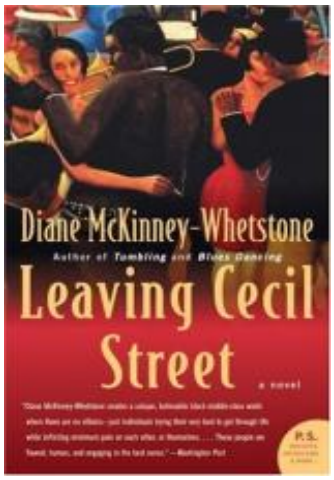
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Leaving Cecil Street: A Novel

by Diane McKinney-Whetstone



About the Book

It is 1969 and Cecil Street is "feeling some kind of way" so the residents decide to have two block parties. Joe, a long-ago sax player has turned his eye across the street to a newly-arrived young southern beauty even as he is suddenly haunted by memories of his horn-playing nights and his affection for a shy, soft hooker from years ago. Joe's wife Louise, a licensed practical nurse, is losing her teeth to gum disease and losing her happiness because of Joe's wandering attention. Their teenaged daughter Shay is consumed with helping her best friend and next-door neighbor Neet who has gotten pregnant by a corner boy. And Neet's mother Alberta is shunned by the block because of her immersion in a religion that has no name. As the novel opens the first block party has ended and a naked woman has secretly taken up residence in Joe and Louise's cellar.

McKinney-Whetstone's superb gift for language and storytelling, for crafting scenes that leave the reader breathless, for distilling a complex of human emotion in a well-turned phrase are on full display here. She portrays the community, the times with precision and compassion in an unforgettable story that gets under the skin. As the novel builds to the second block party, the past becomes as immediate as the present, condemnable acts become righteous, and what is tragic is also filled with hope.

Discussion Guide

1. To what extent do the men in **Leaving Cecil Street** -- Joe, Little Freddie, and the Corner Boys -- use music to seek redemption for their sins and failures? Unlike Alberta's desperate need to be forgiven by her church elders, how does their music teach them to express their remorse and to forgive themselves? How does it give them newfound strength?

2. How did Alberta's religious convictions -- both intentionally and unintentionally -- cast a long shadow over her daughter's childhood and adolescence? How did Alberta ultimately come to realize what her devout faith had cost her daughter? Do you think that Neet will be able to overcome the trauma of her past? Will she be able to believe again in

her own goodness?

3. The decay of Louise's teeth due to her fear of dentists, in some ways mirrored the dissolution of her marriage due to her fear that Joe would abandon her for another woman. How was Louise imprisoned by her fear of her imagined thoughts? What role did her long-ago decision to deny him his saxophone play in his ultimate decision to stray from her? Are you able to forgive Joe's infidelities?

4. What elements did you feel helped McKinney-Whetstone's to capture a lost time and place? What products, games, or images do you associate with life on Cecil Street? What slang or language best encapsulated the rhythm of the block? If you were to draw a picture of Cecil Street, what would be the enduring image from the novel that you would select?

5. What do you think possessed Sondra to want to perform Neet's abortion -- was her intent simply to help Neet? Or do you think she was driven by her desire to have money to spend at Sonny's or was her motivation her determination to put into practice the techniques she believed that she had mastered by observing her mother? How much responsibility did you think that she should bear for what happened to Neet?

6. How was Louise's private pain soothed by taking care of Deucie? How did caring for her in Deucie's dying hour allow Louise to finally grieve the loss of her own mother? How was Louise able to at long last "tell Mother good-bye" -- in a way that she could not as a "little girl, only ten"?

7. **Leaving Cecil Street** is told through a kaleidoscopic, constantly shifting point of view. What do you think of this technique? Did it enhance the story, or would you have preferred the use of an omniscient narrator?

8. We find out late in the novel that Joe and Alberta had known each other intimately when Alberta was forced to work as a prostitute and Joe was her john. How would you describe their relationship throughout the story? How did this recast your impression of their earlier interaction in the novel?

9. Do you think Deucie's presence on the block was a catalyst for change? If so, in what way?

10. Discuss the significance of the title **Leaving Cecil Street**. Why do you think McKinney Whetstone chose this title? Is there any other title that you would suggest for the novel?

11. What did Alberta gain by living in such close proximity to her former lover? What do you believe was her true motivation for asking Brownie to move to Cecil Street? If Joe had married "C.", instead of Louise, do you think that they would have been able to find happiness together, or would Alberta's troubled past have haunted their relationship?

12. Why was unwavering loyalty to one another so important to the residents of Cecil Street -- especially in the hours after Neet's failed abortion? How did McKinney Whetstone capture this sense of collective pride and community identity?

13. Discuss the line at the conclusion of the novel that stated: "Though Alberta left Cecil Street that night, this time Cecil Street didn't leave her." What deeper meaning might this line have about the woman Alberta was on the verge of becoming?

14. What do you think the future held for the residents of Cecil Street? Was there a character or characters that you would like to revisit in another novel, or do you believe that their spirits were meant solely for **Leaving Cecil Street** and the reader's own imagination?

Author Bio

Diane McKinney-Whetstone is the author of the national bestseller**Tumbling**. A native of Philadelphia whose father served two terms as a Pennsylvania stare senator, she grew up in a close-knit family with five sisters and one brother, attending public schools and graduating from the University of Pennsylvania in 1975 with a bachelor's degree in English. She is a regular contributor to *Philadelphia Magazine* and her work has appeared in *Essence* and the *Sunday Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine;* She has received numerous awards, including a Pennsylvania Council on the Arts grant, Discipline Winner in the Pew Fellowship on the Arts, the Zora Neale flurston Society Award for creative contribution to litera-ture, a Citation from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania for her portrayal of urban family life as presented in **Tumbling**, Author of the Year Award from the national Go On Girl Book Club, and more. She has participated regularly in the intensive Rittenhouse Writer's Workshops and reaches fiction writing at her alma mater, the University of Pennsylvania. She lives with her husband, Greg, and teenage twins outside Philadelphia.

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