

## About the author

In 1925, when she was 17, Dorothy West entered a short story contest sponsored by two magazines, *Crisis* and *Opportunity*, the publications, respectively, of the NAACP and the *Urban League*. Her story, "The Typewriter" (which appears in the recent collection of West's short work, *The Richer, the Poorer*) tied for second place with a story by Zora Neale Hurston. Her success with that story prompted West to move from Boston to New York and afforded her introductions to the leading writers and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance.

She continued to publish short stories through the 1920s and, in the early 1930s, accompanied Harlem Renaissance figures, including Langston Hughes, on a trip to the Soviet Union. On her return to the U.S., she founded *Challenge* magazine, hoping to offer a new outlet for black authors. Five issues of the journal were published and included work by West, Hughes, Hurston, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, and others. She moved to Martha's Vineyard in the 1940s, where she finished *The Living Is Easy* and worked for decades as a columnist for the *Vineyard Gazette*, contributing a variety of articles about black life on the island. Prompted by the success of the Feminist Press' reprint of *The Living Is Easy* in 1982, West resumed work on her second novel, *The Wedding*, which was published in 1995 to wide acclaim. Jacqueline Kennedy, then an editor at Doubleday, helped West secure a contract for the book. In 1998, Oprah Winfrey produced a television movie of *The Wedding*, starring Halle Berry, but the story was altered considerably, giving it an artificial happy ending and prompting critic John Leonard to describe it as "Soap Oprah." West died in 1998 in Boston at age 91.

## Discussion questions

1. Describe the roles of her parents in Cleo's life. Is the image she forms of Mama an illusion—something with which to justify Cleo's hijacking of her sisters—or is it an accurate reflection both of the woman herself and of her role in Cleo's childhood?

2. Discuss the party Cleo throws in honor of Dean Galloway and how the various guests and their points of view reflect the nature of the black middle class in Boston at the time. What roles do illusion and reality play in the proceedings?

3. Imagine Cleo's life after the novel ends? What will become of her?

## Further reading

Lorraine Hansberry. *A Raisin in the Sun*. Signet, 1958.  
Pauline E. Hopkins. *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South*. Oxford, 1991 (orig. pub. 1900).  
David Levering Lewis. *When Harlem Was in Vogue*. Knopf, 1981.  
Dorothy West. *The Richer, the Poorer: Stories, Sketches, and Reminiscences*. Bantam, Doubleday, 1995.  
Dorothy West. *The Wedding*. Doubleday, 1994.

***Soul of a People: Writing America's Story* is a major documentary television program about the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Writers' Project produced by Spark Media, a Washington, D.C.-based production and outreach company specializing in issues of social change. *Soul of a People* is being broadcast on the Smithsonian Channel HD (<http://www.smithsonianchannel.com>).**

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# SOUL OF A PEOPLE

## *Writing America's Story*

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# The Living is Easy

by Dorothy West

Discussion guide by Bill Ott

## Dorothy West and the Federal Writers' Project

In the 1930s, Dorothy West tried to launch several magazines to recapture the excitement and exploration of the Harlem Renaissance. Many of them, such as *Challenge* and *New Challenge*, failed after a few issues, but published some of that era's leading black writers, including Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, Richard Wright, and Langston Hughes. In the late 1930s, West worked as a welfare relief worker and witnessed with horror the living conditions of many black families, an experience she distilled into a short story, "Mammy." In 1940 West took a job on the Writer's Project. While there she wrote more stories, none of them published, until she began working for the *New York Daily News* later in 1940.

—David A. Taylor, co-writer and co-producer, *Soul of a People: Writing America's Story*

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Dorothy West's first novel, *The Living Is Easy*, was published when she was 41, in 1948. Her writing career, however, began much earlier. The daughter of two former slaves, West received a privileged, bourgeois upbringing in Boston and exhibited literary talent as a child, writing her first short story at age seven. After winning numerous writing contests, she moved to New York in the mid-1920s and became acquainted with many of the leading figures in the Harlem Renaissance, including Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes. She continued to write stories for the next 20 years, but in the mid-1940s she moved from New York to Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts, on Martha's Vineyard, where she completed *The Living Is Easy*.

Like Judy Judson, daughter of the indomitable Cleo in West's partially autobiographical novel, West grew up in a four-story house in Boston, where she lived with an extended family that included many of her mother's siblings and their children. West's father, Isaac Christopher Smith, a successful fruit and vegetable wholesaler known as the "Black Banana King," was the obvious model for Cleo's husband, Bart, in the novel. *The Living Is Easy*, however, goes well beyond its autobiographical framework to explore the racial, psychological, and interpersonal tensions that lurk below the surface of upward mobility.

The main action in *The Living Is Easy* takes place just before World War I, barely 50 years after the end of the Civil War. That there was already a growing middle class of African Americans in Boston at that time is fascinating simply as a demographic phenomenon, but West's focus is on individual lives and, in particular, on the life of Cleo Judson, who seems, as the story begins, on the verge of realizing all her dreams. She has escaped the poverty and blatant racism of the South and is ensconced in relative ease and comfort in Boston, married to a successful businessman who has just "cornered the banana market." Easily manipulating her older, conservative husband, Cleo has arranged for her family to move from the south side of Boston to Brookline, where the most affluent black people live alongside whites. West explains Cleo's desire to move:

***"The nicer colored people, preceded by a similar class of whites, were moving out of the South End, so prophetically named with this influx of black cotton-belters. For years these northern Negroes had lived next door to white neighbors and taken pride in the proximity. They viewed their southern brothers with alarm, and scattered all over the city and its suburbs to escape this plague of their own locusts."***

And yet, despite Cleo's unbridled ambition to improve her station in life, there is a part of her that yearns to return to the South of her childhood, when "the wildness was in her, the unrestrained joy, the desire to run to the edge of the world and fling her arms around the sun, and rise with it, through time and space to the center of everywhere." In Cleo's mind, to recapture the free spirit that defined her childhood—and to reestablish a connection with her dead mother—she needs only to find a way to bring her three sisters and their children to Boston, where they could enjoy the comforts of the middle class and fling their arms around the sun whenever they felt like it. West is careful to explain that Cleo's sisters are only a means to an end:

***"Her yearning for her sisters was greater than her concern for them. All of her backward looks were toward the spellbinding South. The rich remembering threw a veil of lovely illusion over her childhood. Her sisters, with their look of Mama, would help her keep that illusion alive. She could no longer live without them. They were the veins and sinew of her heart."***

West skillfully portrays Cleo neither as altogether sympathetic nor as thoroughly despicable. We despise the selfish trickery she employs to wrest her sisters from their husbands and shepherd them north, burning their bridges as she goes, but on the other hand, we understand both her yearning for the intimacy of her childhood and her need to inject some of her mama's warmth into the frigid life she has made for herself in Boston.

Social climbing, in whatever context, is an exhausting pursuit, and for Cleo, it is especially demanding, as she must climb so many ladders simultaneously: racial, cultural, financial, behavioral. We admire her stamina as we abhor her ruthlessness and egotism, but most of all we see clearly what she can only glimpse: to reach the top of her multiple ladders is to lose the best part of herself. Or, as West puts it: "You really had to love Bostonians to like them. And the part of Cleo that did love them was continually at war with the part of her that preferred the salt flavor of lusty laughter."

One of the most fascinating aspects of Cleo's character is the way her single-minded determination to improve her lot in life makes her almost blind to the racism that surrounds her. Cleo despises all who hold her back, both black and white—she defiantly tells her husband that she "wasn't born to lick the boots of anybody living"—but she has no time for racial politics, which she sees as just another obstacle in her way, another barricade standing between her and the Emerald City.

To inject the theme of racial unrest into her story, West must turn to her supporting cast and, in particular, to the character of Simeon Binney, who was based on Monroe Trotter, the real-life editor of the *Boston Guardian*. The son of a black doctor who moved from Boston to Cambridge to "avoid the rapid encroachment of Negroes," Binney is a Harvard graduate who, much to the disgust of his father, publishes a radical newspaper that argues for equality of the races. Yet, Binney, too, in an attempt to help his sister, finds himself entrapped in the world of social-climbing blacks. As she does with Cleo, West portrays Binney with subtlety and ambiguity. He functions effectively as a harbinger of the racial conflict to come, in Boston and elsewhere, and his story reminds us that the comfort achieved by a few blacks in the Boston of the early 20th century was as secure as a house of cards, easy prey for the racism that swirled about it. On the other hand, West also shows Binney's naiveté and his blindness to the forces that have made the Cleos of the world who they are.

It is particularly appropriate that the publisher who thought to reprint West's novel in 1982, and thus to introduce it to an entirely new generation of readers, was the Feminist Press. In many ways, Cleo may be a victim of dreaming the wrong dreams, but the vigor with which she pursues her goals and the indomitable spirit that drives her quest give her character and her story an undeniable feminist slant. Cleo belongs in the tradition of Becky Sharp, the equally indomitable and equally wrong-headed heroine of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. Just as we recognize that the Victorian society life Becky lusts for is unworthy of her spirit, so we find ourselves dreaming grander dreams for Cleo, dreams that don't force her to turn her back on so much of herself in exchange for material comfort.

Like Mama Younger in Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun*, Cleo dreams of escaping the old neighborhood, but Mama, unlike Cleo, manages to move ahead without sacrificing her capacity for warmth and tenderness. Too human to be either a role model or a villain, Cleo pulses with the complexities of African American life. Like Edward P. Jones in *The Known World*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel about slave-owning blacks in the antebellum South, West opens our eyes to a little-known era in black history, but in the process of doing so, she gives us a heroine who speaks to women of every race and from every era.