



The Cigar Factory: A Novel of Charleston

Michele Moore , Pat Conroy (Foreword)

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"The sun leaned for down bringing shade to the waterfront," begins Michele Moore's entrancing debut novel, harkening back to an era when the legendary fishermen of Charleston's Mosquito Fleet rowed miles offshore for their daily catch. With evocative dialect and remarkable prose, The Cigar Factory tells the story of two entwined families, both devout Catholics--the white McGonegals and the African American Ravenels--in the storied port city of Charleston, South Carolina, during the World Wars. Moore's novel follows the parallel lives of family matriarchs working on segregated floors of the massive Charleston cigar factory, where white and black workers remain divided and misinformed about the duties and treatment received by each other. Cassie McGonegal and her niece Brigid work upstairs in the factory rolling cigars by hand. Meliah Amey Ravenel works in the basement, where she stems the tobacco. While both white and black workers suffer in the harsh working conditions of the factory and both endure the sexual harassment of the foremen, segregation keeps them from recognizing their common plight until the Tobacco Workers Strike of 1945. Through the experience of a brutal picket line, the two women come to realize how much they stand to gain by joining forces, creating a powerful moment in labor history that gives rise to the Civil Rights anthem, "We Shall Overcome."

Moore's extensive historical research included interviews with her own family members who worked at the cigar factory, adding a layer of nuance and authenticity to her empowering story of families and friendships forged through struggle, loss, and redemption. The Cigar Factory includes a foreword by New York Times best-selling author and Story River Books editor at large Pat Conroy.

The Cigar Factory: A Novel of Charleston Details

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From Reader Review The Cigar Factory: A Novel of Charleston for online ebook

Barbara says

The South has a rich and, sometimes, tortured history. Those who enjoy reading about the South and hearing the tales may appreciate this well-researched story of Charleston, following the lives of an African American and an Irish American family whose women struggle to provide for their loved ones by working in the cigar factory, an institution in Charleston, for many years. The Gullah-Geechee speech patterns help the reader hear the rhythm and cadence of local speech. Reading "The Cigar Factory" will challenge you historically and colloquially, and you will be enriched by the lives of Cassie McGonegal and Meliah Amey Ravelan.

Diane Barnes says

This book would be worth reading for the history and the details of daily life in Charleston in the first half of the 20th century alone, but it goes a step further with a wonderful cast of characters and a memorable story, written so well it's hard to tell it's a first novel.

Two women, one white, one black, both poor, get a job at the Cigar Factory in Charleston, SC. Even though the jobs are coveted because of the steady paycheck and better pay than taking in washing and ironing, it's still a hellhole of a place to work. Backbreaking labor, freezing in winter, stifling in summer, foremen who demand "favors" from the women to keep their jobs, long hours six days a week; all this for their families to survive and the hope that their kids can get an education to better themselves. This novel takes us through 50 years of history, of civil rights and labor inequities, and shows us what people can do when they work together and help each other out, recognizing that, at the heart of it all, we're all the same, no matter what color or nationality.

Kimberly says

Michele Moore nailed this story based on truth. She was dead on with the language without making the characters appear a caricature of the South.

Mary Ess says

This book is well written and extremely interesting. It would have been a 5 if left out the Gullah which detracts from the flow of the book. Also ending a bit rushed but maybe enjoyed the characters so much didn't want it to end.

Janelle says

This very enjoyable novel is set in Charleston, SC, from 1917 through 1946. It centers on two women who are employed at a cigar factory there. One is white and one is black, but both are working class. Included are many details related to the work environment that sound outrageous to us today, such as a required and invasive medical exam to ensure that one isn't pregnant before one starts working.

We also watch the evolution of the factory, as it goes from a building in which people roll cigars by hand to one that is highly mechanized. Wages go down as more machines are introduced, and management pits white and black workers against each other in order to keep wages down. They also work hard to keep the unions out, and even close the factory for a while when they can't figure out how to get around the federal laws that allow labor to organize. One union organizer sums up the situation:

Slavery made the plantation owners wealthy in the past, and while the South may have lost the war, don't worry, most of the plantation owners still owned enough land to sell off chunks over the years in order to send their kids to good schools and to start buying stock in Northern factories that make millions off the South's resources. I am convinced that the Jim Crow is not really about a true belief in the inferiority of the Negro, but instead, it is entirely about maintaining an endless supply of cheap labor. (229)

That's right.

Our two main characters work in the same factory for decades, yet don't cross paths until the very end. I wish that had happened sooner.

This novel includes a laudatory introduction by Pat Conroy that addresses Michele Moore's use of dialect in her book. It also includes a glossary of Gullah and Gullah-influenced Charleston English words that was very helpful to this reader!

Pam Felton says

I will never feel nor look at the streets of Charleston the same again. This is a historical fiction masterpiece that hits very close to home. I drive by the cigar factory every single day on my way to work. Today it is filled with high end restaurants, shops, and frequently used as a venue. If you want an idea of what Charleston was like before it became a destination place, this book will give you a glimpse of how women both black and white worked hard to provide for their families and fight for equal rights in the early days of Charleston.

Carolyn (in SC) C234D says

This was an interesting account of life among the poor cigar factory workers in Charleston, SC, in the first half of the twentieth century. Black and white women were abused and misused by owners and management in the factory, but because of segregation they were each suspicious of the other, until they eventually were forced to unite and strike in 1945. The story follows two families in particular, one black, one white. I cared for the characters and wanted to know what happened to them. And I was also saddened once again, reading about how the haves treated the have-nots, and the cruelties of a segregated society.

Suzanne says

The Cigar Factory requires a bit of patience due to the Gullah/Geechee words scattered throughout the story. The unfamiliar language, however, is essential in depicting a certain class and time of Charleston, South Carolina, and although I had to use the glossary a few times for clarification, it was worth the effort. I even found phrases to love: "Trus-me-Gawd" (the handmade boats whose seaworthiness was doubtful), "the sun leaned down" (sunset) and "he'lenga" (the period just after dark; the lingering time), for example.

I knew nothing about the cigar factory in Charleston before I started reading this book, nothing about the custom of slave women wearing blue dresses, or the bell advising people to prepare for cold weather. I didn't even know that people once had to pay poll taxes and that unmarried women weren't entitled to a pension.

I appreciate having learned all of these things and more, and also for the introduction to the book's varied cast of characters, both black and white, and mostly poor. Although uneducated and sometimes misguided, Cassie, the loyal Irish-American who rises in the ranks of the factory due to her obedience, and Maliah, the African-American who is confined to the basement, are rendered with respect and tenderness.

This is a meticulously-researched, richly told story. Thanks to the late Pat Conroy, who contributed an introductory essay, for this discovery, and to Story River Books for publishing it.

Phyllis says

Moore manages to weave worker activism, race relations, and burgeoning feminism into a well-crafted tale that brings the pre- and WWII era of downtown Charleston to life. Moore has an ability to include real Charleston characters, such as Mayor John Grace and Judge Waties Waring, that also contributes to creating an authentic atmosphere. The old cigar factory building still stands, serving now as a high-end food hall and event space. The neighborhood surrounding it remains lower-income, but the march of gentrification, which appears to be occurring in Charleston at warp speed these days, will likely wipe that away in another few years.

Annmbray says

Loved this book so much -- not only because of the subject matter but also because of the colorful dialect and the breadth of history covered. Got to meet in passing Langston Hughes and Thurgood Marshall of the NAACP! Lovely images include a haint blue sail, the establishment of sweetgrass basket stands in Mt. Pleasant to cut out the white middle-man in Charleston, the idea that July 4th was viewed as a blacks-only, yankee holiday celebrated with sailboat races and picnics on the Battery. Inventions such as the electric fan and the radio (which carried a baseball game won by Detroit Tigers over the Chicago Cubs) added realism. Then the story of the AFL CIO union organizers moving against the poll tax, teaching factory workers to read and write, and noting that the same workplace problems existed in Winston-Salem, Trenton and Philly in the cigarette factories. Ending with the sons of black and white workers serving in WWII(Guam and Saipan) and coming home. The Nicaragua Victory ship hitting and taking out a section of the Cooper River Bridge gives the newly unified workers a feeling that together they can overcome challenges.

Julia Prater says

Terrific historical novel of a time period and social class of Charleston seldom explored. Strong character development and solid story woven into significant events in the history of the city, the nation and the world.

Barb says

Historical fiction at its finest. It's the story of two families, one black and one white, who work at the Cigar Factory in Charleston, SC over a period of approximately fifty years, ending just after WW II. It is a narrative that covers racial relations, working and living conditions, and the eventual attempts at unionization. So much Charleston history is incorporated into the story that even Pat Conroy, who wrote the introduction, stated that he "learned a few things" about Charleston's history.

Rachel Carnes says

I enjoyed very much reading this book of life in Charleston from 1917-1946. This was a time of segregation, harsh working and living conditions, no unions, and life struggling to move forward when so many wanted to keep it the same.

The Cigar Factory illustrates the lives of two families, one working white and one working black. What the author shows is how similar their lives are; their struggles, beliefs, concerns and desires. But, of course, during this time, they live separate lives side by side and they don't interact with each other. They watch from the outside imagining that only they have it hard and only they suffer at the hands of those in charge.

In Charleston, we look at the beautiful, graceful mansions and the lovely gardens and ambling streets with beauty all around. But this life was/is only lived by a select few. This book reveals another side of the city. It was great to look through the eyes of characters brought to life so beautifully by Ms. Moore and to travel back in time to a Charleston I never knew, and now, appreciate even more.

Marisa says

Michele Moore weaves a powerful narrative that reveals the abysmal working conditions, for the female descendants of Gullah Geechee speaking former slaves and white working women alike, in Charleston's cigar factory during the early part of the 20th Century.

Lilla says

I listened to the audible version of this novel which I highly recommend. The narrators did an incredible job

capturing the Charleston and Gullah/Geechee accents. I could hear the accents of home and I loved it, especially since they are disappearing. The story was fascinating because of the setting. I loved being placed in historic Charleston and reading about what the city was like when my grandmother was a child. It felt familiar. There is also the social justice aspect of the novel that I loved, as well as the two main characters.
