

Decent People

De'Shawn Charles Winslow

About this book:

From Center for Fiction First Novel Prize–winning author De'Shawn Charles Winslow, a sweeping and unforgettable novel of a Black community reeling from a triple homicide, and the secrets the killings reveal.

In the still-segregated town of West Mills, North Carolina, in 1976, Marian, Marva, and Lazarus Harmon—three enigmatic siblings—are found shot to death in their home. The people of West Mills—on both sides of the canal that serves as the town's color line—are in a frenzy of finger-pointing, gossip, and wonder. The crime is the first reported murder in the area in decades, but the white authorities don't seem to care or have any interest in solving the case.

Fortunately, one person is determined to do more than talk. Miss Josephine Wright has just moved back to West Mills from New York City to retire and marry a childhood sweetheart, Olympus "Lymp" Seymore. When she discovers that the murder victims are Lymp's half-siblings, and that Lymp is one of West Mills's leading suspects, she sets out to prove his innocence. But as Jo investigates those who might know the most about the Harmons' deaths, she starts to discover more secrets than she'd ever imagined, and a host of cover-ups—ranging from medical misuse to illicit affairs—that could upend the reputations of many.

For readers of *American Spy* and *Bluebird, Bluebird*, *Decent People* is a powerful new novel about shame, race, money, and the reckoning required to heal a fractured community.

For discussion:

1. Throughout the novel, Jo is fixated on Lymp taking a polygraph test. Where does her mistrust originate? Is it valid? How is she influenced by the community?

2. Savannah describes her father, Ted as “not quite a Klansmen,” whereas Darby is described as a “good ol’ boy . . . a third-generation Klansmen.” What is the distinction here, if any? How are different levels of racism expressed throughout the novel and through different characters?
3. “His very existence reminds me of my mother’s heartache” is Marian’s explanation for her resentment toward Lymp. What does she mean by this? What other “mother’s [heartaches]” inform the narrative and the characters’ actions?
4. “And though [Ted] would not be able to confide in [Hera] his sorrows or his worries, he just wanted to feel safe. With his mother, he always felt safe.” How do mothers in the novel protect and endanger their children?
5. Marian tells Ted that she “regrets nothing . . . life is too short for it.” How is the theme of regret explored throughout the novel? How is regret destructive? How does regret help characters channel empathy or compassion?
6. Savannah is disinherited by her father for marrying a black man and having black children. How does she still maintain and exercise her privilege despite these obstacles? How is she perceived by the community, and how does it affect her?
7. Marian believes that “money is freedom.” How is that idea confirmed and challenged in the novel? How does the theme of social mobility intersect with the themes of racism and greed?
8. Eunice is obsessed with “curing” LaRoy of “homosexuality,” claiming “something had to be done quickly, before he had a chance to act on it.” Are her concerns motivated by morality or shame? How is her husband’s absence from the conversation to be interpreted? How can you interpret her husband’s “sins” in relation to LaRoy’s?
9. “All three of ’em had to go. They didn’t know their place. Their daddy didn’t either. They had to go,” Hera confesses to the authorities. What significance does her decisive role in the story have thematically? What do you think the author was trying to suggest by having her as the book’s major twist?

10. “You may not remember, but you were a happy child before we moved north. You loved it in West Mills. It was paradise for you, Jojo.” What is the role of West Mills itself in the novel, and what do you make of the different ways Jojo, Herschel, and others view it? Different characters go north throughout the novel, as opposed to staying in their hometown. What are the results, and what are we to make of Jo’s decision to ultimately make a home in West Mills?

Recommend reading:

In West Mills by De’Shawn Charles Winslow, *American Spy* by Lauren Wilkinson, *Bluebird*, *Bluebird* by Attica Locke, *Real Life* by Brandon Taylor, *The Known World* by Edward P. Jones