

Josie of Birmingham

A Middle Grades Novel

By Anthony Grooms

“Josie of Birmingham” is a novel for middle-grade readers. It features ten-year old Josie Williams and her family as they join in the civil rights demonstrations and school integration effort in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. Inspired by her cousin, Diana, a college student, Josie sneaks and joins the spring demonstrations without her parent’s permission. She is jailed. The jailing does not dampen her spirit for activism. Josie wants to be an astronaut and realizes that to fulfill her dream she needs to go to the best schools possible. She and her sister decide to integrate Birmingham’s public schools, a challenge that proves more perilous than the street demonstrations. Though it features African American characters, “Josie of Birmingham” is written to appeal to upper elementary readers of various racial backgrounds. The language of the novel is playful as the characters engage “hot browns”, “square cities,” and “Vulcan’s butt”. The story is well-versed in the popular culture of the early 1960s as the characters enjoy the “ginchiest” TV programs and music. It also is a strong, but never prescriptive, tool for exploring Jim Crow and the Civil Rights Movement strategies that opposed it. The book should appeal strongly to educators, but will be fun for middle grade readers.

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Chapter 1: Joy Young's

“Just look at her! Walking on her toes like she thinks she is some kind of princess.” Josie Williams turned to her older sister. She made a mocking face, pushing her nose into the air with her finger.

“Quiet. We’re in church!” Valerie admonished. But her cousin, Oscar, sitting in the pew on the other side of Valerie giggled. Valerie gave him the “watch out” stare, and Mrs. Williams, Josie’s mother, sitting in the pew in front of them, turned her head, not far enough to actually glance at them, but far enough to let them know she had heard.

The sun lit up the stain glass windows and its colors speckled across the dark wood paneling of the large sanctuary. The ceiling fans thrummed, blowing cool, damp air. It was July, vacation time, so the pews weren’t crowded as they were apt to be on Easter or Christmas.

Mona Lisa Cartwright continued down the aisle, passing so close to Josie that her crinoline skirt brushed against Josie’s hand. Josie thought she should grab hold of the skirt and tear it from Mona Lisa’s hips. But she didn’t and Mona Lisa paraded with her skirt bouncing as gracefully as a little swan in Swan Lake ballet, mounted the three steps up from the sanctuary to the pulpit, curtsied to her father who sat in the center of three high back chairs behind an ornate lectern. Reverend Doctor Aldous P. Cartwright smiled approvingly. Two more steps up brought her to the choir stand and the piano where she positioned herself in front of the stool. She paused before she folded the crinkling skirt under her and sat with a dainty flair.

Josie heard the dress crinkle and gritted her teeth. *What a show-off*, she wanted to say, but having seen her mother make the head turn, she decided she wouldn’t say it aloud. She

looked at the back of her father's head, with its slight impression of baldness. He remained stiff, but if her mother had heard, she knew well her father had, too.

Mona Lisa raised both hands above the piano keyboard, bent her head forward and began to play. *How pretentious! What is she playing?* Josie found the church program in the seat next to her, and stealthily opened it. Johann S. Bach, "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring." She knew that Bach was an old composer, someone who wore a white wig like George Washington. She guessed that "Jesu" meant Jesus. But what in the world did "Joy of Man's Desiring" mean? The piano playing was melodic with a regular and predictable rhythm. It was hard for Josie to admit, but Mona Lisa was a good piano player. *Well, it was all she did. Sat up in her house, day after day, practicing. She wasn't like regular girls and so snooty.*

Reverend Cartwright had closed his eyes, turned his face upward, and nodded in time to the music. A woman, likely Mrs. Garfield, who was known to do such things, sang out, "Yes, my Lord, yes!" in approval. After a few minutes, when Josie, restlessly tapping her foot against the leg of the pew in front of her, thought she had borne all she could bear, Mrs. Cartwright came to the front of the choir stand and the choir stood up behind her. "Yaaa-suuu-, joooy of man's deeee-siring," she squealed out in a shaky soprano. Josie saw her mother rest her head in her palm, and she giggled. Mrs. Williams shot her a full on, keen-eyed glance that shut her up. Another line of the song and Mrs. Cartwright began to thrill a scale in time with Mona Lisa's piano playing. "Aaah-ah-ah-AH-ah-ah-ahah!" A sigh of admiration went up from the congregation. Reverend Cartwright shook his head from side to side. "Yes, my Lord, yes!" the voice in the back of the church cried out.

"Oh, that rooster squawking!" Valerie said when they had gotten into the car and driven off the church lot.

“Now, mind yourself,” Mr. Williams said. He drove the car down Fifth Avenue past the Kelly Ingram Park. Josie, sat on the side of the car away from the park, but strained to look past Oscar and Valerie to see into the park. Just a few months earlier it had been the site of several large civil rights demonstrations, one of which she, without her parents knowing, had participated in. She could see trees that were still scarred where the pressurized water, shot at the demonstrators, had scraped the bark away. She caught her father looking at her in the rear view mirror.

“I think Mrs. Cartwright was only trying to educate us,” Mr. Williams said.

Mrs. Williams took the hat pins out her pill box hat, took the hat off of her head and patted her hair. “She surely did that!” Valerie’s cheeks filled with air and then she burst into a laugh. “All I meant”— said Mrs. Williams. “Well...what I meant was...the woman just *can’t* sing. Much less sing operatic singing. The girl’s playing was enough, but that singing. In a *Baptist* church, too.”

“Let’s not judge,” Mr. Williams said. Again, Josie caught her father looking at her in the mirror. People said she looked like her father and that made her feel good. She thought he was a handsome man. He was tall, light skinned but not quite yellow. He had soft curly hair which he parted and slicked down. A pencil thin mustache ran along his upper lip. “Oscar,” Mr. Williams called. “Do you like Chinese food?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’ve never had it?” Josie asked with surprise. “You’re from up North. I thought y’all had everything up there.”

“Well, we don’t.”

“I’m sure there are Chinese restaurants galore in Flint, Michigan,” Mr. Williams said. “It’s just that Oscar hasn’t gotten around to eating at one. You are in for a treat, today.”

“Yay! Joy Young,” Valerie said. “I already know what I am having.”

Due to the one way streets in downtown, Mr. Williams took a right on Nineteenth Street, a left on Third Avenue, and left again on Twentieth Street bringing them beside the art deco styled restaurant. A tall neon sign in the middle of the façade, in a script suggesting Chinese writing read “Chop Suey.” Under it, standing on an awning that ran the length of the building in large red letters of the same script was “Joy Young” and under that along the front of the awning was printed “seafood RESTAURANT private booths.”

“Do you think we can get a private booth?” Oscar asked.

“No,” Valerie protested. “Nobody would see us.” They only went to restaurants once in a while and had been to Joy Young’s only once before.

“No Sweetie,” Mrs. Williams said, turning to Oscar. “I suspect it would cost too much.” She turned to Valerie. “Who would you want to be seen by, young lady?”

“She might have a beau,” Mr. Williams said and chuckled. “Besides, I want to be seen, too. Joy Young’s a nice place. One of the nicest restaurants in Birmingham and they serve Negros. They always have been integrated. Always have treated us fairly.”

“I’ve heard they’ve had trouble with the KKK.”

“But not because they serve Negros. But because they are Chinese.”

“What’s the KKK?” Oscar asked.

Josie rolled her eyes and sighed. *What a dumbbell!* Oscar was nine years old and she was ten, but at nine she had known many things he didn’t. “You live in a box?”

“Josie, let’s not judge,” Mr. Williams said.

“Yes, let’s go in and have some chop suey!” Valerie said.

Mr. Williams parked the car in front of the Tutwiler Hotel, across the street from the restaurant.

“Do you reckon we ought to park here?” Mrs. Williams asked. “Wouldn’t this be reserved for hotel guests?”

“It’s public parking,” Mr. Williams said. “Besides the Tutwiler is on its last legs. Nobody stays here these days. Oh, it used to be the grand place, but look at it—it looks like it’s about to implode.”

“Still, I don’t want to get a ticket.”

“It’s Sunday. Parking’s free.”

“It’s just that we’ve never parked here before and I wouldn’t want to get into any trouble with any white people.”

Mr. Williams shut off the engine, paused, and then started it up again. “If you wish, my dear, we’ll go down a block or two. But downtown is integrated now.” Again, Josie saw him glance up at her in the mirror. He smiled. “Thanks in no small part to our own little demonstrator.”

“Oh, please, Raymond, don’t bring that up. We want to have a nice Sunday supper and relax.”

They found a parking space in the next block, and Mr. Williams led the way into Joy Young’s. A woman wearing a long green dress greeted them and showed them to a table. Josie liked the dress with its shiny brocade material. The design had small branches of blooms on it. The dining room was not very full as it was still only a little after three and early for dinner. Mrs. Williams liked to have Sunday dinner early. The tables next to them were empty, but nearby sat a family of white people. They looked up as the Williams family took their

seats. Mr. Williams nodded to them, and the man at the table nodded back. Josie cleared her throat as the hostess presented the menu to her. “Thank you,” she said, taking the menu. “I like your dress.”

“Ahh, thank you, you little girl.” The woman smiled, her face set with wrinkles. “It is called ‘qipao’.” She said the name of the dress again slowly. “Chee-pow.” Then she looked at Mrs. Williams and back to Josie. “You can call it Chinese long dress. Enjoy your meal.”

The menu consisted of chop suey, chow mein, and egg foo yong with choices of chicken, pork or beef. There was American food, too, hot dogs and hamburgers.

“Egg rolls,” whispered Josie, and Valerie agreed.

“I don’t like eggs,” said Oscar.

“You’ll like these eggs,” said Mr. Williams. “They are rolled.”

“I want fried chicken.”

“I can fry chicken for you,” Mrs. Williams said. “You’ll try something new. We’ll all order something different and share. Think of it as an education.”

“Now, who’s trying to be Mrs. Cartwright?” Mr. Williams said.

“I’m not pretentious about it. Putting on airs and fluttering my eyelids.”

“Or walking all tippy-toed like a plastic doll baby,” Josie piped in. “We ought to call Mona Lisa, tippy toes.”

“Now. Now.” Mr. Williams admonished. “We shouldn’t be judgmental.”

“I am not being judgmental,” Mrs. Williams said. “I just don’t like arrogance.”

They hushed when the waiter approached the table and poured water. He was a black man as all of Joy Young's waiters were. Mr. Williams and the man greeted each other familiarly, though they did not know each other. When it was time to order, Mrs. Williams took control and ordered for them. It didn't take long for the food to start coming. First crispy egg rolls that Josie dipped in duck sauce.

"Duck sauce?" Oscar frowned. "It's made from ducks?"

"Just from their brains," Mr. Williams said. He was trying to use his chopstick and dropped a piece of egg roll on the table beside his plate. Mrs. Williams gave him the stare and he quickly picked it up with his fingers and ate it.

Mrs. Williams leaned toward the center of the table and whispered. "You know what they already think of us. You don't have to prove it."

"It's more like jelly," Josie said of the sauce. She encouraged Oscar to eat the eggroll.

"Use your knife and fork, please," Mrs. Williams said, smiled and looked around the restaurant.

"Just relax dear," Mr. Williams said. "This is like fried chicken. It's meant to be eaten with the fingers." He picked up what remained of his eggroll between his thumb and index fingers, plunked it into a pool of duck sauce on his plate and bit into it. It crackled and crunched in his mouth. "Yum."

"Yum," said Oscar, eating his eggroll with his fingers.

"That's a boy." Mr. Williams said. "It's good to have experiences. That's what life is for. To experience new things. To travel to new places and eat new foods. Wouldn't you just love to go to China?"

“I would,” Josie said. “I would love to go see the Great Wall and the Yellow River. I think they would be pretty. I would just love to wear a “chee-pow” like that lady has on.” She pointed toward the hostess wearing the long dress.”

“Please, don’t point.” Mrs. Williams dabbed the napkin on her lips. A little of her red lipstick came off on it.

“One day, you shall!” said Mr. Williams. “That is what I hope for all of you children that you can do whatever you want and Bull Connor or Governor Wallace won’t have a thing to say about it.”

“Who is Bull—?”

“Please,” Mrs. Williams said sharply and glanced around. “Let’s talk about nicer things.”

Just then the waiter came out bearing a tray with the food and placed steaming dishes at the center of the table. “Anything else I can bring you?”

“Oh, gracious,” said Mrs. Williams looking at the food. “I think this is more than sufficient.” She suggested the children eat with forks, since they were likely to make a mess with the chopsticks. Josie wanted to use the chopsticks and her father said that she should try. She tried several times, the food always dropping back to the plate before it got to her mouth. Mrs. Williams signaled the hostess, who smiling, took Josie’s hand in hers and helped her position the chopsticks. She did the same for Oscar and the others followed her instructions. Soon they were all eating with the chopsticks. Josie ate until she was very full.

Leaving the restaurant, they talked happily. Mr. Williams pointed out the three flags flying high atop of the Tutwiler hotel. The flags had a large red “X” from end to end on a white background.”

“What kind of flag is that?” Oscar wanted to know.

“It’s the Alabama flag,” Josie told him. “It represents the cross of St. Andrew, one of the twelve disciples.”

“I thought it was a Confederate flag!” Oscar said.

Valerie said, “It might as well be for what it’s worth.” She opened the car door. “Hot. The car has to cool down.”

“I left the windows cracked,” said Mrs. Williams. “I guess we parked in the sun, though.” They opened all the doors on the Buick to let the hot air out. The

Buick was Mr. Williams’s pride and joy. It was a 1961 four-door Buick Invicta that he had purchased new just two years earlier. Sea green in color, it was a square, roomy car, with fins running from front to back and a large windshield and rear window. More boat than car.

“The Tutwiler used to be a palace. They say it has a great ball room with crystal chandeliers. Movie stars used to stay there. Those flags used to be American flags, not Alabama state flags. When I first moved to Birmingham, they were American flags.”

They settled into the car, the girls at each window and Oscar in the middle. Mr. Williams was still talking about the Tutwiler when there was a muffled boom and the ground shook just perceptively.

“What was that?” Valerie asked.

Nobody answered. After a moment, Mrs. Williams said. “We’d better go home.”

Chapter 2: Another House Bombing

They weren't home ten minutes, when the phone rang. "Oh lord!" Mrs. Williams said, standing up from the chair where only moments before she had sat and kicked off her shoes. "Everybody's all right, though?"

Mr. Williams stopped in his tracks the middle of the den and looked at his wife. The children, who were on their way to change their clothes, stopped and looked at her, too. When she hung up the phone, Mrs. Williams sat back down with a thump. "That noise we heard. That was them blowing up Ceya's house. Cecilia, called Ceya, was Mrs. Williams's sister. She lived in Fountains Heights, just on the north side of downtown, whereas the Williamses lived in Titusville, just to the south of downtown. "Everybody's all right. Thank God, they weren't at home."

"Momma!" Josie said with alarm and came to the side of her mother's chair.

Mrs. Williams took Josie's hand and squeezed it lightly. The squeeze made Josie feel better, though her stomach was jumpy and the egg foo young and chow mein seemed to have been pushing their way back to her mouth. "They are OK. They called from the neighbor's. Uncle Ed is fixing to drive them over as soon as he finishes talking to the police."

"The police? They likely did it." Mr. Williams said. He paced to door between the den and the kitchen, turned and paced back into the den. The den was a bright room with a large bay window with a settee. It was paneled in wide board of knotty pine, which glistened in the afternoon sun. "I guess I'll need to go over there."

“I guess, you won’t,” Mrs. Williams said. She had pulled Oscar into her lap and was holding his head against her shoulder and stroking it. “There’s nothing to be afraid of,” she said to him.” Then to Mr. Williams, “Raymond, if Ed needed you he would have said so. They are coming over here, and so don’t get hot headed and act a fool.”

“I’m acting a fool? I didn’t blow up somebody’s house. And why do you reckon?”

“I don’t know.”

“I know,” said Valerie. She had been standing in the door way between the den and the hall to the bedrooms. “It’s because Diana applied to go to the University of Alabama.” Diana, a college student, was Aunt Ceya’s and Uncle Ed’s daughter and only child.

“Since when?” Mrs. Williams asked. “Where did you hear that from?”

“She told me she was going to. She said that her daddy paid the same taxes as a white man and she had the grades so why couldn’t she go?”

“What’s wrong with Alabama State?” Mrs. Williams said. “I thought she liked it there.”

“She didn’t say she didn’t like it,” Valerie said. Her tone was just a little sharp. “She just said that she wanted to go to Alabama and that it was her right.”

Mr. Williams sighed heavily. “I can’t say that it isn’t. But there are consequences for that kind of thing. She needed to have organized it. Now, she could have gotten herself, and her folks and who knows who else killed. She ought to have known that the KKK wouldn’t take it lying down. Not with Wallace blocking door to the college.” A few weeks earlier, Governor Wallace had tried to stop black students from registering for classes at the University of Alabama

by standing in the doorway with guards from the state police. “It took the President of the United States just to get two of us registered.”

Oscar sat up in Mrs. Williams’s lap and looked around the room, his eyes wide and shiny. “What’s the KKK?” he asked, peering first at Mr. Williams and then at Josie.

“They are a very bad bunch of people,” Mrs. Williams said. “They don’t like Negroes who try to make progress so they try to scare us.”

“They do more than just scare,” Mr. Williams said. He left the den and in a second they heard him slam the screen door to the kitchen.

Mrs. Williams stroked Oscar’s head again. “Don’t you worry about it, baby. They aren’t going to hurt you. You aren’t going to give them any reason to.” Gently, she pushed Oscar from her lap. Now, you children go and change your clothes before Aunt Ceya gets here.

The back of the house had three bedrooms, one for the parents, and one for each of the girls. When adult company came, the girls doubled in Josie’s room where there was a bunk bed. Since Oscar wasn’t an adult, he slept in Josie’s lower bunk, the one she used as a sofa.

“Don’t look at me,” Josie warned Oscar, as she pulled her dress and slip over her head. Quickly, she put on short pants and a tee shirt. “Now you can look.”

Oscar turned away from the wall and sat in the chair to pull off his shoes. His face trembled a bit.

“Don’t cry.” Josie patted him on the shoulder. “They don’t bomb in this neighborhood. We never see KKK over here.”

“What *is* the KKK?” Oscar, comforted now, toed off his shoes and began to pull down his pants. “Aren’t you going to look the other way?”

“No.”

“I didn’t look at you.”

“You weren’t supposed to. You are in my room. Besides, you are a boy and I am a girl. A girl can look at a boy, but a boy can never, never look at a girl. Those are the rules. I didn’t make them and I won’t break them.” She sat on the edge of the lower bunk and crossed her legs. “I can’t believe you don’t know what the KKK is. Don’t you have them in Flint, Michigan? They are a bunch of white people who hate Negroes. They dress up in white sheets and put on masks that look like ghosts with pointed heads. If you are a Negro who does something they don’t like, then they will burn a cross in your yard as a warning.”

“Burn a cross? You mean like a church cross?”

“Yes. Like the cross that Jesus our Savior died on. I don’t know how they get away with it. You would think that Christian people wouldn’t let it happen. Maybe if they burned something that belonged to the devil, like a pitchfork, then it would be better. But the cross of Jesus Christ, that doesn’t seem right to me at all. If you don’t stop doing what they don’t like, they bomb your house or shoot you or hang you from a tree.”

Oscar’s eyes widen and he gulped. “They kill colored people.”

“Don’t say ‘colored.’ We say ‘Negro’ in this house.”

“Why? We are colored aren’t we?”

Josie sighed and slapped her palm to the side of her face. “What *do* they teach you in Flint, Michigan? You don’t know anything about civil rights, do you? ‘Colored’ is so old fashioned. First of all, it’s countrified. City people don’t use that word. Next, it’s ignorant. Everybody, even white people have got a color. If you are the least bit educated, you say “Negro.”

“We *do* say ‘Negro’ in Flint.”

“Then say it. And put on your pants, for Pete’s sake. And yes. They do kill Negroes.”

Oscar stood up, his pants bunched around his ankles. “I’m scared. I want to go home.”

“They kill Negroes in Flint, Michigan, too. So going home won’t help you.” She hopped off the bed and put both hands on his shoulders. “Listen, cousin. Let me tell you how it is. I’m older than you so I know. You can always be scared or you can do something about being scared. That’s what Diana told me last year and she’s right. That’s why I marched in the demonstrations back in May. Talk about being scared! I was *scared*. But I wasn’t scared at the time. I guess I knew I was doing something about being scared.”

“I heard something about that.”

“I bet you did. I heard your momma almost didn’t let you come to visit because she was afraid I would be a bad influence on you.” Josie took her hands from Oscar’s shoulders. “Well, I hope I am. Diana said we have to be bad sometimes to be good. Only problem was I was almost made a criminal. The school board didn’t want to let me go back to school.”

“For real?”

“For real, before God. Put on your clothes and I will tell you about it.”

Oscar alternated standing on one foot and then the other to pull off his church pants and put on shorts. When he was dressed, he sat on the lower bunk. Josie sat crisscross facing him and began her story.

End of the Excerpt