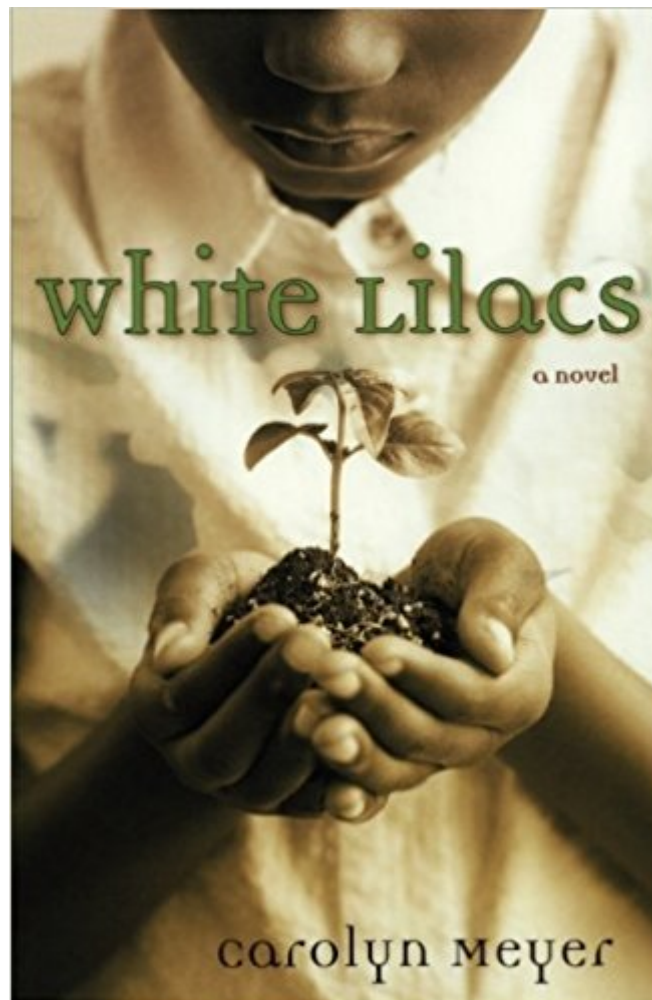


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# White Lilacs



## Synopsis

Young Rose Lee Jefferson is shocked to learn that the white residents of Dillon, Texas, want to raze the city's black enclave, Freedomtown, and build a park in its place. Rose Lee and the other residents of Freedomtown cannot bear the thought of losing their homes. But fighting the city's plans could be costly or even life threatening. Will the families of Freedomtown be able to save their thriving community? Includes a reader's guide.

## Book Information

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Literature & Fiction > Social & Family Issues > Prejudice & Racism #114 in Books > Teens > Historical Fiction

## Customer Reviews

Based, as the author explains in an endnote, on an event that took place in 1921-22, this somber, moving story focuses on prejudice, injustice and everyday bravery. When the city council of Dillon, Tex., unveils its plans to raze Freedomtown--an all-black enclave in the town's center--and replace it with a park, the proposal unleashes a tumult of rage and defiance in the black community. The Freedomtowners' indignation dwindles down to a trickle of unrest and, eventually, resignation after a Klan cross-burning, the destruction of the local school and several other frightening, dispiriting events. As seen through the eyes of 12-year-old aspiring artist Rose Lee Jefferson, this struggle for equal rights quickly becomes a sorrowful march toward an inevitable eviction. Even Rose Lee's activist older brother--a World War I veteran and follower of Marcus Garvey--fails in his fight against Dillon's privileged class: he is tarred and feathered by local hooligans. Numerous historical details and snippets of then-current political thought are smoothly integrated into the story. Bleak though its conclusion is, this bittersweet novel is poignant and tender, both in its spare vernacular dialogue

and delicate description. Ages 8-12. Copyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

Grade 5-7-In a small Texas town in the 1920s, 12-year-old Rose Lee Jefferson's favorite places are the gardens tended by her beloved grandfather. Granted "toting privileges" by his white employers, he has planted a profusion of colorful flowers around his home, so striking that Rose Lee calls the spot the Garden of Eden. Happily surrounded by her hard working, loving family, the girl is shocked when she overhears the casual plan to move her entire black community to the sewer flats, so that a park can be built in the middle of town. Reactions from her neighbors range from quiet resignation and prayer to calls for strikes and a return to Africa. Some whites respond with threats of violence. Rose Lee feels sad and confused, but undertakes a special mission. Perfectly evoking time and place, Meyer carefully layers detail upon detail, until readers nearly breathe the humid floral scents and hear the languid voices so carelessly spelling destruction for a whole way of life. The tone and pace are just right, and characterization is true and varied. Although readers can't help but identify with Rose Lee's first-person narration, the presentation (based on a real incident) is well balanced. Ultimately, this story is about relationships and the difficulties that can be endured when caring people come together. Thematically reminiscent of Mildred Taylor's Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry (Dial, 1976), it could be read as a companion piece, but deserves attention in its own right. Thoughtful readers will hope for an encore.Cindy Darling Codell, Clark Middle School, Winchester, KYCopyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

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My oldest daughter had to read this for college, though she said she would have read it without being assigned, as it delves into aspects of racism and things that still touch modern-day society (her words).

Great book! My son who is 13 really enjoyed it! It's a classic and a great read for young and old alike.

love this book

This book was very interesting about how African Americans were treated in the south in the 30's. I wish they would have used Quakertown instead of Freedomtown as the name of the town.

Great story with historical basis, had my daughter researching and learning much more than I anticipated. Highly recommended reading for school age kids.

grand daughter loved it.

Though the white residents of Dillon, Texas look down upon the more impoverished black community of Freedomtown, young Rose Lee Jefferson finds she's had a pretty content life for the

most part, thank you very much. Freedomtown was built during the post-Civil War Reconstruction Era. It sits on a flood plain so the walkways might get a bit messy now and then, but as Rose points out, the community has pretty much everything a person could want: a school, church, general store & cafe, boarding house, mortuary, even a Masonic Lodge. Her father runs Freedom's barbershop, while Rose and all the rest of her family (on her mother's side, that is) are employed within various positions at the estate of the wealthy & white Thomas and Eunice Bell. Everything changes for Rose and the community of Freedom one night in 1921. Though she normally helps her grandfather in the Bell's garden, Rose is called into the dining room to cover for her pregnant cousin Cora, who suddenly takes ill that night. Eunice Bell is having a dinner party with some of her gal pals and there's some pretty comedic scenes at this point in the story as Rose tries her best to navigate new terrain among the fine serving dishes and the whole "be seen but not heard" requirement. She gets flustered at the process of when to bring out what dish, but her aunt just shrugs and replies, "White folks use a lot of dishes. You get used to it." But the air in the room changes once Rose overhears the ladies talking about the plan to raze Freedomtown to the ground and put a community park in its place. Thomas Bell holds a position on Dillon City Council, so he would be in the know, but this is the first anyone from Freedom has heard of these plans! When one of Eunice's friends, Emily Firth visiting from Philadelphia, pipes up to voice her opposition to this news, Eunice responds with the unbelievably demeaning comment, "Our negroes here are childlike." She continues on to say they should be positively delighted to have something new and shiny in their lives, giving the impression that Eunice has no concept of the idea of attachment to community. That sense of "it might be rough around the edges, but it's mine!" Rose carries the news home to the other residents of Freedomtown. She's then reluctantly thrust into the center of the drama once it's decided that she will continue to cover for her cousin, Cora, as maid / dining room staff. Rose's father explains that this will put her in the perfect position to spy and gather more and more information as the project progresses, hopefully giving the residents of Freedomtown an idea of how to fight back. Rose's older brother Henry also gets caught up in the fight, professing that as a World War 1 veteran, he's fought for this country and deserves better than this kind of treatment. He goes so far as to promise that if Freedomtown is destroyed, he will give up this country altogether and move to Africa. While some residents echo his sentiments, others feel it would be useless to fight, that the wealthy, white residents of Dillon just have too much power and will inevitably get whatever they want. Those that are hesitant to fight admit that they'd likely be willing to move if given fair dollar for their properties within Freedomtown. But further doubts arise on this front when rumors begin that the spot the mayor of Dillon is looking at for relocation seems to be The Flats, a swampy, marsh-like area of

town that no one in their right mind would want to populate. Tensions hit a boiling point the night of the Juneteenth celebration. Henry is caught, tarred and feathered. There's a KKK march through the streets of Freedomtown, ending in a burning cross being left on the lawn of Freedom's church. Later on, when Emily Firth continues to stand up for the mistreatment of this community, she is essentially run out of town. This book's recommended age says 10-14 years, but the reader is presented with some graphic scenarios -- aside from Henry's tar & feathering and the KKK marches, a school is also set on fire to send a message. So there is some disturbing imagery for young readers, but the message and the history behind this novel is very valid and important. Author Carolyn Meyer includes a note at the end explaining that while this story is fictional, as far as the characters and plot, it IS inspired by the very real history of Quakertown, a black community within the town of Denton, Texas (where Meyer herself previously resided) that suffered a similar fate as that of the fictional Freedomtown. Note though, once you read the history of Quakertown, you'll likely recognize quite a bit of the real history illustrated here and there throughout the story of Freedomtown and its residents! As far as the actual plot and its pacing, honestly this is not the most riveting read out there ... but Rose is a very sweet, honest character and slow though the story might seem, Meyer does pull you in enough to want to hear Rose's story and meet her family and neighbors in Freedomtown. The importance of this book is the history it exposes you to -- though fictionally presented, it is based in truth you need to read. The past can be painful at times, but we can't be afraid to look it in the eye if we ever hope to improve our future.

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