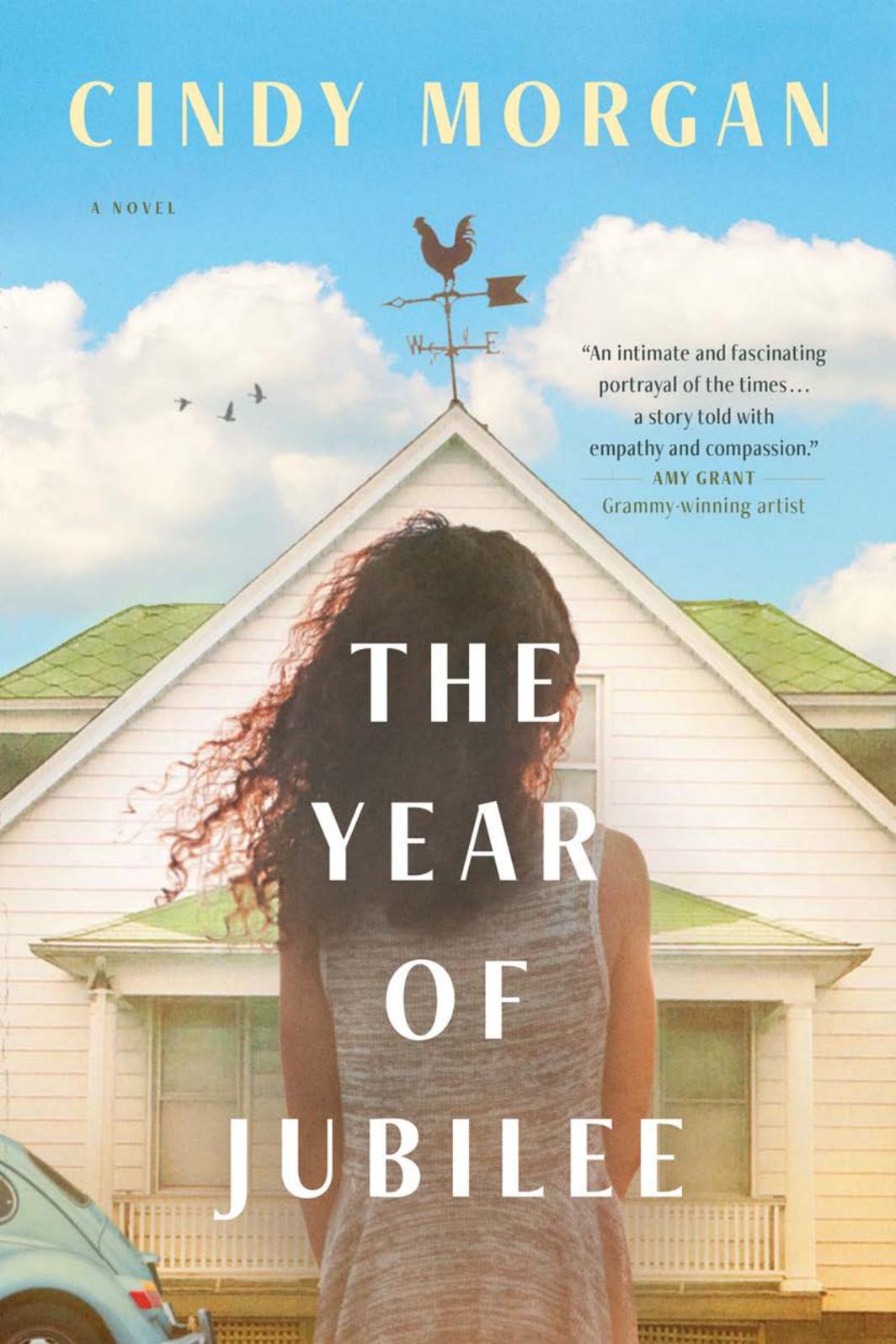


CINDY MORGAN

A NOVEL

"An intimate and fascinating
portrayal of the times...
a story told with
empathy and compassion."
— AMY GRANT —
Grammy-winning artist



THE YEAR OF JUBILEE

PRAISE FOR CINDY MORGAN

“Set in 1963, in the coal-mining town of Jubilee, Kentucky, author Cindy Morgan weaves the threads of the multilayered fabric of young Grace’s life through her interactions with family and their divided community. Against this backdrop of cultural change and uncertainty, Grace’s coming-of-age story is told. I’ve never experienced a more intimate and fascinating portrayal of these times in a story told with such empathy and compassion.”

AMY GRANT, Grammy-winning singer-songwriter and author

“Cindy Morgan is an award-winning singer and songwriter, and her prose is as lyrical as her music. This heartbreaking coming-of-age story eloquently portrays the hellish and heavenly nature of Kentucky life in the 1960s with great detail and sensitivity. Morgan’s story will make you grateful for the Word’s healing touch, the complicated bonds of family and friendship, and the power of air conditioning on a scorching summer day. What a delicious slice of Southern fiction!”

ROBIN W. PEARSON, award-winning author of *A Long Time Comin’* and *Walking in Tall Weeds*

“*The Year of Jubilee* is such a compelling and powerful story that it is clear Cindy’s gift includes more than just music. I would now describe her as simply a brilliant and expressive writer.”

MANDISA, Grammy-winning artist

“Some stories are told; others, like *The Year of Jubilee*, are woven into the reader’s heart. With honesty and bravery, a compelling coming-of-age heroine confronts ignorance and racial prejudice in the deep South while wrestling with her own past demons—and learning the price of forgiveness. A beautiful story wondrously told!”

TAMERA ALEXANDER, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Colors of Truth*

“*The Year of Jubilee* is a poignant coming-of-age story set during a turbulent time in our country’s history in the 1960s. This one is sure to stir your heart.”

T. I. LOWE, bestselling author of *Under the Magnolias*

“Cindy Morgan takes us on a barefoot walk into the heart of Jubilee, Kentucky, as her authentic characters fumble toward love and justice in the divided South. Vivid with style and substance, Cindy Morgan’s debut novel is a down-to-earth masterpiece.”

SANDRA McCracken, singer-songwriter and author

“Cindy brings empathy, a poetic perspective and a resounding hope that calls from the depths to this story. It’s the story of her family, and the story of all of us who have loved and lost and grieved and tenaciously clung to hope. All of us who have experienced Jubilee.”

SISSY GOFF, bestselling author of *Raising Worry-Free Girls* and cohost of the *Raising Boys and Girls* podcast

“In this emotional, heart-gripping and soul-stirring novel . . . the reader gets to travel back in time on a journey of redemptive healing and forgiveness. *The Year of Jubilee* is a must read, especially for anyone struggling with seeing the world around them through the eyes of another!”

LYNDA RANDLE, award-winning singer-songwriter and author

“A brilliant story, woven with beautifully crafted characters and rich, colorful detail. Your heart will be stirred as you come to see through the eyes of the insightful narrator, and learning of her family, her life, and her struggle to understand God will inspire you to contemplate your own journey in new ways.”

GINNY OWENS, musical artist and author of *Singing in the Dark*

“Cindy Morgan’s debut novel *The Year of Jubilee* struck so many personal chords within me, transporting me back to a small-town life in the hills and hollers of Kentucky. . . . A story that will tantalize your heart and soul to the very end!”

DONNA JORDON, Eagleville Bicentennial Public Library (Cindy Morgan’s local librarian)

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A NOVEL

**CINDY
MORGAN**



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The Year of Jubilee

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FOR SAMUEL MORGAN
NOVEMBER 7, 1966 - OCTOBER 31, 1971

THE FEAR OF DEATH FOLLOWS
FROM THE FEAR OF LIFE.
A MAN WHO LIVES FULLY IS
PREPARED TO DIE AT ANY TIME.

MARK TWAIN

PROLOGUE

There are some moments in your life you don't forget. Even when your eyes grow dim and your skin is thin like a moth's wings, you can find them there, buried deep. You dust them off, and they shine like new again. Even now, in my middle years, I only have to crack open the cover of my red journal, and though the ink is fading, the words remain.

I remember.

I remember the feeling of my father's rough shirt beneath my bare legs as he lifted me onto his shoulders and up to the window of Isaac's hospital room. I remember the white walls and silver railings along his bed. I remember Rojo in my arms, still, with only the sound of his soft clucking as we peered in through the glass. The crest atop his head as red as blood against the windowpane. I remember thinking Isaac looked like a bird in a cloud, covered in a mound of sterile white sheets and blankets. I remember long clear tubes from a machine, feeding liquid life into his tiny bird arm.

I remember his lips moving as he looked up at us, and I wondered what he was saying.

I remember my mother in her pale-blue dress standing beside him, holding his hand with a river of sorrow in her eyes. I remember the sound of my heart beating like a drum in my chest and the smell of the rain as it held its breath before relenting.

THE YEAR OF JUBILEE

I remember how we stood there as it started to rain, afraid of breaking the spell we were in. I remember the rain becoming a flood and our lives getting swept away in it.

I remember.

1

CONSTANCE

The minute I saw Miss Adams, I was keenly aware of my lingering eighth-grade awkwardness, my nails bit down to the quick and my clothing meant for comfort instead of fashion. The other girls in her class were also well turned out in their dresses, makeup, and padded bras. I was still in my training bra and trying to tame the frizz in my bush of curly hair. I had come to her midway through the year, skipping from eighth grade into the ninth at the recommendation of my teacher, who felt I was bored and needed to be challenged.

Miss Adams was my new ninth-grade English teacher, fresh out of college and new to Jubilee. All anyone knew was that her daddy was a prominent doctor from down in Mississippi. She was exactly what any principal in a small Southern town would have prayed for, the quintessential Southern woman—real marriage material. Her nails were a soft shade of pink; and her hands, like her figure, were slight and ethereal. When she spoke, her drawl was like sugar rolling off her tongue—the way folks with money from the Deep South speak, nothing like the jagged edges Kentuckians spit out. Instead of saying *mother* and *father* with

THE YEAR OF JUBILEE

a strong *er* sound at the end, she said *mutha* and *fahtha*, and it made you want to crawl up in her lap and purr.

I remember one day in class, just as the winter relented and the blossom of spring was in the air, she announced we would be taking a field trip and that all we would need was our imagination and a good pair of walking shoes. This was no problem for me or any of the boys in the class, but some of the girls, like one prissy girl named Emoline Bluin, had worn their good church shoes to school.

“You will have to suffer through or go in your bare feet,” Miss Adams told them.

Sitting on a large quilt under a magnolia tree behind the school, she read us poetry, asking us to listen with our eyes closed and our hearts open. No teacher in this small hick school had ever taken a class on a nature walk to read poetry. Whether boy or girl—didn’t matter—we were all a little in love with her.

The world blossomed in color and detail when Miss Adams read literary fiction, poetry, and historical novels. I was never bored like I had been in my other class. She took us on expeditions through time. As she recounted important moments and people, the posters of historical figures on the walls came to life. I could hear their voices speaking through her.

We all adored her. That was, until the last day of school.

We were minutes away from the bell that would take us into summer.

“Attention, please.”

Miss Adams stood in the middle of the room, her voice breaking into our restless energy. I noticed that her voice warbled a bit in her throat and she reached for a small glass from her desk and took a dainty drink of water before proceeding.

“Before the bell rings, I’d like to read you something to think about over the summer break. Something that seems fitting for the times we are living in.”

She held up a book for us to see. “This is *The Winter of Our Discontent* by John Steinbeck.”

She cleared her throat, pressing the book to her chest before holding it out in front of her to read. “I wonder how many people I’ve looked at all my life and never seen . . .”

She raised her head, eyes on us, as the book lay open in her hands. A small murmur of disinterest was rumbling from the boys on the back row.

“Boys,” she said, zeroing in on them. Her icy stare froze their words in their open mouths as she waited for silence.

She continued to read. “No man really knows about other human beings. The best he can do is to suppose that they are like himself.”

She let the book close and took a deep breath, her eyes bright and leveled with ours. “Most of you realize, there is much unrest in the South, fear of things changing. School integration is happening all across the country. We don’t know if next year, this school could possibly embrace the idea of integrating—”

Eli Gunner shot to his feet. “You must be out of your m-m-m-mind if you think that’s g-g-gonna happen!”

The boys erupted in laughter.

Eli came to school most days smelling as though he had not showered and devoured the warm lunch as if it was his first meal of the day. The stutter he struggled with made me think that God must have had it out for him.

“Eli!” Miss Adams stretched out her hand toward him. “I know it might seem unthinkable, but you might have to open your mind to something different than what you’ve always known.”

I wondered if all the fantasies the boys had about Miss Adams were shattered in that single moment. In the South, there were two unforgivable sins: speaking poorly of the Holy Spirit and being a liberal. I knew Miss Adams was different, but it wasn’t until that moment that I understood how different. Word would get around.

Miss Adams clapped her hands three times, and we fell quiet. She took a deep breath and pressed her palms together in front of her, as if poised to pray.

THE YEAR OF JUBILEE

Emoline Bluin raised her hand quickly.

“Yes, Emoline!” she spit out, letting her irritation show.

“My daddy says it’s because of the curse of Ham. You see, when Ham looked on his daddy Noah’s nakedness, God cursed him by turning his skin black. All the coloreds are descendants of Ham and are cursed just like he was and that is why they won’t ever be equals to the whites.”

Miss Adams tipped her head sideways, drilling her gaze into Emoline’s. Starting to speak, her voice caught in her throat and she had a small coughing episode. She reached desperately for the glass again, holding her index finger in the air to ask for a moment, and this time guzzled all of the water before responding.

“The proper term, Emoline, is *Negroes*, not *coloreds*. No offense to your daddy, but . . . that sounds like a justification to demean an entire race of people and ease his guilt over denying Negroes their constitutional and God-given rights.”

The room let out a gasp.

Emoline’s eyebrows scrunched together and her mouth gaped open; then she aimed her retaliation. “I don’t think you know who my daddy—”

The bell rang.

Even with the victory of the scathing last word, the message Miss Adams had hoped to convey had landed like a turd in a punch bowl. Most of the kids scrambled to their feet, leaving Miss Adams and her lofty ideas in the dust behind them.

She stood at the classroom door calling out goodbye, hopeful, maybe, that someone would look back. No one did. I felt bad for her.

I’d started to get up from my desk to go when Eli ran past me and tripped on his untied shoelaces. He fell to the ground and his shirt, which he looked to have outgrown in junior high, slipped halfway up his back and revealed a purple bruise the size of a man’s fist. He reached to shove the shirt back down as he got up, and I looked away so he wouldn’t think I’d seen the bruise.

“Are you okay, Eli?” Miss Adams asked.

“Y-y-y-yes.” And he rose quickly, running out of the room without tying his shoelaces.

This left only me and Miss Adams in the room.

“Grace, could I see you for a second?”

I gathered my things and walked over to her, my hands sweaty from the humidity.

She gazed out the door, deep in thought, and then asked me, “What did you think of what Emoline said?”

“Oh, I’ve heard that before, but my father thinks it’s bad theology.”

“Really? And your mother?”

I stared at her, unsure of how to even begin to explain the complexities of Virginia’s theology.

She shook her head from side to side. “It was a shame that our time together in class had to end like that.” Her gaze floated around the room, a look of disappointment piercing her eyes with a slash of gray. I longed to say something to make her feel better, but nothing came out.

Distracted, she reached into her desk drawer and pulled out a package wrapped in brown paper with a red string tied around it. She presented it to me. I carefully untied the string, and underneath the brown paper was a red journal with the outline of a bird on the cover. I heard a faint crack as I turned to the front page, blank except for what was written there:

Grace—

*Thank you for being such an engaged and curious student.
I think life holds many possibilities for you.*

*All the best,
Constance Adams*

Constance. I rolled her first name around in my mouth like a butter-scotch candy. I had never heard such a grand name, and I decided that

THE YEAR OF JUBILEE

it suited her perfectly. Then before I thought better, I wrapped my arms around her waist, smelling the faint whiff of gardenias. She laughed, startled by my affection, and put a gentle hand on my shoulder.

“Thank you.” The words stuck in my throat.

“I know how much you love reading, and I thought maybe you would enjoy writing down your own thoughts.”

“I’m gonna miss you.” I surprised myself by saying that out loud.

“I’ll miss you too. I’m sad I only had you for a little while, but I’d love to keep in touch. Let me know how you are?”

“Thank you again.” I hurried out, turning my face away from her to hide the unwelcome tears that were flooding my eyes.

I wiped them away and left out the front door, heading across the parking lot to the small, two-lane road that led to town. An uneven patch of ground tripped me up, but I managed to save myself from a nasty fall.

Instead of getting up immediately, I sat on the ground, replaying the moment with Miss Adams while I wiped the dirt and gravel from my clothes.

“You all right, Miss Grace?”

I looked up to see Miss Pearl, an older Negro lady who sold peaches out of the back of her truck along the highway across from school.

“Oh yes! Sorry, Miss Pearl. You caught me daydreaming.”

“Daydreaming is good for the mind,” she said, pointing her short dark finger to the side of her head. “Shows you got imagination. Wanna free peach?”

I was so thirsty, my mouth watered at the thought of it. I put the journal into my book bag, letting a truck pass, then crossed to her side of the road.

“Thank you, Miss Pearl. You’re sure it’s okay?”

“Yes, child. Take yo’ pick.”

I selected one that was ripe and ready for eating. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, child. You excited for summer?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I smiled. Miss Pearl had gentleness in her mannerisms, but her eyes glowed with fire. I wiped the trickle of sweat on my forehead with my sleeve.

“It sure is getting hot,” I said.

“Oh, that’s a fact. I melt down out here, but they say the sweat is good for your health, so I must be reeeeeeal healthy.”

She laughed, exposing a missing front tooth. She wore an oversize bright-colored cotton dress to match her colorful personality. The rolls around her middle jiggled and made the dress jump nervously to the rhythm of her laughter. In that moment, I wondered what it would be like to sit in Miss Pearl’s warm lap and let her motherly affection engulf me. Motherly affection was in short supply in my life.

I shook the thought loose.

“Miss Pearl, do you get hot sitting out here all day?”

“I reckon I do, child, but Mr. Oak here, he helps me out.” She pointed upward and gently took hold of a leaf from the low-hanging branch she was parked under. A slight breeze caught her dress and the leaves, making them both shiver for a moment. I fought a sudden burst of emotion at her gratitude for the simple gift of a shade tree.

I wondered how long I’d been standing here talking. Virginia got upset when I took too long to get home. “Thank you for the peach, Miss Pearl.”

“You welcome, baby. Be careful now; they some crazy people on this road.”

“I’m gonna take the trail through the woods and wade in the river all the way back to town.”

“A fine idea. I might dip my toe in the water after the school rush passes.”

I ran back across the road and headed for the trees. I took a bite out of the peach. It was sweet and tart and reminded me of the peach preserves Grandma Josie used to slather on the hot biscuits she made. The juice ran down my chin and onto my shirt, but I didn’t even care.

THE YEAR OF JUBILEE

The real world fell away as I floated into the woods. The long-armed branches reached across to embrace each other. The shimmering leaves gathered into a verdant canopy overhead. The ground was dappled with patches of gold and shadow. The covering ended abruptly, and the blistering afternoon sun raged again. I walked the few short steps to the bank of the river.

I imagined Miss Adams would love woods the way I did.

She wrote that my life held “many possibilities.” It made me feel proud—which concerned me.

Virginia said that you shouldn’t think on compliments long or else they would grow a seed of pride in your heart. You should think of yourself as being of little or no importance to God; then you would never be tempted to be proud, which to Virginia was a cardinal sin.

I allowed myself to hold Miss Adams’s words in my heart a few moments longer, taking my chances with God’s displeasure toward me. It was, after all, a familiar feeling.

I made my way along the edge of the river, peeling off my shoes and socks. My bare feet sizzled as I crept into the icy water, feeling the current rush over my toes. Small crawdads darted away as I got closer.

I winced as my tender skin found sharp rocks along the edge of the riverbank where it flowed underneath the bridge connecting to Main Street. It would never do for Virginia to hear that I had been walking around town like a barefoot hillbilly. I hopped from the riverbank to a small patch of grass and lay back on the soft green cushion, seeing a castle and a shark in the clouds before the wind blew them away. Reluctantly, I sat up to put on my shoes and socks then crossed over the bridge toward town.

As I turned onto Main Street, I saw two men going into the Green Parrot Café. One’s face was so black from coal soot I couldn’t make out who it was. The other was a man I knew—Tater Beggins, a pig farmer who made it a normal practice to wear his dirty coveralls into the diner. The smell of cow or pig manure, coal dust, and three-day-old

sweat wafting above the scent of burgers and fries was just an everyday occurrence.

Jubilee could be charming and even beautiful when the honeysuckle and dogwoods were in bloom. Tidy farms scattered with chickens, pigs, and cows dotted the outskirts of town. But about a half mile from the far end of Main Street was the eyesore—or the crown jewel, depending on how you saw it: KY Coal. Dust billowed from the large heaps of coal no matter the time of day.

Coal was as much a part of living in Kentucky in 1963 as fried chicken, corn bread, and buttermilk. It wasn't just the poor who worked the mines in Jubilee, it was anyone who had no means or desire to go to college or learn a trade or run a business. I looked into the window of the diner as I passed by. I saw Jerry Lawler, who had been a friend of Daddy's since they were kids. Jerry looked up, saw me, and waved. His teeth glistened like pearls against the coal soot that covered his face. Daddy told me that he and Jerry had worked their very first day together in the mines when they were just sixteen.

It was on that first day in the mines that Daddy discovered he had claustrophobia.

“Me and Jerry rode an elevator down into the earth, rattling and shaking, dropping deeper and deeper. We were looking at each other. I could tell he was scared like I was. I remember thinking that hell couldn't be much farther down.”

Daddy never went back. Jerry had been working there ever since.

I kept walking and thinking how glad I was that Daddy wasn't a miner. I had heard too many stories of men dying of black lung. But Daddy said the miners deserved our respect for the courage it takes to ride down that shaft every day.

Those black chunks were the fuel of life hauled in by the bucketful for fireplaces and coal stoves. Virginia had begged Daddy to have electric heat installed, but he said it was still too expensive for us. The dust covered everything with a fine black film no matter how often you dusted.

THE YEAR OF JUBILEE

But what I hated the most was the smell. It was in our clean clothes hanging out on the line and in our freshly washed hair. You couldn't get rid of it. But coal was just a part of life. When everyone smells like coal, nobody does, until someone comes along to tell you that you do.

There was certainly no need for burning coal in the sweltering heat of summer. I breathed in the wild, new freedom that only the first day of summer could bring. The air was rich with the smell of fried catfish and adventure. It was a magical feeling. I wanted to hold on to it as long as I could, so I was taking my time getting home. I knew that feeling would vanish the moment I stepped into the house.

Holding my red journal from Miss Adams against my chest, I knew there was no more stalling. I rounded the corner from town and turned onto my street.