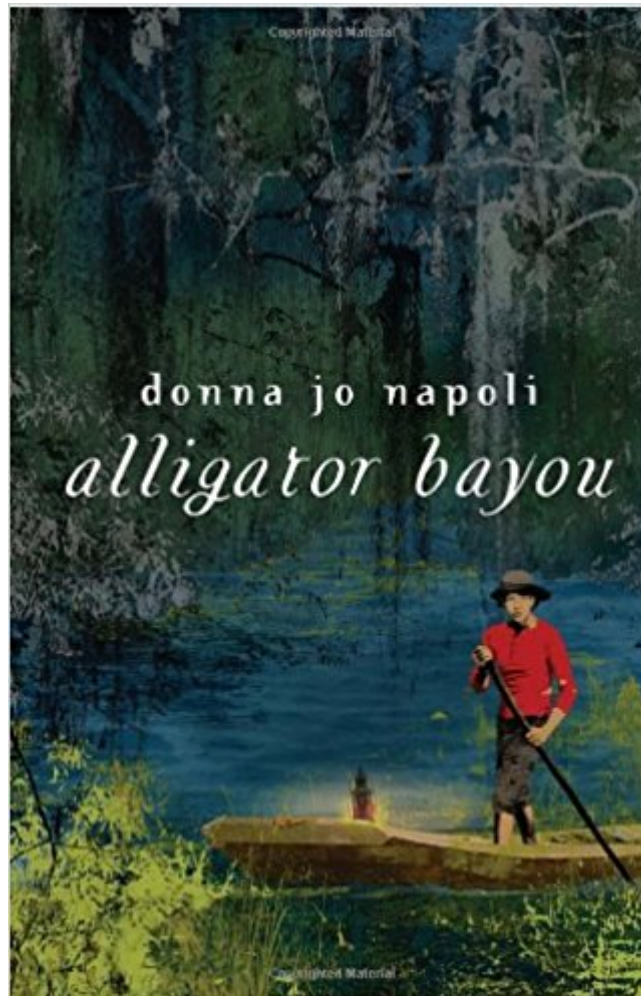




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Alligator Bayou



Synopsis

An unforgettable novel, based on a true story, about racism against Italian Americans in the South in 1899. Fourteen-year-old Calogero, his uncles, and his cousins are six Sicilians living in the small town of Tallulah, Louisiana, miles from any of their countrymen. They grow vegetables and sell them at their stand and in their grocery store. Some people welcome the immigrants; most do not. Calogero's family is caught in the middle of tensions between the black and white communities. As Calogero struggles to adapt to Tallulah, he is startled and thrilled by the danger of midnight gator hunts in the bayou and by his powerful feelings for Patricia, a sharp-witted, sweet-natured black girl. Meanwhile, every day, and every misunderstanding between the white community and the Sicilians, bring Calogero and his family closer to a terrifying, violent confrontation. In this affecting and unforgettable novel, Donna Jo Napoli's inspired research and spare, beautiful language take the classic immigrant story to new levels of emotion and searing truth. Alligator Bayou tells a story that all Americans should know.

Book Information

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Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 10 customer reviews

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Age Range: 12 and up

Grade Level: 7 and up

Customer Reviews

Grade 8 Up – Building on her extensive research conducted after reading a newspaper article about the lynching of Sicilian grocers in Tallulah, LA, in 1899, Napoli presents a moving, sobering

story about an aspect of American immigration that is probably unknown to most readers. After his mother's death, 14-year-old Calogero leaves his bustling Sicilian home for the sleepy southern town to help his uncles and younger cousin run their grocery store. White customers expect to be served before blacks and make their displeasure angrily apparent when the Sicilians fail to do so. Barred from the white school and unaware that he can attend the black school, Calogero learns English from a tutor who also tries to help him comprehend Southern American behavior. The cousins meet some African American boys who take them on a terrifying alligator hunt that firmly cements their friendship. Calogero is attracted to Patricia, a African American girl, but fails to fully understand the danger behind her fear of being seen in public with him. Although he has heard his uncles' stories of the recent lynching of Sicilians in New Orleans, he is unprepared for the horrifying tragedy that befalls his family when a local white doctor kills Uncle Francesco's goats and then convinces an angry mob that the Sicilians plan to retaliate violently. Historical events are smoothly integrated with vivid everyday details, strong characterizations, and genuine-sounding dialogue. Ultimately, the author expands her themes beyond the story's specifics, encouraging readers to reconsider the motivations behind this calamity and other manifestations of racism.

—Ginny Gustin, Sonoma County Library System, Santa Rosa, CA Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

...The facts from [a] little-told chapter in American history frame Napoli's wrenching novel about a 14-year-old Sicilian, Calogero, who joins male relatives in Tallulah after his mother's death. Legally segregated from both whites and blacks, the Italians maintain an insular life, focused on their thriving produce business, until Calo's secret crush on African American Patricia begins to dissolve social barriers between the two communities, even as social tensions with whites escalate into shocking violence. Through Calo's active questioning, Napoli integrates a great deal of background history that is further explored in an extensive author's note. Readers learn, right along with naive Calo, the draconian specifics of Jim Crow laws and the complex factors of fear and economics that fueled the South's entrenched bigotry. A few passages do have a purposeful feel, particularly those between Calo and his tutor, but Napoli's skillful pacing and fascinating detail combine in a gripping story that sheds cold, new light on Southern history and on the nature of racial prejudice. Grades 7-10.

--Gillian Engberg --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Summer reading has been hit-and-miss. *__Alligator Bayou__* was a read for my summer book club, and would otherwise not be my standard fare. What a wonderful surprise, then, to enjoy it so much. Set in 1899 Louisiana, the story revolves around a family of Sicilian immigrants who are attempting to live the "American dream," part of the immigration story that is so often romanticized. But this is the Deep South, just one year after the Plessy decision and in the midst of one of the nation's worst depressions in a quarter century. To boot, the Sicilians are unaware of the racial - and economic - boundaries in their adopted country. Told through the eyes of 14 year-old Calogero Scalise, Napoli does a top-notch job in showing the complexities of the Jim Crow South as well as the challenges immigrants face as they seek to make their way in America. The book is written for younger (ages 9 - 13) readers given the complexity of the sentence structure and plot - but Napoli (a linguistics professor by trade) also shows a mastery of AAVE (African-American Vernacular English) and Italian in the dialogue, and clearly - brutally - brings to light what life was like in the South at the start of the last century. What is perhaps most shocking, however, is that the story she has written here - of Sicilians not seen as "colored" (to use the term of the day) nor as "white" (thereby not granted the social status of "Americans") and the persecution they suffered is based largely on real-life events. At issue, of course, is not so much "race" as the maintenance of power (particularly economic power) by the elite. Power that was held and perpetrated by dividing the poor along "racial" lines (poor whites over poor African-Americans, poor immigrants somewhere in the middle ... divide and conquer, let them fight among themselves in order to preserve the status quo at the top of the social and economic hierarchy.) This is the sort of story I wish was taught more to our youth at an earlier age. Of special interest for older (older than 13) readers is the bibliography Napoli provides at the end of the story, outlining the real events that inspired the story, as well as a list of articles and websites for readers to delve more deeply into the story. It's a short read - maybe a lazy afternoon (or weekend) - but certainly worthy of attention.

Coincidentally, I read this book over the weekend in which Rep. Gabriel Giffords was shot by paranoid loner Jared Loughner. The talk in the media has focused extensively on whether and to what extent the aggressive rhetoric and violent imagery employed by pundits and politicians may have contributed to Loughner's rampage. That question may never be fully answered in Loughner's case, but this book shines light on a perhaps related incident from the 1890s which shows that words do indeed have power. In Donna Jo Napoli's fictionalized account of an actual event, 14-year-old Sicilian Calogero has been staying with his uncles and a cousin in rural Louisiana since his mother's death forced him to leave Italy. The six Italians run a grocery store and produce stand

which have become the favorites of the local women, threatening the solvency of the local company stores in an area already hard hit economically. At the same time, the Italians are not accepted by the local whites as neighbors or even as equals. They don't speak English and they don't follow local customs. Local and national newspapers report that Italians are all mob members, armed and dangerous. The black community (referred to in the book as "Negroes" in keeping with the custom of the times) meanwhile, is also wary of them. With the exception of business contacts and a small handful of more enlightened locals, the Italians are profoundly isolated. Calogero is still trying to navigate his new world when events start to escalate. Calogero finds himself smitten with a black girl his age. He and his cousin Cirone begin to make tentative friends with her and her brothers. Meanwhile, his uncles anger the locals because they wait on blacks ahead of a white man. Their goats roam the town, angering the town's doctor. The more comfortable Calogero becomes with Patricia and her family, the more racial and other tensions escalate. Reading this book is much like reading a horror book (in fact, it could be argued it IS a horror book). You know from the get-go that nothing good is going to come out of the situation, so you spend the whole book waiting for the axe to fall, so to speak. Every happy event, every positive scene is shadowed by the looming disaster, the knowledge that the good times won't - can't - last. This book does a good job of showing the multi-faceted face of racism and prejudice. Prejudice is not just an inherent white-black thing. It's based on fear, economic factors, propaganda, wariness over differences, ignorance. It's also not simply unilateral. The blacks were almost as prejudiced against the Italians as the whites were. The Italians had their own prejudices. But racism has the added component of power, and in the antebellum South, it was the whites who had the power, so they became the perpetrators while blacks and Italians became the victims. I can't quite give the book a five-star rating. The characters were not all terribly well developed. I had a hard time telling the four uncles apart and keeping them straight and many of the white townsmen seemed like clones of each other. Also, Napoli's spare narrative style makes some events rather difficult to follow at first reading. But nonetheless, I recommend the book highly for the spotlight it shines on racist and prejudicial attitudes and the tragedy it can lead to, especially when ignorance is stoked and fears are fanned through rumor and propaganda.

Not many people realize the lynchings of Italians were just as prevalent as lynchings of Africans in America. In fact, the greatest lynching America was the lynching of Italians. In this coming of age tale set in Louisiana, we see the roots of prejudice in the South. It's all about money and power. It is a blight on our country that is still there today with those that want to deny others what they received

so that they do not give up their perks. Christian country, my ass.

wow, I had no idea of this history. great story to show solidarity between oppressed in the jim crow south

I loved this book. Even tho it was a novel, it had historical significance. I thought it was well written and great content, it was easy to read and kept my interest.

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