



## ***Gordon Parks - BOOK REVIEW***

***The Learning Tree*** is Gordon Parks' autobiographical novel about his years growing up in Fort Scott, Kansas. Set during the 1920s, the book follows Newt Winger, Parks' alter ego, as he comes of age in a turbulent border community dealing with often frightening racial issues. The town, renamed Cherokee Flats for the novel, is divided geographically and socially by the railroad tracks, with well-to-do white folks on one side, and a few poor whites scattered amongst the black people living on the other.

Here Newt and his family encounter situations that are practically universal in the experience of African Americans in this country during the days before the civil rights movement: segregated movie theaters and restaurants; separate schools that are definitely not equal; the harm that can come to a black man for paying attention to a white woman; light-skinned African Americans who choose to "pass" as white for the advantages white skin provides.

Despite the social status (or lack thereof) assigned to them because they are black, the Winger family is upstanding and respected. Jack, the patriarch, is an honest, hard-working man, when he can get work. Although he has trouble expressing his love for his children, he is rock-solid, and everyone knows that he, and his word, can be depended upon. Newt's mother, Sarah, is the heart of the family. A strong woman who can handle her son-in-law without fear when he is in a gun-toting drunken rage, she is also the parent who dreams of a better life for her children, especially Newt. Sarah encourages Newt's love for learning, and tells him often that he can be whatever he wants to be, if he works hard enough.

Newt dreams, too, of a better life in a better place. He bristles at the daily indignities he suffers and, when he witnesses a murder, he is torn about whether to tell what he saw for fear of the racial explosion that may rock the town when the truth is known. Ultimately, Newt does the right thing, with his parents standing by him. In the process he learns for himself the lesson his mother imparts to him early in the book: "[Cherokee Flats] ain't a all-good place and it ain't a all-bad place. But you can learn just as much here about people and things as you can learn any place else...let it be your learnin' tree."