



Negroland: A Memoir

By Margo Jefferson

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Winner of the 2015 National Book Critics Circle Award for Autobiography

A NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

New York Times: 100 Notable Books of 2015

New York Times: Dwight Garner's Best Books of 2015

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Marie Claire: Best Books of 2015

Vanity Fair: Best Book Gifts of 2015

TIME Best Books of 2015

At once incendiary and icy, mischievous and provocative, celebratory and elegiac—here is a deeply felt meditation on race, sex, and American culture through the prism of the author's rarefied upbringing and education among a black elite concerned with distancing itself from whites and the black generality while tirelessly measuring itself against both.

Born in upper-crust black Chicago—her father was for years head of pediatrics at Provident, at the time the nation's oldest black hospital; her mother was a socialite—Margo Jefferson has spent most of her life among (call them what you will) the colored aristocracy, the colored elite, the blue-vein society. Since the nineteenth century they have stood apart, these inhabitants of Negroland, “a small region of Negro America where residents were sheltered by a certain amount of privilege and plenty.”

Reckoning with the strictures and demands of Negroland at crucial historical moments—the civil rights movement, the dawn of feminism, the fallacy of postracial America—Jefferson brilliantly charts the twists and turns of a life informed by psychological and moral contradictions. Aware as it is of heart-wrenching despair and depression, this book is a triumphant paean to the grace of perseverance.

(With 8 pages of black-and-white photographs.)

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Editorial Review

Review

“Ever provocative and insightful, the cultural critic Margo Jefferson bravely directs the focus inward to her own life and times as a child of the rigid and nearly invisible world of black elites in pre-Civil Rights, mid-century America. By turns, melancholic and hopeful, raw and disarming, she weighs the psychic toll of constructed divisions at the intersection of race, gender, caste and privilege. A moving memoir that is an act of courage in its vulnerability.” —Isabel Wilkerson

“The generic sub-title—a memoir—doesn’t do justice to everything that’s going on in Margo Jefferson’s marvelous, complex, stimulating and thought-provoking personal history.” —Geoff Dyer

“Margo Jefferson’s memoir leaps from the mica-sharp evocations of her Chicago girlhood into a strikingly original consideration of American cultural history. If you think you were confident using the words “race” and “class,” think again after reading this fierce interrogation of American life. A beautiful scorcher of a book, essential reading.” —Patricia Hampl

“At the heart of Margo Jefferson’s masterpiece—a phenomenal study-cum-memoir about the black bourgeoisie—is a sensibility that belongs to no group or community other than the author’s sorority of one. Jefferson has lived and worked like the great reporter she is, traversing a little-known or -understood landscape peopled by blacks and whites, dreamers and naysayers, the privileged and the strivers who make up the mosaic known as America.” —Hilton Als

“Margo Jefferson’s *Negroland*—autopsy snapshots of mostly upper-class black ways of being and performing—is a tight-lipped performance of willed, earned, and harshly edited silence. Refusing to construct an erotic black body for white consumption, she desires nothing and challenges everything. Asking if it’s possible or meaningful to be human, she posits *etiquette* as the interrogator of America’s psyche. She can read a graveyard in a theater, personality in a hairstyle; she lists instead of declaims. Her asperity is elegantly pithy and violent. In the fissures between and among items, she revolts. Her words are ascetic. She doesn’t want me to envy her life, the fullness of which is only hinted at. She wants me to leave her alone to live within this sentence of her mother’s: “Sometimes I almost forget I’m a Negro.” The last two words, *Go on*, aren’t just a writer walking off stage and getting on with life; they convey the pleasure of taunting future pain the truth of vision will surely yield.” —David Shields

“Margo Jefferson sees everything and expresses it with surgical clarity. She is the Toqueville of race in America. This is a great book, destined to be read for a century.” —Edmund White

“I revere Margo Jefferson’s critical voice for its directness and wit and sanity, its tonal precision, its unabashed aestheticism, and its secret pockets of ambivalence. For years she has been a brilliant interpreter of performance; it makes perfect sense that her analysis of race and class—and the painful performances those categories entail—should offer a similarly wondrous intensity of detail, emotion, and wisdom. *Negroland*, a compactly crafted treasure, showcases a new way to write memoir—a new mode of honest and complicated reckoning, without masks.” —Wayne Koestenbaum

“Powerful and complicated . . . power dwells in the restraint of ‘Negroland.’ Ms. Jefferson gets a lot said about her life, the insults she has weathered, her insecurities, even her suicidal impulses. There’s sinew and grace in the way she plays with memory, dodging here and burning there, like a photographer in a darkroom.

. . . Ms. Jefferson will not be denied. . . . With luck, there will be a sequel to this book."—Dwight Garner, *The New York Times*

"Jefferson is a national treasure and her memoir should be required reading across the country." —Nicole Jones, *Vanity Fair*

"Powerful. . . . Margo Jefferson identifies and deftly explores the tensions that come with being party of America's black elite." —Roxane Gay, *O, The Oprah Magazine*

"Razor sharp, self-lacerating and singular." —Pam Houston, *More Magazine*

"A candid observer, Jefferson articulates the complicated and calculated performance of upper-class black life." —*New York Magazine*

"Treads briskly and fearlessly across the treacherous terrain of race, class, gender and entitlement in this tightly edited memoir that recalls her youth in 1950s and 60s Chicago. . . . [Jefferson] is a poetic and bracing memoirist. . . . Lean, specific and personal . . . enlightening." —Robin Givhan, *The Washington Post*

"A nuanced meditation from a life lived in the upper echelons of Chicago's black bourgeoisie, beginning before the civil-rights era and trailing off in our still-conflicted present." —*Vulture*

"Jefferson's descriptions of how she 'craved' the right to despair are some of the most haunting parts of the book." —Vanessa De Luca, *Time*

"Poignant. . . . In *Negroland*, Jefferson is simultaneously looking in and looking out at her blackness, elusive in her terse, evocative reconnaissance, leaving us yearning to know more." —Rebecca Carroll, *Los Angeles Times*

"A veritable library of African-American letters and a sumptuous compendium of elegant style. . . . [Jefferson] paints her rich inner and outer landscape with deft, impressionistic strokes. It's a technique that disrupts convention—which is her privilege after all." —Donna Bailey Nurse, *The Boston Globe*

"Pulitzer winner Jefferson's personal history is—as she says about vigorous analysis of race, gender, and class prerogatives—as fundamental as 'utensils and clothing.' This is to say that it's one of the truly indispensable books of 2015." —*Flavorwire*

"Reads with the blast force of a prose poem." —Heather Seggel, *BookPage*

"[NEGROLAND] shines a spotlight on a fascinating slice of the American experience of which many people are barely aware." —Colette Bancroft, *Tampa Bay Times*

"Vibrant... lyrical" —*Minneapolis Star-Tribune*

"A stunning, stunning meditation on the limitations of race, class, gender in America and Jeffries own life. More than a memoir, poetic, critical, profound." Clara Nibbelink, A Cappella Books

About the Author

The winner of a Pulitzer Prize for criticism, **MARGO JEFFERSON** was for years a theater and book critic

for *Newsweek* and *The New York Times*. Her writing has appeared in, among other publications, *Vogue*, *New York* magazine, and *The New Republic*. She is the author of *On Michael Jackson* and is a professor of writing at Columbia University School of the Arts.

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I'm a chronicler of Negroland, a participant-observer, an elegist, dissenter and admirer; sometime expatriate, ongoing interlocutor.

I call it Negroland because I still find "Negro" a word of wonders, glorious and terrible. A word for runaway slave posters and civil rights proclamations; for social constructs and street corner flaunts. A tonal-language word whose meaning shifts as setting and context shift, as history twists, lurches, advances, and stagnates. As capital letters appear to enhance its dignity; as other nomenclatures arise to challenge its primacy.

I call it Negroland because "Negro" dominated our history for so long; because I lived with its meanings and intimations for so long; because they were essential to my first discoveries of what race meant, or, as we now say, how race was constructed.

For nearly two hundred years we in Negroland have called ourselves all manner of things. Like

the colored aristocracy
the colored elite
the colored 400
the 400
the blue vein society
the big families, the old families, the old settlers, the pioneers
Negro society, black society
the Negro, the black, the African-American upper class or elite.

I was born in 1947, and my generation, like its predecessors, was taught that since our achievements received little notice or credit from white America, we were not to discuss our faults, lapses, or uncertainties in public. (Even now I shy away from the word "failings.") Even the least of them would be turned against the race. Most white people made no room for the doctrine of "human, all too human": our imperfections were sub- or provisionally human.

For my generation the motto was still: Achievement. Invulnerability. Comportment.

Part of me dreads revealing anything in these pages except our drive to excellence. But I dread the constricted expression that comes from that. And we're prone to being touchy. Self-righteously smug and snobbish. So let me begin in a quiet, clinical way.

I was born into the Chicago branch of Negroland. My father was a doctor, a pediatrician, and for some years head of pediatrics at Provident, the nation's oldest black hospital. My mother was a social worker who left her job when she married, and throughout my childhood she was a full-time wife, mother, and socialite. But where did they come from to get there? And which clubs and organizations did they join to seal their membership in this world?

A brief vita of the author.

Margo Jefferson:

Ancestors: (In chronological order): slaves and slaveholders in Virginia, Kentucky, and Mississippi;

farmers, musicians, butlers, construction crew supervisors, teachers, beauticians and maids, seamstresses and dressmakers, engineers, policewomen, real estate businesswomen, lawyers, judges, doctors and social workers

Father's fraternity: Kappa Alpha Psi

Mother's (and sister's) sorority: Delta Sigma Theta

Parents' national clubs: the Boulé (father); the Northeasterners (mother)

Sister's and my national clubs: Jack and Jill; the Co-Ettes

Local clubs, schools, and camps will be named as we go along. Skin color and hair will be described, evaluated too, along with other racialized physical traits. Questions inevitably will arise. Among them: How does one—how do you, how do I—parse class, race, family, and temperament? How many kinds of deprivation are there? What is the compass of privilege? What has made and maimed me?

Here are some of this group's founding categories, the oppositions and distinctions they came to live by.

Northerner / Southerner

house slave / field hand

free black / slave black

free black / free mulatto

skilled worker / unskilled worker (free or slave)

owns property / owns none

reads and writes fluently / reads a little but does not write / reads and writes a little / neither reads nor writes

descends from African and Indian royalty / descends from African obscurities / descends from upper-class whites / descends from lower-class whites / descends from no whites at all

White Americans have always known how to develop aristocracies from local resources, however scant. British grocers arrive on the *Mayflower* and become founding fathers. German laborers emigrate to Chicago and become slaughterhouse kings. Women of equally modest origins marry these men or their rivals or their betters and become social arbiters.

We did the same. "Colored society" was originally a mélange of

men and women who were given favorable treatment, money, property, and even freedom by well-born Caucasian owners, employers, and parents;

men and women who bought their freedom with hard cash and hard labor;

men, women, and children bought and freed by slavery-hating whites or Negro friends and relatives;

men and women descended from free Negroes, hence born free.

They learned their letters and their manners; they learned skilled trades (barber, caterer, baker, jeweler, machinist, tailor, dressmaker); they were the best-trained servants in the better white homes and hotels; they bought real estate; published newspapers; established schools and churches; formed clubs and mutual aid societies; took care to marry among themselves. Some arrived from Haiti alongside whites fleeing Toussaint L'Ouverture's black revolution: their ranks included free mulattoes and slaves who, after some pretense of loyalty, found it easy to desert their former masters and go into the business of upward mobility. From New Orleans to New York, men and women of mixed blood insistently established their primacy.

I've fallen into a mocking tone that feels prematurely disloyal.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Michael Cardona:

Here thing why that Negroland: A Memoir are different and dependable to be yours. First of all studying a book is good however it depends in the content than it which is the content is as scrumptious as food or not. Negroland: A Memoir giving you information deeper including different ways, you can find any publication out there but there is no publication that similar with Negroland: A Memoir. It gives you thrill reading through journey, its open up your personal eyes about the thing which happened in the world which is might be can be happened around you. You can easily bring everywhere like in park your car, café, or even in your approach home by train. If you are having difficulties in bringing the published book maybe the form of Negroland: A Memoir in e-book can be your substitute.

Glenn Bail:

This book untitled Negroland: A Memoir to be one of several books that best seller in this year, here is because when you read this e-book you can get a lot of benefit onto it. You will easily to buy this specific book in the book retailer or you can order it by using online. The publisher of the book sells the e-book too. It makes you more easily to read this book, as you can read this book in your Smartphone. So there is no reason for you to past this reserve from your list.

Curt Stewart:

Why? Because this Negroland: A Memoir is an unordinary book that the inside of the publication waiting for you to snap that but latter it will shock you with the secret the item inside. Reading this book beside it was fantastic author who have write the book in such wonderful way makes the content on the inside easier to understand, entertaining approach but still convey the meaning completely. So , it is good for you because of not hesitating having this anymore or you going to regret it. This book will give you a lot of benefits than the other book have such as help improving your skill and your critical thinking way. So , still want to hold off having that book? If I were being you I will go to the reserve store hurriedly.

Georgia Cunningham:

Reading can called head hangout, why? Because if you find yourself reading a book especially book entitled Negroland: A Memoir your brain will drift away trough every dimension, wandering in each and every aspect that maybe unknown for but surely can become your mind friends. Imaging every single word written in a publication then become one form conclusion and explanation this maybe you never get previous to. The Negroland: A Memoir giving you a different experience more than blown away your mind but also giving you useful details for your better life with this era. So now let us demonstrate the relaxing pattern the following is your body and mind will be pleased when you are finished reading through it, like winning a casino game. Do you want to try this extraordinary shelling out spare time activity?

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