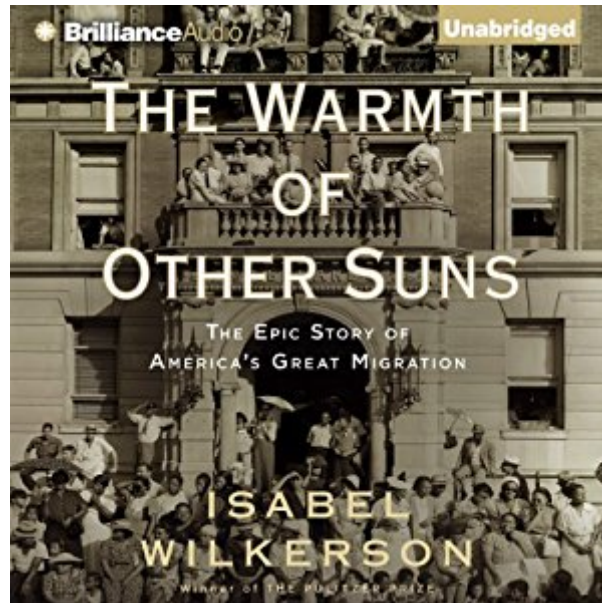


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# The Warmth Of Other Suns: The Epic Story Of America's Great Migration



## Synopsis

National Book Critics Circle Award, Nonfiction, 2011 In this epic, beautifully written masterwork, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Isabel Wilkerson chronicles one of the great untold stories of American history: the decades-long migration of black citizens who fled the South for northern and western cities in search of a better life. From 1915 to 1970, this exodus of almost six million people changed the face of America. Wilkerson interviewed more than a thousand people, and gained access to previously untapped data and official records, to write this definitive and vividly dramatic account of how these American journeys unfolded, altering our cities, our country, and ourselves. With stunning detail, Wilkerson tells this story through the lives of three unique individuals: Ida Mae Gladney, who in 1937 left sharecropping and prejudice in Mississippi for Chicago, where she achieved quiet blue-collar success and, in old age, voted for Barack Obama when he ran for an Illinois state senate seat; sharp and quick-tempered George Starling, who in 1945 fled Florida for Harlem, where he endangered his job fighting for civil rights, saw his family fall, and finally found peace in God; and Robert Foster, who left Louisiana in 1953 to pursue medicine, becoming the personal physician to Ray Charles as part of a glitteringly successful career that allowed him to purchase a grand home where he often threw exuberant parties. Wilkerson brilliantly captures her subjects' first treacherous and exhausting cross-country trips by car and train and their new lives in colonies that grew into ghettos, as well as how they changed their new cities with southern food, faith, and culture and improved them with discipline, drive, and hard work. Both a riveting microcosm and a major assessment, *The Warmth of Other Suns* is a bold, remarkable work, a superb account of an "unrecognized immigration" within our own land. Through the breadth of its narrative, the beauty of the writing, the depth of its research, and the fullness of the people and lives portrayed herein, this book is destined to become a classic.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Isabel Wilkerson, the Pulitzer Prize winning newspaper writer, has now come back to write a fascinating and sweeping book on what she calls "the biggest underreported story of the twentieth century." This is the story... no- make that the stories... of the "Great Migration", the migration of sharecroppers and others from the Cotton Belt to the Big Cities: New York, Chicago, Detroit, LA and etc in the period between the World Wars. Over one million blacks left the South and went North (or West). Of course we all know the tale of the "Dust Bowl" and the "Okies", as captured by Steinbeck in words, by Dorothea Lange in photographs, and even in song by Woody Guthrie. But this was as big or even bigger (estimates vary), and to this day the story has not been covered anywhere near as well as the "Dust Bowl" migrations. Wilkerson's book has more than ten years of research in its making, and thus is a large and weighty volume at more than 600 pages. It is also personally researched, the author having interviewed over 1,200 people. She picked three dozen of those to interview in great depth, and choose but three of those stories to present to you here. The title of this book is taken from Richard Wright's "Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth": "I was taking a part of the South to transplant in alien soil, to see if it could grow differently, if it could drink of new and cool rains, bend in strange winds, respond to the warmth of other suns, and, perhaps, to bloom." <http://www..com/Black-Boy-Record-Childhood-Youth/dp/0060834005> This book is a not an easy summer read, mind you. At times both heartwarming and heartbreaking, at times so riveting you won't be able to put it down- but at other times so moving that you'll need to put it down for a while. The author peppers her book with interesting side notes and anecdotes, such as when some of the migrants, being unfamiliar with a Northern accent, would mistakenly get off at the cry of "Penn Station, Newark," the stop just before Penn Station, New York. Many decided to stay there, according to Isabel, giving Newark "a good portion of its black population." A personal note: My Dad got his Masters on the GI Bill, then took us to Los Angeles to be a teacher. He was partnered with a more experienced teacher- a lady we called "Miz Edna" who had migrated to LA from the South. Our families became friends, as also "Miz Edna's" husband had served in New Guinea with my father (as a cook, however, remember the WWII Army was still segregated). I remember many of her stories, and especially her rich melodic voice, with just enough of the South

remaining. Thus, I "heard" many of the quotations and personal stories here in "Miz Edna's" voice. This is a deep and great book, I highly recommend it. Further reading: Arnesen, Eric. *Black Protest and the Great Migration: A Brief History with Documents* Grossman, James R. *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* Lemann, Nicholas. *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America*

Between World War I and the presidency of Richard Nixon, some six million black Americans fled the indignities and oppression they grew up with in the American south and headed north or west in search of freedom. Some found at least a modicum of it. Some did not. This mass migration --- unplanned, haphazard and often resented --- has affected our laws, our politics and our social relations in all kinds of ways. Some for the better, some not. Isabel Wilkerson did a mountain of research to tell this story. She conducted some 1,200 interviews and digested a huge volume of sociological data. Wisely, she concentrated her book on just three of those six million people --- a gutsy woman from the cotton plantations of Mississippi, an orange picker from central Florida and an aspiring doctor from Louisiana. Each of them left the south in a different decade and with different motivations. They met with varying degrees of success and disappointment. While they didn't achieve everything they had hoped for, none of them in their final assessment regretted their move. Wilkerson plays off these three protagonists against a vast chorus of others whose stories vary wildly but all come down to the determination to leave behind intolerable social oppression and at least try their luck in freer air. Wilkerson herself, a child of two black immigrants from Georgia, is a part of that chorus. Her book is valuable on several levels. It documents in gut-wrenching detail the brutal way these migrants were treated in the region of their birth. It is honest about their own personal failings and the not-always beneficial effect that northern life had on them. It challenges the popular assumption that they themselves caused the problems that have made their life up north so difficult. It documents a different idea --- that much of the problem stems from their children, born in the north and unmindful of what their parents had to suffer to give them a shot at a better life. The book is gracefully written. Its level of personal detail gives readers the impression that its subjects had total recall as they spoke into Wilkerson's tape recorder. She has also elected to preserve the unique syntax and tone of black speech, without cleaning things up to make her subjects all sound like upper-class college graduates, though some of them are. Some passages are riveting in their eloquence --- the automobile journey of Robert P. Foster from his native Louisiana to Los Angeles in the early 1950s, a hellish series of efforts to find unsegregated lodgings before he fell asleep at the wheel; the horrifying descriptions of lynch mobs on the rampage; the life of railroad porter George

Starling serving white passengers while himself unable to escape discriminatory practices and threats against his person; the far-reaching Jim Crow laws in the south that prevented blacks from patronizing public libraries and decreed that, even after desegregation was the law of the land, they had to wait for service in stores until all the whites present had been taken care of. (In Birmingham, Alabama, for many years it was against the law for blacks and whites to play checkers together). Wilkerson devotes major attention to the racial history of Chicago, where immigrant Ida Mae Gladney of Mississippi ended up. This may be simply because the volume of statistical and sociological data on the racial divide there is so enormous, and also because that divide persists to this day in many ways. George Starling made a decent life for himself in Harlem, but watched helplessly as one of his children slid into drugs and criminal activity. But perhaps the most vivid story of all is that of Robert Foster, a medical school graduate and prominent Los Angeles surgeon. He achieved greater success than either of the other two major figures, but it only aroused in him a need to "prove himself" by buying an ostentatious home, spending lavishly in fine clothes and elaborate parties, and developing a gambling mania. Of Wilkerson's trio, he is the most arresting character --- a man who made it big but felt he always had to go higher up the success ladder. Wilkerson is candid about his character flaws. She seems to pity him rather than simply wax critical. *THE WARMTH OF OTHER SUNS* is a rich and powerful book. It tells a story that for many people still needs to be told. --- Reviewed by Robert Finn

There is a page in the book where Wilkerson recounts what a single day of picking cotton in the old South entailed...it's a pretty remarkable mini essay in its own right, and you probably won't forget it. The whole book is like this, with one powerful anecdote after another, woven together with great skill. I've always been fascinated with the Jim Crow era in America, and eyewitness stories of those who lived through it...though this book only follows 3 people out of the millions who endured it, it captures America in the 20th Century as well as just about social history I've ever read. As a gay man, I often look to these books to be inspired by how black Americans "soldiered on" and showed such unbreakable spirit during these years. No, I personally never experienced even 1/10th of their struggle, but it still empowers me to face prejudice and avoid a lazy victimhood mentality. I am incredibly grateful for books like this, as should anyone who faces prejudice or discrimination by a majority. Clearly a book of this scope took years to complete, and I'm rooting for this to win this year's National Book Award. I suggest you set aside a whole weekend like I did and savor every page of it.

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