

BOOK CLUB KIT

THOMAS NELSON FICTION



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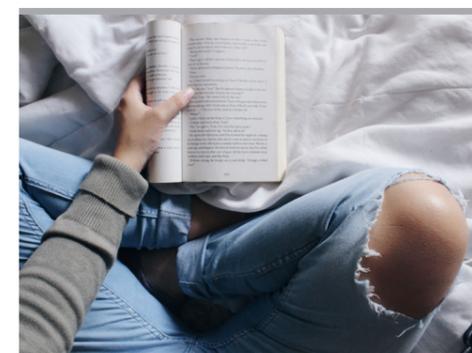
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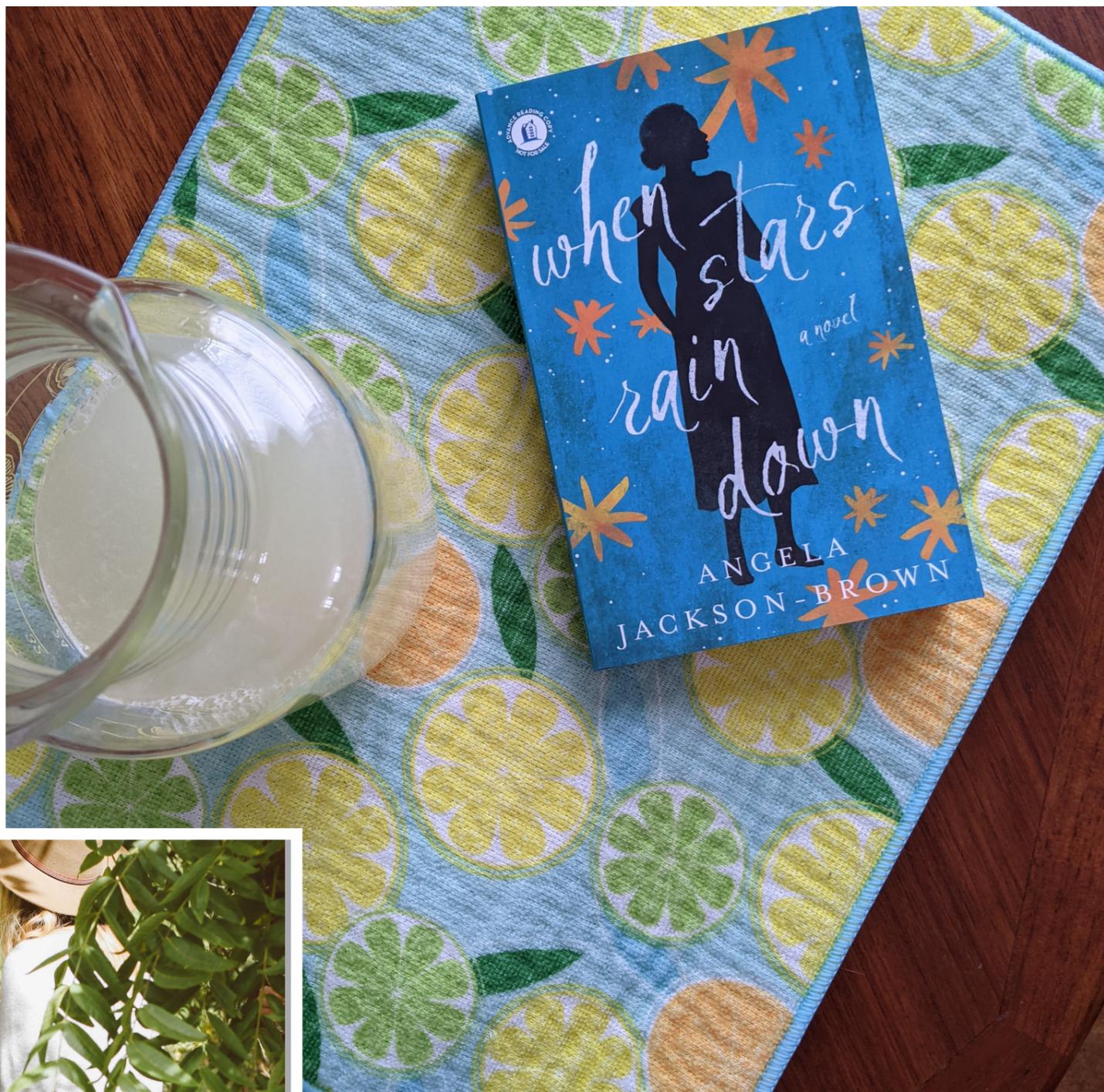


ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Angela Jackson-Brown is an award winning writer, poet and playwright who teaches Creative Writing and English at Ball State University in Muncie, IN. She is a graduate of the Spalding low-residency MFA program in Creative Writing. She is the author of the novel *Drinking From A Bitter Cup* and *House Repairs*.

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HOSTING A GREAT BOOK CLUB

Some ideas for a fun and successful book club meeting for *When Stars Rain Down*

Book clubs are about reading good books, of course, but they're also about so much more: socializing with friends, considering new perspectives and ideas, and maybe even learning something new. For your book club's discussion of *When Stars Rain Down*, here are some ideas for all the components of a good book club that you won't find in a paperback.

Granny's cooking

This novel is rife with rich descriptions of delicious foods and smells, like biscuits baking. For your book club's snacks,

indulge by making some of the Southern comfort staples mentioned in the book. If your book club isn't meeting in person, feel free to make snacks for yourself!

Historical context

For some historical context, consider watching a documentary centering on the South during the 1930s or about the Jim Crow era specifically. There are many excellent options available on public broadcasting, streaming services, or even to borrow from your local library.



I'VE FELT LIKE I'VE MADE FRIENDS IN THIS BEAUTIFUL HEARTWARMING STORY.

—GOODREADS REVIEW

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Angela Jackson-Brown provides context to the reader about the historical legacy of racism and how it manifests in the novel. This note can also be found on pages V–VI of the text.

Dear Reader, Racism in the 1930s was rampant throughout the country, but especially in southern states like Georgia. Because my goal as a writer is always to strive to be historically accurate, there are occasions when characters in the book, who are members of the Ku Klux Klan, will use the “N-word.” My intent in using this word is not to shock but to punctuate the fact that racism was brutal and still is brutal nearly eighty-five years later. I have been a target of the hate that word gives, and I want the readers of this book to understand the full weight of a word so powerful that it is now referred to by its first letter. The white people who were actively participating in the racist behavior found in *When Stars Rain Down* were ordinary,

and this word is a necessary reminder of the hate that lived in the hearts and minds of some of the white citizens of Parsons, Georgia, whom everyone in the community knew. Even when “that word” was not being spoken out loud, many of the white characters illustrated the power of the word through their actions. My hope is that a day will come when that word and other derogatory words are no longer part of our lexicon, but the way we ensure that happens is by staring back at our collective history without blinking or flinching.

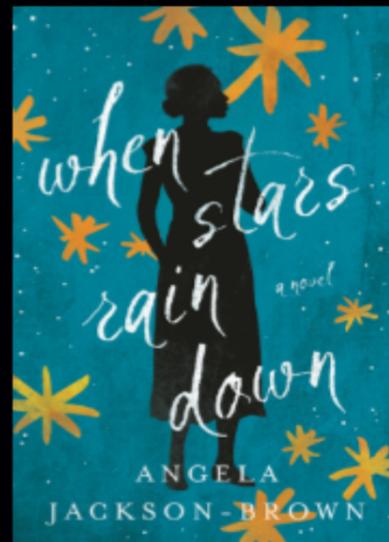
Sincerely,

Angela Jackson-Brown



What you need:

- 1 cup of butter, softened
- ½ cup of white sugar
- 2 cups of all-purpose flour
- 4 eggs
- 1 ½ cups of white sugar
- ¼ cup of all-purpose flour
- 2 lemons, juiced



OPAL'S LEMON SQUARES

Preheat oven to 350 degrees, and don't let yourself start day-dreaming and forget about the oven being on. I left the oven on a couple of times when I was learning to cook, and Grandma Birdie lit into me big time. In a medium bowl, blend together softened butter, 2 cups of flour and ½ cup of sugar. Press into the bottom of an ungreased 9 X 13-inch pan. Make sure you don't grease the pan because if you do, between the butter and the oil, you are going to end up with a greasy mess on your hands. Trust me, I know. Next, bake for 15 – 20 minutes in the preheated oven or until firm and golden. In another bowl, whisk together the remaining 1 ½ cups of sugar and ¼ cup of flour. Whisk in the eggs and lemon juice. Take out your baked crust but don't turn the oven off because you aren't done. Pour the mixture you just made over the baked crust. Lord, I promise you by this point you are going to want to dig in. Don't. I always keep a bit of chocolate nearby to nibble on, so I won't be tempted. Plus, the mixture has raw egg in it. You don't want to get sick, do you? So, put your lemon square concoction back into the oven and bake for an additional 20 minutes. The bars will firm up as they cool. Once cool, cut them into uniform squares. After that, give one to your special someone. They will love you for it, I promise.

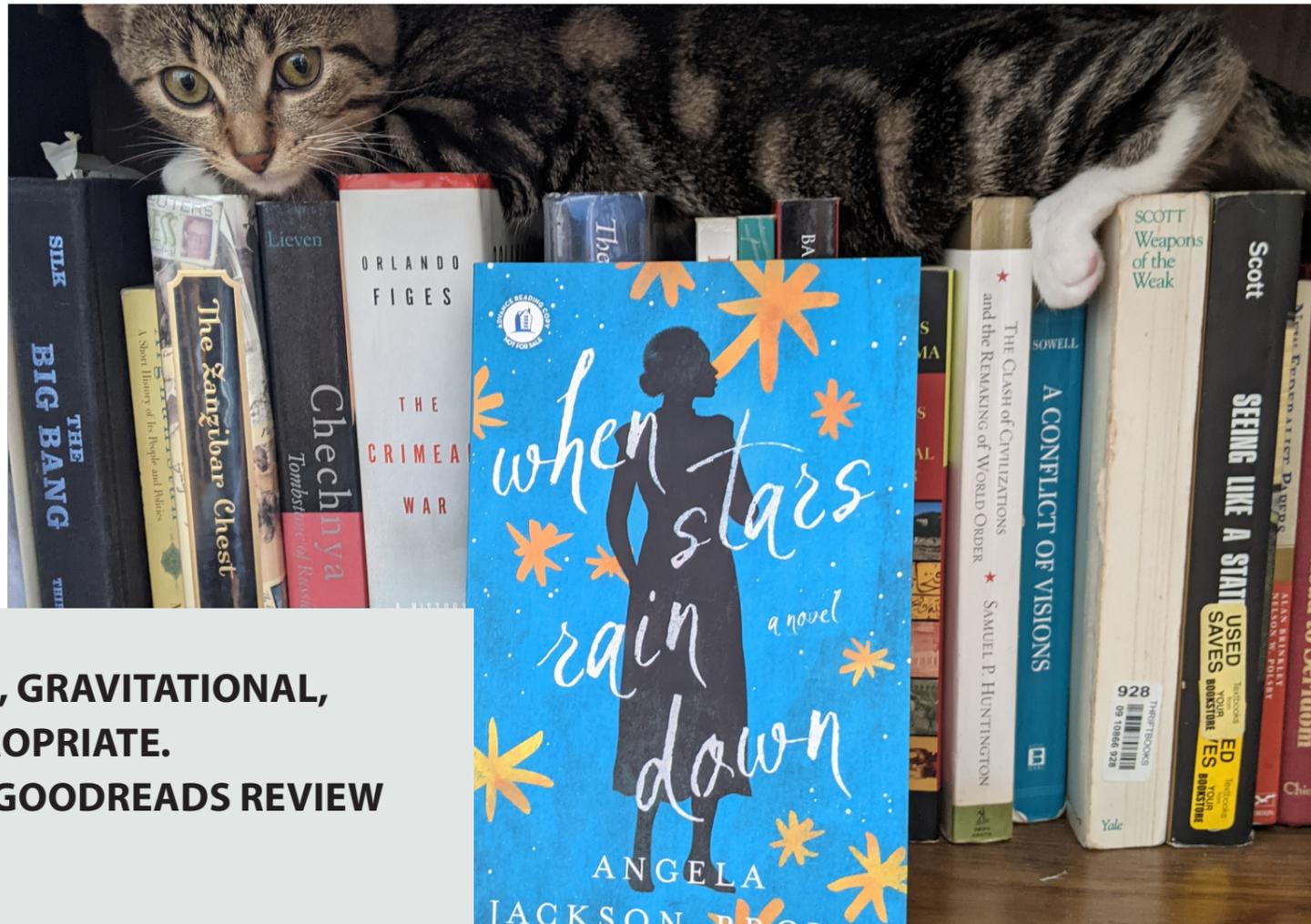
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These discussion questions can also be found on pages 359–361 of *When Stars Rain Down*.

1. Discuss how the drought becomes an antagonist in the novel.
2. How does the absence of Opal’s mother affect her relationship with the other women in the story?
3. In what ways does Opal struggle with the love between herself and her childhood friend, Jimmy Earl Ketchums, and her new boyfriend, Cedric Perkins?
4. Discuss the differences between how Opal views Parsons, Georgia, and her community known as Colored Town.
5. Opal often sees herself as weak. Explain your thoughts about her character. In what ways does she exhibit weakness and in what ways does she exhibit strength?
6. Discuss the role religion plays in the lives of the various characters and how

7. Miss Lovenia, the root woman, shares a different type of spirituality with Opal that eventually Opal rejects. Can you imagine a time when Opal might renew her relationship with the elderly woman and the spirituality the woman tried to share with her?
8. Clear lines of separation exist between the races in the story, but some relationships seem to defy the color line, like

“**REALISTIC, GRAVITATIONAL, AND APPROPRIATE.**
—GOODREADS REVIEW



- Miss Peggy and her family’s relationship with Birdie and Opal, and Doc Henry’s relationship to the community, regardless of ethnicity. Discuss the significance of these uncommon alliances and relationships.
9. Opal often struggles with her faith, similar to the character Mr. Tote, but ultimately, Opal seems to find her way back to believing in God in some form or another. How does her wafting back and forth affect your perception of her?
 10. Founder’s Day has always been a day when the community could come together and celebrate the town and its inhabitants. This Founder’s Day ends in violence and death. In what ways does this outcome mirror the racial unrest that was going on in the nation around that same time?



WHAT READERS ARE SAYING

Readers love the historical detail, the deep emotion, and Opal's voice in *When Stars Rain Down*.



"By the last few chapters I was so invested in Granny and Opal that I needed the tissues. I cried, I laughed, I learned and I enjoyed every minute of the book. It was well written and used language common for the time and location. It definitely made me long for some sweet tea and Georgia peaches."

—Goodreads Review

"*When Stars Rain Down* by Angela Jackson-Brown is an excellent Southern historical fiction that takes the reader straight into the heart of the summer of 1936 in Georgia. Here we are thrown into the middle of the sticky, humid, unrelenting heat of a deep south summer

“ I CRIED, I LAUGHED, I LEARNED AND I ENJOYED EVERY MINUTE OF THE BOOK.

—GOODREADS REVIEW

that is teeming with more than just high temperatures : a tightrope balancing between the coming changes and the dark past and present of segregation, smothering past of slavery, and the aftermath of all that entails....

The author does a fantastic job placing the reader into the 1930s physical and societal landscapes of small town Georgia. I could literally feel the dust rising up on the dry roads, the sun beating down on my back, the smell of biscuits baking in the oven, and the fear, tension, love, anger, loss, family, and emotions crackling in the air. She did an excellent job depicting the dialect, attitude, character development, and descriptions of the locations within this story....

It was hard to read about how the African American community was treated. Despite all that I have read, it obviously never gets easier, as it should never. It was truly heartbreaking to see the hurt, hardships, uncertainty, fear, and life-altering occurrences that happened every day. The author did a great job depicting this all the while weaving a wondrous tale of young Opal, her family and town, and that pivotal summer. It kept me engaged and drawn to each page desperate to

find out what happens. I liked the bittersweet ending and thought it was realistic, gravitational, and appropriate."

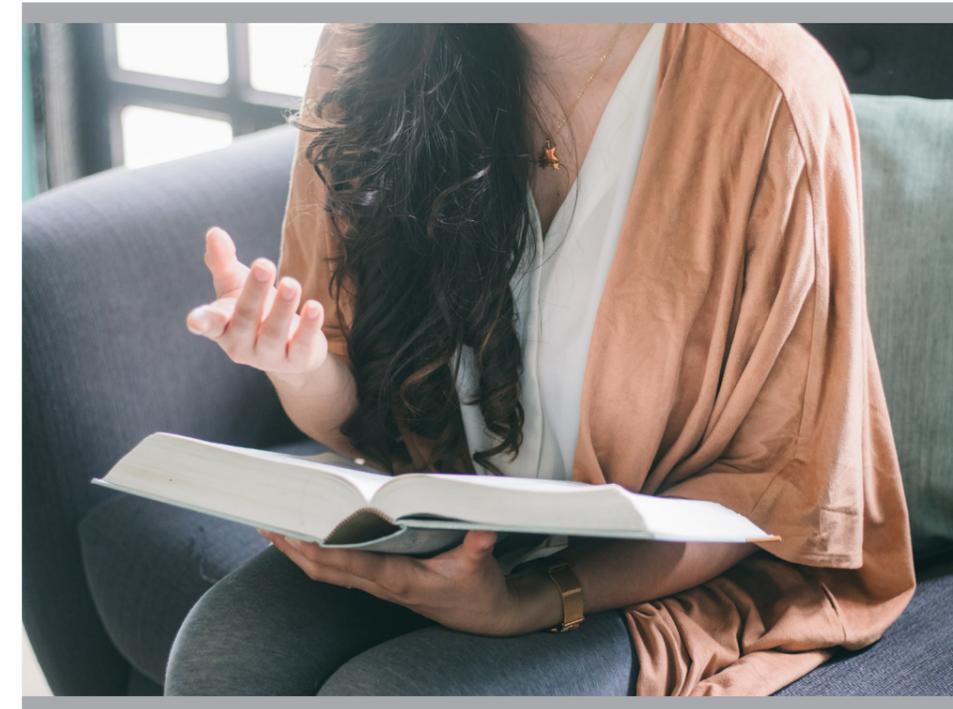
—Goodreads Review

"A powerful tale of race relations in Georgia in 1936. It was difficult to read some parts of how the African Americans were treated, but it is definitely a story that needed to be told. Still relevant today with the racial tensions in our country."

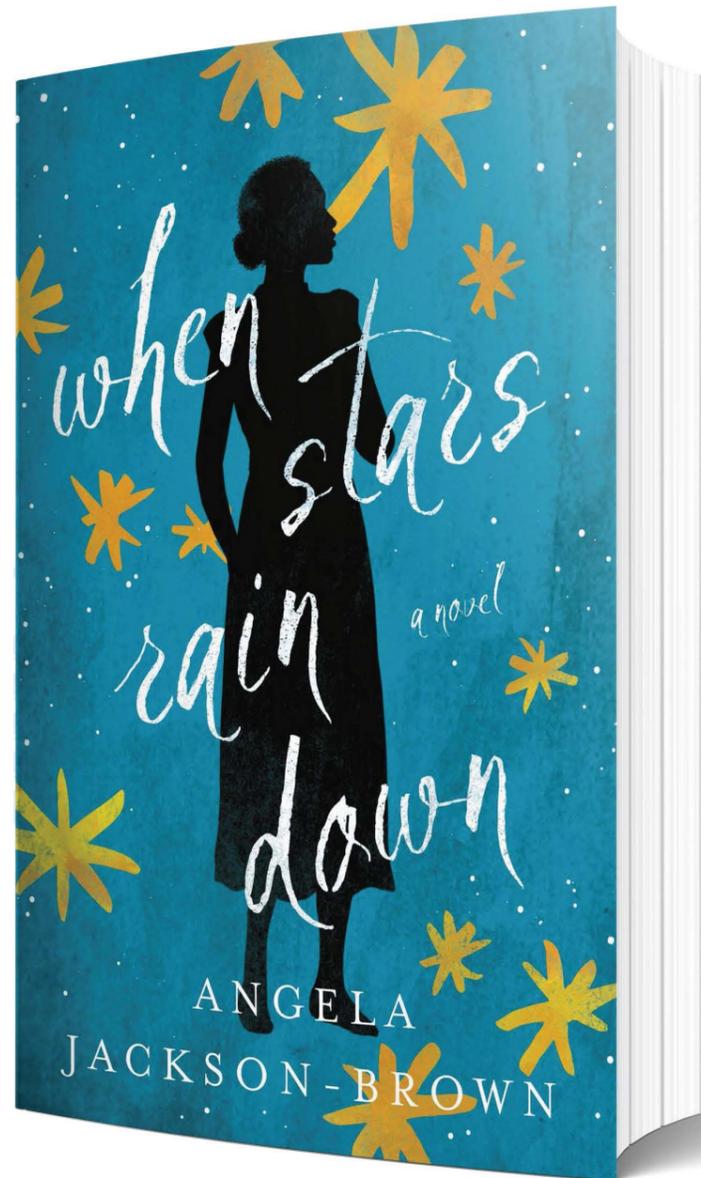
—Goodreads Review

"*When Stars Rain Down* is a very well written historical book. Set during the mid 1930s this book deals with the life of a young woman of color, race relations and the Klan. This author is new to me and I look forward to reading more books by her."

—Goodreads Review



START READING



The inside of Miss Peggy's house was hot like the End of Days the preachers preached about during summertime revival meetings. My pastor, Reverend Perkins, said just this past Sunday that if this heat was a clue of how hot hell was going to be, we should all be lining up to get rebaptized. This type of heat was new to all of us and had some of the End of Days crowd prophesizing that maybe this was the sign of the end. I didn't know about that but I knew one thing: this heat made everything unbearable to do, especially cooking and cleaning.

I was naturally thin, and usually when everybody else was soaked with sweat, I was walking around with a sweater on. But this day, I felt like somebody had drenched me in water. We'd been experiencing unseasonable weather since the middle of April. Tornadoes had been hitting all around us, and it only got worse as the days went on. Now we were in the middle of one of the worst droughts to ever hit the state of Georgia. Lou Zoller, on WSB radio, said 1936 would go down as one of the deadliest

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years when it came to the weather. It most surely felt like Mother Nature was on a warpath, and we were her targets.

Of course it didn't help that I was stuck cooking in the kitchen like it was the day before Christmas instead of the middle of June. I would be eighteen in a few days and I had planned on spending this day shopping in Atlanta with my cousin Lucille. She and I were going to look for outfits to wear to Founder's Day in a few weeks, a celebration that had been going on in Parsons, Georgia, since before Granny was born. Everybody, young and old, Colored and white, wanted to be at Founder's Day dressed in their best outfits. Yet here I was, cooking and cleaning at Miss Peggy's house instead of gazing at dresses made out of tulle, taffeta, and silk. I wasn't planning on buying one of those off-the-rack dresses; since I was pretty handy with a needle and a thread, I planned on making the dress that I liked and saving some money.

I had asked for the day off weeks before, and Granny and Miss Peggy had said yes, but when Miss Peggy told me Jimmy Earl was coming home on the same day as my trip to Atlanta, I knew I had to stay and help her and Granny get ready. Both of them were too old to try to cook and clean in all this heat. I was sad that I had to give up my trip to Atlanta, but I would have just spent the day worrying about Granny and Miss Peggy.

Jimmy Earl was coming home from the University of Georgia to visit for the summer, and Miss Peggy wanted all his favorite foods waiting on the dinner table when he walked inside the door. Ordinarily, on hot days like this, we didn't even cook. I'd make some sandwiches or a tray of vegetables or fruit, and that would be about all. But Miss Peggy was bound and determined

that Jimmy Earl get the king's treatment when he returned from school.

I leaned against the counter. I was so hot I could hardly breathe. The windows were all open, and I had a little fan sitting in the windowsill that wasn't doing much more than circulating hot air. I filled up my mason jar with some of the spring water I'd stopped for that morning. Miss Peggy had indoor water and a Frigidaire she kept it cool in, but water straight out of the faucet just didn't taste the same to me, even though the water came from the well my grandfather had dug for Miss Peggy and her husband when they first built this house.

I mopped the sweat from my face with the dish towel on the counter and looked around the kitchen. There wasn't a single spot that wasn't filled up with a pot or pan or serving tray of Jimmy Earl's favorite foods. The menu for his homecoming consisted of baked ham, short ribs, fried chicken with gravy, dressing, collard greens, stewed okra and tomatoes, potato salad, apple dumplings, buttermilk biscuits, and German chocolate cake. Most everything was already done except for a few things like the biscuits and the gravy that I planned on making right around the time Jimmy Earl arrived.

It was four thirty, and Jimmy Earl was sure to be home any minute. Miss Peggy tried to help me earlier after Granny had to go home on account of her gout acting up, but Miss Peggy was getting feeble her own self, so it was up to me to make sure Jimmy Earl's homecoming dinner was everything his gran wanted it to be.

"Opal, I swear you done got to be as good of a cook as your Grandma Birdie," Miss Peggy said as she walked into the kitchen

taking slow, measured steps. Miss Peggy used to be a big woman like my granny, but she'd lost a whole lot of weight over the last few months. And on top of that, her movements were getting slower. A sign of age, she had said. I'd wondered if that was really the case, but I didn't dare ask. Even at the age of nearly being an adult, I still understood my place when it came to Granny and Miss Peggy. Some things they just wouldn't discuss with me, and their health was generally something they only talked about with each other in hushed tones.

Miss Peggy made her way over to the stove where the pot of greens was still cooking. She stuck the big metal spoon into the pot and dipped out some of the pot likker. She blew on it and then took a sip. I watched her as she closed her eyes and moaned.

"Lord, chile, this pot likker is better than any I've ever cooked. You're gonna make some lucky man a good wife someday."

"I'm not looking for no husband," I muttered. But even when I said the words, I knew I wasn't exactly being honest. I was almost eighteen. No, I didn't necessarily have a boy in mind to marry since Granny wouldn't even let me keep company with a boy yet, but I did wonder who might be the boy I would someday marry and start a family with.

"Every girl is looking for a husband, honey. Some just look harder than others. But never mind all of that. When do you think everything will be ready? Jimmy Earl should be home any minute, and his mama's been napping all afternoon. Hopefully she won't get in one of her moods today," Miss Peggy said.

Jimmy Earl's mama, Miss Corinne, was a bit touched. As far

as I knew, she'd been that way most of her life, but especially after she had Jimmy Earl, or at least that's what Granny told me. She said some women never overcame the stress and strain of childbirth and that Miss Corinne suffered more than most, especially since her marriage to Jimmy Earl's daddy, Mr. Earl Ketchums, didn't work out. Miss Corinne and Jimmy Earl had to come back home and live with Miss Peggy and Miss Peggy's now deceased husband, Mr. Cecil.

A lot of days my whole job revolved around keeping Miss Corinne quiet. Usually that meant listening to her while she sang from the Methodist hymnal. If she got restless, I would just make a song request to calm her down.

"Sing me 'To God Be the Glory,' Miss Corinne," I might say, and she would run off for her hymnal even though she knew nearly every song in there by heart. I'd make her sing song after song until she was worn completely out. Other times, if she wasn't interested in singing, I would take her for a long walk. We'd go from Miss Peggy's house all the way out to mine and Granny's house over in Colored Town and then back again. Sometimes we'd do it more than once in a day's time if she was really riled up, but this heat had made it impossible for me to take her walking.

I was thankful Miss Peggy had convinced her to sleep. I wouldn't have been able to cook and tend to Miss Corinne too.

"Miss Peggy, all I've got left to do is make the biscuits and let these greens cook for another half hour and then everything will be ready," I said.

"What about the deviled eggs? Jimmy Earl loves Birdie's

develed eggs. Should you make some of them too?" Miss Peggy asked, wiping her forehead with her handkerchief.

"Miss Peggy, we've got so much food here now, it'll take Jimmy Earl and half of the county the rest of the week and part of next to eat everything. I hardly made this much when he came home for Christmas last year," I said, determined not to cook one more thing that we hadn't already agreed upon.

I was beyond tired. Of course, I understood Miss Peggy's excitement. Jimmy Earl hadn't been home since Christmas. He was studying pharmacy at the University of Georgia, and during the breaks and holidays, he worked at a pharmacy up there in Athens, and he did some janitorial work at the local hospital to help pay for his schooling. So his deciding to come home for the summer and help around the farm and work at Mr. Lowen's Drugstore was a big deal. And, I had to admit, I had missed him too.

Jimmy Earl and I had grown up together. He was five years older than me, but he always treated me like a little sister. It never mattered that he was white and I was Colored. Granny said when I was a toddler and she would bring me to work, Jimmy Earl insisted that he was in charge of taking care of me.

"Earl! Earl Ketchums, where you at?" I heard Miss Corinne call from the front room, startling both me and Miss Peggy.

"Blessed Savior," Miss Peggy muttered.

I still needed to mix up my biscuit dough and get the red-eye gravy cooking. The last thing I needed was to have to go deal with Miss Corinne. I looked at Miss Peggy.

She patted my hand. "I'll tend to Corinne. You just go on

and finish up the cooking. And when you get done with them biscuits, you fix two plates . . . one for you and one for Birdie, and then you head on home. Birdie probably ain't ate today."

"Are you sure, Miss Peggy? Soon as I get these biscuits in the oven I can go see about Miss Corinne," I said. I was tired but I knew Miss Corinne did better with me than she did with Miss Peggy or my granny. I hated to see Jimmy Earl's homecoming spoiled because Miss Corinne was acting out.

Miss Peggy smiled, but the sadness was all over her face. "No, honey. You go on home once those biscuits are done. You been cooking and cleaning all week. I'll get Corinne to settle down," she said and walked out the kitchen, almost dragging her left leg behind her.

It wasn't easy seeing Miss Peggy and Granny getting old. It was like one day they were middle-aged, still spry and in complete control of their faculties and their bodies, and the next day, they were old women with brittle bones and labored breaths. It scared me.

I gave the greens one last stir and then turned them down real low. Everything looked good. Then I started making the biscuits and the gravy. I was so good at making Granny's cat-head biscuit recipe, she never bothered to make them anymore. She just called on me to make her biscuits. The gravy was easy as well. I just used some of the juice from the ham I had baked, stirred in some flour, and then added the melted butter and half of a cup of this morning's coffee to give it that strong taste everybody loved so much. I turned the gravy down low so it would keep warm until Jimmy Earl got home.

Once those two things were done, I was officially finished cooking, and I was happy for that. I just wanted to get my things and go home, where I could lay out on the porch underneath the stars and catch a breeze if I was lucky. I started fixing plates for mine and Granny's supper. I hoped she would feel up to eating. Then I tidied up the kitchen, making sure Miss Peggy didn't have anything to do but serve the food when Jimmy Earl got home. She and Granny had set the dining room table with the fancy china the day before, so all I needed to do was go find Miss Peggy—but before I could go looking for her, I heard Miss Corinne getting louder and louder in the front room.

"I want to go see Earl Ketchums, Mama," I heard Miss Corinne yell. "And I want to go see him right now."

Clearly Miss Corinne had forgotten that the last time she snuck off to see Earl Ketchums, her daddy had still been alive and had shot Mr. Earl in his rear end, promising to aim higher if he didn't stay away from Miss Corinne. Even after Mr. Muldoon's death, we kept a clear eye on Miss Corinne, making sure she never went off on her own to see him. Jimmy Earl saw his daddy every now and then, but even he would admit that it was best she not be around Mr. Earl because he lived like somebody thrown away. He didn't work, except for selling moonshine, and, as Granny would say, he stayed drunker than Cooter Brown most of the time.

"Corinne, you are getting yourself riled up for nothing. Now go somewhere and be still," I heard Miss Peggy say back to her.

What a Friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!

What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!

"Oh, Lord," I said under my breath. Miss Corinne was about to get wound up and it was going to take an act of God to settle her down. I hurried into the sitting room just in time to see Miss Corinne pull her dress over her head as she continued to sing the words to her favorite song, but she was singing it so fast, all of the words seemed to run together.

Ohwhatpeaceweoftenforfeit,
Ohwhatneedlesspainwebear,

"Corinne Louise Muldoon Ketchums, have you lost your ever-loving mind?" Miss Peggy yelled, her face turning all shades of red.

Allbecausewedonotcarry,
EverythingtoGodinprayer.

I ran over and pulled Miss Corinne's dress back down. "I've got her, Miss Peggy."

Miss Peggy sank into the closest chair, the color steadily draining from her face. I worried that she might just pass out, but I turned my attention back to Miss Corinne, who was trying to pull away from me. I wrapped my arms around her waist and tried to pull her close. She struggled, but then, after a moment or two, she relaxed in my arms.

"I want to go see Earl Ketchums," Miss Corinne said, tears streaming down her face. "You'll take me, Opal? You'll take me now? I need to see him right now. Right now. Right. Now!"

“Let’s talk about it tomorrow, Miss Corinne. Jimmy Earl will be home in a few minutes and you don’t want to miss him, do you?” I asked. I reached into Miss Corinne’s dress pocket and retrieved one of her daddy’s handkerchiefs that she’s kept with her since he died three years ago. Normally, she would have on a pair of his dungarees. They would nearly swallow her up, but wearing them was the only thing that seemed to keep her calm when she started missing Mr. Cecil, which was all of the time. I had convinced her to wear a dress today in Jimmy Earl’s honor. She looked like a fragile white baby doll. I wiped the tears from her face.

“Jimmy Earl’s coming home?” she asked, a half smile on her face. “He’s coming back? Is Daddy coming back too?”

I decided to ignore her last question. “Yes ma’am, Jimmy Earl will be here any minute and you don’t want him to find you all wound up, now, do you?” I smoothed down her brownish-blond hair that looked just like her mama’s used to look before it became thinned out and gray colored. I had French braided Miss Corinne’s hair earlier during the day, but between her restless sleeping and the heat, it looked like I hadn’t even touched it. “Why don’t we go upstairs and get you changed and fixed up again?”

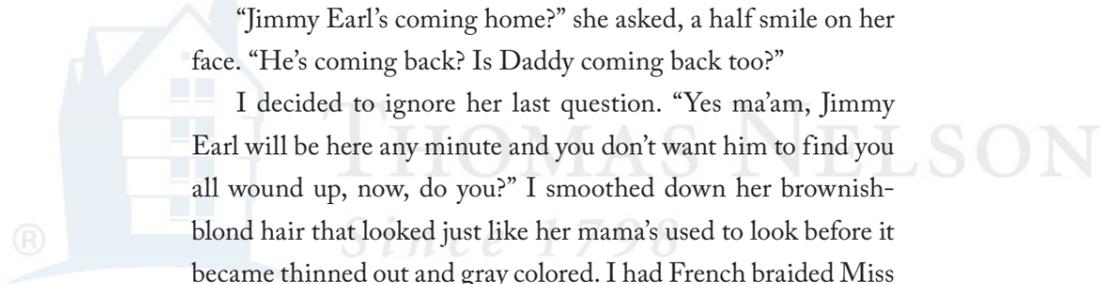
“You’ll take me to see Earl Ketchums tomorrow?” she asked, not to be thrown off from her original request.

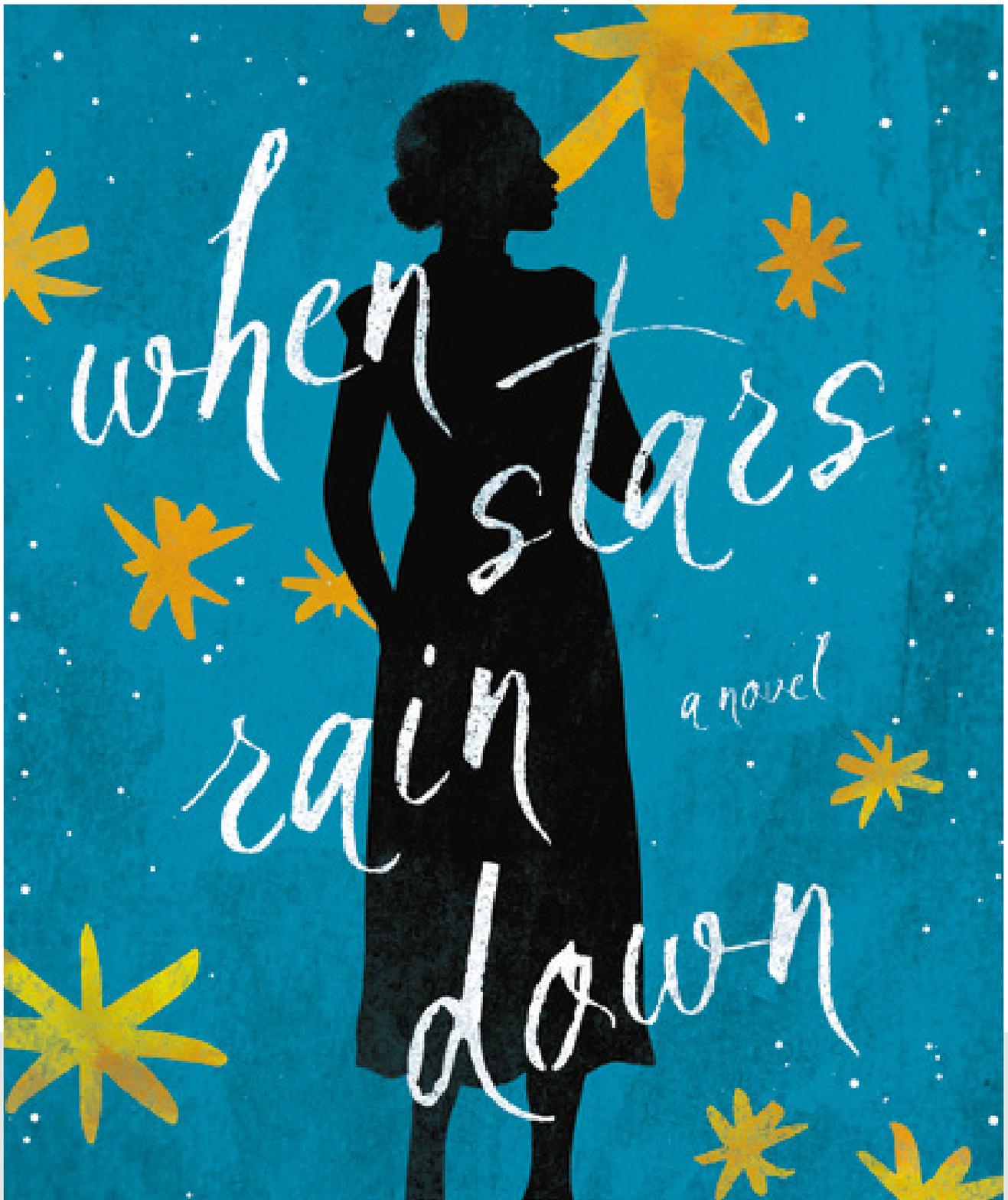
I took her by the hand. “Let’s get you cleaned up and we’ll talk about that later.”

I looked over at Miss Peggy. She was watching us closely, and I could see tears trickling down her face, which was unusual

because Miss Peggy wasn’t a crying type of woman. She mouthed, “Thank you.” I nodded and led Miss Corinne out of the sitting room and up the stairs to her room.

Clearly, I wouldn’t be going home anytime soon.





WHEN STARS RAIN DOWN BOOK CLUB KIT

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