



# Guardian

*Julius Lester*

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There are times when a tree can no longer withstand the pain inflicted on it, and the wind will take pity on that tree and topple it over in a mighty storm. All the other trees who witnessed the evil look down upon the fallen tree with envy. They pray for the day when a wind will end their suffering.

I pray for the day when God will end mine.

In a time and place without moral conscience, fourteen-year-old Ansel knows what is right and what is true.

But it is dangerous to choose honesty, and so he chooses silence.

Now an innocent man is dead, and Ansel feels the burden of his decision. He must also bear the pain of losing a friend, his family, and the love of a lifetime.

Coretta Scott King Award winner and Newbery Honoree Julius Lester delivers a haunting and poignant novel about what happens when one group of people takes away the humanity of another.

## Guardian Details

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Author : Julius Lester

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# From Reader Review Guardian for online ebook

## Michael says

From the start the story is very racism which dose not bother me. yjrow out the story there is a lot of hating and cowardice while pulled me as a reader to the book. Julius Lester is a good writing, he really makes you think "what would I do in this situation?" in enjoyed this book

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## Carol Baldwin says

A short but immensely powerful book, Guardian portrays a lynching as seen from the viewpoint of several characters most intimately effected by the man's murder. Here are seven of these characters:

Ansel Anderson- a 14-year-old white boy living in a small town in the south in 1946.

Bert Anderson- Ansel's father who operates Anderson General Store and helped Big Willie get his job.

Maureen Anderson- Ansel's mother.

Little Willie Benton- Ansel's black fishing buddy who works with Ansel at the General Store.

Big Willie Benton- WWII vet suffering from (undiagnosed PTSD), Little Willie's father. He does odd jobs at Mary Susan's father's church.

Mary Susan Dennis- the girl Ansel likes.

Zach Davis- Ansel's antagonist and town bully. Great-Grandson of the man who founded the town of Davis, son of the man who owns the largest plantation in the town as well as the store where Ansel's father works and the church where Mary Susan's father is the preacher.

Through these multitude of lenses, yet told from the narrator's present tense viewpoint, Mr. Lester has interwoven a story full of deep prejudice and misunderstanding. It is an unconventional style which works well for this topic. The reader intimately sees each character's motivations, fears, and beliefs and feels his or her emotions.

James Scott Bell writes: "A novel usually revolves around a few big scenes. These act like guideposts as the novelist moves from one to the other up through the climax." (p.127) The scene you are about to read happens three-quarters of the way into the book and is one of the big scenes in Guardian. Bert and Ansel have just left their store.

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As father and son cross the street to the car, they see Big Willie hurrying out the front door of the church. He looks quickly to his right and left, and seeing Bert and Ansel, he runs to them.

"Mistah Bert, suh! I'm glad it's you. Yes, suh!" Willie is a tall and rather ungainly young man. His face looks

as if it absorbed every death he witnessed, those he was agent of and those he was not. He is wearing a khaki military shirt with a private's stripe on the sleeve. But the shirt is dirty and torn, as if he has not taken it off since his discharge.

"Wasn't me, Mistah Bert. No, suh! I didn't have nothing to do with it, but I know I'm gon' get blamed for it. Something like this happen, nigger gets blamed every time. Yes, suh. Sho' do. But I ain't done it."

"What are you talking about, Willie?"

Willie points toward the church. "I seen him. I seen him just as sho' as I'm seeing you and Mistah Ansel. Yes, such. The young Mistah Zeph."

Bert hurries to the church and goes inside. In the dim light at the front, he sees and does not want to believe what he sees.

"Ansel! Go outside!"

Instead of doing what his father tells him, Ansel says, "Papa? What's he doing?"

Zeph Davis the Third turns at the sounds of the voices. In his right hand is a knife. It is slick with blood. On the floor in front of the alter lies a body, the skirt raised to reveal her nakedness.

Ansel does not wait for an answer from his father, who is still trying to understand what he is seeing. Ansel screams, "Mary Susan! Mary Susan!" and runs to the front of the church. He stops and stares at her nakedness. Then, realizing what he is doing, he pulls down the skirt to cover her.

In doing so, he sees a ripped blouse and severed bra. The exposed breasts are red and slick with blood.

He wants to stare, but feels that he shouldn't, that Mary Susan would not want him to.

He takes the blood-soaked blouse and pulls both sides over her bared breasts, careful not to touch them.

Zeph looks rapidly from Ansel to Bert, back and forth, back and forth, breathing heavily, not knowing what to do, what to say.

Then he sees Big Willie in the shadows at the back of the church.

"He did it!" Zeph hurls, pointing at Big Willie. "He did it!"

"Mistah Bert? Suh, look at me. Ain't no blood nowhere on me. Look at him. He covered with blood, her blood."

"You know niggers, Bert!" Zeph breaks in. "They do all kinds of stuff with roots. That nigger probably got a mojo that can take blood off his hands."

"I seen him, Mistah Bert. I seen him. I was up in the balcony. I likes to sit up there when no one's around. It's real peaceful.

"That's where I was when the preacher's girl, Miz Mary, come in. I wanted to leave right then 'cause I

knocked it wouldn't look good if I was alone in the same place with a white woman. But wasn't no way I could get out without her hearing. Seeing' me, she might get the wrong idea and start screaming. So I just stayed still.

"She went to the altar and knelt down to pray. I wondered what could be weighing so heavy on the heart of someone as young as she was. If she'd been a nigger gal, I could understand. Us niggers need all the prayer we can get. Yes, suh.

"Miz Mary hadn't been there long when I heard the door of the church open and he come in. I thought maybe the two of them had decided to meet up together at the church, but when she turned around to see who it was had come in and seen it was him she say, 'What do you want? You get on outta here and leave me alone. I'm praying.'

"He don't pay no mind to what she say. He go up to her and grab her try to kiss her. She push him away. She say, 'Get away from me or I'll kick you so hard you won't be able to move for a month.'

"That's when he whipped out his knife and before she could do anything, he was on her, stabbing her over and over. Then I seen him raise up her skirt, and I didn't want to see no more. Mistah Zeph was so caught up in what he was doing that he didn't see me, and I hurried out and that's when I seen you and your boy. That's the God's truth, Mistah Bert. You believe me, don't you? You'll tell the white folks it wasn't me. Won't you Mistah Berth?"

"Who you going to believe, Bert? A nigger or a white man?"

Zeph notices that Bert is hesitating, that Bert is thinking about what the right thing to do is, and Zeph drops the knife on the floor next to Mary Susan's body, runs up the aisle and out of the church.

"Rape! Rape! Pastor's daughter been raped by a nigger!" Zeph is running and yelling at the same time. Over and over he shouts and the only words that are clear are "rape" and "nigger." pp. 71-75.

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Mr. Bell asks:

Was this an action scene? No question. This scene demonstrates high intensity with "tremendous conflict, important emotions, sharp dialogue, and inner turmoil." (Bell, p.128)

Identify the places where you learn about the character's objective in the scene and the conflict:

Big Willie's speech when he meets Ansel and Bert show how he wants his name cleared. That is repeated at the close of the scene bookending his desperation. Conflict roars to life through Zeph's false accusation. Entering the church, Ansel wants to see what has disturbed his father. His internal conflict in seeing Mary Susan is demonstrated in his actions.

Zeph's anger at being rebuffed again (this is not the first time Mary Susan rejects him) leads to his objective: revenge. His conflict is visible in his brief hesitation after his sociopathic behavior.

Bert wants not to see what is plain before his eyes. Afterwards, he also hesitates, showing his internal conflict.

How does the scene end?

Zeph leaves the church and "Over and over he shouts and the only words that are clear are 'rape' and 'nigger.' The reader knows that this certainly means disaster for Big Willie and sets up the scenes which, like soldiers falling in battle, will surely follow.

Do you want to read on?

I'm going to leave this question up to you. Even though you have a strong sense of what's going to happen next, are you pulled into the next scene? Why or why not?

Jim Bell writes, "...you need to end scenes with a prompt, something to make readers turn the page...Don't ever let your scenes fizzle out, ending on a boring note." (p. 124).

It seems to me, that Julius Lester has done just that.

On next week's blog, Mr. Lester shares some personal insights into writing Guardian. - See more at: [http://carolbaldwinblog.blogspot.com/...](http://carolbaldwinblog.blogspot.com/)

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## **Mervene Jones says**

### **Informative**

This writing was a long short story that served as a prelude to a very informative afterword concerning lynching in the United States. I never have run across the fact that the very word itself was taken from a judge who started the practice. Tidbits like this (along with the fact that there was no formal federal repudiation of the practice until 2005!), Made this a book well worth reading.

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## **Angie says**

This is book gives an insightful look at lynching in the south from the perspective of a white teenager. It also causes the reader to think about keeping silent when you know an injustice has occurred. Holding back the truth is just as harmful as committing the injustice. I would recommend this book for young people and adults as well. I was surprised that lynchings were treated like a sporting event in most cases. We have come a long way as a nation, but we yet have a ways to go. In this day we still have nooses being put up all over the country. Mr. Lester said, "The racial divide in the US will not be overcome until lynchings of all kinds are as painful to nonblacks as they are to blacks, until each of us become guardians fo the sufferings history has bequeathed us."

I agree with his feelings. We have no room in this life time to joke about or try to intimidate others with any reference to lynching.

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## **Anina says**

On the back it says "Not since To Kill a Mockingbird has there been a more haunting and poignant novel about what happens when a group of people deny human rights to others." And it's not a quote...that's the publisher's blurb. And I was like...you can't just go around claiming things like that. But I thoguht it lived up

to the quote.

An intense story about lynching told from the perspectives of the members of the small town where the crime takes place. From the beginning the whole setting is desolate and full of misunderstanding. It shows how hatred affects everyone in the community, including the people who cause/perpetrate hate crimes. It is more graphic in descriptions and in topicality than Day of Tears. I had a hard time in many parts. The storytelling is excellent. I think it will win a lot of awards.

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### **Monica Edinger says**

This was powerful, but oh so painful to read. I found it much, much, much harder to do than Day of Tears. Understandably, because it is about a lynching.

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### **Ms\_Harris says**

Guardian is a gritty tale of a lynching told primarily from the perspective of a young white spectator. Readers meet fourteen year old Ansel Anderson and his Negro friend, Little Willie, as they get permission from Mr. Anderson, the town's storekeeper, to suspend their work duties and go fishing at a nearby creek; this is a Tuesday afternoon in the summer of 1946. By Friday, the whole town stands by in a party-like atmosphere as they prepare to lynch Big Willie (Little Willie's father) for the rape and murder of the pastor's daughter. The only witnesses to Big Willie's innocence are Mr. Anderson, Ansel, and Zeph (the true perpetrator). Readers find out how the refusal to tell the truth affects the father-son relationship as well as that of the two young boys who were friends just days before.

Author Julius Lester tells the story mostly from Ansel's perspective but occasionally switches to third-person omniscient narration. Through the third-person omniscient narration, character dimensionality is added as readers become privy to the inner thoughts and experiences of the characters. We understand Mr. Anderson's reluctance to speak up for Big Willie. We understand the casual yet exuberant nature of the crowd, "It could be the annual Fourth of July picnic...The only thing missing was a pig roasting, but a nigger would do." Mr. Lester's language throughout the novel is graphic, brutal, but insightful in a way that only a person who lived in a time and place where lynching was a real threat or a truly gifted dramatist could write. He is both.

Because of the explicit sexual and violent language and content, I wouldn't use this text with students younger than high school. Guardian could be used as part of a social studies unit that deals with the African American experience in the South before the Civil Rights Era. This text could be paired with Leon's Story by Leon Tillage which tells his family's story in North Carolina during the same time period. While Leon's Story is suitable for a younger audience, it provides background knowledge using first-person account of the time. Students should be encouraged to read the author's note and the appendix which lists the reported lynchings that occurred from 1882-1968 by state.

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## **Kathleen says**

Okay, so, first of all? This book is about a lynching. You need to know that right off the bat. The second thing you need to know is that it's about a white boy's experience of a lynching.

Specifically, it's about Ansel Anderson, who has to watch as his black friend Little Willie's father is lynched for a rape and murder committed by Zeph Davis III, grandson of the town's founder. Worse, Ansel and his father know that Big Willie saw the crime committed, and they saw the immediate aftermath.

That's the core of the book, but the emotional arc belongs to Ansel. There's a complicated series of reasons as to why he's sympathetic to black people to begin with, but it is perfectly believable, and so is Little Willie's reaction to everything: there's actually a part I loved after the lynching where Ansel runs to Willie to apologize, and then stops, because he knows that he can't ask forgiveness of Willie, not after what happened.

It's a really good book. If it has a flaw, the ending is too abrupt; there's a lot of buildup and character development before the lynching, and then after it's like ten pages to the end. Still, it's a fast read, but one you won't soon forget.

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## **Morgan says**

This was a pretty horrifying look at lynchings and race relations in the south in 1946, when a young white boy, Ansel, and his friend Little Willie must deal with and are directly confronted with racism at every turn. Ansel, his mother, and mother's friend Esther Davis are sympathetic whites who strongly disagree with the town's views of race--that is, perpetrating the view that blacks are inferior beings, need to be kept in their place, etc. What is horrifying is the character of Zeph Davis III, who is an entitled, supremely racist character who torments Ansel and Little Willie. The drama occurs when Ansel's crush, Mary Susan, is raped and stabbed by Zeph; Big Willie, Willie's father, sees it happen and tells Ansel's father, Bert. Bert knows Zeph is a sociopath and Big Willie is innocent. But for those who read the dedication, you know a lynching is going to happen, and Big Willie is the scapegoat.

Lester makes it clear that Willie probably would have been lynched regardless of what Bert said. The point Lester emphasizes repeatedly is that doing nothing and standing by while an innocent man dies is as wrong as the lynching itself--that Bert could have stood up to Zeph (a young boy), said he believed Big Willie, and allowed Big Willie some peace knowing someone believed in his innocence.

In the afterword, Lester explains that he was approached by a Hollywood director about writing a movie script for a lynching movie. Lester believed that that story was told and wanted to write it from the white child's perspective--how damaging and cruel it is to expose children to the violence and hatred of a lynching. The director wasn't interested, the deal fell through, and Lester wrote this book, complete with an author's note, bibliography, chart, and appendix.

The book is getting three stars because it's too short--there needs to be more--more buildup, more exploration of Ansel's feelings, more understanding of the town's fear of Zeph (he is only 14), just more. Until the lynching happens, I was just wondering who it would be and when, not if it would happen. But, the book is completely realistic and is definitely an unexplored area of young and adult literature--the effects of lynching



and that indoctrination on children. A quick read, though one I won't be using in my African American lit class next semester.

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### **Diana says**

This has been one of the best books I have read in my young life. Not only does the main character have a n amazing turning point. It challenges the reader to think in a different perspective instead of the positive one. I shared it with most of my friends and all agree that they love it.

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### **Jennifer Wardrip says**

Reviewed by JodiG. for TeensReadToo.com

There was a dark time in the history of the United States when even the best-intentioned people bore silent witness to the atrocities that were being committed by others. A time in which a person had to chose between honesty and personal safety.

It is Tuesday afternoon, a hot summer day in 1946. By Friday night a crime will have been committed, two people will be dead, and fourteen-year-old Ansel Anderson will be forever tormented by the events of that night and those that followed.

Ansel lives in Davis, a small town deep in the South. The town was named after the most wealthy and influential family in the area, the family now headed by Zeph Davis. Cap'n Davis has a way of employing his "negroes" in such a way that they remain in debt to him, a legal form of slavery.

Everyone in Davis knows the rules of the social order. Black people are expected to address all whites - even the children - as "ma'am" or "sir", they are to move from the sidewalk when a white person is coming, and they are to always be congenial. Even Ansel's best friend, Willie, addresses him as Mister Ansel.

Ansel works in his father's store, along with Willie. Bert Anderson is preparing Ansel to take over the store someday, and to be a successful store owner he knows that Ansel has to start considering who he spends time with and what the other people in town think of him. His mother Maureen feels differently. She doesn't like the way the townspeople act and doesn't want her son to grow up with such narrow-minded influences. She has bigger dreams for Ansel, and, along with Esther Davis, Cap'n Davis's sister, she plants the seeds for Ansel to dream of a future beyond Davis.

An unfortunate storm is brewing in Davis. Entitlement and anger are swelling in Zeph Davis the Third, the teenage son of Cap'n Davis. But who would believe that the son of a wealthy white man could commit such a heinous act as rape and murder when there was a negroe at the scene of the crime?

And even if they do believe, will anyone take the risk of speaking out?

GUARDIAN is an amazingly well-crafted story that grabs your attention and your heart from the very beginning. Author Julius Lester has a way of pulling you along in such a way that you can feel the intensity

building with every word until the explosive finale. There is no sugar-coating to this story; it is real and it is raw and borne from a very sad reality in our world.

If you can read and pass along one book this year, let it be GUARDIAN.

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### **Natalie says**

Down in the south, segregation is a part of life. It's 1946 and even though blacks have been free of slavery, not everyone thinks they should be. They certainly aren't treated the same. Ansel has been friends with Willie his whole life. They both work in Ansel's dad's store, but Willie only works there because of Esther Davis. Otherwise Bert, Ansel's dad, would never have hired Willie. He wants nothing to do with "their kind".

In the space of a week, everything Ansel thought about his world changes and nothing will be the same.

The story is powerful but confusing. The prologue talks about trees and the last chapter talks about being guardians to pain, shame, and murder. The book is about a lynching, a black man accused and killed without trial, everyone knowing he's innocent.

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### **Jonathan says**

In DAY OF TEARS Lester laid bare the painful legacy of slavery and now in GUARDIAN he turns his attention to lynching with equally devastating effect. A small book with a big punch.

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### **Tasha says**

This is a gripping, striking novel of lynching told from the point of view of a white teen boy who witnesses the hate crime. It is the summer of 1946 and Ansel is fourteen years old. He is the son of the store owner in a small town in the Deep South. One of his best friends is Willie. Though they fish together often, there is always an awareness of their differences solely because of the color of their skin. Ansel is also in love with Mary Susan, daughter of the local pastor, who fairly glows with purity and sexuality. Enter into this an evil spoiled wealthy kid and you have everything it takes to make a lynching.

Lester's language is lyrical, somber and almost languid with the heat of the South. He takes the time to examine each person in the story down to their soul. Each person trapped in their own pain, their own decisions. Each with their own guilt and shame. This is done for a reason, so that knowing these people that deeply, one can only feel gut-wrenching, fearful amazement at what they allow to happen.

Racism is dealt with head on. Lester doesn't hide the evil of racism, but rather shows that a community and nation this divided must inevitably lead to horror and evil. It is a powerful book for all that it says without being didactic and preaching. It is instead a moment in history caught, captured and revolting.

This powerful book with its amazing writing is also invitingly short. High school classrooms will embrace it

as a catalyst for discussion of race in America. Even adult book discussion groups should take a look at it. One of the most powerful novels on race I have ever read, this is one of my top teen novels of the year. I can't wait to see the cover art.

Appropriate for ages 14-17.

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### **Jean says**

Excellent written, though heartbreakingly painful. The story rings true and the characters are very believable. I don't believe I've read any book by Julius Lester. Must check out some of his other fares because this one is primo.

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