

## **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.

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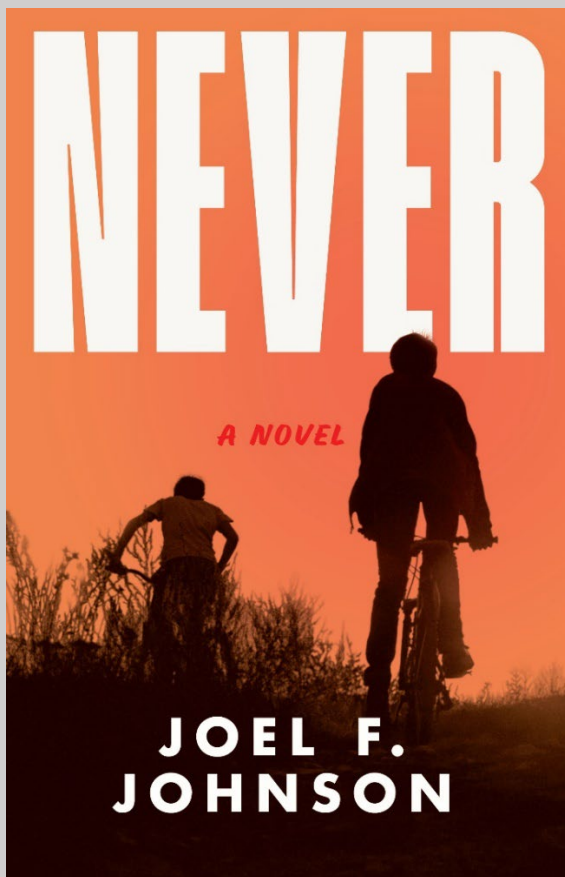
237 pages

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.

“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*.

## 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.

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 graduated from Harvard College in 1976 with a BA in English & American Literature. He 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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Link to Kirkus Reviews *Never*:  
<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/joel-f-johnson/never-1/>

Link to Don Noble's review on Alabama Public Radio  
<https://www.apr.org/show/don-nobles-book-reviews/2023-10-16/never>

Link to Toby A. Smith review:  
<https://tobyasmith.com/2024/02/06/never-by-joel-f-johnson-independent-book-review-memoir-united-states/>

Link to Shepherd review (Ellen Prentiss Campbell):  
<https://shepherd.com/bboy/2023/f/ellen-prentiss-campbell>

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](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 Goodreads reviews:  
<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/156430120-never>

Link to radio/podcast interview with Vicki St. Clair  
<https://conversationslive.net/aug-23-joel-johnson-with-never/>

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

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