
BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

One Mississippi

A Novel by

Mark Childress

A conversation with Mark Childress

The main character of One Mississippi is a reluctant transplant to a small town in Mississippi for his final years of high school. What made you want to write from the point of view of a teenager?

High school is the most intense experience that all of us share before we go our separate ways in the adult world. It's the last time we were all together as kids, the last thing we all have in common as we're coming out of childhood.

To me, high school is simply the grown-up world on an intensified scale, with bigger emotions and lots of hormones raging. Who we are in high school is the seed of who we become as grown-ups. I wanted to write about the high school experience from the point of view of a kid living through it. I still remember how awful and wonderful it was. In my memory, high school was even more hilarious and tragic than real life.

I started with a wisp of an idea and one line that eventually found its way to the end of the book: *Did you really think we could survive high school without any casualties?*

When Daniel first arrives at Minor High, he meets Tim, and the two become fast friends. Do you really only need one friend to get through high school?

I remember kids surviving high school with no friends at all. They were untouchable. Something was wrong with them. Nobody would talk to them. Nobody wanted to be seen with them. We treated them

like we treat homeless people today: we pretended they weren't even there.

See, this is not really a book for the beauty queens and those voted Most Popular. If you were really happy in high school, you may not understand why Daniel and Tim are so deeply affected by a couple of stupid bullies. This book is for the kids who personally identified with the lyrics Janis Ian's "Seventeen."

In 1997 I read the news about this boy who shot nine people at Pearl High School, in Mississippi. Pearl is not far from Clinton, where I went to school. I'll never forget what the shooter told the teacher who asked why he did it: "Life has wronged me, sir." I had the idea for a book that could show the hilarious side of high school but also seek to understand the kind of pain that could lead someone to that moment.

The novel is filled with delicious details of the 1970s, such as sky-blue tuxedos and Wednesday night viewings of The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour. What stands out most in your mind about that decade?

For those of us who were kids in the seventies, normal was defined by the sixties. We grew up thinking normal was people freaking out on acid and National Guardsmen shooting students and all the good leaders getting assassinated on TV. After that, the seventies seemed like a tranquilized time. The music went from breathtaking to insipid without missing a beat. It was as if the country couldn't stand the arguing and just stuck its head in the sand. We resolved the generation gap by turning everybody into children. Thus the three longest-lasting legacies of the seventies are ABBA, the smiley face, and the summer book-movie blockbuster franchise, which began with *The Exorcist* and *Jaws*.

You were born in Alabama and grew up in the South. Some critics refer to your books as "Southern bildungsromans" and compare your style to William Faulkner's or Flannery O'Connor's. How has the South influenced your work as a writer?

Actually I grew up mostly in the Midwest, but my parents are born-and-bred Southerners. We carried the South with us, like an incurable virus. The contrast between my family and the Midwesterners around me was very influential on my (dual) way of seeing. In the South, we look at life as an ongoing story. It's not that we sit around on the porch in rocking chairs, swapping stories, but we do have a narrative way of speaking. A Yankee might say, "I had a flat tire on my way home today," but a Southerner will start by saying, "Let me tell you what happened today!" When I read Flannery's story "Everything That Rises Must Converge" it came as a shock. She was writing about people who sounded just like my kinfolk. It had not occurred to me that people like us could be the stuff of fiction.

When developing characters for your stories, do you make them up from scratch or do you use people you know or have known in real life? Does One Mississippi have elements of autobiography?

Of course! Every novelist uses material from his own life, and if he says otherwise, he's lying. Now, some folks transcribe their actual experience, change the names, and declare it fiction. But the best writers — the ones I'd like to be like — gather elements from their own lives and filter it through their imagination and all their experience. The aim is to come up with a story that comes closer to the truth than nonfiction, which you can only do by getting inside a character's head.

Now, the boy Daniel and the school he attends are pretty close to me and the school I attended — as the story begins. But almost everything that happens in the story is invented. I make it up as I go along.

Sometimes I worry that the actual people I went to high school with will try to see themselves or our classmates in these characters. See? I must still be afraid of the gossip in the halls.

If you count the actual years I spent in high school and the years I've spent writing this book, I think it must be time for me to graduate.

Crazy in Alabama dealt with segregation in the sixties, and One Mississippi is about desegregation and race in the seventies. Is there any special reason why you use racial issues as a background for your stories?

What choice did I have? If I write a novel about the American South in the 1960s or 1970s and I omit the issue of race, I am spinning a pure fantasy. Race and its many complications have dominated life in the South since the eighteenth century, if not longer, and any writer who ignores that is being either oblivious or willfully deceptive. In the South, the burden of our forebears' racial hatred is our cross, the terrible past we must bear, and the present isn't always that pretty either. To bear the past I think we first have to discuss it and understand it.

Also, while there has been progress in race relations since my childhood, there's a certain self-satisfaction in America about the issue. We pretend that we've solved all our racial problems, but I think a lot of them are just buried, like a live ember with ashes raked over it. The fire just needs a bit of oxygen to burn again.

Can you describe one of your typical working days?

The reason you rarely see movies about novelists at work is that all the excitement happens in the writer's head. It's the most prosaic day-to-day existence you can imagine. You sit in a room and type, or don't type but think about typing. I get up and have breakfast and drink coffee and go to work. I am a slow writer and a compulsive rewriter, so I have to put in a lot of hours to get a few pages. I tend to work all day. I work until I don't have anything else to say for that day, or until I can't see what happens next in the story. Then I usually go for a nice long walk with no typing.

What's your greatest challenge when you're writing a new book?

Every time I start a book, I try to wriggle inside the skin of a new character, and write the book in a voice that is appropriate to that

character. It takes me a long time to discover the voice, but once I find it, things get easier. The real challenge is the continuous blankness of the page.

There are many hilarious scenes in One Mississippi, and yet the story takes a dark turn. Do you think of yourself as a comic writer?

You know, this is my sixth novel, and every one of them has a light side and a dark side. That's a quality shared by the novels I love to read, too. I think that combination reflects life. Life offers great joy and great tragedy, usually on the same day. Since *Crazy in Alabama* people tend to think of me as a comic novelist. The book I thought of most while writing *One Mississippi* was *Crime and Punishment*. In the case of my story, I was fascinated by the idea of a small mistake that grows, through neglect and the application of a lie here and there, into something so enormous it can take over your whole life.

Writing this book was a great experience. I hope it's fun to read, too.

Questions and topics for discussion

1. When Daniel Musgrove learns that his family is moving from Indiana to Mississippi, he angrily muses that “there was nothing down there but redneck sheriffs and protesting Negroes and civil rights workers buried in earthen dams” (page 6). Are his perceptions of the South proved correct in any way? At the end of the novel, do you think Daniel would describe the South differently?
2. Tim and Daniel spent their early years in very different communities, and grew up in quite different families. Why is their friendship such a strong one? What do they have in common?
3. What was your reaction when Arnita — fresh out of a coma — announced her new identity? Do you think she truly believed what she said, or were there other reasons for her insistence? Why was Arnita’s speech to the school so provocative to both black and white students in the audience?
4. In an interview Mark Childress once said about readers of *One Mississippi* he encounters: “Everyone [tells] me about their own high school experiences, and that is exactly what I wanted. I wanted the book to remind you what it was like to be sixteen.” What was your high school experience like? Did parts of this novel make you feel nostalgic for the early 1970s? What do you miss about those days? What *don’t* you miss?
5. Tim harbors a secret throughout the novel that propels him to the book’s explosive conclusion. Did learning his secret help you feel sympathy for his choices throughout the book — especially

regarding Arnita and Eddie? What did you think of Daniel's reaction to Tim's revelation?

6. Daniel has a fraught relationship with his father. What do you think motivates Mr. Musgrove to be so hard on his younger son? Have they reached any kind of mutual understanding by the end of the book, or is this just a temporary reprieve? How do you think their relationship will develop from here on in?
7. Do you think everyone in the novel feels guilty about something? Do you think anyone in the novel is completely innocent? Trace the lines of guilt that connect the characters to each other and each other's secrets.
8. Mr. Waxman's students devoted much time to preparing for the All-State band competition, so the black students' protest during the competition itself was especially upsetting to many of their white classmates. Do you feel the protest was justified? How did Daniel's perception of this protest change as he considered both sides of the debate?
9. *One Mississippi* ends in a shocking way. What unexpected sides of Tim's and Daniel's characters are ultimately revealed? Might anything have averted the events at the school in the final scene?