

The Difficult Decision to March

Never, a compassionate but clear-eyed novel, explores the legacy of segregation.

May 31, 2023, New York, NY – Arbitrary Press has published Joel F. Johnson's debut novel, *Never*, which provides a timely account of coming-of-age in the segregated South. "With the passing of the civil rights generation, we should remember and celebrate the magnitude of what they accomplished," Johnson says. "The demonstrators overturned an unjust society that was stacked on foundations of granite."

The novel is narrated by Morris "Little" Nickerson, a white man well into his seventies who is forced to look back on a childhood he has kept "encased in glass." As he tries to make sense of one eventful summer in his hometown of LaSalle, Georgia, Little brings to life the people he knew and loved: Reverend Robert McAllister, the father of his best friend, who speaks the high-flown language of social change but preaches to an all-white congregation; Bit, the Black family maid, who is like a second mother to him, but is made to sit in the back of his family's car; Morris Nickerson, Little's brusque, but reliable father; and Elizabeth, his vulnerable, mysterious mother.

Kirkus Reviews calls the book, "an observant and immersive work about a society in flux." Praising the book for its "eagle-eyed prose," the review notes, "Johnson manages to bring LaSalle and its people to life in a way that often feels revelatory." According to Meredith Hall, author of *Beneficence*, "In *Never*, race, gender and class define roles and relationships, but love and a longing for justice provide a fuse for eruptive change ... an old-fashioned novel, in which the quality of the language is as important as the characters and story."

Joel F. Johnson grew up in Columbus, Georgia and attended segregated public schools through sixth grade. He is a graduate of Harvard College and the author of *Where Inches Seem Miles*, a collection of poems selected by *Kirkus* as one of the best books of 2014. Johnson spent seven years writing his first novel while maintaining his "day job" as a self-employed financial advisor. Though the story makes use of Johnson's memories of a childhood in Georgia, students of the civil rights movement will recognize landmark events from those turbulent years: the mass arrests in Albany, Georgia, the children's march in Birmingham, and the notorious "Never" pin worn by Sheriff Jim Clark of Selma, Alabama.

Published by Arbitrary Press in May 2023

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Hard cover, soft cover, and e-book

\$29.99, \$17.99, and \$9.99

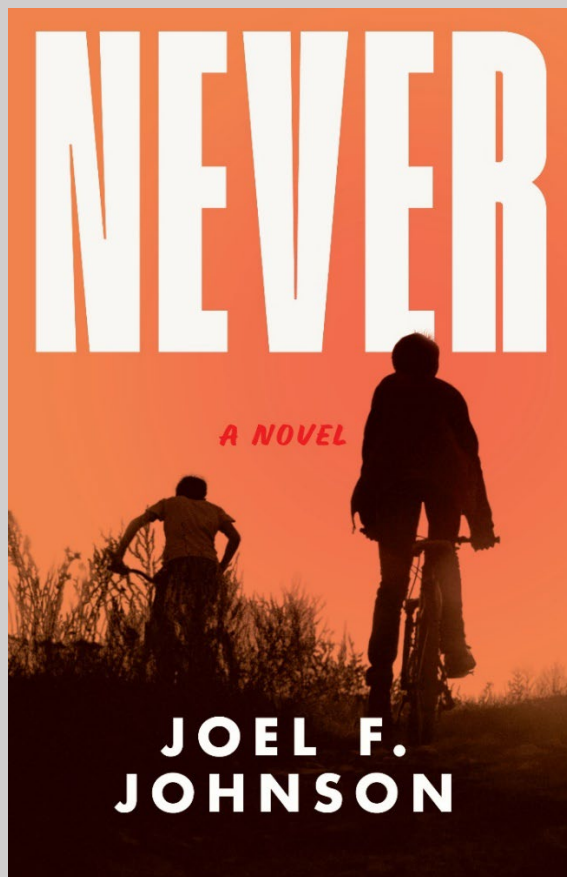
237 pages

Literary Fiction

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Available through Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and select bookstores.



Coming of age in the segregated south ...

In this debut novel, the narrator looks back on a childhood in the fictional town of LaSalle, Georgia, a place notorious in the history of the civil rights movement.

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“Those were just the times.” That’s how Morris “Little” Nickerson has always dismissed the incongruities of growing up in the segregated town of LaSalle, Georgia. But a call from his sister forces Little to reexamine a childhood he’s kept encased in glass for more than fifty years.

As he tries to make sense of one eventful summer, Little brings to life the people he knew and loved: Reverend Robert McAllister, the father of his best friend, who speaks the high-flown language of social change but preaches to an all-white congregation; Bit, the Black family maid, who is like a second mother to him but is made to sit in the back of his family’s car; Morris Nickerson, Little’s brusque, but reliable father, and Elizabeth, his vulnerable, mysterious mother.

In *Never*, three families struggle to keep their footing in a crumbling society. It is a story of conflict between love and obligation, memory and truth, between what a boy intuits and an old man knows.

About the Author:

Joel F. Johnson grew up in Columbus, GA and lives in Concord, MA. His collection of poems, *Where Inches Seem Miles*, received a starred review from Kirkus Reviews as one of the best books of 2014. *Never* is his first novel.



Advance praise for *Never*:

“Johnson’s eagle-eyed prose perfectly captures the mores and frailties of his characters and their community ... An observant and immersive work about a society in flux.”

Kirkus Reviews.

Joel F. Johnson Bio



Joel F. Johnson joined the ranks of debut novelists at age 68.

Johnson was born in 1954, the year the Supreme Court mandated school desegregation, but he attended all-white public schools in his hometown of Columbus, GA through sixth grade. His novel, *Never*, is a coming-of-age story in the segregated South. Though a work of fiction, the novel brims with realistic detail of life on the white side of the Jim Crow South.

At Harvard College, Johnson's reading stretched beyond the southern fiction of William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor. He developed a taste for Blake, Yeats, Samuel Johnson, and Henry James. Among contemporary writers, he likes the Irish ones: Colm Toibin, Roddy Doyle, and Sebastian Barry.

In 2013, Antrim House published Johnson's book of poetry, *Where Inches Seem Miles*. In its review, *Kirkus* found parallels between Johnson's debut and the work of James Dickey. The reviewer described Johnson's writing as "rich, compelling lyric poetry that bores beneath the decorum of civilization, revealing the elementally human beneath."

Johnson has an MBA in corporate finance and has been self-employed for twenty-five years. The father of three, Johnson and his wife live in Concord, MA.

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Sample Interview Questions
Never, a novel by Joel F. Johnson
Arbitrary Press

- What does a story about the segregated South in 1962 tell us about life in America today?
- **Never** is narrated by a white man who describes his Black maid as "a stranger I thought I knew." What makes her a stranger?
- A central character is Rob McAllister, the minister of an all-white church. Where does this character come from?
- How does the author's experience growing up in Columbus, Georgia inform his depiction of the fictional town of LaSalle, Georgia?
- Why create a fictional town? What is unique about LaSalle?
- The narrator has sweet memories of growing up in LaSalle, though the town has a notorious past because of a violent mass arrest of civil rights demonstrators. How do we reconcile our nostalgia for childhood with the hard facts we learn as adults?
- Johnson is a white writer describing the experiences of a Black maid in the segregated South. Isn't that appropriation? How does one balance creative freedom with respect for experiences of others?
- The narrator says that his mother and Bit formed an "odd partnership." What sort of partnership can a privileged white woman have with her Black maid?

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Link to Kirkus Reviews *Never*:
<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/joel-f-johnson/never-1/>

Link to Amazon reviews *Never*:
https://www.amazon.com/Never-novel-Joel-F-Johnson/dp/1958762075/ref=sr_1_1?crid=1TO7HJJ127VK&keywords=joel+f+johnson+never&qid=1688931393&srefix=%2Caps%2C93&sr=8-1

Link to Kirkus Reviews *Where Inches Seem Miles*:
<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/joel-f-johnson/where-inches-seem-miles/>

“THOSE WERE JUST THE TIMES.” That’s how Morris “Little” Nickerson dismisses the incongruities of his childhood in the segregated south. But when a call from his older sister prompts Little, who is now in his seventies, to return to his hometown of LaSalle, Georgia, he finds himself having to reexamine a childhood he’s kept encased in glass all these years. As he tries to make sense of the events of one tumultuous summer, Little remembers Robert McAllister, a minister who speaks the high-flown language of social change but preaches to an all-white congregation; he relates his love for the Black family maid, who is like a second mother to him but is made to sit in the back of his family’s car; he describes recognizing familiar faces among the civil rights marchers who descend on the LaSalle town square, though he has been told that their protests are the work of outside agitators. Even after fifty years, his best friend, his father, and his fragile, often infirm, mother remain mysterious to him, and Little admits he can no longer reconcile the nostalgia he feels for his naïve boyhood with the truths an old man knows.

Advance Praise for **NEVER**

“Johnson’s debut novel... recalls coming of age in the segregated South.... His eagle-eyed prose perfectly captures the mores and frailties of his characters and their community. An observant and immersive work about a society in flux.” —**KIRKUS REVIEWS**

“In stunning prose, Johnson has written a powerful, deeply compassionate story about compelling characters struggling with complex issues that still determine lives today.”

—**MEREDITH HALL, author of *Beneficence* and *Without a Map***

“Joel Johnson’s elegant prose conveys with aching precision the delicate nature of human frailty. You’ll want to read every word, so settle in. *Never* is a book to savor.”

—**CATHERINE ARMSDEN, author of *Dream House***

“One of the most moving books I have ever read, expressed in a moral language that gives humanity to the worst and best of our attempts to know and to love each other.”

—**DAVID MICHAELIS, author of *Eleanor***

“Beautifully rendered ... Johnson writes with nuance and heart.”

—**FRYE GAILLARD, coauthor, *The Southernization of America***



After growing up in Columbus, Georgia, Joel F. Johnson graduated from Harvard and made stops in Alta, Utah, Boulder, and Manhattan, before settling in Concord, Massachusetts. His collection of poems, *Where Inches Seem Miles*, was selected by *Kirkus Reviews* as one of the best independent books of 2014. *Never* is his first novel.



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JOEL F. JOHNSON



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NEVER

**“POWERFUL AND DEEPLY
COMPASSIONATE.”**

—Meredith Hall,
author of *Beneficence*

A NOVEL

**JOEL F.
JOHNSON**