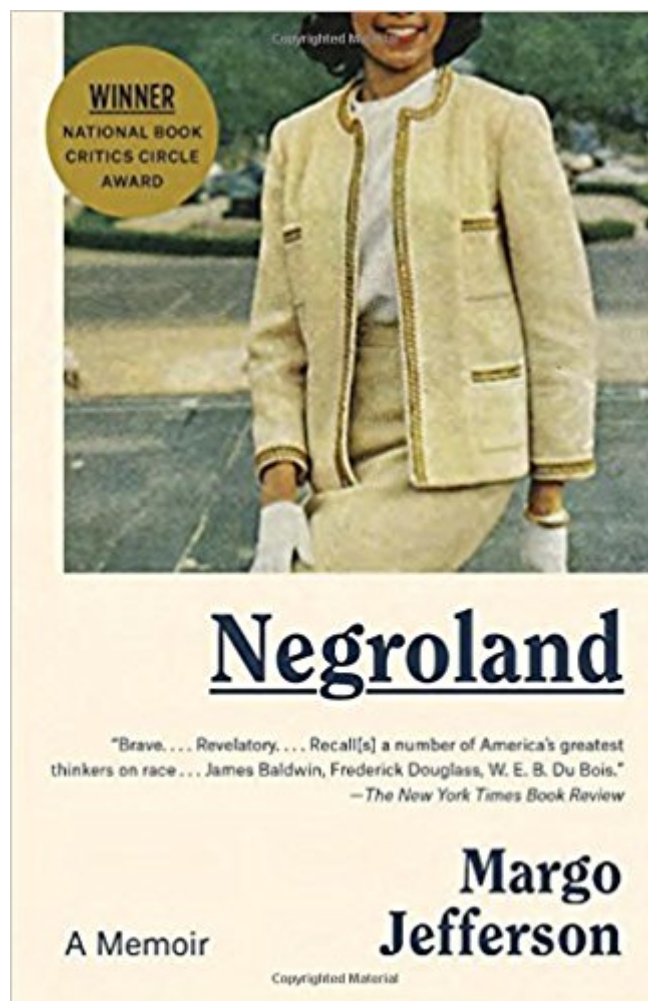




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Negroland: A Memoir



Synopsis

Winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award
Winner of the Heartland Prize
A New York Times Notable Book
One of the Best Books of the Year: The Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Time, Vanity Fair, Marie Claire, Time Out New York, Minneapolis Star Tribune, Kansas City Star, Men's Journal, Oprah.com
Pulitzer Prize-winning cultural critic Margo Jefferson was born in 1947 into upper-crust black Chicago. Her father was head of pediatrics at Provident Hospital, while her mother was a socialite. In these pages, Jefferson takes us into this insular and discerning society: "I call it Negroland," she writes, "because I still find Negro a word of wonders, glorious and terrible."
Negroland's pedigree dates back generations, having originated with antebellum free blacks who made their fortunes among the plantations of the South. It evolved into a world of exclusive sororities, fraternities, networks, and clubs—a world in which skin color and hair texture were relentlessly evaluated alongside scholarly and professional achievements, where the Talented Tenth positioned themselves as a third race between whites and "the masses of Negroes" and where the motto was "Achievement. Invulnerability. Comportment." At once incendiary and icy, mischievous and provocative, celebratory and elegiac, *Negroland* is a landmark work on privilege, discrimination, and the fallacy of post-racial America.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

“Brave. . . Revelatory. . . Recall[s] a number of America’s greatest thinkers on race . . . James Baldwin, Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois.” The New York Times Book Review “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* “Jefferson is a national treasure and her memoir should be required reading across the country.” Vanity Fair “Intricate and moving. . . Powerful.” The New York Times “Enlightening. . . Poetic and bracing.” The Washington Post “[A] masterpiece. . . A phenomenal study-cum-memoir about the black bourgeoisie.” Hilton Als, author of *White Girls* “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.” The Boston Globe “Provocative and insightful. . . Melancholic and hopeful, raw and disarming. . . A moving memoir that is an act of courage in its vulnerability.” Isabel Wilkerson, author of *The Warmth of Other Suns* “Poignant. . . Harrowing. . . 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.” Los Angeles Times “Jefferson combines memoir with cultural critique in a series of unsparing vignettes.” The New Yorker “Provocative and extraordinary. . . Haunting.” *Time* “Lyrical. . . Vibrant and damning. . . Dares to throw a wrench into our tortured debates about race.” Minneapolis Star Tribune “Razor sharp, self-lacerating and singular.” More “A candid observer, Jefferson articulates the complicated and calculated performance of upper-class black life.” *New York* “Brilliantly written. . . Not reading this remarkable, indeed unique book, would be an immense mistake. . . One of the great books published this year.” Buffalo News “Truly indispensable.” Flavorwire “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* “Beautiful. . . Artfully self-aware. . . Jefferson succeeds at something remarkable: she tells her story while at the same time not only evocatively capturing her era but situating her experiences into a centuries-long cultural tradition.” Bookslut “Shines a spotlight on a fascinating slice of the American experience of which many people are barely aware.” Tampa Bay Times “Filled with

incisive commentary and unexpected observations, all of it delivered with a sly wit and in crystalline prose. • PopMatters “Marvelous, complex, stimulating and thought-provoking.” • Geoff Dyer, author of *White Sands* “A beautiful scorching of a book, essential reading.” • Patricia Hampl, author of *The Florist’s Daughter* “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.’” • David Shields, author of *Salinger* “A great book, destined to be read for a century.” • Edmund White, author of *A Boy’s Own Life* “Reads with the blast force of a prose poem.” • BookPage

The winner of a Pulitzer Prize for criticism, Margo Jefferson was for years a book and arts critic for *Newsweek* and *The New York Times*. Her writing has appeared in, among other publications, *Vogue*, *New York* magazine, and *The Nation*, and *Guernica*. Her memoir, *Negroland*, received the National Book Critics Circle Award for Autobiography. She is also the author of *On Michael Jackson* and is a professor of writing at Columbia University School of the Arts.

There was much to absorb and ponder in Margo Jefferson’s *Negroland*, a fascinating recollection of life growing up in the titular purgatory, between two worlds centered on race, class, and wealth in a changing American landscape. Jefferson’s parents were well-to-do professionals (“comfortable” as her mother described it to the young, curious author), rich by black standards, upper-middle class by white standards. Therefore, Ms. Jefferson had a rare experience for the times and one that caused on-going self-image frustrations and a constant internal tug-of-war. She describes her family as belonging to “the Third Race, poised between the masses of Negroes and all classes of Caucasians.” Ms. Jefferson’s writing brilliance gives a strong voice to these memoirs, tackling a host of topics, all couched within her personal family history, as she moves from child to adult. She gives her distinctive, biting perspective on the relentless and myriad demonstrations of racism from next-door neighbors to desk clerks in Atlantic City hotels. She learns by observing her parents’ frustrated and angry reactions to things she is too young and naïve to understand, like the

discomfort or refusal by whites to address her pediatrician father as

“Doctor, or her fourth grade music teacher engaging the class in singing Stephen Foster songs with their racial epithets in the lyrics. Ms. Jefferson juggles the implicit racism from the white community, with the mixed messages and issues of authenticity she received as an educated, upper-middle-class black person in America. It was a delicate balancing act: “Negro privilege had to be circumspect; impeccable but not arrogant; confident yet obliging; dignified, not intrusive. It’s important to distinguish that this is no angry, vindictive rant against an America that continues to struggle with and even acknowledge racial problems, but rather a thoughtful retelling of one woman’s distinctive experience as a well-to-do black woman in a nation not yet ready to accept successful blacks as equal. This book is not overflowing with seething rage or snarky ridicule of racists, but offers instead the powerful and compelling memoirs of an intelligent and reflective woman with a gift for taut prose. In the wrong hands this could’ve been yet another wedge hammered into the chasm of our national racial split. In Ms. Jefferson’s talented hands, it is an evocative photograph, one that shows all Americans just how matter-of-fact these issues are. In short, this is who we are as Americans. These are the divisions that separate us by race, education, gender, and income, fueled by socially accepted stereotypes, evidenced in ways subtle and overt, benign and malignant. *Negroland* is a book that will start debates, introspection, and shed light on racial relations in America. It’s a book that should be read because it gives such a unique and fresh perspective on being black in America. Given the news of the day, this book is enormously timely as well as being a great read.

Negroland starts off with a few chapters on the history of the black elite in America. This history serves to put the rest of book in context. After the bulk of the historical information, which continues to some degree throughout the book, the author takes your hand and leads you on a guided tour of her unique childhood. She frequently asks you to sit with her and her sister and look on at the event as she describes it. This writing feels comfortable and welcoming while maintaining the distance of a narrator. I finished the book feeling like a close friend. The writing is personal yet, interestingly, written with a degree of detachment. She describes her childhood as through it happened to someone else. She becomes an almost objective observer but does retain enough emotion towards the events in the book so as to describe them passionately. In places there’s a poetic, almost lyrical quality to the writing. It stands out a bit but offers a nice break from the documentary style of the bulk of the book. Unsurprisingly, there is a large focus on physical appearances. Everything from

skin color to hair texture to body shape is discussed at length. I found this fascinating. It made me stop and reexamine how I view others. Many parts of the book gave me this same feeling. Things I never would have thought of as differences are often pointed out and discussed. Although the book walks you right up to the present day the vast majority is focused on the mid to late 50's and into the 60's. This certainly makes sense but also serves to make the book more interesting writing. The events of the late 50's were particularly interesting to me as they delved deep into her family's interactions with many different people. Ms. Jefferson puts a human face on the textbook writings on discrimination and civil rights from my high school and college years. The writing is tidy and concise making this a great book to pick up for a few minutes just to read one of the small section. I'm still digesting this book. It was out of my comfort zone for reading but I feel privileged to have read it.

This is an amazing book. Congratulations to Margo Jefferson for writing a ground breaking socio-cultural view of a group of invisible Americans. She is brave for sharing her life experiences that might make some readers cringe and others nod their heads in agreement. Provocative and thought provoking--all the elements of a good read.

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