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# FRESHWATER ROAD

*a novel*

DENISE NICHOLAS

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# Freshwater Road



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1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

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Originally published in hardcover in 2005 by Agate Publishing, Inc.

Published by arrangement with Agate Publishing, Inc.

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ISBN-13: 978-1-4165-2482-3

ISBN-10: 1-4165-2482-7

This Pocket Books trade paperback edition September 2006

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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1. To learn more about the history of Freedom Summer, the goals of volunteers active in the movement, and the seemingly insurmountable challenges they faced, visit: [http://www.core-online.org/history/freedom\\_summer.htm](http://www.core-online.org/history/freedom_summer.htm)
2. To see moving black-and-white images of some of the thousands of volunteers who dedicated their energy to the causes of Freedom Summer like Celeste Tyree in *Freshwater Road*, visit: <http://198.170.117.226/images/imgfs.htm>
3. Did the descriptions of Geneva Owens's southern cooking make your mouth water? If you'd like to try your hand at making some Mississippi specialties, visit: [http://www.class-brain.com/artstate/publish/mississippi\\_recipes.shtml](http://www.class-brain.com/artstate/publish/mississippi_recipes.shtml)

**Acclaim for Denise Nicholas and**  
***FRESHWATER ROAD***

“A first-time novelist best known as a television actress . . . Nicholas rises to [the challenge of writing about the civil rights movement] better than most literary veterans. While she comes to the book with her [own] memories . . . she has delivered something infinitely richer and more artistically satisfying than a veiled memoir. She has found the human complexity within the overarching passion play. . . . It is impossible to praise *Freshwater Road* too much.”

—*The Washington Post*

“This magnificent work . . . was unconscionably overlooked by many book-review sections. It deserves not only accolades, but a large, avid readership.”

—*Newsday*, Best of 2005 Round-up

“What a wonderful surprise Denise Nicholas’s first novel is. Her textured characters unfold against the background of an historic encounter that was destined to change America forever.”

—Sidney Poitier

“Denise Nicholas brings alive all the textures, colors and emotions of the civil rights movement during the perilous adventure that was Freedom Summer.”

—Janet Fitch, author of *White Oleander*

"A sensitive and absorbing story of a young woman coming of age emotionally and racially."

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"Extraordinary. . . . Impassioned prose, full-blooded characters, and rich feeling."

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—*Essence*

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—*Time Out Chicago*

"Vividly depicts the cost of activism . . . Nicholas has a genuine way with words, a keen grasp of visual and emotional metaphor, and the novel illuminates the internal consequences of institutionalized racism and the often suppressed connections between South and North."

—*Chicago Tribune*

"Accomplished. . . . Nicholas appears poised to have an equally successful second career as a novelist."

—*Chicago Reader*

“Vivid, intricate, and powerful; a book that will make you squirm with discomfort and dread, breathe with relief, then gasp with outrage. The characters in this book are so real and the events of that Mississippi summer are so well described that I almost felt like I was reading a history book instead of a novel. Pick up a copy of this incredible book. If you ask me what one novel to read this winter, *Freshwater Road* gets my vote.”

—Terri Schlichenmeyer, syndicated columnist

*In Memoriam*



*Otto Nicholas, Sr.  
and Michele Burgen*

*“History claims everybody,  
whether they know it or not,  
and whether they like it or not.”*

PHILLIP ROTH

*New York Times*, September 2004

# Freshwater Road



# 1



Out of Memphis with night drawing up thick to the windows, Celeste felt the air pressing down. She'd dressed in a gabardine jumper and a long-sleeved blouse against the lingering cool of a June Ann Arbor morning. Now, her clothes weighed on her like a damp blanket. She closed her eyes. Before sunset, the trees had segued to a double-dyed richness of color and the loamy soil had turned blood-rust. Soft-talking voices of the train passengers mutated from the flat singsong of the Midwest to the sloping drawls of the deep South. She shuddered, remembering a life she'd never lived, then laughed at the irony. Every Negro in America had a nightmare of Mississippi, of dying in the clutches of a hatred so deep it spoke in tongues.

The conductor, a tall square-jawed dark-skinned man, his upper body leaning into the car as if primed to run in the other direction, called out, "Senatobia." He clanged the metal door closed. Earlier, he'd walked the aisle swaying with the train, announcing the names of towns, his resonant voice a clarion call to freedom. He nodded to her quiet self, scrunched in her corner, a map of the Southern states spread on the seat next to her. The mimeographed sheets from One Man, One Vote blared out in

bold type, "How to Stay Alive in Mississippi." He knew why she was on this train.

She peered through the dirty window when he poked his head into the car and called out, "Sardis." Not a soul on the platform. They barely stopped. The train lurched forward, slow-waddling south.

*Sardis. Senatobia.* Idyllic names. She checked her map.

"Grenada." What's he saying? An island paradise in the Caribbean with long, sun-drenched beaches and fountains splashing cool water on lush flowers? A quick glance to her. Why does he duck his head in and out like he's hiding in a closet? His eyes are like black marbles in the murky train light.

Saliva had pooled in the corner of her mouth by the time he called out, "Vaughan." At the soft edge of sleep, Celeste dreamed of Negroes darting their ghostly selves like wild children playing hide-and-go-seek. The conductor peeked from behind a tree. She forgot completely where she was going and why. When he called out "Canton," her stomach growled in yearning for Chinese food at one of Shuck's stops in Detroit. Egg foo yung, shrimp in oyster sauce, sweet and sour pork. Shuck's diamond pinkie ring sparkled against his brown skin in the neon light as he held the white carry-out bags away from his camel hair coat.

In the foggy back hollow of her surface doze, a new voice calls out, "Jack-son, Miss'sippi." *Miss Sippi lives down the street.* She longs to sleep past her ticketed stop, but can't escape the appalling pictures of hunted people scattering behind her eyes. "Jack-son." When the train braked with a low howl and a long screech, she woke fully, gagging on the oily aftertaste of a Memphis ham sandwich, remembering Momma Bessie's warning that pork dreams were always nightmares.

By the time The City of New Orleans Limited rolled into the Jackson station, Celeste had been slouching upright on a worn-down seat for more than twelve hours. Counting the night trip from Ann Arbor to Chicago and the hard wait at the station

there, it was closer to twenty-four. No sign of that conductor. Maybe he'd never been there at all. She hoisted her green canvas book bag onto her shoulder by the strap, wrestled her suitcase from behind the last row of seats, and stepped down to the platform. She took off toward the lobby, her suitcase banging her side, her book bag bouncing against her back.

When a rich, low voice called out, "Suh, lemme git dat fa ya, suh." Then, "Ma'am, I got dat, ma'am," Celeste turned to see a Negro porter bowing, grinning, and grabbing suitcases in one fluid intonation of the past. The porter caught her gape-mouthed stare, rolled his eyes, then flashed his pearly whites at the white passengers and continued his work. Ah, she thought, this was the real deal. Mississippi had to be the birthplace of the grovel, hand-maiden to the blues, the crown jewel in the system of slavery, the kick-down place.

Celeste walked faster, her thighs chafing in the swollen heat, blessing her gym shoes with every step she took. She whizzed by lacquer-haired women wearing outdated sundresses and cigar chomping men. Out of the corners of their eyes came slices of stares, sharp as razor blades, which seemed to say, "I know why you're here, and you better go on home where you belong." The cigar smoke irritated her nose. At the end of her train, the dark well of soot-covered tracks disappeared into a pitch-black tunnel. She hurried on.

Under the yellowish glare of bare fluorescent tubes, just off the central waiting lobby of the station, Celeste came face-to-face with the first *Whites Only* sign she had ever seen in her life. She stared at the sign tacked to the ladies' room door, its letters hand-printed and uneven. She needed to go to the bathroom. A blush warmed her ears and acids grumbled her stomach. She surveyed the nearly deserted lobby, the stragglers from her train passing through to the street and a few bag-toting travelers loitering about, smoking. No signs pointing the way to the Negro rest-rooms. Anger tightened her jaws. The pressure in her bladder

grew. It had been a long time since the rest stop in Memphis. Just then, another Negro woman, colorful scarf over a head of rollers, suitcase and bags beating her body, pushed herself, back first, into the ladies' room as if that sign were not there. Celeste followed her in, afraid to turn around to see if anyone noticed.

The woman moved fast, shoving her things under a washbowl and then ducking into a stall. Celeste did the same. Squatted over the dirty toilet, panties down, she imagined being grabbed by the ankles from under the door. Her mind snapped to the television news film she'd seen of young people, Negro and white, yanked off buses and beaten until blood flowed down their faces. *Whites Only* signs flashed like backdrops to a bloodletting. Two minutes off the train and here she was already breaking the law. Her imagination ran on full. But this was real. Her father, Shuck, used to say she had good book sense and not too much of the other. She heard the woman flush and exit the stall. She took deep breaths, pulled the flush chain, and came out into the glass-hard light of the bathroom.

Celeste eyed the ladies' room door, anxious to wash her hands and be on her way. "Is it okay to be in here?" She and the hair-rolled woman were co-conspirators. There was comfort in the assumed comradeship. At least she wasn't alone. They were *in* the *Whites Only* bathroom, had already *used* it. She had a story to tell, and she hadn't even gotten to the One Man, One Vote office.

The woman glanced at her sideways, digging in one of her bags, standing in front of the scum-pocked mirror. "Okay by *who*?" Her round eyes protruded slightly just above full cinnamon-brown cheeks. "Where *you* from?" Her head lurched back then settled as she worked on herself, her bag heaving up a comb and brush, toothpaste, a box of powder, a frayed puff, lipstick, rouge.

"Detroit." Negro people from the South favored the city of Detroit, that mystical blue-collar heaven of jobs. Shuck and Momma Bessie both did a lot of fussing about Negroes *still* coming up from the deep South searching for jobs that no longer existed, running the city services down the drain simply by the

press of their numbers and needs. Celeste plunged soap containers along the line of washbowls. They were all empty. Still, she rejoiced at rolling up her long sleeves to the elbows and getting that fabric off her damp skin.

"Detroit, uh?" The woman smiled a knowing smile, as if honoring Celeste with a good check mark. "Chile, nobody pays that sign no mind no more. Course now, *white* ladies stopped coming in here." She indicated the overflowing trash receptacle, the dirty mirror and basins. "The law says we *can* come in here, it don't say they *have* to come in here." She squinted in the mirror.

Celeste took it in, trying to grasp the logic. "Where do *they* go?" She saw long corridors of bathrooms with color-coded signs, some white, some Negro, some integrated, and some unmarked. Wrong door, bad news. Maybe they gave their old ladies' rooms to Negroes and built spanking brand-new ones for themselves, left the signs up to confuse everyone. How long could they do that?

"I don't give a damn *where* they go." The woman applied her makeup as she talked, manicured nails glowing fuchsia. Then her deft hands quickly removed hair rollers. She brushed her hair, then applied rouge and powder to her face. "Those signs were down 'til the white folks got word about this Freedom Summer thing." She glanced at Celeste with a suspicious narrowing of her eyes, then coughed. She took a plug of toothpaste on her finger, rubbed it on her teeth, bent to get a swig of water from the faucet, gargled, then spat the residue in the bowl.

Celeste, remembering the instruction from One Man, One Vote about announcing to strangers her reasons for being in the South, rinsed her hands under the warm water, splashed some on her face, and volunteered nothing. No way to know who might run straight to the local police, the Klan, or some other enemy. Too late she discovered the paper towel dispenser was empty, too. "You from Jackson?"

"Mound Bayou." The woman paused. "Ever hear of it?"

"No." Celeste stood there dripping.

"It's a all-colored town, north of here. Bolivar County. Ain't nothin' up there but a post office and a lot of mud. But it's ours."

Wouldn't be long before Detroit was an all-colored town, too, if you listened to Shuck and Momma Bessie. Shuck always had a story about some white business or another moving to the suburbs. Still, she thought, she might like to go to Mound Bayou, see it for herself. She'd never realized how Negro Detroit was until she arrived in nearly all-white Ann Arbor. She'd missed Detroit in her bones that first semester and ran home every weekend—until she met J.D. That ended the trips home; Shuck didn't take to her dating a white guy, and he let her know it in no uncertain terms.

"You can't stay in Mound Bayou too long. Sure to lose your mind." The woman laughed. "Somebody like you, from way up there in Detroit and all, you sure to God would forfeit your mind."

The woman made Detroit sound like it was all the way to Hudson Bay, Canada.

Celeste chuckled and got a good look at her own tired face in the mirror.

"They got other ones. Different places in the South." The woman packed her things, took off her flats and slipped on pink pumps, shoved the flats into one of her bags. "Don't want to miss my train. Going to New Orleans for a few days. Get out of Mississippi for a minute. Catch my breath." She headed for the door, high heels clicking on the dirty tile floor. "Always wanted to go to Detroit. Get me one of them jobs at Ford's Motor Car Company."

Celeste might have told her that those jobs were now as rare as gold nuggets in a well-panned stream. She took one last glance at her sallow, travel-weary face in the mirror. Her shoulder length hair had risen to its peak of fullness and become a frizzled helmet of curls, waves, and flyaway strands. Her gray-green eyes had re-

ceded under heavy dark brows, sunk in pits of fatigue. Her lips needed color. She needed color. Whatever makeup she'd had on when she began her journey lived now on the small train pillow she'd left on her seat. She grabbed her suitcase and book bag and followed the woman to the door. Didn't want to be in that *Whites Only* ladies' room alone, whether anybody paid the sign any attention or not. It was still up there.

The woman bumped half way out then turned back, her face primed and ready. "What's your name, girl?"

"Celeste Tyree."

"I'm Mary Evans. Pleased to meet you. You ever been in Mississippi before?" She had a dubious look on her face as she appraised Celeste.

"No. First time. First time in the South." Even in her fatigue, Celeste's face pressed forward with expectation and fear.

"Well, let me tell you something. You be careful, girl, you hear. Mississippi ain't nothin' to play with." She lowered her voice for the last of it, eyes doing a fast flit around the lobby. "You have a nice stay, now, you hear?"

"Thank you." Celeste angled out the door checking for any hard-eyed men in uniform with billy clubs, cattle prods, snarling dogs. "Have a good time in New Orleans."

"Sure to do that. It's a good-time place." The woman sang the words as she fast-walked away, her pink pumps gleaming in the dingy, yellow-lit station.

Celeste figured the woman had guessed why she was there by the way she'd looked at her, sizing her up. But she'd said nothing. Knew better than to venture into that conversation. She checked again for enemies in uniform then bounded across the emptying lobby, through the double glass doors into the dank air of a June Mississippi night.

A sparse parade of cars moved slowly up and down the street. In her rising confusion, she considered trying to hitch a ride. How far could it be? *Not here*. Across the way were closed stores,