

"A beautifully crafted story rife with struggle, intrigue, and the sheer determination to achieve and hold on to the American dream with poise and dignity." —Sadeqa Johnson, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The House of Eve*

PEOPLE OF MEANS

A NOVEL

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NANCY JOHNSON



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Author of
THE KINDEST LIE

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR *PEOPLE OF MEANS*

1. The novel begins with 18-year-old Freda Gilroy's first days as a freshman on the campus of Fisk University in the fall of 1959. How do the expectations of her family back home in Chicago and the traditions of this esteemed institution influence her and ultimately complicate her decision-making regarding activism?
2. The specter of Black excellence hovers over the lives of all the characters. How does it shape the trajectories of Freda, Tulip, Gerald, Darius, and Key?
3. Gerald and Darius come from different backgrounds and worldviews. How do their respective differences force Freda to both question what she believes in and wrestle with the kind of life she wants? Did she choose wisely?
4. How do you think Gerald's encounter with Travis Lee changed his view of racism in America? Does it explain the choices he makes throughout the novel?
5. Cora and Evaline face the hardships of financial ruin and an unwanted pregnancy. How do their personal crises impact Freda and how she perceives the Black condition in America?
6. How did the hidden history about the Pullman Porters and Black entertainers shape your understanding of the heroes of the Civil Rights Movement?
7. In 1992 Chicago, Tulip must decide how to respond after the verdict in the Rodney King case. How does the legacy she inherits from her parents influence her choices?
8. Why do you think you Freda never shared the full story of her involvement in the Movement with Tulip? What do you think might have changed in Tulip's life if she had?
9. Why does Key's working-class upbringing make him skeptical about the effectiveness of protests against injustice?
10. How has your own definition of "people of means" evolved after reading this novel?

Four Questions for NANCY JOHNSON

What is *People of Means* about?

When you're Black in America and on a trajectory of success, so much is on the line. You can't make one mistake when you're already under scrutiny and your entire community is counting on you. But what happens when there's this movement for social change and you know how important it is to be on the side of what's right? That's what Freda had to face in the late '50s and early '60s when she was a college student at Fisk when the sit-ins started. She's young with so many family expectations on her back. She's torn over two men pulling her in different directions and she's torn between two very different ways of advancing her community.

Decades later, her daughter faces a similar dilemma: She's new on the job in 1992 when those four cops get acquitted for the beating of Rodney King. She wants to fight for justice but knows her career could be on the line.

You'll love all the tough choices these women have to make. And of course, there's a love triangle that will pull at your heartstrings. Familiar, famous names make cameos... like Nat King Cole, Rep. John Lewis, Rev. Jesse Jackson, and more.

Why did you write this book? What was your inspiration?

My inspiration usually starts with a question I'm wrangling with, often sparked by something in the news. First, there was the murder of George Floyd the summer of 2020. The level of passionate activism I witnessed among people of every race, ethnicity, gender, and background intrigued me. What made that moment different, unique, and galvanizing?

A few months later, the great Rep. John Lewis died. I watched a documentary about his life and was struck by his unwavering commitment to racial justice as a college student in Nashville, organizing sit-ins while also being part of college life. What was it like to change the course of history while studying for exams, dating, making friends, and trying to have a normal college life?

Personally, I often feel this pull toward activism, yet something holds me back. If I get involved, will I risk destroying this carefully constructed life I've built? Will I alienate those around me who see the world differently? There are moments in time, in history, when we're called to do something significant. Will we have the courage to step up and be a voice for change? That's what I wanted to explore. I wrote this book to challenge our thinking on that.

Why is the book important and timely for today's readers?

We often talk about what we would have done or how we would have acted if we had lived during the Civil Rights Movement or other times of great social change. It's easy to be righteous and noble in theory. But America is facing consequential times right now: the fight for women's health, voting rights, climate change, police reform, and so much more. Antisemitism and Islamophobia are rampant. The world needs courageous leaders more than ever. What will we do?

All the advances we fought for and won over the years feel like they're slipping away. 1960s Nashville looks an awful lot like America right now. Police violence against Black people was commonplace. Today, we're seeing similar abuses of power. That's why this book feels both timely and timeless.

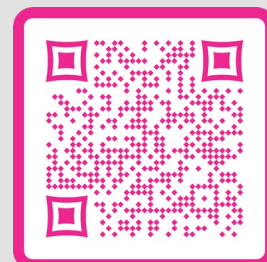
What are the main points you want the audience to take away from your book?

How far will we go to do what is right? We are living in consequential times. The stories of Freda and Tulip will hopefully hold a mirror up to all of us who wrestle with these decisions. The definition of success is pivotal in this book: What does it mean to be successful and is that determined by our parents, our community, societal expectations, or ourselves? The powerful pull of legacy is something I want readers to consider as well. It can lift and sustain you while also holding you back from following your own internal compass and life's purpose.

When people think of the Civil Rights Movement, many assume that most, if not all, Black folks were heavily involved in protests. That's not the case. Those were dangerous times and people worried for their own safety and that of loved ones. If you were Black and middle class, you might have preferred less confrontational, less controversial ways to resist. Your educational and professional ascent signaled upward mobility, and that was a key form of resistance.

Ultimately, I want readers to examine their own lives and consider how they will respond in times of great social change when it matters most. Will they get involved and use their voices for good or remain silent? What are the ramifications of those choices?

**LISTEN TO FREDA AND
TULIP'S FAVORITE SONGS**



MEET NANCY JOHNSON



A native of Chicago's South Side, Nancy Johnson worked for more than a decade as an Emmy-nominated, award-winning television journalist at CBS and ABC affiliates nationwide. A graduate of Northwestern University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, she lives in downtown Chicago and manages brand communications for a large nonprofit. Her first book, *The Kindest Lie*, was a Book of the Month Club selection and a Target Book Club pick.

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