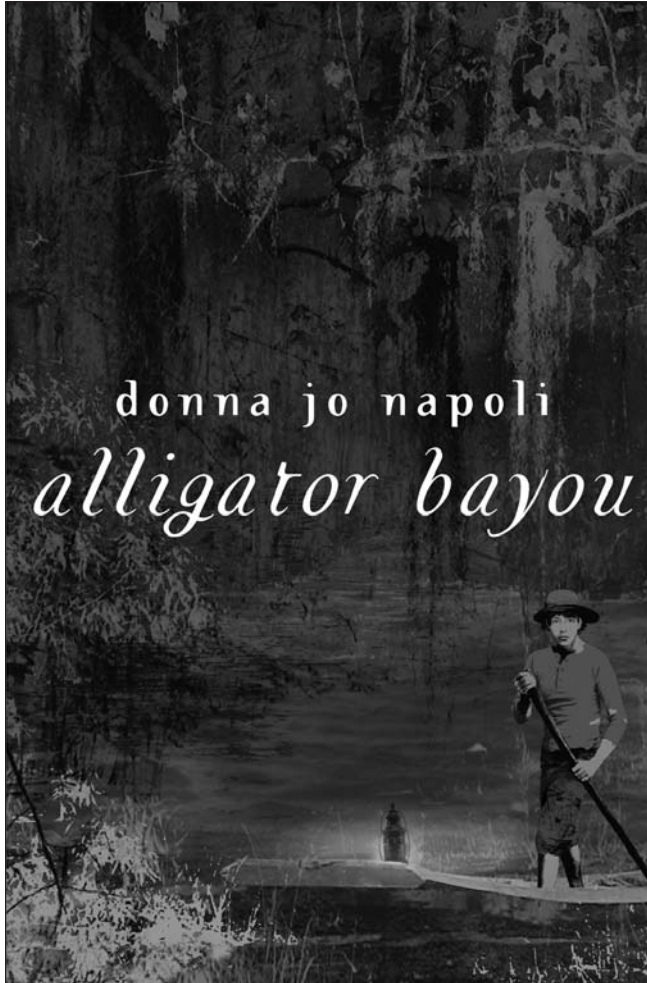


BOOKNOTES

readers guide



Wendy Lamb Books HC: 978-0-385-74654-0
GLB: 978-0-385-90891-7

THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

Prejudice • Good vs. Evil
Courage & Honor • Family

GRADES 7 UP

ABOUT THE BOOK

Since Calogero is a new immigrant to Tallulah, Calogero's cousin, Cirone, shows him the ropes of life in America. But it is Calogero who meets the pretty Black girl, Patricia, whose brothers take him for a 'gator hunt in the bayou. Scared to death by the swamp and the 'gator, and punished with more work, Calogero stays away from the bayou, but spends his time figuring out ways to be with Patricia. As tensions between the white community and the Sicilians heighten, Calogero depends on Frank Raymond, his teacher, to help him and his family out of some dangerous circumstances. As the situation turns volatile, the angry white mob cannot be stopped. Only one Sicilian will escape.

“Every human being got his race to run.”

—Patricia from *Alligator Bayou*

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Dear Friend,

Alligator Bayou is a book I never expected to write, and now I find that I want children to read it more than I've ever wanted them to read any of my books.

This book is about the lynching of Italians in the small town of Tallulah, Louisiana, in 1899. Before I did the research for this book, I had never heard of Italians being lynched. In fact, when I was a child, the word lynch was whispered, as though it carried an evil power and the less we spoke it aloud, the better.

The decades after the Civil War, through the time of this story and even into the twentieth century, were filthy with lynchings, mostly of African American men and women and children but also of several Italians. Add those to the lynchings of the indigenous people of this continent before, during, and after this period, and you have an overwhelmingly brutal picture of injustice in America.

What happened in Tallulah captured me because documentation of the investigation that came afterward allowed me to see details of what happened on the day leading up to the murders. Also, because this case became a cause célèbre in Italy, I could read quite a lot from the Italian perspective, which was markedly different from that in the American press. The Italians saw the case as an economic question from the get-go.

There is no doubt in my mind that these murders and many of the others I read about were motivated by the desire to maintain the status quo regarding economic and social power. My respect for the people who looked this evil in the face and still kept their dignity—oh, that respect is enormous, for their achievement is enormous. I hope my readers can get inside the world of this story and think about what they would do if they were in the situations my characters find themselves in. I hope they'll walk away with admiration for people who keep standing tall, for people who continue to make beauty and share food and laughter in celebration of their achievements and joys, no matter what outside threats come.

This is an American story—as American as any story can be. We are a country with a long history of people coming together from different races, cultures, languages. That kind of mixing strains the fabric of any society. We must not allow such shredding of our society, of our souls, to happen ever again. Learning to weave a social fabric strong enough not to fray under strain is essential as we face the myriad forces in our society today. We need to know our story—and not to whisper about it, but to discuss it openly. We need to use the knowledge of our story to face our future with dignity and humanity.

Thank you for reading this book. Thank you for putting it in the hands of others. I am forever grateful to you.

Love,

Donna Jo

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Alligator Bayou focuses on Sicilian immigrants and the issues they faced in the United States. Ask students to visit the Web sites below and to read through the different links to learn more about some of those issues.

Italian Immigrants in New York in the 1890s
italophiles.com/mulberry.htm

A Slice of Sicily
www.neworleansonline.com/neworleans/multicultural/multiculturalhistory/italian.html

Each student should write down one or two facts from their investigation to share with the class. As a group, discuss and record the findings. Then ask students to write a poem that could be penned by a Sicilian immigrant expressing the frustration of the immigrant experience.

WRITING ACTIVITIES

- Calogero misses his father, but more importantly, Calogero is haunted by the fact that he doesn't know what happened to his father after he came to America. Ask students to assume Calogero's voice and to keep a brief journal for his brother, Rocco, who stayed in Sicily. Each of the twenty journal entries should be at least two sentences long and should use descriptive words and imagery; at least six entries should be illustrated. Have students bind the journals and include an illustrated thematic cover.
- The situation between the white townspeople and Calogero's family continues to heat up through a series of incidents: the sale of the *limoncello*, the graduation party with the Blacks, the goats on Mr. Hodge's porch, waiting on Black customers first in the store, and several other situations. In groups of three, ask students to make a list of all of the altercations between the white townspeople and one or more of the Sicilians, altercations that eventually lead to the violent conclusion. Have students list them on a time line, writing a short paragraph explaining the who, what, when, where, and why of each situation. Students should also illustrate their time lines and display them in the classroom.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- Calogero sums up the senselessness of prejudice on page 2. "Our family supplies this town, Tallulah, with the best fruits and vegetables. You'd think the sound of Sicilian would make their mouths water. Instead, we hold our tongues. . . ." Why would the townspeople not want to hear the Italian people speak their native language? What happens to the Italians when they speak Sicilian?
- Francesco does not abide by the Jim Crow laws. What are the Jim Crow laws? Why don't they impact grocery stores? Do the whites agree with Francesco's interpretation of the law? Why or why not?
- The first time Francesco's goats bother Dr. Hodge, he sends Francesco a message with Joe. Why doesn't Dr. Hodge come himself? How does Francesco receive the message? What does Francesco do in response?
- What do Cirone and Calogero learn from their alligator hunt in the bayou? What does it cost them? What do they gain from their experience?
- What impact do Frank Raymond and Joseph have on Calogero's life? How do they help him understand the good and bad faces of America? What do they teach him beyond book learning?
- What influence do Patricia and her bothers have on Cirone and Calogero? What is Calogero's response when he discovers Cirone has been seeing Rock, Ben, and Charles behind his back?
- Patricia tells Calogero that, "Every human being got his race to run." (p. 143) What does she mean by this statement? How does this come true for Calogero and his family?
- Why is it so important for Calogero and his family to attend Patricia's graduation party? What do they take with them? Do they all enjoy themselves? What problems does it cause for them when they attend?

POST-READING ACTIVITY

There are no words to express the horror of what happened to Calogero's cousins and uncles or the feelings he must have had as he floated away in the *Huri*. The reader is left to wonder, what happens to Calogero? With a partner, students should discuss the possibilities. Have students write a one-page continuation of the events in Calogero's life after he floats downriver. Where does he stop? Is he alive? Who does he meet? Have students read their stories to the class and bind them in a class book for others to read.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Donna Jo Napoli is the author of many distinguished books for young readers, among them *Crazy Jack*, *The Magic Circle*, *Stones in Water*, *Daughter of Venice*, *Zel*, *Breathe*, *Bound*, and *The King of Mulberry Street*. She has taught widely at major universities in America and abroad. She is a professor in the linguistics department at Swarthmore College.

For more information about the author, visit www.donnajonapoli.com.

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INTERNET RESOURCES

Linciati: Lynchings of Italians in America

www.uwosh.edu/filmandhistory/documentary/americanhistory1/linciati.php

Dark Legacy—Article about Italian Lynchings in Louisiana

www.rps.psu.edu/0405/dark.html

Italian Immigrants in New York in the 1890s

italophiles.com/mulberry.htm

Frequently Asked Questions About Alligators in Louisiana

www.wlf.louisiana.gov/faq/?category=12

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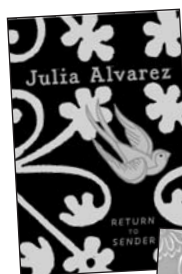


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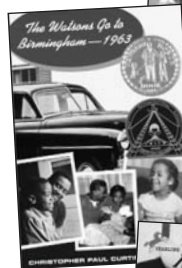
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