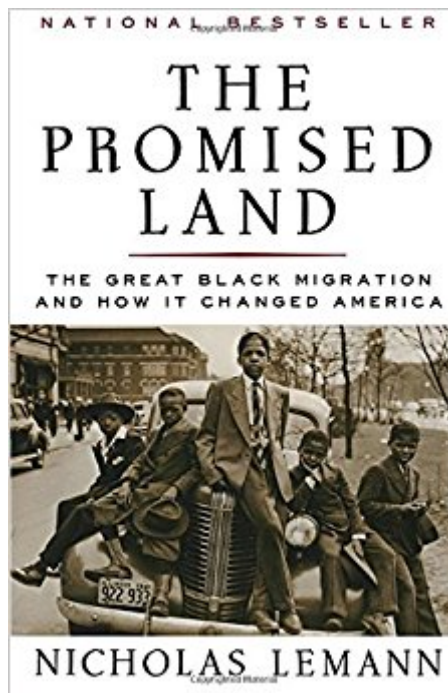




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# The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration And How It Changed America



## Synopsis

A New York Times bestseller, the groundbreaking authoritative history of the migration of African-Americans from the rural South to the urban North. A definitive book on American history, *The Promised Land* is also essential reading for educators and policymakers at both national and local levels.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

From 1940 to 1970, some five million blacks migrated to the urban North. In a vivid document that spent 10 weeks on PW's bestseller list and was a BOMC, History Book Club and QPB alternate, Lemann collects personal accounts and refutes the belief that all federal programs to aid the black poor failed. Copyright 1992 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Focusing on the larger post-1940 complement of the black South-to-North movement--the "Great Black Migration"--that created New York's Harlem and similar black quarters in every major northern city, Lemann traces the roots of America's rotting ghettos. Moving between Clarksdale, Mississippi, Chicago, and the nation's capital with skill, Lemann (a contributing editor at *The Atlantic*) particularizes and personalizes in life stories the forces that shifted five million blacks North after 1940 and then trapped most of them and their progeny in poverty. His essay in social causation and consequences rings as a manifesto of public policy for the 1990s with the clear theme that the nation can and must undo what its racism has done. It is highly recommended for all collections on

contemporary America. Quality Paperback Book Club alternate.- Thomas J. Davis, Univ. at Buffalo, N.Y. Copyright 1991 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

I have to rate this as one of the best nonfiction books I have read. Mr. Lemann tells a complex story so well, weaving together different eras and places. I came away with a much richer understanding of the way events of the past motivated individuals to make decisions that added up to present day conditions. Read the book to learn how the mechanization of agriculture led to the despicable conditions in the cities of the Southern diaspora, including Chicago, Detroit and Baltimore. When there's no paying work, people leave for opportunities elsewhere. When their education and income are limited, they may find their outcomes diminished as well. Mr. Lemann fleshes out these weak generalizations with acutely drawn portraits of individuals, their offspring and their experiences.

Nicholas Lemann story telling style opened up the great history of this great movement within the US. This migration within the US needs to be included in the history books of our schools. Like all large immigration this movement of people has changed northern US and opened up the possibility of marginalized people to be included in everyday benefits. We are a free people but sometimes we need to have peaceful confrontation of the establishment. The migration of the poor share croppers, both black and white, has caused much change. Now we need to analyze the effects of this movement of the 21st century US.

I read this book in conjunction with reading "the southern diaspora." If one were to only buy/read only one of these books, I would definitely recommend the latter; however, I'll go on to review the former, which is worth the read, as well. "The Promised Land" starts out with its best. The first chapter is about Clarksdale, Mississippi, and how Blacks and whites interacted there in the first decades of the 20th century. The whites lived on one side of the tracks, the Blacks on the other. Blacks could not vote, and there was no guarantee their children would have an education. Blacks lived in plantation cabins with roofs that leaked and without electricity or insulation. The shareholder system was in place, as was segregation. The landholders needed Blacks to pick cotton and work the fields; the Blacks had nowhere else to go and no other way to make a living. In 1900, 90% of American Blacks lived in The South. A really good cotton picker could make \$4 per day, but in Chicago in the 40's, one could make 75 cents per hour. Plus, one could work overtime, and rent a place relatively cheap. It was a way out; it was an opportunity. The author introduces us to several cottonpickers and laborers in Clarksdale who decide that they have had enough. They move to

Chicago to seek the promised land and opportunities. One is Ruby Hopkins. The book then tells us about the Black experience in Chicago in the 40's, via Ruby and others, and it introduces us to the world of Mayor Daley. But, abruptly, in a new chapter, the book moves us to Washington, D.C., where we get excruciating details about the politics of Washington in the 60's and 70's and how it addressed Black poverty and inequality. It's as if another book has begun. There is juicy information about President Kennedy, Robert Kennedy and President Johnson...and Sargent Shriver, the war on poverty, the Office of Economic Opportunity and more. But I yearned to get back to the actual Black experience. And just like that, the book turns back to Chicago in the 60's. The theme now is about how the Blacks from Clarksdale have coped in the 20 years in Chicago, who they have married, the kids they've had, the jobs, the welfare, the housing, etc. Some have made it, some have not. There are property lines that Blacks are not to cross, but as their population grows, the lines must be crossed. New schools and new housing are built. It is still a better experience than Clarksdale could have been. But there is much more crime. Folks get hooked on cocaine. Public housing deteriorates. In short, there can be a price to pay, if one cannot move beyond the Black ghetto. Back in Clarksdale, the shareholder system is essentially over, as mechanical cotton pickers have taken over the need for most manual labor, and insecticides have been introduced to take care of weeds. Blacks still cannot vote, defacto segregation is still in place, and life still can be very hard for Blacks. Up North, if one has found a career in meat-packing, steel, manufacturing, hotel services or such, one had done well and has probably moved out of the ghetto. Ruby is still there. So, she makes the decision to move back to Clarksdale. In her mid-70's now, Ruby is back to where she started. Several of her children and their children are there as well. She is better off than she has ever been. But it's still The South, and it is far from perfect. It is what it is. So, that's the gist of the book, with tons of details skipped. Again, I much prefer the book, "the southern diaspora" on this general topic, because I think it provides much more general information and has a better flow. But "The Promised Land" is still a fascinating read, for the most part.

A good companion for *Hillbilly Elegy* by JD Vance. It is much harder to read, because it is so full of details, facts, names and places, but the migration out of the Delta South to Chicago bears remarkable resemblance to the migration from the Appalachian South to the Mid-west rust belt. The hope, courage, hard work of two very different peoples match, as do the disappointment, loss of cultural bearing, and slide back into resentful, hopeless poverty. I recommend reading this first, then the *Hillbilly Elegy*.

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