

BOOK CLUB KIT



A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Memphis is an ode to my city and to the Black women living in it. She is my proof that a great peoples reside in the South. That its women are full of mystery and magic and humor and grit. They can gut catfish and fry green tomatoes and lead revolutions and do hair and tuck their children in at night and sing all the while. *Memphis* is my declaration that our lives—our beautiful, rich, full Black lives—matter so very much.

Read more about my inspiration at the bottom of this guide.

—Tara M. Stringfellow

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Joan's sections are told in first person, while the other North women are written about in third person. How did this change in perspective affect your reading experience? Did it make you identify more strongly with any of the characters?
2. Discuss the different generations of North women—and North men—and some of the defining characteristics of each person. Which traits were passed down through the family line? Which traits seem to belong to individuals?
3. Why do you think Miriam brought Joan and Mya to live with August and Derek, despite knowing what happened to Joan years before? Do you think she made the right choice? Why or why not?
4. "Wars fascinated me," Joan says. "How on earth could a sane man charge into a volley of bullets—say, at D-Day? Weren't they terrified?" She later compares these feelings to her own experience walking into August's house knowing Derek lived there, too. What do you make of this comparison? Do you believe personal traumas can be as damaging as war?
5. How do Myron and Hazel's lives—and deaths—reverberate through the future generations of their family?
6. *Memphis* is full of cultural references, from historical events and figures to well-known music and literature. How did these details influence your reading experience? Which reference was your favorite?
7. "History had awakened me to the fact that racism is the only food Americans crave," Stringfellow writes. Discuss this quote. What do you think she means by this? Do you agree? Why or why not?
8. How do the people of Douglass support each other throughout the years? What do you think *Memphis* is saying about the value of community? Does this community support ever fall short? If so, where?
9. "I wasn't sure if my burying that comb was what landed my cousin in prison," Joan says, "but I thanked God—and Miss Dawn—for the magic of it." Do you believe the magic worked? Either way, do you feel Joan got justice for what happened to her when Derek went to prison? Why or why not?
10. Joan's relationship with her father remains complicated throughout the novel. "I did not forgive him for abandoning us," she says. "That is too big a thing to forgive. But driving in the Shelby through the streets of North Memphis with Daddy, I couldn't deny how lovely it felt to have one." Do you think it's possible for a relationship to move forward without forgiveness? Why or why not?
11. One of the themes of the novel is encapsulated in this quotation: "The things women do for the sake of their daughters. The things women don't." How do these lines describe the behaviors of the North women?
12. August once says to Joan, "Free? A Black woman hasn't ever known the meaning of that word, my love." By the end of the novel, Joan says, contrary to what August told her, that she does feel free. What gives her this freedom? What kind of life do you imagine for Joan and Mya's own daughters, if they choose to have them?

PLAYLIST MEMPHIS: AN ODE

Listen to Tara Stringfellow's *Memphis* playlist on **Spotify**,
featuring a song that encapsulates the mood of each chapter.

1. "Memphis in June" – Nina Simone
2. "Shake the Frost" – Tyler Childers
3. "Bennie and the Jets" – Elton John
4. "If You Ain't from My Hood" – Project Pat, feat. DJ Paul & Juicy J
5. "Not Gon' Cry" – Mary J. Blige
6. "Smokestack Lightnin'" – Howlin' Wolf
7. "Miss Celie's Blues (Sister)" – Quincy Jones
8. "For the Good Times" – Al Green
9. "Gimme a Pigfoot and a Bottle of Beer" – Bessie Smith
10. "I Put a Spell on You" – Red Band and Ninet Tayeb
11. "Outro (Amazing Grace . . . dedicated to Andretta Tillman)" – Destiny's Child
12. "Chickenhead" – Project Pat, feat. La Chat & Three 6 Mafia
13. "When the Levee Breaks" – Memphis Minnie
14. "Leaving on a Jet Plane" – Coby Grant
15. "Summer in the City" – B.B. King
16. "Daydream Believer" – The Monkees
17. "Do Right Woman, Do Right Man" – Aretha Franklin
18. "Country Grammar (Hot Shit)" – Nelly
19. "Fuck tha Police" – N.W.A.
20. "Alright" – Kendrick Lamar
21. "B*tch from da Souf" – Latto
22. "This Is America" – Childish Gambino
23. "Maybe" – Janis Joplin
24. "Come Together" – Ike & Tina Turner
25. "Keep Ya Head Up" – 2Pac
26. "Landslide" – The Chicks
27. "Clair de Lune" – Kamasi Washington
28. "How Can You Mend a Broken Heart" – Al Green
29. "Fool of Me" – Meshell Ndegeocello
30. "Over the Rainbow" – Judy Garland
31. "Looking for You" – Kirk Franklin
32. "This Will Be (An Everlasting Love)" – Natalie Cole

RECIPE

DELLA'S FRIED GREEN TOMATOES

Ingredients

- ♦ 1 cup cornmeal
- ♦ 1 cup flour
- ♦ Paprika
- ♦ Salt and pepper
- ♦ Garlic powder or garlic salt
- ♦ 1 fresh brown egg (get this from Stanley's)
- ♦ Some buttermilk
- ♦ $\frac{1}{4}$ lb. fresh, unripe green tomatoes (best right from the garden in April or September), sliced in rounds
- ♦ Vegetable oil (hot, hot, hot)

Now, don't be giving my recipes away to white women. But if you must, give 'em this one. It's so easy, Lord knows, they can't mess this up.

Mix the cornmeal and flour together to get your breading. Add the seasoning. Enuff—don't ask me how much—until it looks and taste good, Jesus.

Note from August: I just use fish fry mix. McCormick is the best. Ain't nobody got time to be making all this breading, getting the kitchen all dirty.

Note from Miriam: I agree. We got too many kids for all this. But I like that Louisiana fry that comes in a bag.

Next, you gon' get your basting together. Whisk that egg and add the buttermilk. Again, enuff. So it look milky, chile.

This part the hardest. Cutting the tomatoes. If you cut them too thin, they'll turn out too crunchy or they'll crumble in the skillet. Too thick, and it'll taste like you eating a tomato steak. Cut them just right. They shouldn't be no thicker than your pinky finger. If you still uncertain, think about the lies men tell. Make them like that. Perfect.

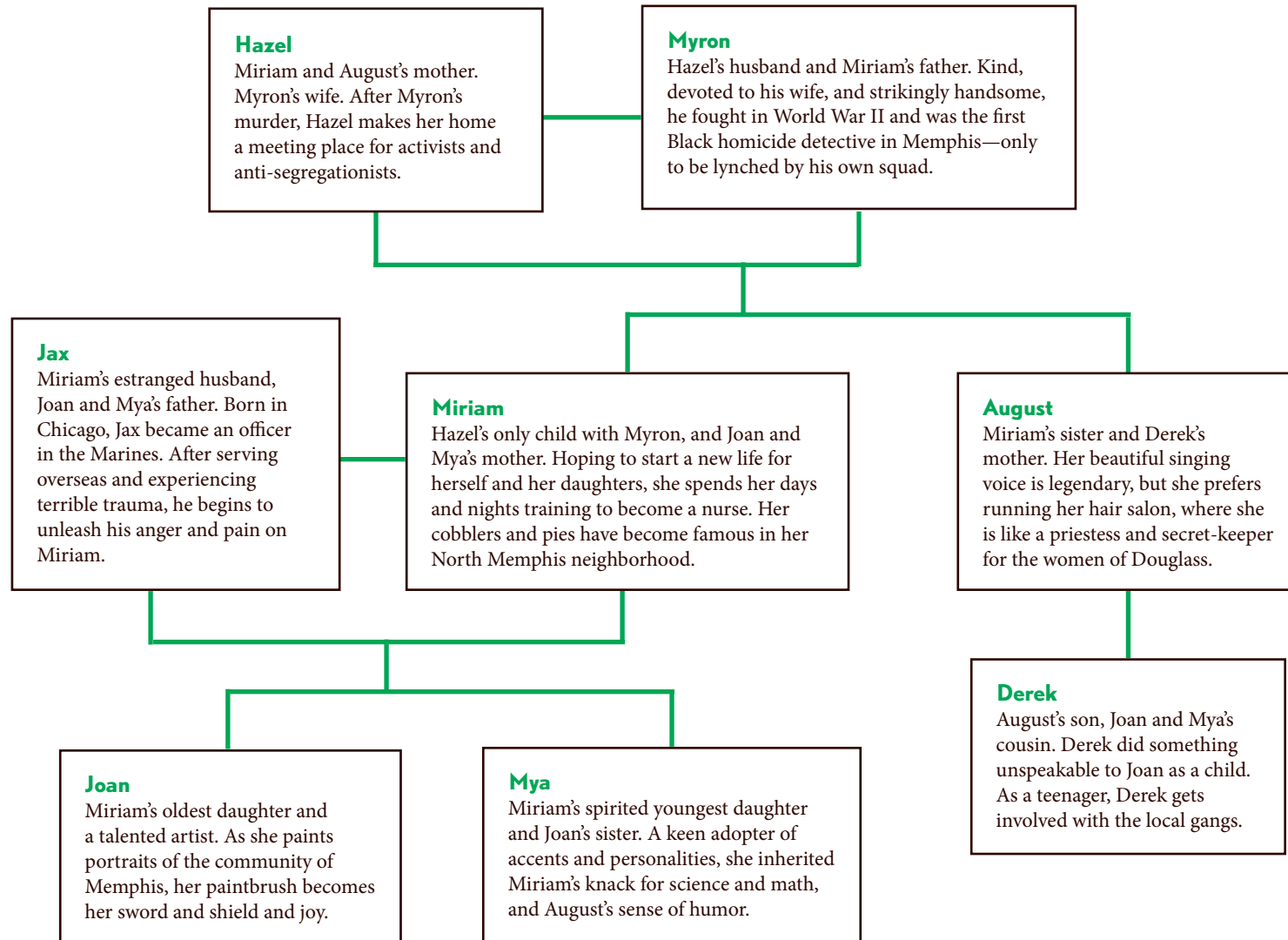
Dip the tomato slices into the batter, then into the breading. Your skillet needs to be crackling hot. Test it by throwing in a pinch of the batter. If it sizzles up, you ready. Place the coated and breaded tomatoes into the hot grease.

Cook them until they're golden brown on both sides. You know the brown I'm talking 'bout. Like the Mississippi at dusk.

Eat and enjoy.

Note from Hazel: Mama would make these in the mornings. I serve mine with some fried salt pork. Y'all can do how y'all want. But that's how we eat them down in Memphis.

FAMILY TREE



CAST A SPELL

Channel the wisdom and magic of Miss Dawn with the spells below,
adapted from **Enchantments** by Mya Spalter.

FOR BANISHING NEGATIVITY

Crushed Red Pepper

Planet: Mars

Element: Fire

Most peppers and spicy things are associated with Mars because of its active, fiery vibe.

It's sometimes sprinkled around the perimeter of a space for uncrossing or banishing negativity by metaphorically burning it off. (Black pepper can be used similarly, to ward off bad vibes and ill-intentioned people.) Sprinkling it protectively around the perimeter of the home is one way to employ this element's power.

Crystals

If you're into crystals, you're in luck, because quite a few of them can be worn or carried to help protect your home, physical safety, or psychic space. I'll list some prime examples below.

Black tourmaline: This crystal is said to absorb negativity

when carried or worn. It's pretty rad-looking, both matte and shiny at the same time in its natural form, and it's not particularly expensive or hard to find. I might suggest this as a helpful cubicle crystal for workplace toxicity.

Pumice: With its uniquely porous surface, pumice is supposed to absorb negative energy like a sponge. A simple banishing ritual is to visualize whatever energy you want to be rid of flowing from your hand into the stone, and then chuck it into a body of water and never look back. The same process can be performed with any other receptive stone, but the porousness of pumice makes it particularly sympathetic.

TO PREPARE FOR BATTLE

Tiger's eye: Roman soldiers were known to have carried amulets of tiger's eye into battle, for physical protection and to promote the courage necessary to rise up to the challenge of their rivals. Now that I think of it, I can't imagine a better incantation for a charging ritual for a tiger's eye than getting pumped listening to Survivor's "Eye of the Tiger" with the stone in your hand. God, now I wanna try it.

FOR ATTRACTION

Essential Oils

The love-magic approach that I tend to recommend involves choosing one of the roles in this story and trying it on as you would a costume. The trick is to become, for a time, the aspect of the god or goddess that most reminds you of yourself at your very best, your most adorable.

I listed a few usual suspects below, but you should think of the internet as your very own exhaustive list. Do some research on love deities and their sacred scents. I humbly suggest that you might want to start by looking for archetypes from your own cultural background(s). You don't have to stop there, but I'm a firm believer in the idea that the magic you need is always close at hand.

Pick a god or goddess and use their sublime qualities to lure your equal opposite.

- ♦ To honor **Aphrodite** (Miss **Venus** if you're Roman), try rose, orris, jasmine, or ylang-ylang.

- ♦ To get into the **Oshun** mood, you might try cinnamon, sandalwood, or star anise.
- ♦ **Freya** from the Norse pantheon and **Erzulie** from Vodou are both partial to strawberry.
- ♦ Egyptian musk for **Cleopatra**, apple blossom for **Eve** . . . we could go on like this forever.

A Bath to Attract Love and Lust

What about the person who's like, "Hey, I don't do perfumes. Can I still immerse my senses in sexy luxury?" Why, yes! You can! Thanks for asking. You might like to try this super-simple love-drawing bath. All you need is a chai spice tea bag. A lot of the spices that tend to be included in the blend—ginger, cardamom pods, cinnamon, star anise, fennel, peppercorns, nutmeg, or cloves—can be charged and used intentionally to attract love and lust. If you're crazy like me, you might add some powdered milk and a little honey to the bathwater for an extra-sexy body latte.

TARA STRINGFELLOW'S MEMPHIS

Goner Records – Midtown

Best record store in Memphis! I was able to find hidden gems like Bessie Smith, Blind Boy Fuller, and Ma Rainey here.

Veeta Moore, who owns a local delivery service called Grindtime Errands (@grindtimeerrands and grindtimeerrands.com)

This Black, female-owned delivery service saved my life during the Memphis blizzard of 2020. They deliver anything, absolutely anything, to your house, and fast! They will also complete errands for you. Dry cleaning pickup is a godsend.

Hair Angel Love – 2740 Bartlett Blvd, Bartlett, TN

Please see Adrienne or Angie at this beauty shop in Bartlett specializing in natural hairstyles. These ladies keep me looking glamorous for every photo shoot, every vacation, every holiday. And their shop is an oasis for Black relaxation—they have monthly spa and wellness days.

Local jeweler Blacck Daria (@Blacckdaria and blacckdaria.com)

She makes gorgeous, affordable Afrocentric jewelry in Memphis. Her stackable resin rings and Nefertiti chains make me feel like I rule both North Memphis and Memphis, Egypt.



Cozy Corner – Downtown Memphis

Most tourists ask for the best barbecue place, and I tell them, “My uncle’s.” But if us locals do go out to eat barbecue, we go to Cozy. Black, female-owned and located between North Memphis and downtown, it’s the best eating you’ll have. Get the Cornish hens. Tell them I sent y’all.

Porch and Parlor – Midtown Memphis – Overton Square

This is a very posh, gorgeous venue located in Midtown. Perfect for romantic first dates or when parents are in town. When I took my father there, I found out the old Marine and my mom used to drink margaritas there before it was redone.



Hu. Hotel – Downtown Memphis

I love boutique hotels, and this one is my favorite. Located downtown, it has breathtaking views of my city. And the rooftop bar makes the best damn deviled eggs I've had. Go on a Saturday night in the summer and expect to dance.

Sage – Downtown Memphis

Another Black and female-owned venue! Their brunch is considered Memphis famous. Expect a wait, but you will not be disappointed. Best shrimp and grits.

Lucky 7 Brass Band

An amazing local band. They covered "Crazy in Love," y'all. I saw them perform at Railgarten, but they perform all over Memphis.

The Jimmy James Band (@jimmyjamesband1955)

My favorite blues band. You can find them downtown on Beale Street playing at Rum Boogie, my favorite blues bar.



HUCKLEBERRY'S RECOMMENDATIONS

Dogs Rule Day Care & School – Cooper-Young, Memphis

Huckleberry attends this doggy daycare regularly, and he loves it there. I cannot even say the word "daycare" until we are on our way. He gets a snack and a nap in the afternoons and gets to play with his friends—human and canine—while mama is on deadline.

Overton Bark – a dog park in Overton Park, sponsored by Hollywood Feed

Huckleberry adores this dog park and trails. He loves playing with his friends Gert, Storm, and Beowulf, and he must stop and get kisses from every single person on the trail.

Hollywood Feed – Midtown locations

Huckleberry's favorite pet store. Huckleberry is a Southern gentleman, so he adores the deer antlers and the gator chews from this pet store that also delivers! Godsend.

MEMPHIS: ORIGIN STORY


I come from a long line of storytellers. My father, as much Marine as he is poet, would sit me in his lap with our copy of *The Best Loved Poems of the American People* spread out before us, and he'd warn me that because I was woman, because I was nonwhite, I'd have to write better than this man here. He pointed to Poe. During the day, my mother paused in her singing only to tell me Southern stories lush with history—that her mother marched with Dr. King, that her father was the unknown and unsung hero of Memphis, that I descend from a long line of Southern quilters. She'd joke that her mother's quilts I slept under and these stories were her Southern dowry and would be mine. How telling.

Growing up, I knew my grandfather was the first Black homicide detective in Memphis, but the circumstances of his death were as murky as the banks of the Mississippi from which his body was pulled. My mother was all of five when her father was found, body broken and bruised, face unrecognizable. His pregnant widow screamed that he had been murdered, and she had to be carried, near dragged, to his funeral. My mother remembers touching her daddy's face and wondering why it was so cold.

I also knew my grandmother was the first Black nurse at **John Gaston Hospital** in Memphis, now known as Regional One. That after the four little girls were bombed down in Birmingham, she didn't talk to nobody for weeks, not a soul. My daddy can remember Emmett Till's funeral in Chicago; he told me about the men in his family chain-smoking to keep from sobbing. My mother recalls the way it snowed in Memphis after Dr. King died. Even though it was April, a full-on blizzard. She was twelve. She says God Himself didn't know what to do with His grief, so the heavens turned on Memphis. *Turned on us all*, she says, *for taking a king early*.

I grew up with devastating, grief-laced stories about gorgeous and unknown Black folk. All I had as proof were quilts and stories. But I knew, intrinsically, that it would be my lifelong duty, like my mother in our kitchen, to make those tales sing.

What sparked my foray into fiction was racism. Nothing but. A few days after my thirty-first birthday, Donald Trump won the 2016 presidential election. I have never been naive about the racial injustices this country has birthed



and suckled, but I was not prepared for the tsunami of hate, nationalism, and domestic terrorism, aimed not only at Blacks but at anyone marginalized—immigrants and refugees, my Muslim and Jewish brethren, all queer folk, Asian Americans, women—that Trump’s presidency unleashed.

That November night, I did what any Black woman does when she is lost: I called my mother. I’ll never forget what she told me:

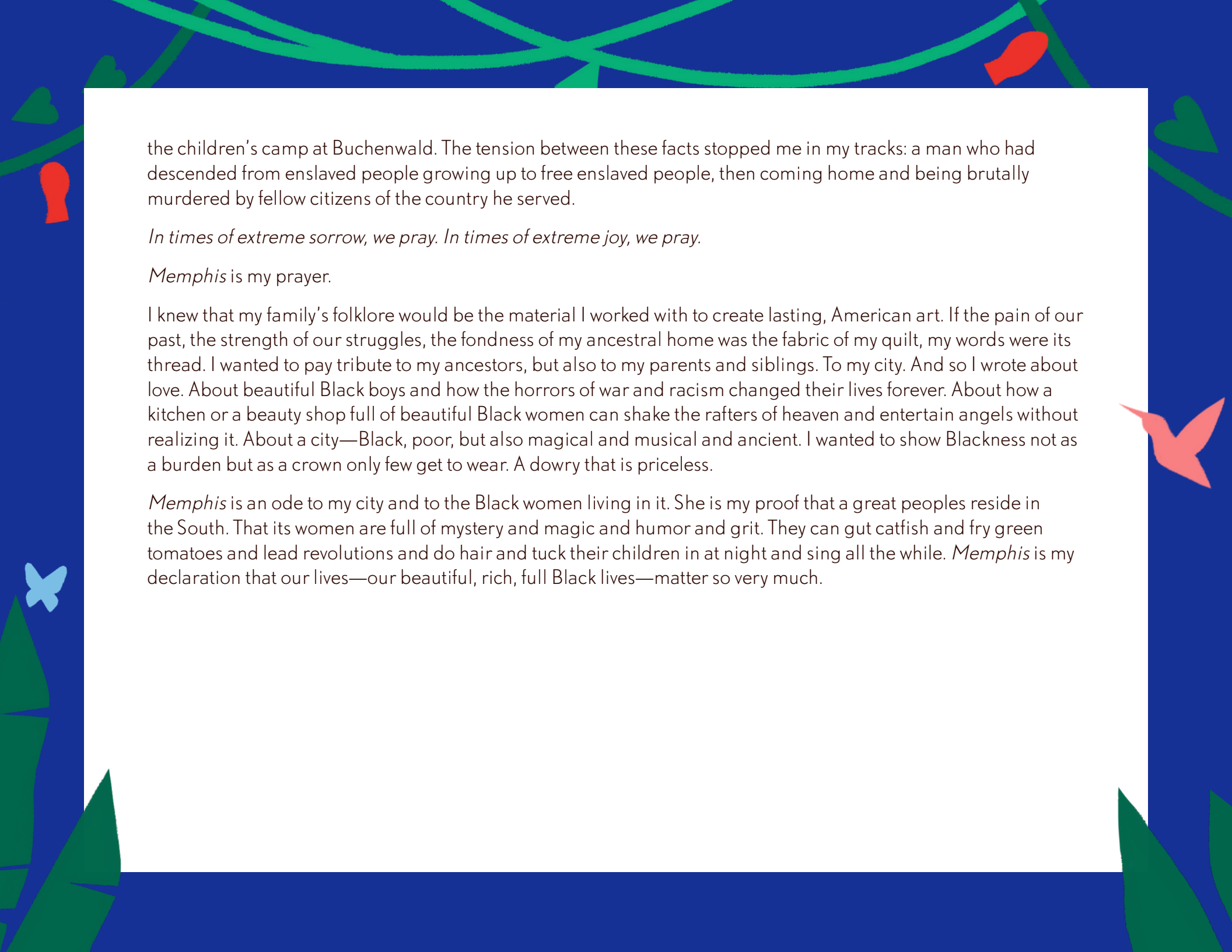
In times of extreme sorrow, we pray. In times of extreme joy, we pray.

I began writing—the closest thing I know to praying.

By this time, I had given up on being an attorney to write full-time. I had left the law firm where I once worked, was doing odd jobs—teaching, secretarial work, anything I could do to eat dollar tacos, pay Chicago rent, and complete an MFA program in poetry at night. But at the end of 2016, even the literary prayer of poetry wasn’t offering the salvation I sought. I started writing the novel that would become *Memphis*. Prose was uncharted territory for me. So I wrote in the same way I’d heard my family’s stories growing up—piecemeal, in vignettes, moment by moment, until the disparate pieces began to weave themselves together.

After class one evening, one of my professors, Reginald Gibbons, looked at some early pages of my book and made a suggestion that would wholly transform the way I understood my family’s story, my history, and myself. He told me the university gave students free access to Ancestry.com.

I soon found myself in front of a computer at the school library, hoping to learn more about my grandfather’s mysterious death. The research skills I’d developed in law school suddenly seemed to have a real purpose. What began as a search on Ancestry.com later sent me on a path through archived newspapers, military records, and history books. I learned that, as a young police officer in Memphis, my grandfather had caught a serial rapist who’d been terrorizing women in the city. I learned that the Black newspapers in Memphis had reported my grandfather’s death as a lynching, while the city’s white newspapers attributed it to a boating accident. I also discovered that, before becoming a homicide detective, my grandfather had been a sergeant in Company A of the 183rd Engineer Combat Battalion. On April 11, 1945, his all-Negro unit was part of the group of American soldiers that liberated



the children's camp at Buchenwald. The tension between these facts stopped me in my tracks: a man who had descended from enslaved people growing up to free enslaved people, then coming home and being brutally murdered by fellow citizens of the country he served.

In times of extreme sorrow, we pray. In times of extreme joy, we pray.

Memphis is my prayer.

I knew that my family's folklore would be the material I worked with to create lasting, American art. If the pain of our past, the strength of our struggles, the fondness of my ancestral home was the fabric of my quilt, my words were its thread. I wanted to pay tribute to my ancestors, but also to my parents and siblings. To my city. And so I wrote about love. About beautiful Black boys and how the horrors of war and racism changed their lives forever. About how a kitchen or a beauty shop full of beautiful Black women can shake the rafters of heaven and entertain angels without realizing it. About a city—Black, poor, but also magical and musical and ancient. I wanted to show Blackness not as a burden but as a crown only few get to wear. A dowry that is priceless.

Memphis is an ode to my city and to the Black women living in it. She is my proof that a great peoples reside in the South. That its women are full of mystery and magic and humor and grit. They can gut catfish and fry green tomatoes and lead revolutions and do hair and tuck their children in at night and sing all the while. *Memphis* is my declaration that our lives—our beautiful, rich, full Black lives—matter so very much.