



Damn Near White: An African American Family's Rise from Slavery to Bittersweet Success

Carolyn Marie Wilkins

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Carolyn Wilkins grew up defending her racial identity. Because of her light complexion and wavy hair, she spent years struggling to convince others that she was black. Her family's prominence set Carolyn's experiences even further apart from those of the average African American. Her father and uncle were well-known lawyers who had graduated from Harvard Law School. Another uncle had been a child prodigy and protégé of Albert Einstein. And her grandfather had been America's first black assistant secretary of labor.

Carolyn's parents insisted she follow the color-conscious rituals of Chicago's elite black bourgeoisie—experiences Carolyn recalls as some of the most miserable of her entire life. Only in the company of her mischievous Aunt Marjory, a woman who refused to let the conventions of “proper” black society limit her, does Carolyn feel a true connection to her family's African American heritage.

When Aunt Marjory passes away, Carolyn inherits ten bulging scrapbooks filled with family history and memories. What she finds in these photo albums inspires her to discover the truth about her ancestors—a quest that will eventually involve years of research, thousands of miles of travel, and much soul-searching.

Carolyn learns that her great-grandfather John Bird Wilkins was born into slavery and went on to become a teacher, inventor, newspaperman, renegade Baptist minister, and a bigamist who abandoned five children. And when she discovers that her grandfather J. Ernest Wilkins may have been forced to resign from his labor department post by members of the Eisenhower administration, Carolyn must confront the bittersweet fruits of her family's generations-long quest for status and approval.

Damn Near White is an insider's portrait of an unusual American family. Readers will be drawn into Carolyn's journey as she struggles to redefine herself in light of the long-buried secrets she uncovers. Tackling issues of class, color, and caste, Wilkins reflects on the changes of African American life in U.S. history through her dedicated search to discover her family's powerful story.

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