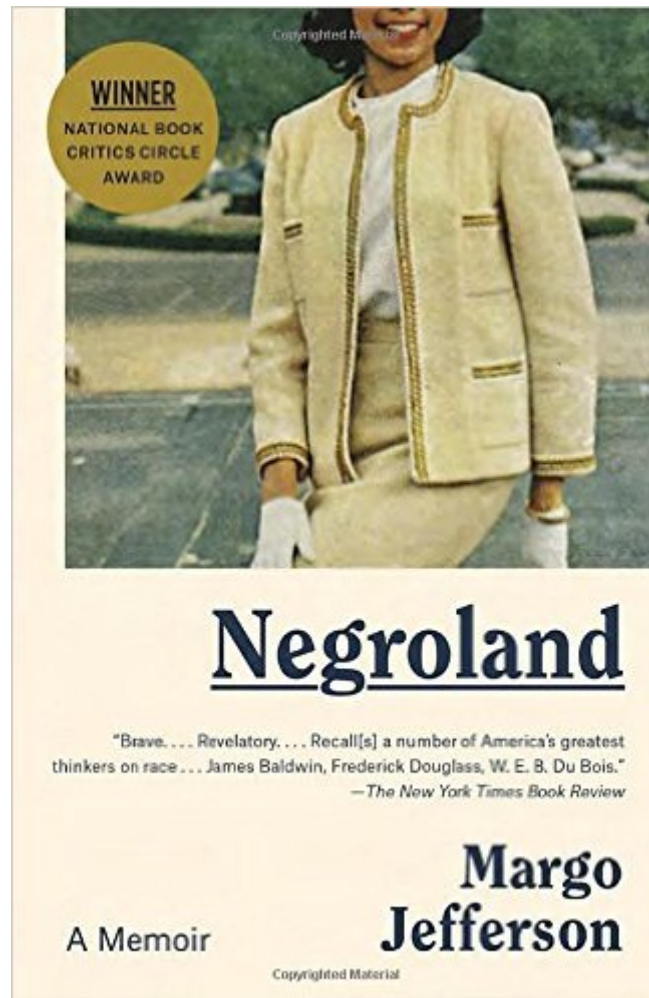


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Negroland: A Memoir



Synopsis

Winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award 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

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 (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.

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.

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