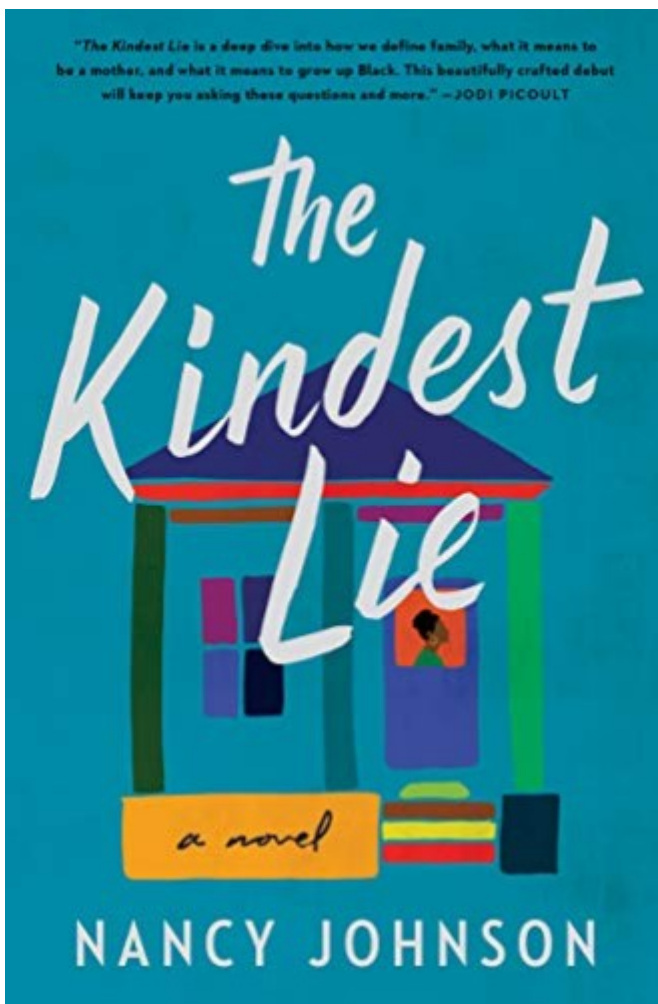


The Kindest Lie is a story about race and much more

In Nancy Johnson's debut novel, a family secret draws a successful Black woman home to small-town Indiana.

by [Katara Patton](#) in the [May 5, 2021](#) issue

In Review



The Kindest Lie

A Novel

By Nancy Johnson

William Morrow

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In a time when race weighs heavily on our minds and emotions, Nancy Johnson's debut novel offers a refreshing look at two families in a factory town in Indiana—one Black, one White—whose lives are intertwined, with similarities and differences. *The Kindest Lie* is a tale of race in small-town America, but it is neither trite nor predictable. The narrative delves deeply into the inner lives of two sets of grandparents who raise their grandchildren, immersing readers in their struggle to address educational gaps, sacrifices, work ethics, pain, and loss.

The story's heroes seem to be the Black family. But the story becomes more complex as the main character, Ruth Tuttle, deals with a critical secret she left behind when she left her grandparents' home in the fictional Ganton, Indiana, to attend Yale University. She's the inspiration for the title, which is unveiled early in the first page of the book: "A lie could be kind to you if you wanted it to be, if you let it. With every year that passed, it became easier to put more distance between her old life and her new one."

As a successful engineer, Ruth is the pride of her family. She lives in Chicago against the backdrop of the nation electing its first Black president. But the action really takes place a few miles away in Ganton, a town that seems light-years away from Ruth's middle-class lifestyle in the big city.

She returns to her hometown to find out more about the secret she has been keeping: the child she bore as a teen. The baby was whisked out of her arms as she was shuffled off to Yale along with the hopes and dreams of her grandmother and brother. They knew the smart girl in their family had a chance to "be somebody," and they weren't about to let a pregnancy stop her from going to college.

Upon her arrival back home, the prodigal daughter meets Midnight, the second main character in this web. He happens to be the grandson of Ruth's grandmother's longtime White friend. He also is being raised by his grandmother, who has been affected by both the death of her daughter in childbirth and the closing of the town's automotive plant. The declining economy leads to less business for her small store,

and she has a tough time keeping up with her bills as she raises her teen grandson.

For some reason, this White boy is drawn to “Ms. Ruth.” He’s called Midnight because he hangs out with more Black kids than White children. “These kids and their ridiculous nicknames,” comments his grandmother in one of the book’s many good riffs on race.

We hear the story in Ruth’s and Midnight’s voices alternatively, which provides insights into their worlds, insecurities, fears, disappointments, hopes, and dreams. A young White boy coming of age in Indiana and a successful Black professional woman with a secret make for a broad range of experiences and insights. Johnson creates authentic voices for each of them.

Their bond offers suspense as readers wonder how Midnight might be involved in the kindest lie Ruth needs to uncover. From the beginning, hints of her child’s identity are dropped, raising anticipation and suspicion. Ruth’s rather quick identification of her child was disappointing to me, as it seemed less authentic than the rest of the book. But it also reminds readers that the book is about much more than one mother’s search for the child she gave up.

The Kindest Lie is about race. And *The Kindest Lie* is about more than race. Economic troubles deeply shape the characters’ identities as the narrative unfolds. “You know losing your job isn’t just about the money. It’s like you lose everything. Everything that makes you who you are can be gone just like that,” one character comments. Throw in a crooked lawyer, a suspicious pastor, a prideful family, a husband desiring a child—and there’s enough drama to keep readers on the edge of their seats.

Johnson is a former television reporter. Because she was a classmate of mine at Northwestern University long ago, I follow her on social media. As a publishing professional, I was surprised by the large amount of publicity she received leading up to the publishing of *The Kindest Lie*—until I read the book. It’s a gem of a book that deserves its spot on *Newsweek*’s 21 Best Books to Read, *Parade*’s 25 New Books Written by Women of Color We Can’t Wait to Read This Year, *Entertainment Weekly*’s Must Read list, and many more. Johnson weaves a compelling story. I know I’m not alone in hoping this debut novel won’t be her last.