
They lost it at the movies

In Martha Southgate's new novel, three generations of women - an actress in blaxploitation flicks, her movie-fan mother and film-student daughter - connect on the silver screen

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THIRD GIRL FROM THE LEFT, by Martha Southgate. Houghton Mifflin, 272 pp., \$24.

Martha Southgate's vivid, spirited novel "Third Girl From the Left" is largely about families - not just the ones we're born into, but the ones we make for ourselves. But it's also about movies and the hold they can have on us, sometimes even despite our better judgment.

The book's most magnetic character, the heart-quickeningly beautiful Angela, leaves her stifling hometown of Tulsa, Okla., in 1972 for Hollywood, where she hopes to make it big in the movies. Instead, she makes it small in the movies, landing bit parts in assorted blaxploitation pictures - her credits include roles such as "Murder Victim #1" and "Junkie in Park" in movies such as "Blacula" and "Coffy."

Angela doesn't become a star, but the allure of movies has marked her for life, just as it did her mother, Mildred, and just as it will her daughter, Tamara. These three generations of women can't always communicate in real life, but they connect nonetheless in the dream universe that flickers by at 24 frames per second. Don't think for a minute, though, that this is just another squishy book about mother-daughter relationships: This is a novel in which the gorgeous and great '70s movie star Pam Grier has a walk-on role. (She even has a line: "You look good in that dress, girl. Too bad I gotta tear it.") It also details, with perspicuity and a refreshing lack of moral disapproval, an orgy at Wilt Chamberlain's infamous Los Angeles love pad. Entertaining, occasionally racy and moving when you least expect it to be, "Third Girl From the Left" is a book with blood in its veins.

Angela's story is the chief focus of the book, its complex, shining center, and Southgate deftly shifts points of view to weave the stories of Mildred and Tamara around it. Mildred is a dutiful wife and mother, the kind of woman who devotes her life to taking care of her husband and raising her kids right (she has three, of whom Angela is the youngest). As practical-minded as she is, though, she feels an anxious yearning that she doesn't really understand. And she's haunted by the horrific murder of her mother, who was shot in front of her during the 1921 Tulsa race riots when she was just a child.

Mildred tries hard to be a good mother, observing all the rituals of grooming - the hair straightening and braiding, the smoothing of the stiff white Sunday dresses - that impart to children, wordlessly, that they're loved. But Angela is a headstrong kid who grows into a willful teenager. And although Mildred sees more of herself in Angela than she cares to admit, the two clash. The only place they can find accord is in the movie theater - they see "Splendor in the Grass," "Carmen Jones," anything starring their favorite, Katharine Hepburn.

Angela sets her sights on becoming a movie star and leaves home, breaking her parents' hearts, at age 20. But after a few years struggling in L.A., Angela becomes pregnant. (The father isn't on the scene, but his relationship with Angela is one of the most beautifully played-out narratives in the book - Southgate takes care to portray him as a human being, not a sperm machine.) Angela's daughter, Tamara, is as bewildering to her as Angela had been to Mildred. But they, too, forge a connection through movies: Angela takes Tamara to see everything, regardless of appropriateness. Tamara sees "Raging Bull" at 5, which gives her nightmares for weeks. But this cinematic education also leads her to realize that she wants nothing more than to be a filmmaker: She scrimps and saves to put herself through New York University, leaving home to pursue a way of life that her mother doesn't really understand, just as Angela had done years before.

Southgate has a terrific ear for dialogue. When Tamara meets the fellow student who will eventually become her boyfriend, he introduces himself with the ultimate film-school geek line, one that also alludes to the fact that they're two African-American students in an otherwise very white milieu: "I'm Colin Walsh. Which 'Imitation of Life' do you like better? The Stahl or the Sirk?" The line is hilarious as a gentle send-up of film-school types, but Southgate allows the character to redeem himself a few paragraphs later. When Tamara concedes that she hasn't seen the first "Imitation of Life" but that she very much likes the Douglas Sirk remake, Colin confesses he likes that one better anyway: "You gotta give it up for Doug. That boy was all that and a bag of chips."

"Third Girl From the Left" isn't explicitly about issues of race - like all good novels, it's simply a story about people, who in this case happen to be African American. Even so, Southgate is sharply observant about the cultures and eras she's dealing with, particularly when it comes to blaxploitation filmmaking. She doesn't gloss over the reality that blaxploitation starlets often had to perform sexual favors for the men in power (who were, of course, for the most part white). But she also sees the era of blaxploitation filmmaking as one of intense excitement, at least for the brief time it lasted: "To look up in the theater and see yourself, no matter how manipulated and filmed and badly lit, and speaking crappy, unconvincing dialogue, to see yourself, to see your rage there for a minute - that was enough for a lot of folks." Southgate knows that the energy and brio of these movies can't be contained by anything so dully restrictive as political correctness.

There are times when Southgate works too hard to make her points - her efforts seem superfluous, because her characters have already told the whole story. The book's final pages, for example, offer a meditation on the beauty and power of black women in America, and a book this vital doesn't need that kind of tidy summation. But for the most

part, Southgate is perceptive enough to let her characters do the talking for her. In the book's most wonderful passage, Angela lounges in her crummy L.A. apartment with her roommate and closest friend, Sheila (the two will eventually become lovers, although they shudder at the idea of themselves as "dykes"). Angela and Sheila are young and great-looking; it's 1972, and amazing things should be happening for them. They have steady work as Playboy bunnies, but they wonder why their careers haven't taken off as they'd hoped.

Then Sheila notices a copy of Ebony on the coffee table. Inspired by a picture of Cicely Tyson on its cover, they impulsively decide to let their hair go "back." Too embarrassed to go to the barber shop, they shape each other's coifs using a pair of old clippers. Then they survey their reflection in the mirror, stunned by this new type of beauty they've brought out in each other. "I do believe you're an African queen," Sheila says to Angela. And then, partly to complete their new look and partly to burn off some of their excitement, they go shopping - even though they know deep down that they've already got the thing that money can't buy.

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