

Book festival Northern Arizona

***Leaving Atlanta*, By Tayari Jones - ISBN: 0-446-52830-7
Reviewed by Tammy Blankenship**

This is a fictional story based on an actual series of brutal murders of black children that took place in 1979, and was dubbed “The Atlanta Child Murders.” Over the course of two years, twenty-two African American children were abducted from the places they played, on their way home from school, and out from under the noses of those watching, to be brutally murdered. Without preamble, Jones pulls you into the lives, minds, homes and hearts of fifth graders surrounded by this tragedy.

In three parts, you are introduced to three separate children whose lives are touched irreversibly by this heinous crime. You’re inside of their heads, thinking their thoughts and feeling their fears. As I sat reading this book, I couldn’t help having the uncontrollable urge to reach into the pages and hug those children close and let them know that it would all be okay.

First, you meet Tasha, whose parents are in the midst of an unhappy marriage, and after a brief stint of separation, are returned to a semblance of marriage under the same roof in an attempt to protect their two daughters. Tasha falls in and out of popularity with her friends at school and can’t seem to figure out the ways of some people. Being a young girl just reaching the stage when boys are cute, she starts to fall for a boy from the projects, when her life is interrupted by the killer.



Next you meet Rodney. He’s the quite boy at the back of the class. On the outside he seems like he’s got it together, nice family, not poor, but not rich. When you climb inside his head, you learn that appearances can most defiantly be deceiving. An abusive father, an overachieving, but noncommittal mother and a baby sister who gets all of the “cute” awards.

Octavia is the next shyest person in class. She even gets picked on by the other African American children, as she happens to be darker than they are. You have to stop and take pause at this, and remember that kids usually honest to the point of pain can also be cruel. Her parents were never married, and her mother works nights to try and make ends meet. She tells herself that she doesn’t live in the projects... they are across the street. When she just starts to see a spark of happiness, it gets yanked right out of her hands.

Segregation was “supposedly” over by 1979. Jones is so skilled at the thoughts of the children, that the segregation in the schools and neighborhoods is palatable. You can feel the fear throughout Jones’s entire community of fictional characters and know that this is only a portion of the real fear felt in our actual history, yet you still double check your doors and windows and kiss your kids twice to be sure.

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