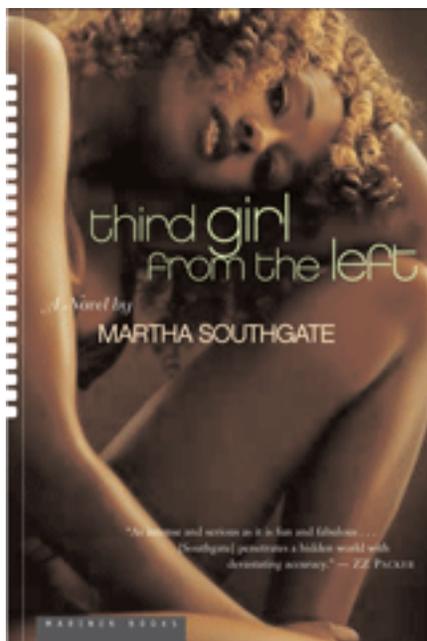


A Reader's Guide



Third Girl from the Left

by Martha Southgate

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"As intense and serious as it is fun and fabulous . . . [Southgate] penetrates a hidden world with devastating accuracy." — ZZ Packer

About the Book

At the center of this dazzling novel is Angela, a twenty-year-old beauty who leaves the stifling conformity of Oklahoma to search for fame during the rise of blaxploitation cinema in Los Angeles. But for her mother, Mildred, a straight-laced survivor of the 1921 Tulsa race riots, Angela's acting career is unforgivable, and the distance between them grows into a silence that lasts for years. It is only when Angela's daughter, Tamara, a filmmaker, sets out to close the rift between them that the women are forced to confront all that has been silenced and left unspoken in their lives.

Bold and beautifully written, *Third Girl from the Left* deftly explores the bonds of family and the inextricable pull of the movies.

"Erotic love, mother love, movie love: whatever form of desire she describes, Martha Southgate has come up with a voice to adore." — *Time Out New York*

About the Author

Martha Southgate has been an editor at *Essence*, a reporter for *Premiere* and the *New York Daily News*, and a contributor to the *New York Times*. She is the author of the critically acclaimed novel *The Fall of Rome*. She lives in Brooklyn, New York, and is at work on her next novel.

Questions for Discussion

We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and provide a deeper understanding of *Third Girl from the Left* for every reader.

- 1.** Movies play a central role in the lives of the characters in *Third Girl from the Left*. Mildred is an avid moviegoer, Angela moves to Los Angeles to pursue an acting career, and Tamara is a filmmaker. How does the author, Martha Southgate, individualize each character's relationship to film? What is it about the movies that brings the characters together, or drives them apart?
- 2.** Angela leaves Oklahoma in 1972 and sets out to find fame and success in Hollywood. How does leaving home shape her as a person and how does it affect her relationship with the family she left behind?
- 3.** Upon her arrival in Los Angeles, Angela discovers the difficulties of "becoming a star," along with the darker side of the movie business. Discuss the opportunities for African Americans in the Hollywood of the novel and in Hollywood today. How are they different? How are they similar?
- 4.** Though it is entirely fictional, *Third Girl from the Left* features cameo appearances from celebrities such as Pam Grier and Wilt Chamberlain. Do you think the inclusion of real people in fiction grounds the book in the real world? How do these characters inform your reading experience of the novel? Can you think of other novels that use this device? Why do you think a writer might make such a choice?
- 5.** One of the main themes of the book is the difficulty that mothers and daughters sometimes have in communicating. What are the similarities and differences in the relationships between Mildred and Angela? Angela and Tamara? How are their difficulties illustrated?
- 6.** How is the romantic and sexual relationship between Sheila and Angela affected by the time in which they live?
- 7.** Before Angela returns to Los Angeles her mother Mildred says to her, "I didn't raise you to die here. I'm glad you didn't hide." What does Mildred mean and how does this reflect her view of her own choices in life?
- 8.** The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 is a pivotal event in the life of Angela's mother, Mildred. How does this experience inform her actions as a parent?
- 9.** Martha Southgate has said that one of the main themes of her book is "the weight of history or lack thereof within a family." How does history influence the lives of the women of the novel?
- 10.** The title *Third Girl from the Left* refers to Angela's small role in the movie *Coffy*. What actions do Mildred, Angela, and Tamara take to avoid becoming the "third girl from the left" within their own lives?

- 11.** When Mildred ends her relationship with William, we learn that Mildred's husband, Johnny Lee, did not ask the identity of her lover, and William does not tell Mildred of his confrontation with Johnny Lee. Why do you think both Johnny Lee and William hide their knowledge of each other from Mildred?
- 12.** When Tamara arrives in Tulsa to meet her grandmother for the first time, she and Angela visit the memorial to those who died in the Tulsa riot. Tamara is surprised that Angela never told her about the riot. Why has Angela ignored this terrible event from her own mother's past?
- 13.** When speaking of William, Mildred tells Tamara, "Some people you meet, and some you recognize," prompting Tamara to think of her former boyfriend Colin. Is this also true of Angela's relationship with Rafe, or Angela's relationship with Sheila? Why?
- 14.** Why does Mildred choose to confide in her granddaughter, Tamara, instead of her own daughter, Angela?
- 15.** When asked by Tamara why Mildred never spoke of the Tulsa riot, Angela responds, "Sometimes it hurts too much to tell the truth." What other secrets are held by each of the characters? Are they kept secret to protect themselves or those they love?

Movies mentioned in the book

- [Sweet Smell of Success](#)
- [Coffy](#)
- [Cleopatra Jones](#)
- [Foxy Brown](#)
- [Carmen Jones](#)
- [Splendor in the Grass](#)
- [The Breakfast Club](#)
- [She's Gotta Have It](#)
- [The Lion in Winter](#)
- [Raging Bull](#)
- [An Officer and a Gentleman](#)
- [Imitation of Life](#) (1934)
- [Imitation of Life](#) (1959)