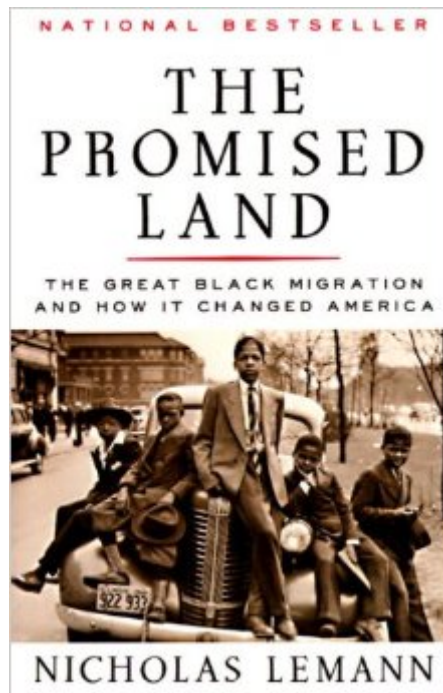


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The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration And How It Changed America



Synopsis

A New York Times bestseller, the groundbreaking authoritative history of the migration of African-Americans from the rural South to the urban North. A definitive book on American history, The Promised Land is also essential reading for educators and policymakers at both national and local levels.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"The Promised Land" is a fascinating study of the effects, both on the "immigrants" themselves and on America, of the migration of Blacks from the Mississippi Delta to the industrial cities of the North, in this case, specifically Chicago. The book traces the experiences of a group of individuals who made the migration, telling their story through time, beginning with the immigrants and continuing on with the families they built in the North, with a rough time frame of the 1940's - 1970's. The book comprises 2 basic strengths: the approach to the material and the resulting structure in which the story is told, and the sheer interest of the events themselves and the people who lived them. The author approaches the story he wishes to tell in two ways: He relates the story of the people themselves, giving these sections of the book an oral history like content, but intermixes the chapters with those based on an analytic, scholarly approach, where the individual stories previously related are woven into the bigger historical picture. The approach works wonderfully, giving the book a structure both readable as a straightforward story of human beings relating their own very personal roles in historical events but also allowing the reader to put these events in a

greater historical context, to understand for instance the sad downward slope experienced in the Black working class communities as the years passed. The early immigrants made their way to Black sections of Chicago which, while segregated and relatively poor compared to the White sections, also managed to provide at least the basis of a thriving community, in which work was available and there was a hope of moving up in the world. The comparison of these communities in the 1940's to the boarded up, drug infested no-man's land some of them were to become later is startling. Some of the resulting questions raised are fascinating, especially in the current environment with the all-out effort to replace welfare with workfare. At it's most extreme is the question raised by Federal Welfare authorities as to whether it is perhaps better to just support people in the Mississippi Delta with welfare, given that the outlay is relatively minor, as opposed to encouraging people to move North. They might improve their lot with better jobs not available in the Delta but with the risk that they will perhaps end up on welfare forcing the authorities to pay out much more in benefits than would be necessary to pay in the Delta with it's significantly lower standard of living. In the final analysis however, it is the stories of the immigrants which really take center stage and make reading this book such a satisfying experience. In a world of jet planes and instant electronic communications it is hard to imagine to almost biblical migration which took place all by virtue of a scheduled train line, people being transported to a profoundly different world by a day or so of travel, a world which at least initially offered a degree of prosperity and an improvement in living standards way beyond that of the Delta they left behind. The fragility of that life in the "promised land" however would become sadly apparent in the mixed experiences the future was to hold for the immigrants and their families and in the sad decline of their communities. Driven by the disappearance of the Industries and Stockyards whose jobs fueled the great migration in the first place this movement eventually ground to a halt. Victims of both economic and racial segregation, the once dynamic Black working class communities of Chicago became more and more isolated and desolate as jobs became ever scarcer and drugs and welfare took a firmer hold. Those residents who had prospered and could afford to do so left for the suburbs open to them, while those who for whatever reason, whether their own failings or just an inability to keep up with a changing world were left to reside in the inner city in such stark monuments to failed policies as the Robert Taylor homes. "The Promised Land" captures an episode in American history not likely to be repeated, and does so in a manner which combines the best of both analytic and anecdotal writing styles, driven by the heartfelt and exciting remembrances of the participants themselves, those who comprised the great migration to the promised land.

This is a well written interesting book presenting information vital to understanding contemporary America. At the same time this is only indirectly a book about the Great Black Migration. Rather it is about policies at the federal level, especially the collage of programs called the "war on poverty" and how they relate to American society in the 1960s and 1970s with examples from several African Americans from the Clarksdale Mississippi area who migrated to Chicago, several of them returning to Clarksdale. One of the most valuable parts of the book--and well-written--is the description of the changes that went on in the 1940s with mechanism of agriculture that led to the migration--cotton got picked and then weeded mechanically the army of cotton field hands who had been the most important segment of the African American population was no longer needed in the South. This is one of the best and most practical explanations of this, especially as he focuses on Clarksdale Mississippi and the surrounding area. He gives a good history of the evolution of the cotton crop in the area and the evolution of Black society, providing examples in the lives of several people. To me this is quite useful because one of my chief focuses is the history of the Blues. Clarksdale --the big town near where Muddy Waters, Ike Turner, Robert Johnson, John Lee Hooker, Elmore James, Son House, Charlie Patton, and so many other Blues singers came from--is central to the history of the Delta Blues. Knowing the social and economic conditions that existed there is quite useful for music scholars who can profit from this part of the book. Lemann is pretty good in describing the way the plantation system broke up families and how the immigration to Chicago impacted several different Clarksdale folk who travelled up to Chicago. He charts their stories getting into Chicago in the 1940s and early 1950s fairly well. Once he does this, there is an abrupt shift. He tries to chart the various conflicts in the Kennedy and Johnson administration about dealing with the Black urban problems, the rebellions, and poverty, which is really an aside from discussing Black migration. In this regard as he used Clarksdale as an example, he uses Chicago where all of his people from Clarksdale have migrated. I would imagine that the intimate detail that he goes into regarding the inside debates on forming the poverty programs and the infighting between Johnson and Kennedy factions of the Democratic party over it and the way the Daley machine in Chicago related to all of this is of interest to many people. It was told in such a way that even though I am not interested in it, it was interesting though not absorbing. He presents the end result of the programs is that they never did anything but create a larger base for the Black middle and upper middle class among administrators of these programs and other public functionary jobs. In the 1960s, many of us who fought for a perspective for Black people independent of the Republicans and Democrats pointed out that this was the actual purpose of the programs, not to end poverty, but to incorporate political activists who might otherwise be drawn into the struggle for the interests of Black people into the

apparatus of the government and into the feeding ground to become part of the Democratic and Republican parties and corporate America. Lemann is good at showing the failure of these programs and the hell they produced for Black working folk like the subjects of his story, but he rarely steps back and examines the larger question of the way society as a whole functions. If American capitalist society persistently creates a large army of poor African Americans, now supplemented by millions of equally poor or poorer workers without papers with even less rights, is this not something required by the system. Is this not a damper of the attempts of all working people for better working conditions, better wages, better social programs in education, health, and the environment. Is this not a feeding ground for the racist ideas that nourish acceptance of this society. Is this not a way of stopping social solidarity among working folks. Again, I expected an overall history of the migration covering the whole of the nation in the 20th Century. This is not that book, but an extremely readable book giving very good case studies of how the Southern cotton plantation system worked, how it ended, and a history of the war on poverty in the 1960s and early 1970s. In passing, he provides some stories of African Americans women and men who lived through this history.

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