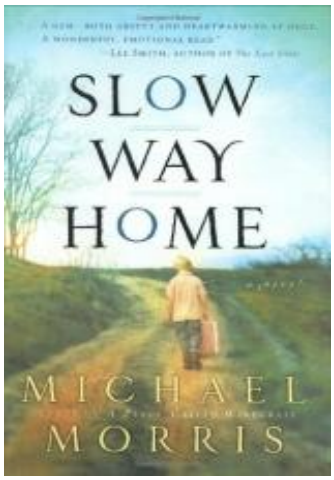
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Slow Way Home: A Novel

by Michael Morris



About the Book

On the surface, Brandon Willard seems like your average eight-year-old boy. He loves his mama, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and G. I. Joe. But Brandon's life is anything but typical.

Wise beyond his years, Brandon understands he's the only one in this world he can count on. It's an outlook that serves him well the day his mama leaves him behind at the Raleigh bus station and sets off to Canada with "her destiny" -- the latest man that she hopes will bring her happiness. The day his mother leaves, Brandon takes the first step toward shaping his own destiny. Soon he sends himself spending pleasant days playing with his cousins on his grandparents' farm and trying to forget the past. In the safety of that place, Brandon finally is able to trust the love of an adult to help iron out the wiry places until his nerves are as steady as any other boy's.

But when Sophie Willard shows up a year later with a determined look in her eye and a new man in tow, Brandon's grandparents ignore a judge's ruling and flee the state with Brandon. Creating a new life and identity in a small Florida town, Brandon meets the people who will fill him with self-worth and self-respect. He slowly becomes involved with "God's Hospital," a church run by the gregarious Sister Delores, a woman who is committed to a life of service for all members of the community, black and white, regardless of some townsfolk's disapproval.

Discussion Guide

1. Brandon Willard longs for a close-knit extended family, and yet it is the people in the community who become his key allies. Do you have people outside of blood relatives you consider to be "family"?

2. Slow Way Home addresses custodial rights of grandparents. Should grandparents have a legal right for custody of their grandchildren? What are your feelings about the legal system upholding custodial rights of parents when abuse or abandonment are involved?

3. Throughout the novel, Brandon is searching for a place to call home. Do you think he ever found it? What is your definition of home?

4. Sophie, Brandon's mother, repeatedly tells Brandon that she loves him. How do you think Sophie would describe love? What obstacles do you think the "working poor" have today as single parents?

5. Do you think that Brandon's grandparents, Pearl and A.B., fled with Brandon to protect him or to satisfy the guilt over their failure with Sophie? Do Pearl and A.B. ever come to terms with their past mistakes? Does Brandon help Sophie come to terms with her own past?

6. How does Sister Delores's church in Abbeville differ from Brother Bradley's church in Raleigh? How did Pearl come to terms with the crisis in her faith?

7. Why did Brandon's friend Beau need to gain acceptance from Mama Rose and her son Alvin? Did Beau ever come to terms with Alvin's role in burning God's Hospital?

8. Racism is portrayed in the novel as both overt, such as Alvin's role in the Ku Klux Klan, and hidden, as in the case with A.B.'s concern about Brandon attending a minority church. What changed A.B.'s attitude toward Sister Delores? Which type of racism do you see in your own community?

9. When Sister Delores visits Brandon at the foster home he tries to kiss her, but she pulls away from him and cautiously watches the neighbor across the street. Why do you think Sister Delores responded in such a manner?

10. When Brandon goes to live with Gina Strickland, he enters a world he has never known, one of wealth and privilege. In what ways did Brandon help Gina come to terms with her own past?

11. Gina Strickland joins forces with Brandon's attorney, Nairobi, and together they lobby to reduce Pearl and A.B.'s sentences. What long-term effects do you believe this allegiance had on Gina's politics? How would you describe Nairobi's relationship with Brandon given the issue of race and the culture of the early 1970s?

12. Winston and Brandon first meet at a party manners school hosted by an aging socialite. What impact did this training have on Brandon? Do you think such a school was part of the Old South or do you believe the formal training still has a place in today's society regardless of region?

13. Esther, Gina Strickland's longtime housekeeper, is extremely allegiant to Gina's welfare. Do you think the relationship went beyond that of class structure, or was it merely based on the way Esther viewed her job as caretaker? How would you describe Esther's relationship with Gina?

14. At the end of the novel, what do you think will happen to the section of the farm that Brandon purchased? Where do you envision him taking Pearl?

15. According to the latest census, 2.5 million grandparents are raising grandchildren in the United States. What are some of the benefits that such a household can provide? Are there drawbacks to grandparents raising their grandchildren? What type of impact does this have on the children, the grandparents, and the community in general?

Author Bio

Michael Morris is a Southern Book Critics Award finalist whose work has been compared to Harper Lee and Flannery O'Conner by the *Washington Post*. His debut novel, A PLACE CALLED WIREGRASS, won a Christy Award and was named an Indie Next List Great Read. His second novel, SLOW WAY HOME, was nationally ranked as one of the top three recommended books by the same organization and named one of the best novels of the year by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Michael is also the author of a novella based on the Grammy-nominated song, *Live Like You Were Dying*, and his work has appeared in Sonny Brewer's STORIES FROM THE BLUE MOON CAFE II and in NOT SAFE, BUT GOOD II, an anthology edited by Bret Lott. A graduate of Auburn University, Michael also holds an MFA in creative writing from Spaulding University. He lives in Alabama with his wife, Melanie. Visit him online at www.michaelmorrisbooks.com.

Critical Praise

"Morris excels in creating the child's voice.... an inspiring portrait of a true survivor."

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