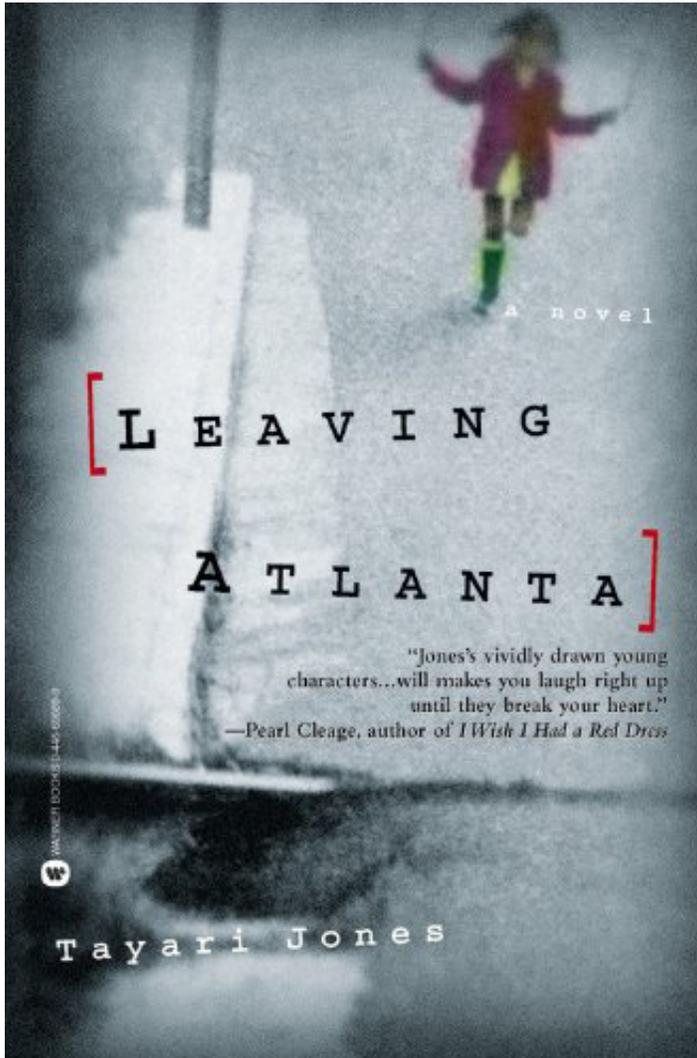


## READER'S GUIDE TO *LEAVING ATLANTA* BY TAYARI JONES



In her critically acclaimed debut, Tayari Jones explores the tragedy of the Atlanta Child Murders through the eyes of three unforgettable children.

Like all kids across the city, fifth-grade classmates Tasha Baxter, Rodney Green, and Octavia Harrison were discovering that back-to-school now meant special safety lessons, indoor recess, and being thrown into a world their parents couldn't comprehend, one in which the everyday challenges of growing up were coupled with constant fear—and the news of the murders of one's peers.

Tasha can't understand why she daily falls in and out of favor with her classmates—she isn't weird like Rodney or “too dark” and outspoken like Octavia. Then, through a sudden crush on a boy from the wrong side of town, she finds that words have the power to both heal and wound. (The next thought was that Tasha herself had brought it upon him with her hateful words. “I hope the man snatches you.” And she meant it when she said it.)

For her classmate Rodney, almost everything feels wrong. Not tough enough to be loved by his strict father, too different to be accepted at school, he struggles to fit in somewhere. How far will he go to escape his bleak inner landscape? (Nothing you know is in the direction you're heading. Home is the other way.) And Rodney's “almost friend” Octavia, the loner the kids call “the Watusi,” who lives near the projects, will discover that she, too, has something left to lose. (I cried because it seemed like everything good in the world was locked in a box. “Mama, let me stay.”)

Movingly detailed and quietly heartbreaking, *Leaving Atlanta* shimmers with the piercing, ineffable quality of childhood. It is the hurts and little wins we all went through, the slow and all-too-sudden changes, and the forces that swept us into adulthood and forever shaped our lives.

## In Her Own Words

I was almost nine years old when the bodies of fourteen-year-old Edward Smith and thirteen-year-old Alfred Adams were discovered in Atlanta, beginning the official investigation of what became known as “The Atlanta Child Murders.” Over the course of the next two years, at least twenty more African American children were murdered. Two of them were students at my elementary school.

People often ask me if my childhood was stolen. I tell them no, but I don't think that they believe me. Maybe after reading *Leaving Atlanta*, they will. I wrote this novel to make a record of how life was for those of us who were too young to understand the complicated social and political landscape of Atlanta, the “city too busy to hate.” Those of us on the playground didn't know that in 1979 Atlanta was the only city in the country that could boast of having a black mayor, police chief, and school board president. We had no idea that we were the heirs of the civil rights movements. When children's bodies were found strewn in wooded areas, creeks, and dumpsters, most of us had no knowledge of the history of lynching in the American south. What we knew were the things that mattered to us as children. Like all other children, we worried that we wouldn't be accepted by our peers, we fretted that our parents might divorce, but we also worried that a faceless predator might murder us.

During my freshman year at Spelman College, an eight-year-old boy didn't show up as scheduled for tutoring. I panicked, scouring the campus, shouting his name and asking everyone if they had seen a little boy with jug-ears. Some people simply indicated that they hadn't seen him but others put down their notebooks, abandoned their boyfriends and helped me look. I soon realized something about everyone who helped me-- the young women who looked under bushes, placed desperate calls to public safety, and retraced the route from the bus stop to the campus gates. We were all Atlanta natives. We remembered.

As the survivors, we have a responsibility to tell the story. James Baldwin wrote about the murders in *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*. Toni Cade Bambara's opus, *Those Bones are Not My Child* also revisits this difficult period in Atlanta's history. But the time had come for someone of my generation, to tell the tale from the vantage point of the playground. This novel is a memorial to twenty-nine (or more) who did not survive and it the testimony of the thousands who will never forget.

## Discussion Questions

1. As you probably know, *Leaving Atlanta*, is set against the backdrop of an actual historical event, The Atlanta Child Murders. Do you remember these murders? Did you know about them before reading *Leaving Atlanta*?
2. The novel is divided into three sections, each with a different point of view. How did this affect your experience reading the novel? Which section was your favorite and why?
3. The author, Tayari Jones, was herself a fifth-grader during the Atlanta Child Murders. Why do you think that she uses “herself” as a character in the novel.
4. Although this is a novel about a specific historical moment, much of the novel is about the day-to-day life of a fifth grade class. Were there moments in the story that reminded you of your own childhood? What things were different?
5. One of the most powerful moments in the novel comes at the end of the second section. Do you think that Rodney Green purposely puts himself into the killer’s hands?
6. The three children in this novel all have very different home lives. Which parents do the best job with their children? What do you think is the best way to explain tragedy to young people?
7. The issue of social/economic class is very important in *Leaving Atlanta*. In your reading of this piece, how did you see economic class as a factor in the children’s lives?
8. For the author, Tayari Jones, the Atlanta Child Murders were a defining moment in her childhood. She has said in an interview that: “This is when found out how the world worked. That children could die. That there were people who would want to hurt you for no reason at all. But it was also when I found out that there were people who we didn’t even know, who would do whatever they could to keep us safe.” Was there a moment in your own childhood that caused you to look at the world with a more grown-up perception?
9. The character, Mrs. Greir, makes a big difference in Octavia’s life. Did you have a special relationship with a teacher in your life? How do you think that student-teacher relationship has changed over the years?
10. In the first section, Tasha’s father is very upset that no one has taught the children about the history of civil rights and racial violence. Do you think that it is good to share such information with young children?