists capture the broad range of migrants and migration experiences, they also all represent the same core principle—migrating for freedom—that Wilkerson sees as both a universal norm and the specific core of American national identity.

PART TWO: IDA MAE BRANDON GLADNEY

Chicago, 1996. When elderly Ida Mae Brandon Gladney looks out her window, she sees local drug dealers doing business down on the street. The South Side of Chicago hasn't always been "so dangerously absurd." But the whole neighborhood respects her. She starts to tell Wilkerson her story.

Before flashing back to Ida Mae's upbringing, Wilkerson opens with a portrait of her in the present. This contrast between the past and the present highlights how the fateful decision to migrate transformed her life forever.

Van Vleet, Mississippi, 1928. When Ida Mae is 15, two suitors in their twenties start visiting her every Sunday after church. David McIntosh has a horse, so he arrives first, while the quieter George Gladney—who walks miles to see Ida Mae—stays longer. Miss Theenie thinks they're too old and dark-skinned for Ida Mae, but Ida Mae ignores her. Ida Mae has always been fearless: she likes to kill snakes, climb trees, and hunt rabbits with her brothers.

Ida Mae's bucolic but impoverished rural childhood represents the experiences of one important cohort of migrants: the sharecroppers who continued working on plantations even after the Civil War ended and slavery was abolished. These anecdotes show that Ida Mae's family and community adhere to the traditional values that she will later bring with her to the North.

Ida Mae's family lives in the northeastern hills of Mississippi. When she's little, her father, Joseph Brandon, struggles to grow **cotton** and raise hogs on a parcel of depleted land. Ida Mae is no good at picking cotton, but she accompanies her father to the fields anyway. In 1923, he gets sick after chasing his hogs through floodwater. There are no Black doctors in town, so he never gets medical attention. Ida Mae thinks that he's still alive and in a coma when the family buries him.

Joseph Brandon's life and death speak to the adverse conditions and striking lack of basic services that Black Southerners faced well into the 20th century—particularly in rural areas. It's easy to draw a direct line between these conditions and the system of slavery that preceded them, and it's easy to see why people like Ida Mae would choose to leave the South in order to escape them.

As a child, Ida Mae has to walk a mile each way to Chickasaw County's one-room schoolhouse. After her father dies, she has to fend for herself. Her one-legged teacher, Mr. Kirks, whips her for misspelling "Philadelphia," and a local farmer ruins her holidays by telling her that Santa Claus isn't real. This year, Miss Theenie can't afford Christmas presents. Later, a boy beats Ida Mae nearly to death after she lets his horse run loose.

In the highly patriarchal society where Ida Mae lives, others will not respect her unless she has a father, brother, or husband. Thus, her childhood is full of minor tragedies—and her memories of it are defined by loneliness and deprivation. Grasping these circumstances is crucial to understanding her decision to migrate.

Soon, boys are interested in Ida Mae for other reasons. She meets steely-faced 22-year-old George Gladney at a community party one summer. She doesn't pay him much attention: she is already in love with Alfonso Banks. But Alfonso brings another girl to the party, so Ida Mae hits him in the head with an umbrella. Meanwhile, George Gladney falls in love with Ida Mae at the party, and then he starts visiting her every week. The next year, she agrees to marry him, but she doesn't tell Miss Theenie—who finds out the day before the wedding and reluctantly agrees to support it. Ida Mae follows George to Edd Pearson's plantation, where he starts sharecropping.

Ida Mae and George's marriage is largely the product of circumstance. Like Ida Mae's eventual decision to migrate, it promises her an escape from the confined life that she has lived—even if, at the end of the day, it only improves her situation incrementally. Yet none of this means that she is a helpless or passive person. Rather, as the episode with the umbrella suggests, she is spirited, freethinking, and self-reliant. However, she also recognizes that she won't have many opportunities as a young, single woman in rural Mississippi. Thus, her decision to marry George is actually a testament to her grit, and not any kind of feminine weakness.

In 1920s Mississippi, white people have absolute power over Black people in every realm of life. But most Black people have very little contact with white people. When Ida Mae is seven, she visits a white blacksmith to run an errand for her father, and the blacksmith's sons dangle her over a well and threaten to kill her by dropping her inside. She also helps a white neighbor gather and sell eggs. But one day, while they're selling eggs in town, a white customer calls Ida Mae a racial slur. Her neighbor is horrified, but she stops working with Ida Mae because she doesn't want to alienate other white people.

So far, Wilkerson's portrait of Ida Mae's childhood has focused on the lack of resources, services, and opportunities that she faced in rural Mississippi—but not on the caste system that fundamentally underlies these problems. Unlike the book's other protagonists, Ida Mae is largely insulated from this system because she lives in a rural, all-Black community. But her occasional run-ins with white people make it clear that she will never truly be able to escape subordinate status if she stays in the South.

Ida Mae has other, more perilous run-ins with white people. A local white farmer often gets drunk on Friday evenings, rides down to Ida Mae's farm, and shoots at anyone he sees. Ida Mae and her family learn to hide from him—one day, she barely survives by sheltering in a barrel of cornmeal. And when Ida Mae is 13, white people lynch two local Black boys for allegedly insulting a white woman. After this, the rest of the Carter family moves north. Eventually, Ida Mae will follow them.

For Ida Mae and other Black southerners living under Jim Crow, white terrorist violence is an ordinary fact of life. The graphic violence of lynching is horrifying, but actually, it's far more insidious than it initially seems. Its real purpose is not merely to target individuals, but rather to deter the whole Black community from challenging the racial caste system. In other words, lynching is as much about punishing individuals as about preserving the South's white supremacist society in general.

PART TWO: THE STIRRINGS OF DISCONTENT

Selma, Alabama, Early Winter 1916. The Great Migration starts during World War I, in response to labor shortages in the North. Its first documented participants are a few hundred Black families who leave Selma, Alabama for Chicago in the winter of 1915–1916. They are fleeing "the long and violent hangover after the Civil War," in which the planter aristocracy has taken away their hard-won freedoms.

The Great Migration's origins are fundamentally economic. Until World War I, Northern industry was entirely closed off to Black workers, but during the war, white industrialists saw these workers as their best option to keep turning a profit. This underlines the way that, throughout the 20th century, most Black people were at the mercy of economic forces outside their control. Still, this represented an improvement over centuries past, as Black people could still make crucial personal decisions about how to respond *to these circumstances—such as whether or not to migrate.*

Right after the Civil War, most formerly enslaved Black families stay on plantations to sharecrop. But the government protects their political rights for the first time, so some are also able to go to college, start businesses, and even get elected to office. Then, in the 1870s, this Reconstruction era ends. White supremacists take over state governments across the South and, slowly but surely, start revoking Black people's rights. The 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision legalizes "separate but equal" accommodations—which are never actually equal.

Reconstruction is a crucial but often forgotten stage in the history of U.S. race relations. After all, most Americans likely don't realize that Black Americans had more political rights in the 1860s than in the 1950s, when white supremacists took political control of the South, rolled back these rights, and set up a regime that resembled the slave states of years past. Above all, the history of Reconstruction underlines the fact that U.S. history is not an inevitable march toward equality, but rather the product of concrete political decisions.

White supremacists also enforce their political power through violence. Lynching becomes commonplace: white families throw huge parties while they torture, hang, and burn Black people alive, often for crimes as minor as allegedly insulting a white person. In 1915, the film *Birth of a Nation* causes a national racist panic. The Ku Klux Klan returns to the South, and white mobs riot and burn down Black neighborhoods and businesses.

Much like the history of Reconstruction, the gruesome details of lynching parties and white riots are often left out of ordinary conceptions of U.S. history today. To many, this history is simply too painful to acknowledge directly—but Wilkerson suggests that doing so is crucial to fully addressing the U.S.'s long legacy of white supremacist violence. Notably, lynching and white riots were not spontaneous acts of passion, but rather deliberate strategies designed to prevent the Black community from advancing—and depriving white landowners and businessmen of their cheap labor.

Southern states pass discriminatory laws to restrict Black people's rights and enforce racial segregation. They are called Jim Crow laws, named after a popular blackface routine from the 1800s. Southern states segregate transportation, workplaces, and public spaces. White and Black people are cut off from one another, and race relations worsen. Black people see their rights gradually disappearing and their status steadily decreasing. Black leaders encourage their communities to stay in the South, but their followers begin slowly disappearing, moving north.

Jim Crow laws work hand-in-hand with white supremacist violence to sustain the racial caste system. This creates a dilemma for Black Southerners: to pursue a better life, should they stay or should they go? Is it easier to change the racial caste system by fighting it directly, or by leaving and living freely in the North? While it may seem like choosing to migrate means choosing oneself over one's community, Wilkerson's portrait of the Great Migration will show that the truth is far more complicated. In some cases, migrants do turn their backs on the South, but in many others, they leave the South precisely so that they can help their friends and family back home.

Young Black people growing up in the early 1900s have less contact with white people and face far more virulent racism than their enslaved parents and grandparents ever did. Everything in the South is segregated, from restrooms and elevators to ambulances and post offices, even though building two sets of everything is far more expensive than just building one. Black people can't use white facilities, pass white drivers on the road, or even disagree with white people's ideas in conversation. If they break any of these rules, whether formal or unwritten, they often face severe violence. This is the environment in which Ida Mae, George, and Pershing grow up, and it explains why they—and millions more—choose to move north. Many of these migrants never even tell their children and grandchildren what they experienced.

In this chapter, Wilkerson has used history and social science to paint a general portrait of the Jim Crow South, on the scale of society as a whole. But here, by describing the average Black person's experience, she transitions back into the personal perspective that dominates her book. Her goal is to put her readers in her protagonists' shoes—after all, imagining life under Jim Crow is the best way to understand the dilemma that migrants faced and the difficult decisions that they made. In particular, Wilkerson wants readers to understand how overwhelming feelings of terror, hopelessness, and injustice deeply shaped her protagonists' experiences and decisions to migrate. Put differently, migrants weren't just seeking better wages or more political rights—they were also drawn by the feeling of liberation that they achieved by freeing themselves from Jim Crow.

PART TWO: GEORGE SWANSON STARLING

New York City, 1996. George Swanson Starling lives in the cluttered basement of the Harlem brownstone that he owns, thanks to decades of "hustling and saving." He is a widower and suffers from arthritis, but when he sits to tell Wilkerson his story, he remembers every detail vividly.

Like with Ida Mae Gladney, Wilkerson begins George Starling's story with a snapshot of him at the end of his life, living out the consequences of his decision to migrate in the city that he chose as his new home.

Eustis, Florida, 1931. George Starling grows up in the orange groves of north-central Florida, where he and his friends climb local churches' orange trees at night and pick them clean of fruit. One evening, the Black community's unofficial policeman catches them, accuses them of stealing wood off his porch, and threatens to tell their parents. Black Southern parents punish their children harshly to help prepare them for the arbitrary cruelty and violence they will face from white people, so George and his friends beg the man not to say anything.

George's childhood is similar to Ida Mae's in many ways: he lives in a small Black agricultural community in the South. Yet there's one key difference: Ida Mae lives on an isolated rural plantation, while George lives in a town. As a result, he grows up with a higher standard of living but also experiences racism, segregation, and violence to a greater degree. Wilkerson points out how Jim Crow even shapes social norms among Black people, who go out of their way to avoid conflicts because they know that they will always lose out in any dispute resolution.

George Starling hasn't lived in Eustis for long; he has grown up following his parents from city to city, as they move around for work. His grandfather John is a grumpy sharecropper who, as a young man, killed his abusive plantation owner in the Carolinas before moving to Florida. George is his grandfather's favorite, and his other cousins resent him for it. But his family is full of conflict: one of his earliest memories is his abusive uncle murdering his aunt.

Like virtually all other Black Southerners, George's family can trace their roots directly back to plantation slavery. In fact, his family is only slightly removed from the conditions in which Ida Mae lived. It also shows how the violence of enslavement and Jim Crow ultimately compounds itself, fostering further conflict among the Black families and communities who experience it. The rest of George's story will show whether or not he manages to break this cycle of intergenerational trauma.

Every year, Mr. Reshard, the owner of the plantation where John Starling sharecrops in Florida, declares that their accounts "broke even" and that neither man owes the other anything. But this makes him better than most plantation owners, who cook their books to drive sharecroppers deeper and deeper into debt every year, effectively returning them to slavery. The legal system always supports planters, so sharecroppers usually have to accept this dishonesty. But some try to resist—for instance, George's uncle Budross learns to read, checks Mr. Reshard's books, and then confronts him about his lies. Reshard's family attacks Budross, who disappears to escape being lynched.

Reshard's business model makes it clear that Jim Crow was designed to maintain the economic structure created under slavery, in which white landowners profited handsomely from Black laborers. It also shows how the South upholds a racial caste system by combining neutral-sounding laws with unequal enforcement strategies. The law may technically permit sharecroppers to enter into fair contracts, but in practice, this never happens. Plantation owners never treat them fairly and never face legal consequences no matter what they do—up to and including lynching. This system rewards corruption and abuse, which leads such practices to become the norm.

George's parents leave, too: they move to St. Petersburg, where his father works in construction. But during the Great Depression, his father starts drinking and beating his mother, and his parents split up. George goes to live with his grandmother, a traditional healer, who puts him to work digging up roots and makes him take an endless succession of disgusting home remedies. He lives with his cousins, whose mother is working up in New York. She and George's father send money whenever they can, but often, it isn't enough. After two years, George goes to Eustis to live with his father, who does manual labor and owns a small convenience store.

It's significant that George's family freed itself from the abuses of plantation life through migration*—the same tool that George later uses to improve his own life and that was long Black Americans' only option for achieving freedom from slavery. Wilkerson situates the Great Migration within this broader historical context. Yet, at the same time, George's attempts to avoid his problems through migration at the beginning of his life backfire. Leaving home doesn't make his life much better, and this shows that migration isn't always a silver bullet to life's problems.*

Eustis, Florida is far more like the rest of the South than glitzy Miami. In fact, Florida was one of the cruelest slave states, one of the quickest to secede during the Civil War, and one of the first to pass severe Jim Crow laws after it ended. Lynching and mob violence are common there—in fact, the highest-profile lynching in the nation's history occurs there in 1934. A mob abducts, tortures, and murders a Black farmhand, allegedly for raping and killing his white neighbor, then invites a crowd of families and children to mutilate his dead body. They hang him from a tree, take his severed body parts as souvenirs, and riot when police take him down. Later, investigations show that he was innocent.

Wilkerson again points her readers toward important but neglected aspects of history—like Florida's long tradition of white supremacist violence—by emphasizing the difference between contemporary stereotypes and historical realities. The horrific 1934 case underlines not only the magnitude of the terror that Black Southerners faced under Jim Crow, but also how ordinary this system seemed to the white Southerners who upheld it. In particular, the fact that lynching was a family celebration shows that white Southern parents went to great lengths to inculcate white supremacist values in their children, so that they would uphold the racial caste system.

Like every young Black man growing up in Florida, George Starling fully understands the threat of lynching and reluctantly learns to follow the absurd rules of Jim Crow. The racial caste system turns cruelty into a social norm. For instance, the preacher who runs the local Black grocery store charges unreasonable prices, so George and his friends decide to start stealing from the store when the owner leaves his absentminded wife in charge in the afternoons. George spends his free time stealing oranges, shooting pool with bootleggers, and playing basketball.

George's childhood shows how deeply the caste system shaped Southern society, especially as Black people internalized the violence it did to them. Beyond merely limiting Black people's rights and economic opportunities, Jim Crow also sought to limit their sense of possibility and self-worth by convincing them that they could never escape the system and their lives could never improve. Fortunately, as the rest of the book will show, migration offered George an alternative to merely accepting this subordinate status.

George is also a brilliant student. He graduates high school as valedictorian and then goes to study at Florida A&M University. But his father orders him to drop out after two years and start working, as he claims that the family needs the money. When George learns that his father has been secretly saving money in the post office, he hatches a plan to get revenge.

George views education as a way out of his provincial Southern town, both because it literally allows him to leave and because it will allow him to become a middle-class professional (instead of a manual laborer, like the other men in his family). It's easy to see why he finds his father's mindset so frustrating: his father does not seem to understand his desire for a better life.

George suddenly marries his girlfriend, Inez Cunningham, whom his father hates because she grew up in the backwoods. Then, he spends the summer working in New York. When his father writes saying that he can't afford the next year of tuition, George writes back revealing that he has married Inez. But when George returns to Eustis, he learns that his father really *was* saving up for tuition—and he definitely won't send him back to college now that he is married. So, George reluctantly settles into married life instead.

Marriage closes off the only pathway that George sees to a better life—he will have to make peace with the trappings of small-town life in Eustis instead. Ironically, in his attempt to spite his father, he actually follows in his troubled family's footsteps: he makes an impulsive, angry decision that ultimately backfires. As the rest of the book will show, this mistake marks him forever. It also teaches him a crucial lesson about living with the consequences of his decisions.

PART TWO: ROBERT JOSEPH PERSHING FOSTER

Los Angeles, 1996. Robert Joseph Pershing Foster is enjoying his retirement to the fullest in his showy mansion. A wealthy Hollywood physician, he's always happy to tell his story.

Like with her other subjects, Wilkerson starts with Robert at the end of his life, enjoying the fruits of his decision to migrate. But, as a wealthy professional, he clearly belongs to a much higher socioeconomic class than Ida Mae and George. Needless to say, his story will reflect a very different side of the Great Migration.

Monroe, Louisiana, 1933. Pershing Foster lives on the poor Black side of town. His parents are teachers who supplement their income—a fraction of white teachers'—by selling milk from their cow. Pershing has big shoes to fill: his two older brothers are already a medical student and a star college baseball pitcher. But after he tries and fails to milk the cow and play the piano, his parents give up and let him do what he really wants: to dress up and go to the Paramount Theater on the prim white side of town. He has to enter through the "colored" door and sit in the dingy "colored" seats, which smell like urine. But he loves the movies so much that he scarcely cares.

As a child, Robert Foster goes by his middle name, Pershing. If George's childhood was marginally better than Ida Mae's, then Pershing's childhood is marginally better than George's. His parents are educated and well-respected, but they're still relatively poor, and they still desperately hope that their children's lives will be better than their own. For Pershing, the segregated theater represents both the promise of a better, more interesting life (in a place like Hollywood) and the obstacles that the South presents to him achieving such a life.

Pershing Foster's parents graduated college and got married in New Orleans before moving to Monroe, a peaceful but brutally segregated town on the other side of the state. Pershing's father is the school principal, a prominent community leader, and a part-time preacher at the local Baptist church. In fact, Pershing's father eventually takes over the church, but half of the congregation wants the old preacher to stay and starts a brawl, which turns into a gunfight and leaves multiple people dead. The church shuts down. Meanwhile, Pershing's mother is a serious, sophisticated New Orleans woman who throws grand parties and seems to know all the Black people in town.

Pershing's parents are highly influential in their local community, but they run into serious obstacles in their attempts to uplift that community. Rather than uniting to build greater power in their community, they and their peers end up fighting for a limited amount of power over *the community. Their experience helps illustrate why even Black political leaders and professionals would choose to leave the South in the early 20th century: it can be incredibly difficult to effect change within oppressed communities when the political system refuses to recognize their rights at all, or to listen to them under any circumstances.*

As the youngest child in an accomplished family, Pershing constantly tries and fails to impress his parents. In seventh grade, his mother is his teacher, and she is extra strict with him. Whenever his parents punish other boys at school, the boys get revenge by beating Pershing up later. And Pershing's attempts at teenage rebellion don't go far, since everyone in town knows his parents.

Pershing grew up in a peculiar situation: his family was very high-achieving but would never achieve full social acceptance because of Jim Crow. This helps explain his lifelong perfectionism and disdain for the South: leaving will offer him both the opportunity to get out from under his family's shadow and *the opportunity to build a successful career on a much more even playing field.*

Pershing starts understanding segregation in high school. The books at his school are the ones the local white high school throws away, and he can't get science books because he isn't allowed at the whites-only public library. He sees the city building a luxurious new high school for white students, while his parents earn barely 40 percent as much as white teachers. Such deep pay disparities, compounded over generations, have contributed to the vast wealth gap between white and Black families. Pershing wants a better life: he resents segregation and the way it has limited his opportunities.

Pershing's attitude about segregation is rooted in a deep recognition that he and his peers are just as worthy as their white counterparts, even as the government deliberately diverts resources away from them and towards white people instead. Thus, whereas Ida Mae and George understand Jim Crow primarily in terms of the violence that the white population inflicts on Black people, Pershing also recognizes the underlying structural factors behind segregation—which is really a mechanism to maintain the social structure created under slavery, through which white people continue to benefit at Black people's expense.

One day, when Pershing is 14, a white man stops him in the street and asks him for "a nice, clean colored girl." Pershing knows he has to be careful—in a nearby town, a white mob recently dynamited and burned down the courthouse to kill a Black suspect who was trapped inside. Still, Pershing is furious, and he replies, "You get your mama for me, and I'll get you one." Then, he runs off, knowing he could be lynched for what he said.

Pershing's reaction to the white man represents his feelings about Jim Crow in general. Needless to say, it's perfectly understandable to be incensed about a racial caste system that gives white people absolute rights over Black people's lives, labor, and bodies. Indeed, the fact that Pershing risks facing retaliation for this reaction only underlines how brutal the Jim Crow system is. Under this system, it's perfectly acceptable for a white man to sexually abuse a young Black woman, but it's effectively a crime—punishable by death—for a Black man to point it out.

The South, 1915 to the 1970s. During major holidays, Black migrants return to their hometowns in the South. They show off their money, visit their old churches, and tell their relatives about the North, where there's no segregation or Jim Crow. For instance, a woman named Francie Elie returns home to Mississippi from Ohio and tells her little brothers, Gilbert and Percy, about her new life. A few years later, Gilbert and Percy hear a disturbing noise from the woods behind their house—it's a white mob beating a Black man to death. Then, a group of white boys attacks Gilbert, and Gilbert hits them back. His father apologizes profusely to the white boys and punishes Gilbert, who follows his sister to Ohio soon thereafter.

Migration is not a simple flow of people that moves in just one direction, from the South to the North. Rather, it involves a constant flow of people, money, and information back and forth between *the North and the South. Gilbert and Percy Elie's story exemplifies this process: most migrants choose to move to the North because of a complex mix of "pull" factors (the promise of a better life elsewhere) and "push" factors (acute problems at home that encourage people to leave). All of Wilkerson's protagonists will follow this same formula, as they face mounting difficulties at home and receive increasingly promising information about their prospects elsewhere. Of course, Pershing could have faced the same dangers as Gilbert Elie after talking back to the white man—but even though he survived the confrontation unscathed, the threat of similar violence would continue to hang over his head.*

Similarly, when Beulah DeBreaux returns from New York to visit her family in North Carolina, her sister Virginia decides to follow her. When Wilkerson's uncle learns that his white boss belongs to the Ku Klux Klan, he immediately leaves Georgia and moves to Detroit. Ida Mae's siblings tell her about Toledo and Milwaukee. George's friends tell him about New York. And Pershing meets Mantan Moreland, the most famous Black man from Monroe, who is working in Hollywood. These connections inspire all three of the protagonists to migrate, too.

When talking about the Great Migration, it's easy to wrongly assume that people made migration decisions in a vacuum, by objectively weighing the costs and benefits of moving. But this is far from the truth: as the stories of Beulah DeBreaux, Wilkerson's uncle, and this book's protagonists show, family connections, rumors, and migrants' emotions and aspirations were all crucial pieces in the puzzle. None of them had perfect information about the places they were going to—after all, they had none of the digital technology that makes it easy to learn about faraway places today. And yet all of them made the decision to migrate anyway, out of a combination of drive, trust, and faith.

PART TWO: A BURDENSOME LABOR

Chickasaw County, Mississippi, 1929. At age 16, Ida Mae moves to Edd Pearson's plantation with her new husband, George Gladney. They live in a ramshackle wooden cabin and work Pearson's **cotton** from sunrise to after dark. Like most sharecroppers, George and Ida Mae keep half of what they produce, minus the cost of materials. Edd Pearson is unusually honest for a plantation owner, but he still criticizes Ida Mae for not working as hard as he wants.

George and Ida Mae's lives closely resemble those of enslaved Black people who worked on plantations in the South for centuries before them. While Edd Pearson may be honest, the unfair legal system enables other sharecroppers to effectively enslave their sharecroppers by inventing debts that prevent them from leaving their jobs. And the mere fact that Edd Pearson honestly follows the rules of Jim Crow does not make these rules fair or legitimate. Indeed, this again highlights the true purpose of Jim Crow: to maintain the social and economic structure of slavery, which allowed a small group of elite white property owners to profit from the labor of the oppressed Black masses.

The benchmark for **cotton** pickers is 100 pounds a day—or 7,000 cotton buds. The work is backbreaking and monotonous. It's also a key foundation to the U.S. economy—but a long series of middlemen keeps most of the profits. While everyone admires the fastest pickers, who can harvest as much as 400 pounds a day, many quietly rebel against the system. For instance, to increase the weight, some pickers add rocks to their sack, and one young man famously urinates in it at the end of the day.

Wilkerson depicts the daily life of a cotton picker in vivid detail so that her readers can fully appreciate the brutality of the conditions that Ida Mae and George escaped by migrating to the North. She also emphasizes its role in the U.S.'s broader economic life—including Northern industry as well as Southern agriculture. Moreover, just as they face the dilemma of whether to stay in the South or leave it, Black sharecroppers also face the dilemma of whether to try to succeed within the essentially unjust sharecropping system or to get ahead by undermining it.

Ida Mae wears burlap dresses because she can't afford clothes made of the same **cotton** she picks. George's family sharecrops on the Pearson plantation, too, and his niece teaches Ida Mae to cook, clean, and do laundry. She also tends the vegetable garden and the chickens. She's fearless: when a snake slithers into the kitchen, she beats it to death without a second thought. During the Great Depression, cotton prices plummet, and she has to go without shoes.

Ida Mae's clothes and lack of shoes underlines how impoverished the rural South is in the early 20th century. But this poverty doesn't mean that Ida Mae and George are passive or helpless—the anecdote with the snake proves as much. They're the victims of a deeply exploitative social system, but they also actively look for ways to improve their situation.

Soon, Ida Mae gets pregnant. The first time, she miscarries, but the second time, she has a baby girl and names her Velma. About a year later, she has another girl, Elma. But as a toddler, Elma gets sick and dies after eating plums from a tree. Finally, in 1935, Ida Mae has a son, James. When James starts to have seizures as a toddler, a neighbor advises Ida Mae to take off his clothes next time it happens. She does, and she burns them, for good measure. James never has a seizure again.

Much like her father, who died of a mysterious infection after wading into floodwater, Ida Mae has virtually no access to medical attention in the rural Jim Crow South. As Robert Pershing Foster's story will soon show, there were very few Black doctors in the South, and fewer still who were willing to treat patients in the backcountry. Of course, Pershing's story also makes it clear why so many doctors chose to join the Great Migration instead of practicing under the constraints of Jim Crow.

Life gets even harder during the Depression. Many pickers lose their jobs, and George's sister moves in with him and Ida Mae. But Ida Mae trusts that God will set everything right. When their turkey has chicks, instead of watching them carefully (like the other sharecroppers), Ida Mae lets them run free.

Ida Mae's faith and resilience eventually prove to be her greatest strength, because they enable her to adapt to the unpredictable, changing conditions that she encounters in the North. By highlighting these traits, Wilkerson again emphasizes that every migration story is unique because every individual confronts the challenges of migrating with a different mix of strengths, weaknesses, and decisions.

Eustis, Florida, 1939. George Starling should be in college, but instead, he's riding in the back of a truck, heading to pick citrus in the local groves. This is the only real job opportunity in his part of Florida, but he's not very good at it. Every morning, foremen come through town and pick up the best workers. When he can, George joins Babe and Reuben Blye, the only Black foremen. Like with **cotton**, fruit pickers are paid by weight, so they have all kinds of tricks to improve their take.

George Starling faces the consequences of his rash decision to marry Inez—which led his father to stop paying his college tuition. His job may not be quite as backbreaking or unfree as Ida Mae's—at least he can choose whom to work with—but it's still precarious, exploitative, and poorly paid. Like Pershing, George clearly sees that his circumstances in the South are preventing him from reaching his full potential, and he yearns for the chance to do so.

Citrus picking is dangerous. Pickers have to climb tall ladders up into the trees, and they frequently fall and break limbs. One day, the foreman makes George climb all the way down his ladder and go back to an earlier tree, because he left a single orange at the top. That afternoon, in the back of the truck, the ladders come untied and knock all the pickers off. George is seriously injured, but the company only sends him $12.48 as compensation. In fact, farmers constantly cheat the pickers out of their pay—prices for different kinds of fruit change every day, and workers struggle to keep track of how much they're owed. They don't even consider fighting the company over it, because there are dozens more workers eager to replace each and every one of them.

The dangers of citrus picking underline how Southern society is built on exploitation: the citrus companies can only underpay and mistreat their pickers because they know that the law won't stop them and that they will never run out of workers. Locals like George have no option but to accept this system, which is extremely profitable for the grove owners. Again, this shows that Jim Crow is essentially an economic system: it represses Black people's political rights so that they can be exploited economically. While this may be more severe than in the North, it's not inherently different. After all, the Great Migration began during World War I precisely because white employers needed to fill a labor shortage.

Monroe, Louisiana, 1935. At age 16, Pershing Foster takes the bus to visit his brother Madison up in St. Louis. It's the first time he has ever left Monroe; the ticket is his graduation present, and he's wearing his finest tweed suit. He sits in a seat with a "COLORED" sign, but whenever white passengers board the bus, they move the sign, take his seat, and make him move toward the back. There's no toilet, and the bumps and jerks on the road make him pee his pants. He feels humiliated.

Pershing's bus ride represents the contrast between his high aspirations and the humiliating limitations that segregation places on him. As his tweed suit suggests, he knows that he deserves far better than the second-class status the South is willing to give him, and this is why he will leave it. This anecdote also foreshadows his fateful road trip to California in the next section of the book.

Pershing enjoys his trip to St. Louis, but when he returns home to Monroe, he decides that he doesn't want to go to college. His parents refuse. He can't go to the nearby Northeast Louisiana College, which is whites-only, so he goes to Leland College, where his parents went. They save up money so that he can eventually transfer to the more prestigious Morehouse College. When he returns home in the summer, a local store won't hire him as a janitor because of his education, so he ends up working in a sawmill.

Pershing's college choice exemplifies how segregation systematically limits Black people's opportunities. No *Black people in Monroe can get a college education without moving elsewhere, and once they do, they're far less likely to ever move back. This explains why there are virtually no educated professionals in town (besides Pershing's parents).*

To Pershing, Morehouse College—home of the well-dressed, ambitious Black elite—is "too perfect for words." Atlanta is full of successful Black professionals, who have built a thriving community. For the first time, Pershing feels free from Jim Crow. He joins the choir and becomes well-known around campus for his exquisite voice.

Pershing finally gets the dignity and opulent lifestyle that he has always felt he deserved, and he will refuse to ever go back to the humiliation of living under Jim Crow. Morehouse represents freedom to him because, even though he's still in the segregated South, he can do everything he likes and no longer has to accept inferior status to the people around him.

During Pershing's senior year, a professor introduces him to Alice Clement, the daughter of Dr. Rufus Clement, Atlanta University's president and one of the nation's most powerful Black leaders. He is perhaps most famous for his feud with W. E. B. DuBois, the country's most prominent Black scholar, whom he summarily forced into retirement. Pershing is sharp, well-reputed, and extremely polite, but Dr. Clement doesn't know if he's good enough for his daughter. After graduating from Morehouse, Pershing starts graduate school at Atlanta University and then medical school in Nashville.

Morehouse opens significant doors for Pershing, both personally and professionally. Most importantly, his relationship with Alice catapults him directly into the nation's Black elite. Yet, whereas Northern Black elites like DuBois believed in fighting for political equality, Southern ones like Dr. Clement believed in working hard to create strong, independent Black institutions at home in the South. This conflict resembles the dilemma that faced migrants: whether to seek new opportunities in the North or make the best of their limited ones at home in the South.

A Thin Light Far Away. In 1919, when Ida Mae, George, and Pershing are children, Edwin Hubble discovers a sun outside our galaxy for the first time.

Wilkerson uses Hubble's discovery as a metaphor for the Great Migration: it expanded humanity's sense of what is possible in the universe, just as the Migration expanded Black Southerners' sense of what could be possible for them.

PART TWO: THE AWAKENING

Chickasaw County, Mississippi, Late September-Early October 1937. Addie B., Ida Mae's neighbor on the Pearson plantation, awakens to find that her turkeys have disappeared. Late that night, Edd Pearson brings a group of heavily armed white men to Ida Mae's cabin to look for Joe Lee, George Gladney's cousin and a notorious thief. Unbeknownst to Ida Mae, who has been sleeping, Joe Lee is hiding out in the kitchen. The white men take him away. But Ida Mae and George still don't know why.

Even though Edd Pearson is generally about as honest and humane as plantation owners get, he's still willing to use extrajudicial mob violence—the classic tactic of Southern white supremacy—to enforce his power. Indeed, Pearson's nonchalance about kidnapping Joe Lee again shows how utterly normal this kind of violence was in the South, and how deeply white Southerners were invested in perpetuating it. After all, for centuries, the Southern legal system was designed by and for slaveholders, for the exclusive purpose of protecting their power—and the Jim Crow system was designed to keep this arrangement the same, to whatever extent possible.

Eustis, Florida, December 1941. After the U.S. enters World War II, the Army rejects George Starling over heart problems. But he learns that there are plenty of factory jobs up in Detroit, where he'd earn several times what he's making now. Inez wants to quit her job as a maid and go to beauty school in Tampa, so George is saving for her tuition by working weekends, selling insurance and using his car as a taxi. Inez resents that she almost never sees George, but by 1943, he's nearly saved enough for her school. He decides to earn the rest by spending the summer working in Detroit—but the neighbors spread rumors that he's actually going to D.C. to be with another woman. Inez is bitter when he leaves.

Just like World War I, World War II opens opportunities for Black Americans by increasing their power as workers. George's summer in Detroit shows that migrants didn't always make a single, definitive decision to leave the South. Unlike Ida Mae, but similar to Robert (Pershing), George lived in many different places and went back and forth between the North and South several times before finally choosing to settle in New York. Despite his rocky marriage and conflicts with his neighbors, his financial wisdom promises to help him secure a stable, middle-class life for his family.

In Detroit, George works in a cargo plane factory. His job is dangerous: he works with highly flammable chemicals and his paranoid managers are on the hunt for Communist spies. In late June, an enormous week-long riot breaks out between the city's white and Black communities, but George tries to ignore it and keep going to work, as usual. But on Monday, a mob attacks the trolley he takes to work, and on Tuesday, he has to outrun the mob to get back to his apartment. That night, he watches the National Guard send tanks down his street while his neighbors loot nearby stores. Many of his coworkers get killed and arrested.

George's new job might pay better than picking fruit in Florida, but it's not much safer or more dignified. The riots show how the Great Migration produces a serious racist backlash: white Northerners worry that Black migrants will threaten their own precarious economic status, so they try to drive them out of town, and the migrants respond with violence, too. Just as in the South, the government and police back white mobs, not Black ones.

George decides to quit his job, leave Detroit, and go home to Florida, where he spends the rest of the summer picking citrus. But now, all the able-bodied men have gone off to war or factory jobs, so the only people left to work in the groves are women, children, and the elderly. George is one of the strongest pickers now, and after his summer in the North, he can't stand it when white people demand deference from him. He organizes the pickers and negotiates a significant raise—from 15 cents per box of oranges to 22 cents. With their savings, Inez goes to beauty school, and George and Inez rent a house of their own and buy all new furniture—in cash.

George cuts short his sojourn in Detroit, but his time there wasn't a complete failure. It still shows him that he can take control of his own future and seek better opportunities by leaving the South. At home in Florida, he benefits from labor market effects similar to those he experienced in the North: there are fewer workers, so they have more power and can demand better wages. George's education and financial literacy help him win better conditions for himself and his colleagues.

Atlanta, 1941. Pershing Foster marries Alice Clement shortly after she graduates college in 1941. Their elaborate wedding is "the social event of the season" for the Black elite. After they marry, Pershing goes to medical school in Nashville. Alice spends a year at Juilliard in New York, then returns to Atlanta to teach. They have two daughters in 1943 and 1945. After medical school, Pershing's residency takes him to St. Louis, North Carolina, and New York, but his mother dies of cancer before he finishes.

By marrying Alice and going to medical school, Pershing fulfills his dream of becoming a respected professional, joining the Black elite, and forging a pathway out of the segregated South. However, circumstances force him and Alice apart, which also prevents him from taking an active role in raising his daughters. Similarly, his mother dies before he can impress her with his achievements. In other words, the education and migration that promise Pershing a better future also cut him off from his family, the very people he hopes to help by improving his future.

Pershing's brother Madison is the only Black doctor in Monroe. He spends most of his time treating patients in the backwoods because he's not even allowed inside the hospital. By helping his brother out, Pershing quickly realizes that he doesn't want to be a country doctor. But he also has many invaluable experiences. One day, he delivers a baby in a rural cabin without medical equipment and realizes that the mother knows far more about childbirth than he does.

Madison's career shows Pershing how restricted his life would be as a physician in the segregated South. It also highlights how seriously segregation affects Black Southerners' quality of life. It not only cuts them off from the rest of society and limits their social and economic opportunities, but also prevents them from accessing reasonable medical care. This underlines how much better life gets for migrants as soon as they cross over into the North, where most basic services are available to them.

After residency, Pershing becomes a medical officer in Austria for the U.S. Army. For the first time, he and Alice get to live together with their daughters. Thousands of Black soldiers had helped liberate Europe in World War II, only to face violence and discrimination back at home. For instance, a white mob murdered Wilbur Little in Georgia for daring to wear his army uniform around town. But Pershing doesn't escape Jim Crow in Europe. His commanding officer, a white man from Mississippi, doesn't let him treat white women, and the other white doctors constantly overrule his judgment. But when he makes a crucial call that saves a white lieutenant's wife from a C-section, the base warms up to him.

Like George Starling's time in Detroit, Pershing's time in Europe isn't quite as liberating as he might have hoped. It shows him that he will still face flagrant racism even in technically integrated places. Yet it also encourages him to keep fighting for a better life by showing him that he has the power to take his life into his own hands. As Wilkerson points out, World War II therefore accelerated the Great Migration for two reasons: it created a labor shortage that drove further Black migration to the North, but it also exposed Black soldiers and their families to the prospect of a better life, free from racism.

Chickasaw County, Mississippi, Fall 1937. The white mob ties Joe Lee up in the woods, beats him bloody with a chain, and takes him to jail. But he never even stole Addie B.'s turkeys, which wander back home in the morning. George Gladney complains to Mr. Edd, but he has to be very careful not to offend him. George goes to the jail to get Joe Lee, who has barely survived, and then he decides it's time to move north.

Joe Lee's torturers face no consequences for their actions—after all, the government consistently supports white mobs who engage in violence (or it just looks the other way). Ida Mae and George are humiliated to have to deal with this system and are worried that something similar could happen to them or their children. Ultimately, while the overall desperation of sharecropping life may have primed George and Ida Mae to think about leaving Mississippi, the attack on Joe Lee is the acute stressor that makes them decide to do it once and for all.

Eustis, Florida, 1944. "Lil George's roving union" makes waves in town. Babe and Reuben Blye, some of the only Black foremen, help George negotiate reasonable prices for each grove. Usually, they succeed, but occasionally, the packinghouses reject their offers and leave George stranded in the groves, dozens of miles from town. He knows that, as a Black man in the Jim Crow South, he could face far worse. The Florida police have started arresting Black men, assessing them huge fines for vagrancy (not working), and forcing them to work for weeks to pay off the fines. After Eustis's local sheriff, Willis V. McCall, arrests a citrus picker and beats him unconscious, the picker's whole family escapes to New York.

Like Pershing, George Starling takes matters into his own hands in order to fight the limitations that racism puts on him. But, like Ida Mae and George Gladney, he's still in the South, so he still faces the very real threat of police and white mob violence. The Florida vagrancy law exemplifies the way that Southern governments use their power to get as close as they can to recreating the system of plantation slavery. Just like plantation owners can invent debts for their sharecroppers, the police essentially extort Black citizens into unfree labor by making failing to work a crime (but only for Black people). Willis V. McCall's abuses further underline how the law authorized and enabled white supremacist violence, rather than preventing it.

One day, a tangerine grove owner threatens George when he insists on negotiating prices. The pickers are more and more worried every day. Soon, a young yard cleaner overhears a grove owner planning to lynch George and his partners, Sam and Mud. He tells George, who realizes that he has to leave Florida. George explains the news to his father.

George faces any Black Southerner's worst nightmare: he learns that he will be lynched and knows that the law will do nothing to stop it. For Ida Mae and Pershing, leaving the South is a wise and well-planned decision, but for George, it appears to be the only safe option.

Fort Polk, Louisiana, Early 1953. Pershing stands out in the army, but when he's discharged to Louisiana, he doesn't know what to do. He can join his brother Madison in Monroe, but his mother is dead and his father is a pariah, having been pushed out of his job. He can join Alice's family at the Clement mansion in Atlanta, but only at the price of his independence. He settles on California, where lots of people from Monroe have already gone, and where he'll finally be treated like an equal. Alice agrees—he'll go first, and she and the kids will follow him later.

Pershing has tasted local fame (in Monroe), power and luxury (in Atlanta), and freedom and adventure (in the military). The question of where to migrate is consequential but thrilling—unlike Ida Mae Gladney and George Starling, Pershing could truly move and set up a practice anywhere he wants. Still, the migration paths of his friends and his taste for glamor still deeply influence his decision.

America, 1915-1970. Like the millions of others who join the Great Migration, Ida Mae, George, and Pershing all leave the South for different personal reasons related to the violence of Jim Crow. Limited numbers of Black people had been migrating north for centuries, but the World War I labor crisis set off a much larger wave. Southern elites panicked about losing their workers: they passed laws to ban labor recruitment, confiscated northern newspapers, and even shut down **trains** and arrested migrants. But all of this only made people even more eager to leave. Southern businessmen and politicians even visited the North and begged former sharecroppers to move back. Virtually none did. Suddenly, labor was scarce in the South, too, and planters had to increase wages and improve conditions for those who stayed.

While Wilkerson emphasizes that every migration decision was independent and highly individual, she stresses two factors as key contributors to the Great Migration: violence and labor. The North promised migrants a better life in both respects: freedom from white terrorist violence and better economic opportunities. In the South, these were linked because white supremacist violence helped keep Black people as a pool of cheap, unskilled labor by preventing them from moving up socially or economically. This explains the seeming paradox of white Southerners protesting Black migrants' departure: they may have hated and oppressed Black people, but they also needed them to keep the plantation economy running. Indeed, by reducing the surplus of Black laborers in the South, the Great Migration ultimately improved conditions for those who stayed, too.

PART TWO: BREAKING AWAY

Chickasaw County, Mississippi, October 1937. Ida Mae and George Gladney decide to leave Mississippi after the harvest. They sell everything they own, but they don't tell anyone, lest Mr. Edd Pearson find out and invent new debts to keep them indentured. At the end of the season, they take their remaining possessions to Miss Theenie's house, and then George settles his accounts with Mr. Edd, who actually owes him a little bit of money, enough for four **train** tickets north. He weighs the risks and decides to tell Mr. Edd the truth. Mr. Edd is astonished. Meanwhile, Ida Mae is pregnant, but she hasn't told George or Miss Theenie because they would want her to stay home in Mississippi.

Like millions of others, Ida Mae and George make the difficult choice to leave behind their lives, families, and community in the South. Yet leaving can be even more dangerous than staying—indebted sharecroppers are not allowed to leave plantations, so landowners can effectively use debt to re-enslave them. And as Joe Lee's fate has shown George and Ida Mae, Edd Pearson's honesty only goes so far. Indeed, Pearson's astonishment at Ida Mae and George's decision to leave shows that he simply doesn't understand his sharecroppers' lives, perspectives, or economic situation. In other words, because he lives in a society where racial exploitation is the norm, he does not realize that he is exploiting his sharecroppers.

Eustis, Florida, April 1945. George Starling tells Inez that his life is in danger and he has to leave Florida. He packs up his things in secret—the grove owners can't know he's going, and he knows they'd pay off anyone who informed on him. Inez is furious with him, but he promises that she'll be able to follow him as soon as he gets settled in with his aunts in New York, and she agrees to let him go.

What Ida Mae and George Gladney most feared—that the violence of Jim Crow would eventually target them personally—comes to pass for George Starling. So he has to leave urgently, and he's even more secretive and careful about his plans than they were. Fortunately, he also has the resources to leave on the turn of a dime.

Monroe, Louisiana, March 1953. Pershing keeps working in Louisiana, but only to save up for his move to California. His brother Madison wants him to stay and work in Monroe, but he has already made up his mind. A white storekeeper he's known all his life asks him to stay but doesn't even realize that he isn't allowed to work at the Monroe hospital. Madison insists on making do in Monroe, which means doing medicine with limited resources and foregoing certain luxuries to comply with Jim Crow. For instance, he just doesn't go to stores and theaters because they're segregated. But Pershing won't do the same. The brothers agree to part ways. Neighbors throw Pershing a going-away party, and at the party, Pershing tells everyone to follow him to California.

Pershing and Madison reach opposite conclusions about how to best build their careers and support their families. It's easy to view Pershing's decision as selfish and Madison's as selfless, but the reality is more complicated. While Madison wants to serve the local community that raised him, Pershing is chasing a higher ideal. Pershing thinks that the greater resources he can access in California will not only help him succeed as a doctor, but also help him help the Black community to a far greater extent than he would be able to at home in Monroe.

America, 1915-1975. Nobody expected the Great Migration to continue after the end of World War I, but mass migrations are never "seasonal, contained, or singular." Migrants usually take the quickest path to freedom, which means their routes are usually orderly and predictable. In the Great Migration, there were three main routes, which followed **train** lines. First, migrants from coastal states in the South (like George) generally migrated north along the eastern seaboard to cities like New York, Philadelphia, and Washington. Second, migrants from inland states (like Ida Mae) traveled up the Mississippi River to industrial centers like Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Detroit. And third and finally, migrants from Texas and Louisiana (like Pershing) went to the West.

In one sense, migration is unpredictable because it depends on millions of smaller decisions, which people make of their own free will. This is why the Great Migration continued after social scientists expected it to end. It's also why Wilkerson views migration as both a pathway to achieving *freedom and a* basic expression of *it. Yet, in another sense, migration is perfectly predictable—it's easy to understand where people chose to migrate and why. They went where trains could take them, and where their family and friends had already gone. After all, the fact that people make free decisions to migrate doesn't mean that there are no constraints on those decisions—to the contrary, migration was often their best option in an unfavorable situation.*

Many migrants only decided to leave the South for good after making other, shorter trips to fight overseas or visit family and friends. And many traveled much farther than was strictly necessary to find jobs—which, according to migration scholars, makes them more like refugees than ordinary economic migrants.

Wilkerson highlights the scholarly comparison between Black migrants and refugees in order to point out how the Great Migration blurs the distinction between voluntary and forced migration. Whereas economic migrants usually set out in search of new jobs and return home once they're able, refugees plan to permanently leave their homeplaces because they are no longer hospitable. Jim Crow may not have been the same kind of acute crisis as the wars, famines, and natural disasters that are usually associated with refugees, but it still made the South inhospitable for many Black people. So they set out in search of new homes, with little intention of ever returning.

PART THREE: THE APPOINTED TIME OF THEIR COMING

Near Okolona, Mississippi, Late Autumn 1937. Ida Mae's brother-in-law drives her, her children, and all their remaining possessions to the **train** station. Ida Mae fears that Edd Pearson will try to stop them, or that life will be no better in the North. But George is waiting for her at the train station, and she trusts his judgment. She also knows that she'll be joining her sister and her husband's family in Wisconsin. The family boards the train's Jim Crow car and departs.

Ida Mae's departure circles back to the book's opening scene. Now, the reader has the context needed to understand why Ida Mae is so nervous: migrating requires a profound leap of faith. She has never left the South, and she doesn't know if she and her family will actually be able to go. If it doesn't work out, they have no clear alternative, because once they leave, they simply can't come back to Mississippi.

Eustis, Florida, April 14, 1945. George Starling throws together some clothes and books, then has a friend drive him to the **train** station and boards the Silver Meteor train to New York.

Unlike Ida Mae Gladney, George Starling doesn't need to take a leap of faith to migrate. He's already been to New York, and with the grove owners planning to kill him, he's far more afraid of staying than leaving.

Monroe, Louisiana, the Monday After Easter 1953. Pershing Foster drives west to California, following other famous Monroe residents like actor Mantan Moreland, Black Panther Party founder Huey Newton, and basketball player Bill Russell, as well as several friends and acquaintances. Countless migrants go from Texas and Louisiana to California—in fact, the state's Black population almost quadruples just during World War II. As he drives toward Houston, where he'll spend the night with a friend, Pershing decides that he needs a new name. All his life, everyone has called him "Pershing" (which his parents chose after the great World War I general). But from now on, he'll just be Robert—or better yet, Bob.

Even though his solo road trip might suggest otherwise, Pershing (or Robert) belongs to a mass migration just as much as Ida Mae Gladney and George Starling. But by pointing out that Monroe's most famous residents were also emigrants, Wilkerson also highlights how the freedom and opportunities that they encountered in California enabled them to actually develop their talents. Needless to say, Robert hopes to do the same, and changing his name is a way to reinvent himself, mark the beginning of his new life, and take his fate into his own hands.

On the Illinois Central Railroad, October 1937. In the night, Ida Mae, George, James, and Velma head northwest to Jackson, Tennessee, where they switch **trains** and board the famous Illinois Central Railroad. It's the most popular route to Chicago and Detroit for Black migrants. It's also historically significant: Mark Twain and Abraham Lincoln worked for it, then it turned into a key supply route for the Union during the Civil War, and then it became the way goods, packages, and Black newspapers like The Chicago Defender reached the South. But Ida Mae and her family don't know that they're also making history.

Wilkerson again toggles back and forth between personal and sociological perspectives in order to show how individual decisions, when added together on a large enough scale, could fundamentally shape the course of U.S. history. By emphasizing the history of the Illinois Central Railroad, she shows how an endless range of historical factors contributed to the shape of the Great Migration and places the Great Migration within a long legacy of Black freedom struggles.

On the Silver Meteor, April 14, 1945. The Black passengers have to ride in the **train**'s baggage car, but George Starling doesn't care. He's still angry at the other pickers who turned him in to the grove owners.

In addition to showing how deeply the logic of Jim Crow penetrates into everyday life, George's ride north aboard the segregated Silver Meteor also foreshadows his life once he moves to New York and finds work on the same train.

East Texas, April 1953. Robert Foster decides to visit Mexico and then make his way to Los Angeles along the southern border. After visiting his medical school friend Dr. Beale in Houston, he drives his beloved Buick Roadmaster down to Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, where he spends an afternoon wandering around and trying margaritas. After crossing back over the border, he heads for New Mexico, where he has heard that hotels take Black people. He has to drive all night, and in desolate west Texas, he repeatedly pulls over and takes brief naps in his car. But he has to be very careful about where he stops—and around whom.

Robert's road trip is a thrilling but perilous adventure. His visit to Mexico expands his horizons and gives him a brief respite from segregation. He's lucky to have a friend in Houston, since Texas is segregated, like the rest of the South. Otherwise, he may have had nowhere to stay, like in rural west Texas, where he's effectively on his own. As Wilkerson frequently points out, he travels roughly 2,000 miles—much further than many international migrants.

On the Illinois Central Railroad, October 1937. Ida Mae and her family barrel north through the night on the **train**. The Jim Crow car is crowded and uncomfortable, and Black passengers have to bring their own food because they can't get into the dining car. But at least they're headed for freedom.

Ida Mae and her family's last taste of segregation may seem particularly bitter, since it's on the train that is supposed to carry them to freedom. But they have also never known anything else, and their hopes for the future inspire them far more than their current predicament weighs on them.

On the Silver Meteor, Somewhere in the Carolinas, April 15, 1945. The **train** may be uncomfortable, but George Starling is thrilled to start over in New York.

Like Ida Mae and her family, George Starling feels like he's already achieved freedom on the segregated rail car.

Somewhere East of El Paso, April 1953. Robert Foster heads through the desert towards El Paso, which is on not just the U.S.-Mexico border, but also "the unspoken border between the Jim Crow South and the free Southwest." **Train** passengers can switch seats and desegregate themselves as soon as they cross into New Mexico, just like those on the East Coast can do in Washington, D.C. For a few years, in the Midwest, trains actually have to stop in the yard to switch out segregated cars for integrated ones after reaching Cairo, Illinois, on the Ohio River.

The borders of the South seem like a magical threshold that promises migrants freedom—which makes it all the more disheartening when they don't find it (such as when Robert struggles to find a hotel in Arizona in the next chapter). Meanwhile, the trains that have to switch from segregated to integrated cars underline how inefficient and counterproductive the Jim Crow system is, as well as how deep the divide between Northern and Southern states truly ran.

Even migrants who travel by car have to pay careful attention to these borders. For instance, one family tells Wilkerson that they stopped at an all-white motel in El Paso because they could pass for white—except for one grandson, whom they had to disguise as luggage and carry into the hotel under a blanket. In contrast, Robert Foster doesn't pass as white, so he doesn't rest until he reaches an integrated hotel four hours into New Mexico. Whenever they travel during the Jim Crow era, Black people have to seek out safe houses like this one—which they learn about through word of mouth or special green guidebooks. Robert's hotel is basic, but he makes the best of it and sets out toward the Arizona border in the morning.

For Black travelers, the novelty and excitement of travel also meant facing all sorts of new perils. They could never be sure when racism would thwart their plans or even put them in serious physical danger. While having the right information (like the green guidebooks) could help, it also created even more barriers to traveling. Of course, this also helps explain why many migrants preferred to travel north by trains—which took them straight to their destination cities. In addition to underlining how stringent and absurd segregation laws were, the anecdote of the family at the El Paso motel also shows how Black people sometimes managed to successfully circumvent these laws.

PART THREE: CROSSING OVER

Western New Mexico, April 1953. Robert Foster drives through the endless, sweltering Arizona desert and passes Phoenix around nightfall. He's tired, but he finds several motels. He's thrilled to finally be treated as an equal—until one after another refuses him service. At the fourth, even after he gives a speech explaining his situation, the sympathetic proprietors reluctantly explain that the other motel owners would get angry if they rented to him. So he continues through the desert, exhausted and delirious. At a gas station, he breaks into tears to the kind owner—he thought he was escaping Jim Crow, but maybe he isn't. The owner comforts him but admits that "Los Angeles ain't the oasis you think it is."

Robert's experience at the Arizona hotels shatters his hope that he would achieve acceptance and equality as soon as he left the South. His doubt and disappointment are understandable: he realizes that the freedom he is seeking in California might be a mirage. Perhaps his experience in Austria was no anomaly, and racism truly is just as common outside the South. Still, his sympathetic chat with the gas station owner shows that his destination will still be better than where he started—in the South, all white people expect deference from him, but in the West, only a minority of them do.

Robert drives on, half-asleep. At a fork in the road, he decides to go to San Diego instead of Los Angeles, because it's 35 miles closer. When the road starts winding through the mountains, he can barely tell where he's going in the dark. He pulls over several times to take short naps. When he reaches the California state line and sees a sign announcing the dangers ahead, he starts wondering if his whole journey might have been a mistake. But he figures that it's too late to turn back. He reaches San Diego around sunrise.

Robert's route through the mountains underlines how truly dangerous his journey is. These dangers serve as a convenient metaphor for the risks of uprooting one's life to migrate. Contemporary readers should note that the interstate highway system didn't yet exist when Robert took his trip, so he's driving on treacherous backroads. Notably, during her research for this book, Wilkerson retraced his route in an attempt to understand what it would have been like for him to drive it, sleep-deprived and alone, in the 1950s.

On the Illinois Central Railroad, October 1937. Ida Mae and her family barely notice when their **train** finally leaves the South and crosses into Illinois. The night looks no different, and there is no rush to integrate the train. Soon enough, they're in Chicago.

Even though Ida Mae and her family understand the Illinois state line's significance as the place where the free North begins, their destination—and the place where they will start to feel truly free—is Chicago.

On the Silver Meteor, Northern New Jersey, April 15, 1945. The **train** pulls into Penn Station in Newark, New Jersey. Surely, some of the passengers mishear "New York" and get off. But George Starling has been to New York before, and he knows to stay on.

George knows exactly where he's going, so unlike Ida Mae—and the migrants who confuse "Newark" for "New York"—he knows exactly what awaits him and feels no doubts at all about his journey.

San Diego County, April 1953. When Robert Foster reaches San Diego, he's more relieved than amazed. He stops the first Black person he sees and asks for "a colored hotel." The man is confused and says Robert can try any hotel, but Robert insists—he can't stand to be rejected again. The man directs him to a nondescript boarding-house, and Robert is delighted to shower and rest. When he wakes up, he drives the 121 miles to Los Angeles and entertains himself by looking at the billboards on the way.

Robert arrives in San Diego so exhausted that, despite his burning desire to live free in an integrated state, his first instinct is to seek out segregated facilities. The other man's response shows him that California is more hospitable than the South or Arizona, but he simply doesn't want to face the hassle and disappointment of racism once again. He waits to exercise his new California freedom until the next morning.

The South, 1915-1975. Southern observers originally blamed the Great Migration on northern recruiters, publications like The Chicago Defender, and the boll weevil (a beetle that devastated **cotton** crops). But in reality, migrants were just making an informed decision to find better work and escape Jim Crow. And contrary to most predictions, Black migration to the North and West dramatically *increased* after World War I: from 555,000 in the 1910s to 903,000 in the 1920s. Migration fell back down to 480,000 in the 1930s due to the Great Depression, but then it shot up during and after World War II, reaching 1.6 million in the 1940s, 1.4 million in the 1950s, and 1 million in the 1960s. And these numbers are certainly an undercount: numerous migrants also avoided census takers, passed as white, or underreported their household size.

Wilkerson rejects Southern elites' explanations for the Great Migration because they deny agency to migrants themselves. Recruiters, newspapers, and economic forces certainly contributed *to the migration, but attributing it* solely *to these causes means treating Black Southerners as passive victims of circumstance, rather than active creators of their own destinies. Similarly, by providing an overarching timeline for the Great Migration, Wilkerson shows that no simple set of external causes can explain it. While it's important to consider the changing historical conditions that contributed to people's migration decisions, it's also crucial to recognize that they were still fundamentally* decisions. *This timeline also helps explain why Wilkerson chooses to focus on three migrants from different time periods—Ida Mae from the 1930s, George from the 1940s, and Robert from the 1950s.*

Migrants almost always remember the details of their trips north. And they generally migrate for similar reasons—even well into the 1960s, when white supremacists substantially step up their use of violence during the civil rights movement. For instance, a young man named Eddie Earvin leaves the Mississippi Delta in 1963. He has worked as a **cotton** and spinach picker since the age of five. One day, he cuts his finger and decides to go to the doctor—but his boss stops him on the road to town and holds him at gunpoint. He decides to leave Mississippi, so he spends half a year saving up for the $21 bus ticket to Chicago. For months, he repeatedly visits the bus station to figure out the schedule (which isn't posted). He sneaks away with his family. But the whole bus ride, they're too afraid to speak.

The trip north or west consistently stuck in migrants' memories because it was the moment they permanently chose a new direction for their lives. As Wilkerson repeatedly puts it, leaving the South was both a way for migrants to achieve freedom and an expression of their very freedom. Meanwhile, Eddie Earvin's story may shock many readers because his early life so closely resembles Ida Mae's, even though he is thirty years younger. Indeed, he arguably faced an even greater threat of violence than she and George did. His experience shows how little the South changed—and how similar migrants' experiences were—from the turn of the 20th century until the civil rights movement overturned many segregationist policies in the 1960s.

PART FOUR: CHICAGO

Chicago, Twelfth Street Station, October 1937. Ida Mae and her family disembark in the chilly Chicago morning and walk through the swarming crowd. Now, they have to cross town and board another **train** to Milwaukee. "The great belching city" of Chicago—the first city they've ever visited—feels like heaven.

The thrill of disembarking in Chicago leaves a strong impression on Ida Mae for the rest of her life. The city's novel, exciting bustle represents the freedom that she has seized and the better life that she has chosen to pursue by moving to the North—even if she had little choice in the matter.

PART FOUR: NEW YORK

New York City, Pennsylvania Station, April 15, 1945. George Starling walks out into the bustling blur of the New York morning. He's supposed to have a note in his pocket with his aunt Annie's address, but it's not there, so he goes to a different friend's apartment instead. Exhausted, he takes a bath and remembers that his aunt lives on 112th Street. He heads over. Eventually, he will learn to walk, talk, and think like a New Yorker. But for now, he just feels free.

Like Ida Mae, George recognizes that he's starting a whole new life as soon as he gets off the train. New York may not be entirely new to him, but he's still thrilled to be safe and sound in the North. Indeed, it's worrying to think what may have become of him if he didn't have the resources and experience to escape Florida.

PART FOUR: LOS ANGELES

Los Angeles, April 1953. Robert Foster drives into smoggy, wide-open Los Angeles and goes to meet William Beck, his old medical school professor. Beck decided to become a country doctor after his own father caught tuberculosis and died because there were no Black doctors around and no white doctor would treat him. After World War II, Beck and his wife moved to Los Angeles, where they decided to buy a grand mansion. A clause in the deed limited the house to white buyers, but the realtor found a way around it. Still, the night the Becks moved in, someone burned down a tree in their front yard. Then, all of their white neighbors moved out.

Dr. Beck's life trajectory is a reminder that Black people chose to leave the South for diverse reasons, at all stages of their lives and careers. Beck shared a formative childhood experience with Ida Mae: both watched their fathers die because medical attention wasn't available to them in the segregated South. Fortunately, Beck had the resources to help fight this problem and dedicated his life to it, like Robert's brother Madison. Meanwhile, the Becks' experience moving to a white neighborhood was depressingly typical in the mid-20th century. In fact, the federal government legally mandated that mortgages be restricted to all-white neighborhoods and whites-only clauses be put in property deeds. This meant that the government systematically funneled capital toward white neighborhoods and away from Black ones, while many white homeowners learned to expect financial disaster when Black neighbors moved in. These policies are the foundation of the close link between race, home values, and residential segregations that still shapes American cities today.

There are very few Black people in California until the Great Migration. And when they start arriving, they encounter a totally different system than in the South or North. They have to compete for jobs with immigrants from China, Japan, Mexico, and Europe, and every workplace is segregated differently.

Northeastern and Midwestern cities received most of their immigrants from Europe, so the racial hierarchy was familiar to Black newcomers: native-born white people were above white immigrants, who were above Black people, who took the worst available jobs. But California's unique, less consistent ethnic mix meant that Black migrants didn't reliably end up in the same jobs—even though they did reliably face discrimination.

Unsure what his future will hold, Robert Foster visits Dr. Beck at his office. Beck eagerly offers him a place to stay and the opportunity to work at his practice. Then, Robert meets some old classmates, who show him around Hollywood and Beverly Hills. Los Angeles is all he dreamed it would be: vast, beautiful, vibrant, and clean. It's still divided by race, but a few successful Black families can break the color barrier.

Robert tours Los Angeles to decide whether he wants to live there. Dr. Beck's hospitality and the city's glamor charm him: he can easily picture himself building a life there, or even achieving the same standard of living as the city's white professionals. In a word, he feels freer there than he ever has anywhere else, and his perilous journey seems to have been worth it.

Next, Robert heads north to Oakland, his other option, where he knows more people from Monroe than in Los Angeles. But he finds that, even though the migrants are doing well, it looks just like Monroe. People have small cottages with gardens in the back—it isn't glamorous at all. He stays with his friend John Dunlap, a mortician who is working at a shipyard. The next morning, he visits hospitals to look for a job, but he comes back empty-handed. So his decision is easy: he heads back to Los Angeles.

For many migrants, the opportunity to recreate a piece of the South in Oakland is a source of comfort and pride. But for Robert, it's merely a reminder of a past that he would rather leave behind. So even though he recognizes that he could succeed in either city (and that it's just a coincidence that John Dunlap happens to be in Oakland while Dr. Beck happens to be in Los Angeles), he never doubts his decision.

PART FOUR: THE THINGS THEY LEFT BEHIND

In the North and West, 1915-2000. Migrants leave behind their loved ones, their homes, and some of their Southern traditions. Wilkerson's mother always remembered how her own mother cared for her night-blooming cereus, which only blossoms once per year, and invited the whole neighborhood over to watch when it did. But migrants try to preserve other traditions, including their cuisine, dialect, religion, and holidays. They set up clubs with other people from the same towns, send money home, and always remind their children where they came from.

The Great Migration leaves a permanent mark on the cultures of both the North and the South. Despite bringing elements of Black Southern culture to the North, it also causes Black culture to diverge permanently between the North and the South. Wilkerson's grandmother's night-blooming cereus represents the aspects of Southern culture that simply cannot be reproduced in the North (as the cereus cannot survive Northern winters) and the tight-knit communities that migrants often have to leave behind. Their hometown clubs show that they try their best to maintain these links and strengthen their hometowns, but Wilkerson admits that they can never recreate them perfectly.

PART FOUR: TRANSPLANTED IN ALIEN SOIL

Milwaukee, Wisconsin, November 1937. The Gladneys move into Ida Mae's sister Irene's living room. Like most migrants from Chickasaw County, Irene and her husband followed recruiters to Beloit, Wisconsin during World War I, then ended up in Milwaukee. Black workers replaced the European immigrants who stopped coming during the war—they took the dirtiest jobs around, usually in foundries and slaughterhouses. However, Ida Mae and George arrive during the Great Depression, when these jobs have mostly dried up, and the remaining few are reserved for white people. Yet Black migrants keep coming—they're now a majority in the North Side neighborhood. Ida Mae is pregnant, and she decides that she wants to give birth at home in Mississippi, instead of in a northern hospital.

Ida Mae, George, and their family are free from Jim Crow, but they still face incredibly difficult conditions in their new home in the North. It's understandable why Ida Mae would want to give birth in the familiar surroundings of Mississippi, instead of in the cold new city where she has landed. Irene and her husband joined the Great Migration in its earlier days, but World War I's labor shortages are long gone, and Ida Mae and George have scant opportunities. In fact, the same racial hierarchy that keeps Black people poor in the South is doing the same in the North. The only difference is that it's enforced through informal discrimination in the North, but a formal system of legal segregation in the South.

Harlem, Spring 1945. World War II is in full swing, so George Starling has no trouble finding a job in New York. Ironically, this job will send him back to the South: he'll be an attendant on the railroad, including the Silver Meteor **train** that brought him to New York. But at least he gets to live in Harlem, New York's most important Black enclave.

The difference between Ida Mae and George Gladney's economic prospects in Milwaukee during the Great Depression and George Starling's in New York during World War II is stark, mainly because they enter different labor markets. This shows how powerfully the nation's overall economic situation shapes migrants' experiences at different points in time. In the rest of the book, George's job on the railroad will become a powerful symbol of the Great Migration: he gets to help others come north on the same train that saved him from lynching and brought him to freedom.

In 1863, Irish immigrants angry about the Civil War draft rioted, lynched 11 Black men, and pushed New York's Black residents out of lower Manhattan. They moved north and eventually settled in Harlem, where the local white population fought hard to keep them out. But in the North, unlike in the South, profit won out over ideology: landlords eventually decided that renting to Black people was in their best interests. Harlem quickly became Black America's cultural capital. When George moves there, idols like Langston Hughes, Duke Ellington, and W. E. B. DuBois all live within the same few blocks. George buys a brownstone in the less swanky part of the neighborhood and starts spending his free time at dance halls like the Savoy Ballroom, where he meets many old friends from Eustis.

George gets the privilege to live in an extremely exciting place in Black America and participate in its vibrant cultural scene—something that could only be possible in the North. Wilkerson gives crucial historical context to help her readers understand how Harlem became New York's primary Black enclave. Yet it didn't happen because Northerners were kindhearted or antiracist, but rather because, unlike the South, the North didn't let its racism get in the way of its drive for profit. Landlords recognized that it was profitable for them to designate an isolated Black enclave, because if Black people could only access a small section of town, they would be willing to pay far higher rents to live there. Thus, New York exploited Black migrants in order to integrate them into the city. The story is similar when it comes to labor. Black migrants were desirable to Northern industrialists most of all because they were willing to work for very little. This is also why white workers violently resisted Black migration: they understood that they would have to compete with the newcomers for jobs.

Los Angeles, 1953. Robert Foster drives back to Los Angeles. His savings are down to $1.50, but Dr. Beck offers him a guest bedroom and a steady flow of patients. Then, he finds a job screening patients for a Black insurance company. He's overqualified and never wanted to treat patients door-to-door, but the job pays well enough. It also surprises him—like when one Black woman insists that she will only see a white doctor. Robert gets no surgery referrals, so his hopes of building his own private practice start to fade. His acquaintances from Monroe prefer white doctors or California-educated Black doctors, and some still hold a grudge against his family.

Robert faces more discrimination than he expected, confronts old grudges from back home in Monroe, and has to start at an all-Black company with a job well below his proper pay grade. But he still has plenty of support and can look forward to more promising opportunities than he would have found in Monroe. In this sense, his story shows how the Great Migration allowed two generations of educated Black professionals to more fully realize their potential in the North and West.

Robert worries that he'll disappoint his brother Madison and his father-in-law, Dr. Clement—especially after he learns that Dr. Clement has been elected to the Atlanta Board of Education. This will make him the first Black person since Reconstruction to hold statewide public office in Georgia, where Black people still can't vote. Robert decides to hunt for referrals by visiting local physicians and churches, but this doesn't work. However, he has more luck converting his insurance exam clients, especially the ones who just migrated to California from the South.

Robert believes that, if he doesn't build a successful private practice in Los Angeles, then he might as well have just stayed in Monroe, where he was guaranteed a prominent role in the community, like his brother Madison. Meanwhile, Dr. Clement's election to the Board of Education arguably makes him the most influential Black man in Georgia. Robert is acutely aware that he and Dr. Clement have chosen opposite paths in life. Beyond the simple contrast between Robert's decision to leave the South and Dr. Clement's decision to stay, Robert is also pursuing success on his own highly individualistic terms, while Clement has succeeded by courting power and leaning into existing institutions.

PART FOUR: DIVISIONS

The North and West, 1915 to the 1970s. Migrants face "a headwind of resentment and suspicion" in the North. Their clothes, accents, and customs set them apart, and even social scientists view their culture as deficient and pathological. But this is wrong: scholars also know that the farther migrants travel, the more ambitious and educated they tend to be. Most migrants to the North come from Southern cities and towns, not from plantations, and they are better educated than the average Black Southerner. In fact, by the 1950s, they even have more education than *white* locals. And, compared to Black locals, migrants are more likely to be married, employed, and financially secure. Sociologists explain this "migrant advantage" by pointing out that the most resourceful, hardest-working people are the most likely to migrate, while less resilient migrants often return home.

Wilkerson hones in on the prejudices and stereotypes that limit migrants' opportunities and social integration in the North. Many of them remain extremely common even today—such as the racist but commonly-repeated idea that Black urbanites are disproportionately poor because they brought a morally deficient culture with them from the South. (The reality, as Wilkerson will show, is that they are disproportionately poor because of factors like labor discrimination, government disinvestment in Black neighborhoods, and racist housing valuation policies, all multiplied over generations.) The research handily disproves these stereotypes and shows that, like migrants everywhere, the Great Migration's participants were really unusually ambitious, educated, and successful.

Still, migrants face harmful stereotypes in the North. Teachers treat Southern schoolchildren as disabled because of their accents, seat them all in the front or back rows, or force them to do menial tasks. For instance, young J.C. Owens becomes Jesse Owens because his teacher misunderstands his accent. Later, he becomes the U.S.'s greatest track and field athlete, and he wins four gold medals at the 1936 Olympics in Nazi Germany. Even though neither Hitler nor President Roosevelt will shake his hand, he's treated better in Germany than at home.

While stereotypes certainly hold migrants and their children back, Wilkerson offers Jesse Owens's success as proof that facing discrimination in the North is still far less detrimental than suffering from segregation in the South. Owens likely never would have been able to develop his talents or compete internationally if he had stayed in the South. So life in the North is far from painless or perfect, but it's still markedly better than life in the South.

Chicago, August 1938. Fearing that Northern doctors would strap her into a hospital bed, Ida Mae returns to Mississippi to give birth at home, with a midwife. In the meantime, George moves from Milwaukee to Chicago, where he finds work as an ice deliveryman and rents a tiny basement apartment in the dilapidated but vibrant Black neighborhood of Bronzeville. Ida Mae and the children join him in August. They try their best to avoid the neighborhood's gangsters, gamblers, and vice.

Unlike Robert Foster, who chooses Los Angeles over Oakland simply because he likes it better, Ida Mae and George end up in Chicago simply because George finds work there. Put differently, their migration decisions are entirely economic, and like most other Black migrants, they're fundamentally at the mercy of the labor market. After all, Ida Mae's decision to give birth at home shows that, unlike George Starling and Robert Foster, she doesn't feel freer, safer, or more comfortable in her new city than she does at home.

In some ways, life in Chicago is even more miserable than in Mississippi: families are packed into in one-room shacks, which are usually falling apart and often lack heat and running water. Nobody will rent to Black people outside Bronzeville, but as more and more migrants arrive, there is less and less space for them. And since they have no other option, they pay much higher rents than white families—for far inferior housing. Eventually, this "pattern of overcharging and underinvestment" creates ghetto neighborhoods in cities across the North.

Wilkerson emphasizes the connections between the history of "overcharging and underinvestment" in urban Black neighborhoods since the early 20th century and the often-impoverished character of these neighborhoods today. The root cause behind these conditions is discrimination: landlords prefer to hike up the rent for slum properties in the area than to integrate the housing market. This trend has continued unbroken for decades—and is still the norm today.

After World War I, jobs and housing were insufficient to keep up with Black migration to Chicago. In 1919, after white boys drowned a Black teenager who swam too close to the white side of a beach, serious race riots broke out. For two weeks, white and Black city residents randomly attacked each other and burned down houses and businesses. Such riots are effectively the North's version of lynching—most are started by "disaffected whites," who are often from the rural South—just like the Black migrants they blame for their poor working conditions. The first such riot was in East St. Louis, Illinois in 1917, when white miners turned against Black strikebreakers. After the Chicago riots, even though the government made recommendations for improving race relations, the city only became more and more segregated.

Wilkerson compares race riots to lynching not only because they are both common forms of racist violence, but also because they serve the same specific function: they both use terror to try and prevent the Black population from seeking better wages, political rights, and living conditions. The city government's report on the riots is significant not only because it gives a detailed portrait of what happened, but also because it shows that local governments fully understood the situation and were capable of addressing it—but chose not to. In other words, the report disproves the common but naïve assumption that racist policies in the past were merely "products of their time," and that nobody stopped them simply because nobody knew any better. In reality, Chicago's segregation was a deliberate policy decision.

New York, Summer 1945. George brings Inez to New York with him and offers to rent her a beauty shop for her business. But she takes up nursing instead, whether "to show her independence, to spite him, or both." George starts partying during his free time to cope with his unhappy marriage. Like Ida Mae's neighborhood of Bronzeville, Harlem is overcrowded, and its residents pay unfairly high rents—which they cover by throwing poker parties. George starts attending and then throwing his own parties with Babe Blye (now his upstairs tenant). But Babe keeps losing their money, and then George catches him cheating, so he shuts down their operation.

George's impulsive decision to marry Inez as a young man continues to weigh on him. Meanwhile, his friendship with Babe Blye, one of the citrus foremen he used to work with in Florida, demonstrates how people like George manage to support one another and stay connected with home by rooting themselves in networks of fellow migrants. Finally, the poker parties show how the deliberate "pattern of overcharging and underinvestment" in neighborhoods like Bronzeville and Harlem by government and financial institutions has directly led to the rise of crime and vice in them.

Los Angeles, June 1953. Robert Foster decides to open his own private practice. He finds an office near the USC campus, and friends from Monroe help him furnish it and throw an open house. Then, Alice and their daughters join him. He finds an apartment near the office, but the landlord cancels at the last minute, so he rents a doctor friend's apartment near the Becks instead. Still, he struggles to get patients. Some Black migrants from Monroe prefer white doctors, some hold onto old hometown grudges, and some simply envy his success. So he targets patients from New Orleans, Baton Rouge, and Texas instead.

Robert finally takes the leap and starts working on his own. Like Ida Mae and George, he succeeds largely thanks to supportive networks of friends and acquaintances. And like George, he makes a living by working within the Migration itself. His patients trust him because he shares their migrant background and can cater to their specific needs and anxieties. After all, Ida Mae's insistence on returning to Mississippi to give birth shows how migrants often found the medical system cold and hostile in the North and West—if Ida Mae had been able to see a fellow migrant doctor in Milwaukee, perhaps she would have felt comfortable giving birth there.

PART FOUR: TO BEND IN STRANGE WINDS

Chicago, Late 1938. When Ida Mae first moves to Chicago, she's isolated and homesick. A neighbor from Mississippi stops by and introduces herself, then shares a bottle of homemade wine with Ida Mae and gives her advice about how to handle the big city. But this angers George—he tells Ida Mae not to drink or let strangers in. Ida Mae feels ashamed of "her innocent country ways." Migrants like her face judgment from northern-born Black people, earlier migrants, and the Black middle class (such as the successful businesspeople, doctors, and landlords who can't leave the neighborhood due to the color line). Old-timers and newcomers even go to different churches.

Living in the city means trusting strangers far less than migrants like Ida Mae are used to. Migrants' "innocent country ways" may contribute to their marginalization within Northern cities, but only because it leads others to discriminate against them—and not, as Wilkerson explained in the last chapter, because it makes them any less capable of succeeding economically. In Northern cities like Chicago, informal neighborhood segregation creates conflict among different groups of Black residents for the same reason as it enables landlords to hike up rents: it forces Black people to fight over an artificially small pool of space, resources, and opportunities.

Most of all, old-timers fear that newcomers will make them look bad and threaten their precarious success in the city. But they also recognize that the new migrants have finally broken free from Jim Crow, and many do their best to help. For instance, The Chicago Defender and Chicago Urban League publish "do's and don'ts" lists for newcomers. Ida Mae appreciates the advice but doesn't take all of it: she won't change her name, shed her Mississippi accent, stop making her food, or forget her Southern songs.

Longtime Black Northerners understand that, in their city's racist social and economic system, their status will fall if white people start to associate them with the recent migrants and their out-of-place country ways. So they kill two birds with one stone by helping new migrants assimilate: they mitigate this risk while also supporting their community. Yet Ida Mae's approach shows that Southern culture is also an important part of migrants' identities. Holding onto it is a crucial way for them to cope with their new lives and maintain connections with their families and communities.

New York, January 1947. George and Inez finally have a child. Meanwhile, George sees the Great Migration firsthand at his job on the Silver Comet, where he helps Black passengers with baggage, directions, and whatever else they need. Often, as soon as they board the northbound **train**, migrants start acting different—more confident and freer. On southbound trains, the passengers are mostly older migrants visiting family. On the way north, they pack their bags full of all the food they can carry. Once, blood from a butchered animal starts dripping out of someone's luggage. One woman hides a watermelon in her hatbox. Another man claims that his box is full of clothes, but it's really sweet potatoes. George drops the box during a wild curve, and the sweet potatoes start rolling around all over the train car. Everyone laughs like crazy.

George's job gives him a special perspective on the Great Migration. He gets to observe the way it changes over time and, above all, its emotional significance for migrants, who appear comfortable and free from the moment they enter the train. He also sees how the migration creates sustained links between the North and South, as people support their Southern hometowns with their earnings from the North and recreate Southern traditions in the North. The box of sweet potatoes is a playful but fitting metaphor for this process: migrants try to bring the elements of Southern culture that are dearest to them (like their food) to the North. But often, things don't go entirely according to plan, and they end up transforming that culture in the process of bringing it north.

Los Angeles, 1954. Alice is used to her family's Atlanta mansion, so the new Los Angeles apartment is a difficult adjustment. She and Robert have never actually lived together, except very briefly in Austria, and they realize that they disagree on many things. Their daughters are used to being spoiled by their wealthy grandparents, and while Robert wants Southern comfort food, Alice and the kids prefer bland, sophisticated dishes like soufflé. Robert hopes to start building a social circle, but Alice is ashamed of their apartment and refuses to make friends until they have a bigger house. Robert still feels like he's not good enough for the Clement family. He decides to buy a Cadillac to impress them and his patients. Alice is against it, but he does it anyway.

Robert faces the unfortunate truth that his professional ambitions and history of frequent migration have distanced him from his family. Alice and her daughters stick to Dr. Clement's old-money lifestyle, which clashes with Robert's personality and new-money vision of success. Robert came to California in pursuit of the freedom to do what he wants with whom he wants—not to spend his time imitating white aristocrats at stodgy high-society functions. So it's no surprise that he eventually starts trying to free himself from his family, too.

PART FOUR: THE OTHER SIDE OF JORDAN

Chicago, November 1940. It's election day, and both parties have been campaigning hard in Chicago. Ida Mae has never voted before—in Mississippi, she couldn't, so she never even paid attention to politics. But now, the Democrats—the party of segregation in the South but the New Deal in the North—are courting her vote. She doesn't even know how to use the ballot, but a volunteer helps her. Eventually, Ida Mae becomes an election volunteer, too. By voting, she is "defying the very heart of the southern caste system." That year, Chicago migrants help deliver President Roosevelt a third term.

Ida Mae is nearly thirty, but voting is an entirely foreign concept to her. This shows how brutally effective Jim Crow laws were at preventing Black people from exercising their voting rights or participating in politics in the South. Wilkerson tells the story of Ida Mae voting for the first time in Chicago in order to underline how simply crossing over to the North entirely transformed Black people's rights and status in society. Migration enabled Black Southerners to participate in political life as full citizens for the first time since Reconstruction.

On the Silver Comet, Mid- to Late 1940s. On the 23-hour voyage from Birmingham, Alabama to New York, George Starling notices a man hiding out between the **train** cars. In fact, many migrants hop trains when they can't afford the tickets. For instance, a young man named Johnson migrates from Louisiana to Los Angeles in 1931 by hopping freight trains with a group of friends. Patrolmen kick them off of several moving trains, and at one point, they have to beg for food and spend the night at a hobo camp. But they make it, and Johnson eventually becomes a successful accountant. When George notices people hopping his train, he tries to bring them food—and he never turns them in.

The freight hoppers demonstrate that there was another cohort of migrants even poorer than Ida Mae. Yet Johnson's story affirms Wilkerson's basic message: that migration can fundamentally transform people's lives by giving them opportunities that simply were not available in the places where they started. Meanwhile, in his new job, George still makes decisions based on his strong social conscience: he recognizes that the train hoppers are seeking freedom and a better life in exactly the same way that he did, so he does what he can to help them out.

Los Angeles, Summer 1955. Robert starts performing surgeries out of a local hospital, where the white doctors constantly brag about their weekend trips to Las Vegas. Robert dreams of joining them, but Las Vegas hotels are white-only. Then, he learns that the city's first Black casino executive, a man named Jimmy Gay, has been secretly getting reservations for Black visitors. Jimmy secures reservations at the new Riviera Hotel for Robert's party of 13. But when they arrive, dressed to the nines, their reservation is gone. Fortunately, Jimmy Gay gets them rooms elsewhere, and Robert gets to live out his Las Vegas fantasy. He even impresses a white woman with his red satin-lined suit.

As Robert becomes more successful at work, he runs into new glass ceilings. Las Vegas promises him the thrill, freedom, and glamor that originally motivated him to come to California, but it also represents the segregation and racial hierarchies that he has always wanted to fight. He has never stopped believing that he deserves everything white people can have, and Jimmy Gay helps him turn this into a reality. So it's little surprise that he so fondly remembers his first trip to the casinos. Again, this anecdote shows that informal segregation in the North and West is often (but not always) negotiable, but only for the right price.

Chicago, Early 1939. George and Ida Mae struggle to find work—they have few skills, and most jobs are limited to white immigrants. Eventually, George finds work on the assembly line at the vast Campbell Soup factory. It's as monotonous as picking **cotton**, but it's also indoors and stable. He avoids the racial conflicts that plague many Chicago factories, in which factory owners stop hiring Black workers after white workers refuse to work with them. (Other bosses use Black workers to break strikes, or as a threat to keep white workers' wages low.) Most Black men are unskilled laborers or servants, while most white men have skilled desk jobs. The disparity is even worse for women. But Ida Mae still needs to find work—and cope with the unfathomably cold Chicago winter.

George and Ida Mae's new lives are extremely difficult but still generally better than their earlier lives in Mississippi. The social dynamics of Chicago's factories show how racism and capitalism reinforce one another. Namely, the market pits different groups of workers against one another (like white immigrants from Europe and Black migrants from the South) by making their success zero-sum. White immigrants feel that Black migrants' gain is their loss, and vice-versa. This is particularly convenient for business owners because it prevents workers from banding together and demanding better wages and working conditions.

New York, December 1951. George Starling receives disturbing news about Harry T. Moore, a man he once met while working as a substitute teacher in Eustis. Moore was the Florida NAACP's intrepid head organizer. He spent his days driving around the state, recruiting members, investigating lynchings, and lobbying legislators. He also started a public campaign to fix the more than two-to-one pay disparity between Black and white teachers, and when he stopped in Eustis, George agreed to join him. But he couldn't convince any of the Black teachers at his school to join the NAACP. It turned out that the county school board threatened the school's principal, who reluctantly told the teachers not to sign up.

Wilkerson tells Harry T. Moore's story for several reasons. First, it speaks to the violence of segregation and the dangers that activists faced before the organized civil rights movement emerged. (This had important consequences for the Great Migration: until the late 1950s, Black people had little hope of seeing conditions change in the South, which encouraged them to migrate.) Second, it gives important context to George Starling's early life in Florida. And third, Harry T. Moore is a largely forgotten civil rights hero, and Wilkerson hopes to help revive his legacy.

Later, Harry T. Moore got involved in a major lynching case in Groveland, near Eustis. A jury sentenced two Black men to death, and one to life in prison, for raping a white woman. There was no evidence against these men, and they got a second trial thanks to lobbying by Moore and the NAACP. But on the eve of their trial, the county sheriff, Willis V. McCall, shot and killed them, claiming self-defense. Moore began publicly calling for an investigation into the sheriff. Then, the NAACP leadership replaced him due to a disagreement about strategy. A few days later, the KKK bombed his house, killing him and his wife. This is the news that George Starling receives. Nobody is charged for Moore's death. He becomes one of the civil rights movement's first martyrs.

Sheriff McCall's blatant abuses of power and Harry T. Moore's tragic fate are just more examples of how, beyond just enforcing segregation laws, the government also played a central role in perpetrating and supporting terrorist violence against Black Southerners. Indeed, Moore's murder likely confirmed to George that he was right to leave Florida—the same thing could have just as easily happened to him. Thanks to a resurgence of interest in Harry T. Moore's story, his murder case was reopened in 2005. The government identified four perpetrators, all long-dead Ku Klux Klan members.

Los Angeles, Mid- to Late 1950s. As Robert Foster's reputation grows, his friends from Monroe finally start coming to see him. So do hospital workers like orderlies and nurses, who take a liking to him. Soon enough, patients are waiting several hours for their appointments, and Robert is practically living at work. He's so charming and fashionable that people call him "the Jitterbug Doctor," and he starts befriending and treating celebrities, beginning with Ray Charles. And he can finally afford to buy his family a new house. But he wants to avoid conflict—white people are rioting all over Los Angeles as Black people move into their neighborhoods. So Robert finds a beautiful mansion in an area where several prominent Black professionals already live, and he moves his family in.

Robert ultimately builds a thriving practice because of the precise traits that he once expected would hold him back: his Southern background and his infectious, relatable, folksy personality. In this sense, he achieves every migrant's dream—by leaving the South, he frees himself from segregation and succeeds on his own terms. His elite class status may separate him from the majority of Los Angeles's Black population, but there's no question that he makes an important contribution to his community through his medical practice.

PART FOUR: COMPLICATIONS

Chicago, 1939-1940. To keep her family afloat, Ida Mae needs to find a job. But there are very few options for Black women, who are "literally at the bottom of the economic hierarchy." Employers even recruit white women from out of town or just remain understaffed instead of accepting Black migrant women, most of whom end up as informal domestic workers. Some assemble in so-called "slave markets" and wait for white women to hire them, while others simply walk around white neighborhoods. They make little more than they did on plantations, while facing similar exploitation, racism, and sexual violence.

Wilkerson is careful to emphasize that, while Black men generally find better economic opportunities in the North, this isn't necessarily true for Black women. This distinction is important because many narratives about Black history center men's perspectives, intentionally or otherwise. City life exposes women to new kinds of violence and exploitation, and they have virtually no power as workers because there is so little demand for their labor in the landscape of mid-20th century American society.

Ida Mae finds a job cleaning for a wealthy white family, but when she arrives to start working, the husband asks her to have sex with him. She refuses, and fortunately, he leaves her alone. She's relieved to be in the North—in the South, the man probably would have assaulted her and gotten away with it. Next, she finds a job putting lids on cans for a steel company. But she quits after she sees a machine cut off her coworker's fingers. She briefly works with George at Campbell Soup and in a printing press. Then, at last, she finds stable work as a hospital aide sterilizing and organizing medical instruments. With her income, her family can afford a bigger apartment. Their friends and family members from Mississippi start visiting them, and some even stay.

Ida Mae's cleaning job demonstrates both how much progress Black women make simply by moving North (which gives Ida Mae the power to escape sexual violence) and how much work there is left to be done until they can truly live free, dignified lives. Her fortunes improve when she finds stable work in the formal sector. Her eventual success underlines the fact that migration consistently pays off in the long run, even if it causes growing pains in the short term. And her visits from family again highlight the way that network effects drive the migration. In other words, people do not make the decision to migrate in isolation, but rather because they hear rumors about the North, have family who has migrated, or even visit to check it out for themselves.

New York, 1950s. One day, George Starling gets a drink with a coworker after a long shift, and the bartender smashes their glasses on the ground. This is the New York way of telling Black people that they're not welcome. At work, the white **train** conductors also abuse the Black attendants. One conductor makes them run along the moving train to clean it. But when George refuses, the conductor starts hitting him whenever they cross paths. One day, he pushes George onto an elderly white woman. Fortunately, she sees everything, blames the conductor, and formally complains to the company. This gets the conductor suspended, and George switches routes.

Wilkerson carefully puts her protagonists' experiences in perspective: they face different kinds of obstacles, largely because of the ways they differ in gender and class, but they also consistently have more opportunities in the North than they would have in the South. Compared to Ida Mae, George suffers less from discrimination and limited opportunities based on his city's informal racial hierarchy (although he still does). Yet he faces much more direct racism than Ida Mae, in part because he is middle class and has more direct contact with white people (especially at work). While readers might find his conflict with his boss disturbing, within the context of the 1950s, it's also remarkable that the company ultimately takes his side—even if it takes an elderly white woman to make that happen.

Los Angeles, 1961. Robert gets an urgent call from Ray Charles's wife in the middle of the night. Ray is passing out and losing blood fast; he seriously cut his hand on a glass table after collapsing due to a mix of exhaustion and heroin. Ray's wife ruses him to Robert's office, where Robert performs emergency surgery and then transfers Ray to the hospital for a blood transfusion. To recover, Ray shouldn't use his left hand for six weeks, but he's going on tour in a few days. Robert decides to follow him on tour to take care of the injury—and have the time of his life. Ray Charles will long consider Robert one of his dearest friends—and even name his next son after him.

While Robert's perfectionism may cause him trouble in other parts of his life, it makes him excellent at his job. He may not have a close relationship with his family, but he certainly loves his work. Indeed, Wilkerson uses this anecdote to show why he's such an exemplary doctor: he goes above and beyond in caring for Ray Charles. He cherishes the opportunity to witness Ray's tour up close and knows that his friendship with Ray will enable him to move in more elite circles in Los Angeles, but this doesn't make his dedication to his work anything less than sincere.

The North, 1915-1975. Scholars constantly debate the causes, effects, and deeper meaning of the Great Migration. But when the Chicago Commission on Race Relations actually surveys migrants, their responses to these questions are mixed. For the most part, though, they report feeling freer, living without fear, and finding better work for the first time.

Wilkerson again emphasizes the limits of 20th century scholarly research about the Great Migration: it's often unreliable because much of it is written from a deeply prejudiced perspective, with particular, often exploitative policy goals in mind. In contrast, the Chicago Commission's report is valuable because—like Wilkerson's book—it depicts the Great Migration through its participants' eyes.

PART FOUR: THE RIVER KEEPS RUNNING

Whitfield, Mississippi, February 7, 1958. In Chicago, conversation often revolves around people's struggles to escape the South. For example, the Black pro-integration newspaper publisher Arrington High ends up permanently committed to a Mississippi insane asylum after exposing segregationists visiting a Black brothel. The doctor and civil rights leader T. R. M. Howard helps High escape the asylum in two five-car motorcades, one with Mississippi plates, one with Alabama ones. High hides in a coffin for the **train** ride to Chicago. (Black people have used similar tactics for generations—in 1849, Henry Box Brown shipped himself north in a dry goods box and miraculously survived the 26-hour journey.) In Chicago, Dr. Howard brings Arrington High to a funeral home in his coffin, then lets him out. Many other people escaped the South the same way—although nobody will ever know how many.

The enduring connections between the North and the South extend to activism, which shows how the Great Migration is crucial to the formation of the civil rights movement. This link is another way in which migrants actually strengthen the South by leaving it for greener pastures. Arrington High's story once again shows how Southern states go to extreme lengths to silence anyone who threatens white supremacist rule. Indeed, the fact that Howard and his allies take High all the way to the funeral home shows that they aren't playing around: they take extreme precautions because they know how extremely draconian Jim Crow can be. Ultimately, High's incredible escape is perhaps the book's most vivid example of how migration meant liberation for Black Southerners.

New York, 1957. Even though George and Inez's marriage is always rocky, they enjoy hosting visitors from Eustis, have another daughter in 1954, and adopt Inez's troubled niece, Pat, after her sister dies in 1957. George feels sympathy for Pat, but when she arrives, he's away for work, and Inez demands that she start paying rent. When Pat reports that George and Inez's 12-year-old son, Gerard, is doing drugs with his friends, Inez kicks her out of the house. Still, once George returns, he becomes a father figure to Pat. Meanwhile, Gerard becomes a heroin addict—many of his friends die of overdoses, and he starts stealing from his parents. And Inez keeps mistreating Pat, although they do eventually make amends.

George's family problems continue to mount: despite his best efforts, he finds himself embroiled in the same kind of conflict that defined his childhood. In particular, Gerard's addiction shows how urban life in the North presents migrants and (especially) their children with unfamiliar new risks. Migrants like George were often willing to work hard and put up with discrimination, underinvestment, and delinquency in the North because they had experienced far worse in the South. But for their children, life in the Northern cities feels profoundly limiting, and drugs and crime seem like viable alternatives to a life of drudgery in poorly paid jobs like George's.

Los Angeles, May 1962. Ray Charles writes a song about Robert, and it hits #20 on the *Billboard* charts. It's called "Hide Nor Hair," and it dramatizes the sexy Dr. Foster stealing one of Ray's girlfriends. Robert is flooded with patients, who often spend the whole day waiting for an appointment. In return, he often invites them to gamble or party with him.

Robert has far better luck than George. He achieves everything that he dreamed about when he first left Louisiana for California. His family life may be almost as rocky as George's, but his professional success, connections to Hollywood, and popularity more than make up for it. He's practically a celebrity in his own right. This all confirms his lifelong belief that he deserved a far better life and career than the South was willing to give him.

PART FOUR: THE PRODIGALS

Somewhere Near Cartersville, Georgia, Summer 1956. As a young woman, Wilkerson's mother drives home from Washington, D.C. to Rome, Georgia in her brand-new Pontiac. But the car is covered in dust from the trip, so she goes for a car wash. After all, this is her "moment of glory." Migrants typically visit home for summers, holidays, family events like funerals, and connecting their northern-born children to their family and culture. But often, these children don't know how to deal with Jim Crow.

Wilkerson's mother cares deeply about the impression she leaves on her relatives in Rome. This isn't because of selfishness or vanity, but because she understands that her whole family will take pride in her success. Her visit will represent the excitement and promise of life in the North—and perhaps even convince others to follow her.

Ida Mae and George Gladney are too busy in Chicago to visit Mississippi for anything but funerals. Robert Foster prefers not to return to Monroe, and George Starling worries that it's too dangerous to go back to Eustis, even though his job frequently takes him to other nearby parts of Florida. Relatives usually drive hours to meet *him* at the station, even if only for a few minutes while he waits for the **train** to refuel. One day, he even briefly runs into the notorious sheriff Willis V. McCall at the train station.

Ida Mae, George, and Robert represent the diversity of the Great Migration in virtually every way, but their lack of visits home is probably the only major exception. George and Robert, in particular, try their best to permanently leave their lives in the South behind—even if their social networks in New York and Los Angeles are primarily composed of fellow migrants.

The most famous Black Northerner to visit the South is Emmett Till, the 14-year-old boy who goes to Mississippi to see his great-uncle and gets lynched for allegedly offending a white woman. His mother decides to hold an open-casket funeral in Chicago. Thousands of people attend, including Ida Mae. She's horrified when she sees Till's disfigured face.

Most Americans learn about the famous case of Emmett Till, but seldom in the context of the Great Migration. This is what makes Till's story so tragic: he didn't even understand the oppressive Jim Crow social codes that were used against him. But it's also what makes his story so powerful: his family could only spread the news of his murder, hold a massive funeral for him, and make political statements because they lived in free Chicago. Otherwise, Till may have become just another of the countless lynching victims who never received recognition.

PART FOUR: DISILLUSIONMENT

Chicago, 1951. By the 1950s, there isn't enough housing for Black migrants in Chicago, and white neighborhoods still refuse to accept them. In fact, white residents deliberately terrorize them through arson and bombings. For instance, when the Black, well-to-do Clark family rents an apartment in the all-white suburb of Cicero, protestors meet them on move-in day and the police run them out of town. A white mob breaks into their apartment, destroys everything they own, then burns down the whole 20-unit building and riots for three days. The city prosecutes the Clarks, landlord, and realtor—and not the mob. This riot shows that racism can be just as vicious in the North as in the South, and it makes front-page news around the world. And decades later, there are still virtually no Black people in Cicero.

The same pattern of violence and housing discrimination continues in Northern cities, which should dispel the common assumption that the North was less racist than the South. Instead, the crucial difference was merely that racial hierarchy wasn't written into the law, which meant that ordinary citizens took it upon themselves to enforce it. This led to situations like the one the Clark family faced. Notably, even though the government didn't write segregation into the laws, it still chose to side with the racist mob. But at the same time, the Clarks' story begins with something that never would have been possible in the South: a Black family moving into a white neighborhood. This fact alone speaks to the greater flexibility in the North's racial hierarchy as compared to the South's.

White homeowners tend to justify excluding Black newcomers from their neighborhoods by claiming that they will reduce property values. Social scientists have found that this is true, but only as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Often before Black families even move into a neighborhood, white residents sell their homes at a discount because they merely *worry* that Black people will come. Meanwhile, new white residents refuse to move in and banks refuse to offer new mortgages in the area. These conditions lower property prices, making the area attractive to Black buyers (and highly profitable for real estate speculators). And this cycle explains why, in the 1950s, white families started leaving cities for the suburbs—a pattern that continues into the 21st century.

As Wilkerson explains here and social scientists have broadly shown, housing markets and the financial system have been some of the most powerful forces behind the persistent economic inequality between different racial groups in the U.S. These forces create a self-reinforcing cycle, in which the housing market rewards white homeowners and neighborhoods with a premium, while penalizing Black ones by reducing the value of their properties. This is particularly devastating and bitterly ironic because, at the same time, segregation drives up rents and drives down housing quality in Black neighborhoods like Harlem and Bronzeville. Readers might even attribute Robert Foster's success in part to the fact that he managed to buy a home in a predominantly white—but technically integrated—area, which didn't fall victim to the same deterioration as Ida Mae and George's neighborhoods.

New York, 1963. Through TV and newspapers, George Starling learns how the police are brutalizing civil rights protesters in the South. It reminds him of his own childhood. He feels angry at white people and concerned for his friends and family. And he watches tensions between his white and Black passengers get even worse. He sends what money he can to support the movement, and he joins a fundraising drive to rebuild three burned-out churches in Georgia. He feels that he has to do everything he can to push for justice. He spends a month enthusiastically collecting donations, and he keeps going even after the drive formally shuts down.

Thanks to his strong conscience, George continues supporting justice and Black empowerment in whatever way he can. His story serves as a reminder that the civil rights movement truly was a collective undertaking led by a whole generation of ordinary people. It also highlights the way that technological change influenced politics: television famously enabled Americans everywhere to see segregationist police brutalizing civil rights protestors in the South in 1965. This significantly contributed to popular support for the civil rights movement. Indeed, it helped create a collective Black national consciousness in a way that wasn't possible when Ida Mae, George, and Robert first migrated in decades past.

Los Angeles, August 1961. When Robert learns that his brother Madison needs gallbladder surgery, he insists that Madison do it in Los Angeles, instead of dealing with the segregated medical system in Monroe. Madison agrees, and Robert ensures that he gets the best surgeon available. The surgery goes perfectly, but a few days later, Madison starts feeling strange—and then he has a serious blood clot in the bathroom. He dies soon thereafter, but not before Robert has a chance to visit him in the hospital. Even though Madison's blood clot was impossible to prevent, Robert blames himself for it.

Just like the Chicago riots show why so many migrants were wrong to think of the North as a perfect, integrated paradise, Madison's sudden, tragic, but unpreventable death in California is deeply ironic because it contradicts Robert's rosy view of the state (and especially its medical system). At the end of the day, Robert will never definitively win over his brother—or Dr. Clement, the other most influential person in his life who questions his decision to migrate.

PART FOUR: REVOLUTIONS

Chicago, 1966. Ida Mae and her grandchildren notice a crowd on the street, packed around a man giving a speech. It's Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. After his Nobel Peace Prize, the massive 1963 March on Washington, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, he's famous around the country, but he's also unsure what his movement should focus on next. This is why he's in Chicago, speaking about the deep inequalities and pervasive discrimination that Black migrants face in the North. However, fighting informal racism is much more complicated than simply overturning Jim Crow laws: the adversary is not blatant segregation, but rather "the ill-defined fear and antipathy" that white and Black Northerners feel for each other.

Political differences between the North and the South created different systems of racial domination, which required different responses from the civil rights movement. The South could not progress towards equality until the federal government blocked state-level Jim Crow laws, but in the North, achieving equality required completely transforming society, including by changing the way millions of people thought and breaking down the informal color lines in housing and employment—a task that is still far from complete today.

Dr. King moves to Chicago's poorest neighborhood and starts negotiating with the mayor, Richard Daley, who cleverly gives King's followers so much police support that their marches prove uneventful. But then, at a march in August 1966, a mob of 4,000 white protestors overwhelms the police to brutally attack King and his marchers. Dr. King later admits that it's worse than any attack he ever saw in the South.

The civil rights movement's power derives above all from public support—and especially from popular outrage over the violence that protestors faced. Indeed, just as racist sentiment actually grew after the end of the Civil War in the South, it also became far more common in the North after the Great Migration. This happened for a simple reason: the law no longer enforced racial hierarchy, so white people suddenly needed to do it on their own, through their attitudes and behavior. This shows that racism correlates more closely with white people's anxiety about their economic and social status than the actual level of racial inequality in U.S. society at any given point in time.

New York, Pennsylvania Station, Mid-1960s. **Trains** have long been integrated in the North, and in 1964, the new Civil Rights Act officially integrates them in the South, too. Suddenly, it's George's job to enforce the law: Black passengers no longer have to change from integrated cars to segregated ones when the train passes through Washington, D.C. However, many conductors ignore the law and insist on segregating the trains anyway. When they do, George tactfully reminds Black passengers that they're legally allowed to stay in their seats. This could get him fired, so he carefully gauges his passengers' reactions before he tells them too much, and he asks them to keep everything confidential. But many passengers don't understand, go to the Jim Crow car out of fear, or get angry at George. Yet nobody ever turns him in, and nobody who stays in their seat ever gets kicked out.

George tries to balance job security with his desire to advance the cause of racial equality. In doing so, he makes a small but distinct and important contribution to bettering his society—just like the millions of other rank-and-file participants in the civil rights movement. But his ordeal is a reminder that many Americans strongly resisted desegregation, above all in the South, and law enforcement seldom stopped them. Indeed, Black passengers' reluctance to remain in the integrated car shows how Jim Crow invaded their own thinking, terrorizing them into complacency. While they certainly recognized that segregation was discriminatory and unjust, they preferred to deal with it rather than risk invoking the wrath of white supremacists.

Chicago, Spring 1967. After almost 30 years living in the North, Ida Mae and George Gladney have six beloved grandchildren, but still no house of their own. But they and all three of their children have stable jobs, so together, they buy a three-floor home in the South Shore neighborhood, on a beautiful tree-lined block near Lake Michigan. In the next few weeks, dozens of white families move out of the area and Black families start moving in. Within a year, the neighborhood is entirely Black. Landlords stop maintaining their properties, the city pulls money out of schools and infrastructure, and stores start to close.

Homeownership is the icing on the cake for George and Ida Mae's life in Chicago—it represents their ability to rise beyond the ranks of the working poor and achieve a stable middle-class lifestyle. Yet the deterioration of their neighborhood threatens their fragile success. Indeed, their neighborhood's fate shows how racism in the housing market systematically erodes Black families' wealth over time. Contrary to popular racist stereotypes, Black families aren't the ones who impoverish the neighborhoods where they live. Rather, middle-class Black families move into an area, and then financial institutions and the government pull resources out of it, until only impoverished families are willing to move in.

Ida Mae's family is far from the first to have this experience. White residents threaten incoming Black families with protests and bombings, then move out fast once they arrive. Decades before Ida Mae, the renowned gospel singer Mahalia Jackson moved to South Shore. She got bombing threats in the middle of the night. Her neighbors shot out her windows, then moved away. By the end of the Great Migration, all of Chicago is highly segregated, with a few exceptions (like the wealthy neighborhood of Hyde Park). In fact, by the 1980s, it's the most segregated city in the nation, and all of the top 10 are key "receiving stations of the Great Migration."

The pattern that Ida Mae and George observe extends back decades, to the first Black enclaves in the North, like Bronzeville and Harlem. And it continues today. Home equity is the primary source of wealth for middle-class families in the U.S., and financial institutions and the government have historically discriminated against Black families. As a result, these problematic economic and societal power structures essentially incentivize some white families to see keeping Black people out of their neighborhoods as a necessary step toward defending their wealth.

New York, Late Summer 1967. George and Inez send their 13-year-old daughter, Sonya, to spend the summer in Eustis, and to their horror, she gets pregnant. George remembers when a girl at his own high school got pregnant and claimed he was the father—she miscarried, but if she hadn't, George probably never would have finished school. Worse still, when Sonya gets pregnant, so does a woman with whom George is having an affair. Both of their babies survive. To George, the whole situation feels like poetic justice for his impulsive decision to marry Inez so many years ago.

Just like her brother Gerard, Sonya makes poor choices that threaten to ruin her life forever. This deeply disappoints George: it makes him feel as though all of his effort to provide a better life for his children was all for nothing. Indeed, it seems to suggest that one bad decision early in life—his marriage—will overshadow all his prudent adult decisions, like migrating to New York and scrupulously saving to buy a home. Of course, he also makes some less prudent decisions as an adult, like his affair, but ultimately these are more the result of his unhappy family life than the cause.

Los Angeles, 1967. Robert Foster chose to leave the South, and Dr. Rufus Clement chose to stay. They are both successful, and both want to show the world that their path was the right one. Clement hews close to institutions that Foster rejects, and Foster believes in integration, while Clement views it as unnecessary. They also compete for influence in the family.

In Wilkerson's eyes, the reality is that neither path was inherently better than the other. The right decision depended on each individual's particular desires, skills, and social standing. Indeed, the civil rights movement largely succeeded because Black leaders who stayed in the South worked together *with those who migrated to the North.*

As Robert spends more time at horse races and Las Vegas casinos, Alice and the children again grow closer to her family and start living the same socialite lives they once had in Atlanta. The only thing Robert and Alice both enjoy is throwing big parties. Robert loves nothing more than choosing extravagant dresses for Alice's grand entrances. He also calls the press whenever Dr. Clement visits. But Dr. Clement dies of a heart attack in 1967, and Alice's mother, Pearl, moves in with Robert and Alice.

Like George, Robert continues to neglect his unhappy family life and focus his attention elsewhere. He keeps up appearances perfectly well, and he builds the vibrant social life that he always wanted through his grand parties. Ultimately, with his lifelong vision of a happy life fulfilled, his family conflicts feel like an unfortunate but irrelevant footnote.

Chicago, February 1968. Ida Mae's coworkers at Walther Memorial Hospital go on strike for better wages and working conditions. But she never considers joining. She doesn't understand unions, and she has worked so many degrading jobs throughout her life that she's immensely grateful for her current one. After buying her house, she also can't afford to get fired. The police have to escort her to work, and the strikers often yell at them.

Ida Mae isn't anti-union, just confused. Like the Black passengers who refuse to integrate George Starling's trains, Ida Mae prefers to take what she can get rather than ask for more. After all, her satisfaction with working conditions that her colleagues view as intolerable only goes to show how much things have improved since she first moved to Chicago.

New York, Los Angeles, and Memphis, April 1968. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is assassinated in Memphis and protests erupt in cities around the U.S. George Starling notices fires in his neighborhood on his way home that night. Ida Mae listens to the news and prays while entire blocks burn down on the West Side. Notably, social scientists find that most participants in the riots are Northern-born young men, not migrants.

Dr. King's assassination is such an earth-shattering event that Black Americans like Wilkerson's protagonists remember it vividly for the rest of their lives. The social scientists' conclusions about the riots reflect Ida Mae and George's observations about the second generation of the Great Migration: even if they grew up with more resources than they would have had in the South, migrants' children clearly recognize and revolt against the systematic discrimination that they face in the North.

Robert Foster is busy working during the assassination, and he strongly disapproves of the riots. He doesn't believe in protest, violent or otherwise: he thinks that Black people should just work harder, like him. George Starling is also busy during the assassination—he's drinking and talking baseball with his friends, and he doesn't learn the news until he gets home. He feels totally shocked and numb. In contrast, when John F. Kennedy was assassinated five years before, George broke down in tears. Surprisingly, King's assassin is from Illinois, not the South. And just a few days after King's death, President Johnson passes the Fair Housing Act.

For all of Robert's differences with his late father-in-law, Dr. Clement, his opposition to protest is one thing they would clearly share. Indeed, Robert's life story helps explain why he believes that hard work is a better alternative to politics: it worked for him. Meanwhile, George's reaction to JFK and King's assassinations reflects his growing disillusionment with U.S. society in general: unlike in his youth, he no longer has faith that good will win out over evil. The home state of King's assassin underlines Wilkerson's conclusion that racism in the North is not necessarily less severe than in the South. Finally, the Fair Housing Act is an important (but inadequate) attempt to address the systematic discrimination that Ida Mae has experienced throughout her life as a Chicago renter and homeowner.

PART FOUR: THE FULLNESS OF THE MIGRATION

The North and West, 1970. Demographers declare the Great Migration over. The civil rights movement has all but ended Jim Crow, and fewer Black people are migrating to the North. Some are even returning to the South. Ida Mae never considers it—she's comfortable in Chicago, where she has built a community. Even the local gang members call her "Grandma." She gets hit by a car and turns out fine, but her daughter Velma dies in a car accident, which haunts her for the rest of her life. Still, all things considered, she and George live a respectable working-class life.

The Great Migration ends after the civil rights movement, which removes the primary force that compelled migrants to move North: the system of segregation that prevented them from fulfilling their true potential, building thriving communities, or even living safe, ordinary lives. Ida Mae recognizes that she might have been able to succeed in the South if she were born decades later, but by 1970, she has already built her life in Chicago—starting over again is not an option.

In the early 20th century, two groups of poor rural migrants move to Chicago in search of better opportunities: southern and eastern Europeans (or "white ethnics") and Black Southerners. While the white migrants can easily assimilate into the dominant culture through marriage or by changing their names, Black migrants cannot. Instead, they get locked into the bottom of the social hierarchy. Contrary to stereotypes, Black migrants have far fewer children than both European migrants. But they receive far lower wages because they are systematically locked out of skilled occupations and trade unions. And they face more severe hostility, largely because the government could never simply prohibit them from coming (like it did to immigrants from Asia). So they do their best to cope with poverty and isolation.

By emphasizing the striking similarities between Black and European migrants to Chicago, Wilkerson shows how racism is specifically responsible for the divergence in their outcomes over time—as well as the persistent inequalities in urban America today. She also carefully points out and dispels racist stereotypes about Black city-dwellers. Beyond merely alerting her readers to the truth, she also wants to help them understand where these stereotypes come from and how they have contributed to further discrimination and inequality over the years.

New York, 1970. George Starling's life is a mess. His marriage is miserable, his teenaged children are struggling, he has to support an illegitimate child too, and he will never advance at work or finish his education. He is too old to truly benefit from the Civil Rights Act, and he watches young people challenge norms around marriage and preach about Black Power with admiration and envy, but never resentment. He knows that his great mistake was dropping out of college to marry Inez and work in the citrus groves. And he wonders how his life would have been different if it weren't for Jim Crow. He pleads with the young people around him to make better choices.

Even though George fares better economically than most migrants, like Ida Mae, he never builds the kind of tight, loving, thriving community that she does. The contrast between their stories is a reminder that even grand historical phenomena like the Great Migration are still the sum of individual lives and decisions. George recognizes that he suffered from a significant dose of bad luck, and that his generation suffered and fought hard so that the next generation wouldn't face the same challenges. But this only makes his children's failures and missteps even more tragic.

Los Angeles, 1970. Robert Foster is successful, popular, and highly respected, but not fulfilled. He feels that no matter how hard he works or how perfect he looks, people will never view him as good enough. He also dwells on the racism he experienced in the South decades ago. And he was born on Christmas, so nobody ever celebrates his birthday. But he hopes to change this by throwing himself the most extravagant birthday party ever. Yet, as the guests gather downstairs, he starts worrying that it won't be perfect and feels sick to his stomach.

Robert's inferiority complex is not just a youngest sibling's psychological quirk: it's also a specific reaction to discrimination. His experience shows how racism can fundamentally damage people's sense of self, because it ensures that others never judge them as equals. But his dissatisfaction with his glamorous life also shows how the promise of wealth and prosperity is sometimes a meaningless mirage. What he really wants is to be surrounded by people who love and admire him. After all, he has no connection to his old community in Monroe anymore, so it makes sense that he wants to make up for his sense of alienation by becoming the most popular man in town.

Robert has spent all year planning every detail of the party and meticulously selecting the guest list. Out of his 200 invitees, 194 R.S.V.P. yes, and he spends weeks choosing the perfect suit for himself and (more importantly) the perfect gown for Alice. Robert's nephew Madison, Jr., a sociology graduate student, agonizes about how he'll meet Robert's unrealistic expectations for the party. He admires Robert, but Robert has always criticized him for minor gaffes like failing to anticipate his dinner guests' orders or wearing cheap pants. So Madison has two different suits tailor-made for Robert's party.

As his complex relationship with Madison, Jr. shows, Robert's irredeemable perfectionism causes his loved ones almost as much anxiety as it causes him. But it's also the key to his professional success (and the reason he left the South in the first place). In this sense, Robert is an example of the "migrant advantage" phenomenon that Wilkerson explained several chapters ago: highly motivated people (like perfectionists who always want the best of everything) migrate in greater numbers because they are far more likely to actively chase after a better life.

On the day of the party, the florists, caterers, and bartenders spend all day perfecting their displays. Robert collapses of exhaustion just before the guests arrive, but then he finds the energy to run downstairs. There's a red carpet, a festive band, several bars, and endless maids and valets. The *Los Angeles Sentinel* runs an article calling it "The Party of the Year," and Robert's **photo** album from it is among his most prized possessions. After it's over, he makes sure to ask his guests if it lived up to the hype.

Robert's party is arguably even more central to his grand fantasy of California success than his thriving medical career. Through it, his perfectionism pays off once again—even if it breaks him down psychologically in the process. Yet, after the fact, he never doubts that the party was worth it: it proves to him that he really could be whoever he wanted in California—and, despite his frequent doubts, that he absolutely made the right decision by going there.

PART FIVE: IN THE PLACES THEY LEFT

Chickasaw County, Mississippi, 1970. The land where Ida Mae grew up still looks the same. After Mr. Edd Pearson's death in 1945, a planter named Willie Jim takes over his **cotton** plantation and runs it with sharecropper labor until the mid-1960s. Otherwise, the remaining Black residents mostly work in factories. Like many places in the South, Chickasaw County strongly resists integration—for instance, the Supreme Court ordered the South to integrate schools in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, but Chickasaw County doesn't do so until 1970. When it does, white families start sending their children to private schools.

Wilkerson uses the story of Ida Mae's Chickasaw County plantation as a metaphor for the overall fate of the South's agricultural economy. Remarkably, besides the introduction of new technologies and the departure of generations of migrants, little changed on Southern plantations between the 1870s and the 1960s. Most importantly, racial exploitation continued to be their economic foundation. Meanwhile, the county's resistance to integration is an important point because it challenges the commonly held misconception that federal action immediately ended segregation once and for all.

Eustis, Florida, 1970. After Eustis finally integrates its schools in the 1960s, George Starling's stepbrother, an assistant principal, raises an outcry by choosing to discipline a Black boy who gets in a fight with a white boy. Willis V. McCall personally comes after the Black student, but Black parents protest and stop him. McCall, the sheriff who shot two Black rape suspects in 1949, is still in office. Miraculously, one of the suspects survived and revealed that McCall shot them execution-style in the woods, not in self-defense. The governor pardoned this man, who then mysteriously dropped dead a year later, while visiting his family in McCall's jurisdiction. McCall survives 49 misconduct investigations and doesn't take down the Jim Crow "COLORED" signs until 1971. The next year, he finally loses reelection after kicking a Black man to death in his jail. (But he gets acquitted in court.)

In Eustis, as in Chickasaw County, many aspects of Jim Crow persist long after the federal government mandates integration. After all, the controversy surrounding George's stepbrother shows that race remains the main factor animating Southern politics. Nevertheless, the Black parents managed to stop Sheriff McCall, which shows that the new laws did empower them to defend their rights. Still, McCall never faces any consequences for his three-decade reign of terror, which specifically shows that the legal system remains seriously biased against recognizing Black people's equal rights. Indeed, many scholars would argue that this is still true today, as racial disparities in law and policing persist throughout the United States.

Monroe, Louisiana, Early 1970s. Robert Foster's whole family has left Monroe. Even though his father educated every Black student in town for three decades, their family name is barely relevant there anymore. The city named its new Black high school after a rival family, which devastated Robert's father. It did name a housing project after him, but Robert is ashamed to see the family name associated with poverty and crime. Robert only returns to Monroe for funerals. By the 1970s, the streets in his childhood neighborhood still haven't been paved. He *can* enter establishments that used to be segregated, like an old diner, but the experience is totally underwhelming.

While Robert may be surprised to see how much stays the same in Monroe for generations, his family's departure also shows how the Great Migration causes a brain drain in many Southern cities, as the most educated and ambitious people are the most likely to migrate. The new Black high school is certainly a plus for Monroe, but the circumstances around its construction show how the South's longstanding inequality and lack of democracy fostered corruption. A politically connected teacher at Robert's father's school unseated him as principal, then convinced the governor to build a new one and name it after him.

Back in L.A., Robert and Alice have a chic anniversary dinner at the same restaurant every December 23. One year, he's furious at the maître d' for seating them in the back corner, and another year, for giving them a booth that makes Alice look taller than him. Every year, he has the florist create a specific bouquet for the table, and every year, he adds one more rose to represent one more year of marriage.

Even if it helped him succeed as a doctor and migrant, Robert's extreme perfectionism also makes him a very difficult customer and husband. But his anniversary ritual with Alice shows that they manage to make their marriage succeed by striking a reasonable balance between their opposed personalities and tastes.

PART FIVE: LOSSES

Los Angeles, December 1974. Alice Foster dies of cancer at just 54 years old. Black newspapers like The Chicago Defender run glowing obituaries of her, and she is buried with her father in Kentucky. Robert's children have moved out, so he lives alone with Alice's mother, Pearl, in the Los Angeles mansion. They both miss Alice, but they simply don't like each other, and Pearl eventually goes back to Kentucky.

Wilkerson follows the story of Robert and Alice's anniversaries at the end of the previous chapter with news of Alice's death at the beginning of this one. Despite all their differences and disagreements, they achieved a reasonable measure of happiness. Yet Robert's conflicts with Pearl underline the risk that his life will become unduly lonely without Alice around.

Chicago, February 1975. Between work, church, and her kids and grandkids, Ida Mae is busy well into her 60s. And everyone in her family is having health problems. Her sister Irene needs eye surgery, Miss Theenie died after a serious stroke in 1959, and George has had two heart attacks, but refuses all treatment. Ida Mae goes to Milwaukee for Irene's surgery, but when she returns, her son James informs her that George had a heart attack and died. Ida Mae feels terrible for not being with George during his final moments, but she's relieved that he at least died peacefully in his sleep.

Even though Ida Mae had by far the poorest and most difficult childhood of the book's three protagonists, by the end of her life, with her tight-knit community of family and friends, she is easily the happiest. George's death is tragic, but Ida Mae's faith and sense of perspective help her cope. Notably, by pointing out George's resistance to seek medical care, Wilkerson returns to a key motif throughout her research: migrants who grew up with little access to medicine in the South often distrust the medical system in the North and West. Robert's career is so remarkable in part because he manages to break through this barrier of distrust, and George's distrust is deeply ironic because Ida Mae works in a hospital.

New York, 1978. Inez lives in a world of heartbreak: she has few friends, her son Gerard struggles with addiction, and George has a second family. Above all, she isn't sure if moving to New York was worth it. She gets breast cancer in 1978 and dies shortly after. She and George never repair their marriage.

Like Robert and Ida Mae, George also loses his spouse and struggles to transition to living alone. His other family will never compensate for his distance from Inez, Gerard, and Sonya. While Inez may have regretted her marriage and move to New York, however, George never does—he probably would have been lynched if he stayed in Florida.

Los Angeles, 1978. After Alice's death, Robert's social life largely disappears. And without the social life, his lucrative job starts to feel pointless. So he drops his private practice and takes a more predictable job at the Veterans Hospital. He flies to Las Vegas all the time—sometimes, he goes after his shift, plays blackjack all night, then flies back in the morning to see more patients. He often wins or loses tens of thousands of dollars per night. His friends and coworkers try and fail to help him control himself, but fortunately, he has plenty of money. His gambling is really a way to prove himself and win attention. In his 90s, he gets into a car accident and loses his driver's license, so he takes a taxi all the way to Vegas.

Aging and losing Alice help Robert develop a clearer picture of his true values. He realizes that social connection was always his most important sources of happiness and meaning—which is not surprising, because Ida Mae Gladney and George Starling ultimately realize the same thing, too. His attempts to replace socializing with gambling ultimately fall short, but the humorous anecdote about his taxi to Las Vegas shows that he recognizes this and does his best to take his decline in stride.

PART FIVE: MORE NORTH AND WEST THAN SOUTH

Chicago, 1978. After George's death, Ida Mae retires and becomes her extended family's "sweet-natured but no-nonsense matriarch." Her neighborhood is much poorer and more dangerous than it was when she moved in, so she doesn't go out much, although she enjoys watching the drama between the drug dealers and sex workers down on the street. There's always news to keep track of in the family and holidays to plan for. In fact, in 1977, the supermarket chain Jewel Food Stores does a **photo** shoot of Ida Mae's family to represent "the typical Chicago family at Thanksgiving." Jewel runs a photo of them in a full-page advertisement in the *Chicago Metro News*.

Ida Mae grows into the congenial grandmother whom readers first met at the beginning of the book. As this chapter's title suggests, by the end of her life, Ida Mae has unquestionably made Chicago her home. And the converse is true, too: she is also a typical Chicagoan, as the Jewel photo shoot literally declares. And it also recalls the other significant photos that have appeared throughout the book, most importantly the photo of Wilkerson's mother shortly after her arrival in Washington, D.C. As bookends to the story of the Great Migration, these two photos are a testament to how profoundly the Great Migration has shaped Black identity and the geography of race in the U.S.

New York, 1978. After Inez's death, George Starling becomes another old Southern man imparting wisdom to the local Harlem youngsters. Like many other migrants, he never expected his children to get caught up in the city's dangers and vices, and he didn't realize what was happening until it was too late. To his great disappointment, his son Gerard becomes a major drug dealer in Miami, while his daughter Sonya moves back to Eustis. George keeps working on the railroad, but in 35 years, he never gets promoted. He never achieved his full potential, but he did get to see the Great Migration and its aftermath up close.

George's story is the most tragic of the entire book. Personally and professionally, Ida Mae and Robert have relatively good luck throughout their lives, and they live out their days with few regrets. But George's luck is terrible: he sees the ugliest side of the Great Migration and watches his children live far worse lives than his own, rather than the better, freer lives that he always wanted for them. He never regrets leaving Florida, which certainly did improve his life, but he sees migrating as the single excellent decision in a life full of misfortunes and mistakes.

Los Angeles, 1978. Robert finally has the hospital job that he always dreamed about as a young man in the South. In fact, his job is to treat the rest of the hospital staff, so he no longer has to worry about the business side of medicine at all. He relishes the chance to socialize with his coworkers, especially the Black staff members who also migrated from the South. But he clashes with other staff members and the hospital bureaucracy, which moves him to a rundown office next to a stinking bathroom. After a lifetime of devoting himself to medicine, he feels humiliated: this reminds him of all the sleights he suffered as a young man in the South.

Ironically, Robert experiences his greatest professional failure when he finally gets his dream job. At first, he cherishes the opportunity to make a new and exciting career move so late in life. And his relationships with his coworkers at the hospital attest to the Great Migration's enduring legacy in California. But eventually, it becomes clear that the hospital doesn't value his contributions or autonomy. This reminds him of his childhood because it's another instance when prejudice prevents him from getting what he knows he deserves.

Robert formally complains to the Labor Department, but the stress of the process ruins his life. Out of pride, he refuses to quit—until he suffers a heart attack and agrees to retire for the sake of his health. Even though his reputation survives and he maintains his wide network of friends and patients, the situation permanently taints his optimism about California.

Readers have known Robert and his pride for some 500 pages, so they won't find it surprising that he refuses to go down without a fight. His life after the hospital job is not much different from his life before it, but it affects his perception of California because it confirms that prejudice, whether racist or ageist, exists there all the same. This shows that Robert was probably right to spend his career running his own private practice. Others—especially white-run institutions like hospitals—would never recognize his brilliance in the same way as fellow Black Southerners (including his patients) could.

PART FIVE: REDEMPTION

1. Chicago, Summer 1996. Isabel Wilkerson first meets Ida Mae, she is 83 and spends her time at home, doing crosswords, collecting her late friends' funeral programs, and staying up to date on the family gossip. She also watches "the lost grandchildren of the Migration" out her window as they sell drugs, dodge the police, and shoot at each other. She wonders how the city's young people have totally lost their sense of morality. At least they look out for her by telling her which nights it's too dangerous to go out. During their interviews, Ida Mae and Wilkerson hear a glass bottle crash outside the window and watch the police arrest a local janitor. But Ida Mae refuses to be afraid.

The narrative reaches the point in time when Wilkerson entered her subjects' lives and began interviewing them extensively for this book. In addition to presenting the three protagonists' personal reflections on the Great Migration and their lives, then, this chapter also offers the reader a chance to understand what originally drew Wilkerson to write about them. For instance, Ida Mae is the glue that holds together her family and community. She sticks to the old Southern values that were once the foundation of migrant communities in the North. And she is a treasure trove of knowledge about how the Great Migration and the racist backlash to it have transformed her city.

2. Harlem, 1996. George Starling's basement apartment is full of **photos**, old documents, and funeral programs. He speaks clearly and carefully, giving Wilkerson all the detail she could hope for. His pastor stops by, and they reminisce about the New York of the past, when there was still a sense of community and drugs hadn't taken over the city yet. He spends his time alone, "sort[ing] through the paperwork of his life" and mourning his daughter Sonya, who recently died of a car accident.

Wilkerson likens George's basement to an archive, but really, he is the archive she's after. Unlike Ida Mae and Robert, he spends most of his time turned inward in reflection. His near-perfect memory isn't his only asset as a witness to the past. He can also speak to how the civil rights movement looked from the perspective of one of its ordinary supporters in the North, and he spent decades watching countless others migrate on the train where he worked.

3. Los Angeles, Spring 1996. Robert Foster invites Isabel Wilkerson into his living room, with its 1970s décor, and brings her the slice of pound cake that he offers to all his visitors. He tells her about his early life and worsening heart problems, but he explains that he doesn't want another bypass operation and "wouldn't have any regrets" if he dies tomorrow. He spends his time playing blackjack, talking on the phone, and giving extremely precise instructions to his obedient gardener. He has a beautiful house and highly accomplished children and grandchildren. Whenever Wilkerson interviews him, several old friends and patients call him for medical advice.

Driven by his boundless anxious energy, Robert tries to make the best of his remaining time on Earth. What he lacks in close relationships he tries to make up for through his social status, hobbies, and obsessive curation. His story speaks to two opposite trends. On the one hand, his glamorous personal life shows how a select few migrants managed to join the nation's mainstream cultural elite in the 20th century. On the other, his medical career shows how segregation hampered the South's development by driving its best and brightest minds to leave, as well as how migrant communities in the North and West could uplift themselves from within.

Eustis, Florida, July 1996. Now that the orange grove owners who wanted to kill him and the brutal sheriff Willis V. McCall are all dead, George Starling finally decides to go visit Eustis. He has dinner with Reuben Blye, one of the old foremen, who playfully insists that "a Florida man got more sense than a born New Yorker." George still owns a small piece of land in Eustis, too, and he's pleasantly surprised to see the South becoming more tolerant. He even saw a Black man and a white woman holding hands on the street. He and Reuben drive by their old orange groves and reminisce about their picking days.

Even though he has stayed in touch with many people from his community (like the Blyes), George has not been to Eustis in more than 51 years, since the day he left in 1945. So it's little surprise that he barely recognizes the town when he finally goes back. But this change is uniformly good news: as a young man, he always wanted to leave Eustis, but now, he's astonished to see that it's the kind of place where someone like him might actually want to live.

George starts coming to Eustis every other year for high school reunions. Thanks to his years of service with the railroad, his **train** ticket is free. People in town have "a distant kind of respect" for him—they know that he left and succeeded in the North, but they can't pinpoint exactly how they know him, or if they're related. On one Sunday, Wilkerson follows him to services at his old church, where he sings a tearful solo for the whole congregation.

George surprises even himself by reestablishing links with his hometown. At last, after so many thankless years, he builds some semblance of a community and gets the recognition he deserves for his remarkable accomplishments and grit. Ironically, by returning to the South, he achieves the same peace and contentment that he and so many other migrants sought in the North. But none of it would have been possible if he hadn't gone to New York in the first place. This redemption may be too little, too late, but at least it helps ameliorate the tragedy of his late life in New York.

Los Angeles, November 23, 1996. There are sixteen people, all seniors, left in the local Monroe, Louisiana Club. Robert Foster brings Wilkerson to one of their meetings. One of the men says a prayer for the food—and Wilkerson's book—and then everyone digs into the oxtails, collard greens, and more. The club members chat about their old acquaintances, their experiences under Jim Crow, and how things have changed in Monroe. One man remembers the segregated Paramount Theater that Robert used to visit. The man explains that he left Monroe after he risked death by complaining after a white cashier gave him a worthless token instead of his change. Robert tells his own story about insulting the man who asked for help finding "a clean colored girl." The other club members say he's "lucky to be alive."

Like George, Robert finds meaning and community in his last years by connecting with other migrants from his original cohort. As his last trip to Monroe showed him, unlike Ida Mae and George, he simply has nothing left back home in the South. His home is Los Angeles, and his version of Monroe resides not in the city itself, but rather in the memories, stories, and recipes of his fellow migrants. Of course, their memories aren't particularly fond—which is why they left. And they feel incredibly lucky to have been able to do so: Robert and the other migrant's story capture the outsized dangers that they faced.

PART FIVE: AND, PERHAPS, TO BLOOM

Chicago, 1997. In her kitchen, Ida Mae sticks to tradition, cooking the same Southern dishes that she has eaten all her life. When she tries new things, like replacing ordinary cornmeal with self-rising cornmeal in her cornbread, it just doesn't turn out the same. As the oldest person left in her family, she's a regular at every funeral. But each feels more tragic than the last. Ida Mae's nephew Robert and his wife Catherine both have serious strokes, so she goes to visit them in the hospital. She feels deeply indebted to Robert, who originally helped her and George move to Chicago. She comforts him and tells him to trust in God.

By keeping Southern traditions alive in the North, Ida Mae acts as a kind of cultural bridge for her community. She always remembers where she came from in terms of her family, too. Her enduring connections with the relatives who helped her move north show how the Great Migration was fundamentally a collective endeavor, a way for entire families to lift themselves up—as well as to help out their relatives who remained in the South, too.

One day, Ida Mae shows Wilkerson **photos** of her nephew's funeral. Her nephew's partner was so distraught that he wanted to get in the casket. Ida Mae says that this is what real love means. After her sister Irene dies in 1996, Ida Mae periodically goes to Milwaukee to manage her estate. Wilkerson accompanies her on one of her trips. On the way, it starts raining, and Wilkerson says she hopes it clears up. But Ida Mae calmly replies, "Now, we ain't got nothing to do with God's business."

Ida Mae's musings on love point to one of the central messages that Wilkerson gleans from her protagonists' stories. Namely, while economic and social factors are no doubt the Great Migration's direct cause, beneath these factors, migrants are really motivated above all by love—and specifically their desire to give their children a better life than they were able to live. This explains, for instance, why Ida Mae is so content with the course of her life, but George Starling is so regretful. Meanwhile, Ida Mae's comment about "God's business" shows how her faith has enabled her to cope with adverse circumstances throughout her life by helping her make peace with things she can't control while doing her best with the things she can.

New York, 1997. Like many of his fellow migrants, George Starling considers moving back to the South for retirement. Many of his friends encourage him to go, but he decides that New York is his real home. Other migrants feel that returning to the South would mean "a retreat, an admission of failure or […] the end of life itself." For instance, Babe Blye never wanted to go back to Florida. But when Babe realized he was terminally ill, he finally went. He wanted George to sing the song "Peace in the Valley" at his funeral, and George struggled to finish it through his tears.

George's trip home makes a serious impression on him: a generation ago, Jim Crow made returning to the South unthinkable, but now, social progress has made it a serious option. Of course, this also shows that life in the South is far more hospitable for young people today than it was in George's time. Finally, George's song for Babe Blye is a tribute to the nationwide migrant networks that connect the North to the South, making it possible for people like George to escape the violence of Jim Crow and pursue happiness elsewhere.

Los Angeles, Autumn 1996. For Robert Foster, giving medical advice to aging friends and family members is practically a full-time job. When he visits an old college classmate at the hospital, an orderly runs up to him and reminisces about their time working together. But he also has regrets. He still dwells on the time he was rejected by the motels outside Phoenix, although he has never returned to that stretch of highway. He regrets putting unfair expectations on his daughters and teaching them so little about his childhood in the South. And he regrets idealizing California: it's not perfect, but it's much better than Monroe. He takes Wilkerson out for soul food and then asks her to drop him at the racetrack. In casinos, he feels confident and powerful. He still loves being the center of attention.

Even though Robert once proudly told Wilkerson that he "wouldn't have any regrets" if he died tomorrow, he now admits that his life often fell short of his high expectations. (Still, even this admission is progress: it shows that he's accepting his fate.) He never doubts that going to California was worth it, but he does wonder if he overreacted by completely severing his and his family's connections to Monroe. He did so above all because his early run-ins with racism affected him so deeply. This attests to a basic but often underappreciated truth about the Great Migration: perhaps even more than poverty and violence, migrants were fleeing a system that asked them to view themselves as subhuman.

PART FIVE: THE WINTER OF THEIR LIVES

New York, 1997. Harlem has completely changed since George Starling arrived in the 1940s. Places like the Savoy Ballroom have long shut down, Black elites have left, and poverty and crime have skyrocketed. Most other longtime residents are dead or gone, but George loves the neighborhood anyway, and his neighbors know and take care of him. He has plenty of regrets, but leaving Florida for New York, where he could be a free man, isn't one of them. The local drug dealers and sex workers proudly tell him about their successes in school or rehab, even though they're often obviously lying, and he tries his best to set them on the right track.

As always, George focuses on making a small but honest contribution to his community. His outreach in Harlem is also a way to try to atone for his children's fate. The changes in his neighborhood are strikingly similar to those in South Shore, the area where Ida Mae lives in Chicago. They reflect the same basic pattern: elites and institutions systematically pull resources out of Black neighborhoods. Some do so because of racist ideas and stereotypes, while others simply follow racist policies (like the federal policy restricting mortgages to white people), and others still conclude that investing in Black people is a losing bet precisely because they see how racism continually disadvantages them. But regardless, this pattern gradually impoverishes the Black middle class—including George and his loved ones.

Los Angeles, Winter 1997. Robert starts getting sick, and he's frustrated when his doctors don't treat him with the same care and sympathy that he always gave his own patients. He has survived a heart attack and is on dialysis, but his mind is as sharp as ever. A live-in nurse named Barbara helps him with day-to-day tasks. And his siblings are all dead. He particularly misses his sister, Gold, who followed him to California and then succumbed to a deadly mix of "parties, liquor, [and] men." His beloved Dr. Beck is gone, too. Still, Robert cherishes the small pleasures of his everyday life, even if he's not supposed to have many of them (like bacon and fried catfish). He's as meticulous as ever about his garden, too.

Robert brings a perfectionist's eye to the ordinary trials and tribulations of growing old, like losing his loved ones, but he manages to make the best of his remaining days by keeping things in perspective. His frustration with his own doctors highlights how exceptional he was at his job. Indeed, the warmth and attention that he offered his patients are a reflection of his Southern culture—and this is no doubt one of the few respects in which he would agree that the South is superior to even California.

One day, after Robert gets out of the hospital, Ray Charles visits and brings him a dozen steaks. Then, Robert gets a letter informing him that he has cancer. He resents that the doctor didn't tell him personally. Worse still, Barbara gets sick and has to quit, and no other nurse is ever as good. But Robert does receive some good news: his grandson Daniel gets into Harvard, Princeton, and Yale. However, he's too sick to attend Daniel's graduation.

The silly anecdote about Ray Charles's visit demonstrates how Robert's dedication to medicine has made a lasting impact on those around him. Of course, his approach to medicine couldn't contrast more with the letter he receives about his cancer, which is so impersonal that it's offensive. Meanwhile, his grandson Daniel's success suggests that he has passed on his steadfast belief in being the best he possibly can.

Robert grows depressed. Soon, Wilkerson has to drive him to dialysis to make sure he actually goes. Then, he suffers a bad fall. Old friends and patients visit, including a man from Monroe who credits Robert with convincing him to trust Western medicine and ultimately saving his life. A few months later, Robert has a stroke, enters a coma, and passes away.

Wilkerson doesn't just visit her protagonists occasionally for an interview—rather, in a testament to how much effort she puts into her research, she dedicates years to building relationships with them and becomes one of the most important people in their lives. Robert dies peacefully, and in his last conscious days, he's surely aware of how many other lives he saved over the course of his own.

Robert's funeral is as well-attended and meticulously planned as any of his parties. Afterwards, the mourners assemble at his house and spend the rest of the day paying their respects. Robert's nephew Madison remembers his uncle's generosity and impossible perfectionism, his devotion to medicine and his love for California, and—above all—his infectious energy. Indeed, Robert's friends, family, and patients remember him fondly to this day. One patient recalls that, after Robert operated on her, her blood pressure spiked and she nearly died. But even as she slept, Robert spent all night by her bedside, trying to help and praying. Robert is buried in a beautiful mausoleum at Inglewood Park Cemetery, which is on a hill overlooking his favorite racetrack.

Robert's funeral reaffirms what he and his loved ones already knew: he was a pillar of his community, an important resource, and an anchoring presence for the countless other Black migrants who came from the South to Los Angeles. Madison's comments particularly demonstrate how Robert's best traits inspired others to better themselves as well. And his patient's anecdote shows that, no matter how much he loved the wealth and glamor that came with practicing medicine, his dedication to it was absolutely genuine.

Chicago, August 1997. Like most hardworking, law-abiding Black Chicagoans, Ida Mae can't trust politicians to make her neighborhood any safer. So she takes matters into her own hands by regularly attending community meetings with the police at a local church. The attendees look over lists of reported crimes in the area, then anonymously write suggestions on index cards. (It's too dangerous for them to reveal their identities.) After the meeting, Ida Mae privately tells an officer that thieves robbed the building next door to her house, but he ignores her.

Ida Mae remembers her neighborhood's better days and knows that the young people growing up there deserve far better than they currently get. So she does her best to give back to her community, even though she recognizes that fighting its violence and poverty is an uphill battle. She knows that this kind of change ultimately requires systemic solutions, but she has seen systemic change work in the past, and she wants to help make it possible in the future, too.

At another meeting, the police warn residents about the local gangs and promise that they're working hard. At a different one, they report that one of the regular attendees has been shot. An activist visits to speak out against an anti-loitering law, but the attendees support the law as a way to reduce crime. The well-known local city councilman attends another meeting with a TV crew and gives a political speech. And at one more, the community gets a visit from the new Democratic state senator they just elected: a young lawyer named Barack Obama

These anecdotes show how grave the situation in Ida Mae's neighborhood has become. When Obama visits her group, Ida Mae witnesses history once again—just like when she saw Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speak in Chicago 30 years before. In fact, she runs into both Obama and King by just living her daily life. This suggests that experiences like hers are far more central to the U.S.'s politics and history than most people tend to think. Put differently, Wilkerson argues that Black stories like the Great Migration have long been left at the margins of American history, when they are actually central to it. This book was published in 2010, the second year of Obama's presidency. So Obama's visit also suggests that the Great Migration's legacy of empowering Black Americans in the 20th century made an unmistakable impact on U.S. politics in the 21st century.

New York, Spring 1998. After finding an unusual dark spot on his foot, George Starling needs to start dialysis. Then, he has a serious fall. He moves into a nursing home—where he has an even worse fall, hits his head, and ends up in a coma. His niece Pat and his estranged son Gerard visit him. Gerard, who is also on dialysis, breaks down when he sees his father. He relapses back into drug use, stops going to his own appointments, and dies just a few days later. Isabel Wilkerson also visits George in the hospital and pays her last respects. He dies soon thereafter.

George's swift decline puts a tragic end to his son Gerard's short, tumultuous life, perhaps by finally showing him the importance of something he neglected for so long: family. Gerard's death also brings George's own childhood family drama full circle, suggesting that there are some cycles that even the Great Migration and a lifetime of hard work cannot entirely break.

At George Starling's funeral in Harlem, his neighbors remember his generosity, his choir sings, and his illegitimate son Kenny sobs quietly for the father he barely knew. In Eustis, his family holds another funeral. They remember him most of all as the well-to-do cousin who worked on the **trains**, brought gifts from New York, and always remembered his roots. Reuben Blye is there, too. George is buried at the only Black cemetery in Eustis.

The jubilant atmosphere of George's funerals couldn't contrast more with the somber fate of his family life. Indeed, the funerals show that, even if he never had particularly close relationships with very many people, he still managed to make a small, memorable difference in the lives of a vast number. And the fact that he has two funerals shows that, far more than Ida Mae or Robert, he built his identity around a combination of the North and the South.

PART FIVE: THE EMANCIPATION OF IDA MAE

Chicago, October 15, 1998. Ida Mae visits Mississippi, where she hasn't been since she went to see her dying sister 15 years ago. Wilkerson goes with her. They drive into Chickasaw County, past bales and fields of **cotton**. At one point, Ida Mae gets out of the car and picks some of it, just for fun. Then, they continue down unnamed dirt streets to Ida Mae's sister-in-law Jessie's house. Jessie and her husband moved back from Chicago to Mississippi for retirement, but her husband has since died, so she's living alone now. She and Ida Mae chat about their cotton-picking days, the family, the drugs infesting Chicago, and their late husbands.

It's clear that Wilkerson views the opportunity to visit Mississippi with Ida Mae as an immense privilege—and a perfect opportunity to close her book with reflections on the overall historical course of the Great Migration. While brief, the scene in which Ida Mae picks cotton by the roadside is extremely significant: she goes from being forced to pick cotton in order to survive to being able to do it freely, on her own terms. This change shows how, all things considered, migrating profoundly improved her life by freeing her from the brutality of sharecropping. But it's also a metaphor for the overall progress that Black Americans have made since the end of enslavement, and particularly the way that the Great Migration enabled them to achieve true freedom from the South's system of racial exploitation for the first time.

Ida Mae, her brother-in-law Aubrey, and Wilkerson drive around the peaceful Mississippi woods. They encounter a dilapidated old shack that may or may not have been Miss Theenie's, a new **cotton**-picking machine, and many of Ida Mae's old friends. Most haven't seen her in 60 years, but some still recognize her. They visit her family at the church cemetery, but Ida Mae insists that she'll be buried in Chicago. Lastly, they visit David McIntosh, the man who used to visit Ida Mae on horseback every Sunday and wanted to marry her. Of course, she decided to marry George Gladney instead. She wonders whether she would still be living in Mississippi if she had chosen to marry David instead.

Ida Mae's tour of her past shows her at once all that she left behind in Mississippi, how much she has gained by going to Chicago, and how things might have been different if she had made other decisions. Yet she also recognizes that nobody can ever fully understand all of the consequences of their decisions at the time when they make them. For instance, as a young woman, Ida Mae assumed that she would stay in Mississippi—she never thought that marrying George or David would determine where she lived the rest of her life. This all highlights one of Wilkerson's central points throughout the book: Americans must remember the Great Migration chiefly through the eyes of its participants, as a life-altering decision that required a profound leap of faith but also gave them an opportunity to take control over their lives, often for the first time in countless generations.

Chicago, March 5, 1999. Ida Mae puts up new blinds in her living room. Then, everyone comes over to celebrate her 86th birthday. Her granddaughter Karen brings a new boyfriend, Mike, and her friend Wilks reports that his mother was just diagnosed with cancer. But Ida Mae promises that "God don't make no mistakes." Everyone prays and eats, and Ida Mae starts telling Mike about moving north from Mississippi. But it turns out that he did too—he came in 1969, at the very end of the Great Migration. It's snowing outside, which is as normal in Chicago as **cotton** is in Mississippi.

This anecdote about Ida Mae's birthday party shows how two specific factors underpin her total, untarnished happiness: her loving family and her steadfast faith. Meanwhile, Mike's story once again highlights the Great Migration's vast reach. Two generations after Ida Mae, he undertook the same transformative journey from the same place. He did so under very different circumstances, but for the same basic reason: to seek the kind of better life that Ida Mae has achieved.

In 2002, Ida Mae turns 89. She sits in her new recliner by the window, watching the police chase criminals down on the street. Even though she has lost many loved ones, she's lucky to live with her son James, her daughter Eleanor, and her grandson.

This final portrait of Ida Mae brings the book full circle, because Wilkerson opened it with the story of Ida Mae leaving the South in the 1930s. Sixty-five years later, Ida Mae is nearing the end of her life—she will die later the same year. It's clear that her life, while far from perfect, was rich, meaningful, and full of love. Above all, it was far better than her enslaved ancestors' lives, or than hers would have been had she stayed in Mississippi.

Ida Mae Gladney, Robert Foster, and George Starling joined the Great Migration "during different decades for different reasons and with different outcomes." Their lives in the North were far from perfect, but they all found their own versions of happiness there. Leaving the South allowed them to exercise their freedom, and none of them ultimately regretted it.

Wilkerson reminds the reader about the key commonalities and differences among the book's three protagonists, whom she chose to represent the Great Migration as a whole. Her overarching message is simple: no matter how much the migrants differed in class, occupation, gender, age, luck, hometown, destination city, and precise life experiences, they all made the harrowing, risky decision to leave the South because they believed—usually correctly—that they could live better, freer lives elsewhere. While some of them may have regretted it, on the whole, the Great Migration had tremendously positive impacts on both Black Americans in particular and the U.S. as a whole.

For Ida Mae, Chicago will always be home, even though "Mississippi [is] deep inside her" too. In fact, she's one of the last remaining Chicagoans who left the South before World War II, and she feels that every day of life is a blessing.

Ida Mae's mix of North and South represents the way the Great Migration transformed American culture forever by spreading Black Americans throughout the nation. Moreover, her status as one of the last remaining migrants underlines why it was so important for Wilkerson to write this book and, in doing so, preserve her protagonists' memories.

PART FIVE: EPILOGUE

The Great Migration impacted virtually all Americans, from its participants and their descendants to the Black Southerners who didn't migrate (but had relatives who did) and the white people who interacted with Black migrants. Social scientists have long argued that the Great Migration was a failure, as migrants merely traded rural backwardness for urban poverty. But census records disprove this idea: Black migrants were more educated, socially stable, and economically successful than both Black Northerners *and* Black Southerners who stayed in place.

In her Epilogue, Wilkerson explicitly connects her protagonists' stories to key sociological conclusions about the Great Migration as a whole. In particular, she focuses on correcting popular stereotypes and misunderstandings about the Migration, especially those from 20th century researchers who were often more interested in the specific problems that migrants encountered in the North than the overall context of their migration. For instance, Wilkerson points out that many Black migrants and their descendants did *end up in impoverished, high-crime areas, but she notes that this has largely been the result of government policies, and she emphasizes that their lives were still better than they would have been if they hadn't migrated.*

Every major Northern city's first Black mayor was either a migrant or a migrant's child. So were three of the most influential jazz musicians ever (Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, and John Coltrane). These successes support the scholarly consensus that migrants are more resourceful, determined, and resilient than non-migrants. The longer migrants spent in the North, the more likely they were to suffer poverty and violence. This shows that these problems came from the cities where migrants went, and not from migrants themselves. The Great Migration also made U.S. cities more hospitable for immigrants of color, boosted income for migrant families no matter their level of education, and contributed to the civil rights movement that finally ended Jim Crow.

Wilkerson points out the obvious evidence of migrant success, which researchers who are focused on more narrow issues often overlook. It's telling that most of the leading Black figures in 20th-century American cultural and political life were migrants—it suggests that, even if the Great Migration had some unintended consequences, it largely fulfilled its primary goal of helping migrants live freer, more successful lives. Wilkerson emphasizes that this happened for two different reasons: the "migrant advantage" (migrants' tendency to be more ambitious, educated, and resourceful), and the fact that life in the North and West gave migrants freedoms and resources that they wouldn't have had in the South.

Each of the book's three protagonists adjusted to their surroundings differently. Robert Foster embraced California and tried to forget about the South, even though this cut him off from his family and his roots. He used gambling, perfectionism, and attention-seeking to deal with his anxieties. George Starling, who left Florida to avoid being lynched, ultimately found a tenuous middle ground between his Southern roots and his Northern reality. Despite suffering deep poverty, Ida Mae Gladney built a strong community in Chicago and kept her Southern culture alive. She found spiritual fulfillment and ended up far happier than Robert or George.

Just like they belonged to different social classes and migrated to different places at different times, the book's protagonists also reshaped their identities in very different ways after migrating. Wilkerson puts Ida Mae, George, and Robert on a spectrum—in that order—in terms of how much they stuck to their Southern identities or built new ones around their destination cities. But none of their approaches are inherently better than any other. Ida Mae might have turned out the happiest, but as Wilkerson's analysis suggests, this is because of her strong community, rather than the fact that she specifically stuck to her Southern roots.

Scholars have also long debated how much factors like Jim Crow, lynching, the boll weevil pest crisis, and new **cotton** harvesting machines influenced migrants' decisions. While none of these factors correlates perfectly with migration statistics, all of them clearly had some effect. The desire for *freedom* was another key factor—in fact, simply leaving the South was a way for migrants to affirm their freedom, seek better educational and economic opportunities for their children, and "pursue some version of happiness."

Wilkerson doesn't mean to suggest that the factors that she lists here weren't important contributors to the Great Migration—on the contrary, she explores them at some length elsewhere in her book. Rather, the point she's making here is that simply chalking the Great Migration up to the "push" factors that encouraged people to leave the South runs the risk of missing the most important part of the story: the human element, the sense in which the Great Migration was a free decision by a newly freed people who believed in their own capacity to build a better future.

In a way, the Great Migration is just another version of the classic American immigration story: migrants formed enclaves in new cities, both carried on and modified their traditions, worked extra hard to move up, and experienced a generational disconnect with their children. Yet Black migrants were also always Americans. They were born citizens, and their ancestors had been in the U.S. for four centuries. Men of African descent actually founded Chicago, Los Angeles, *and* New York. In historical hindsight, Wilkerson hopes, perhaps we will learn to see the Great Migration as the final step in Black Americans' march toward freedom, a way of bringing the American Dream to life.

Wilkerson emphasizes the connection between the Great Migration, which she has portrayed as a tale of Black Americans collectively pursuing freedom and happiness, and popular ideas of American identity, which frequently revolve around these same concepts. Ultimately, this is part of a broader project of integrating Black history and identity into our core understanding of what it means to be American, in the same way as the "nation of immigrants" story about white Europeans has been. Indeed, for Wilkerson, this and the Great Migration are really two versions of the same story.

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