



The Last Resort: Taking the Mississippi Cure (Willie Morris Books in Memoir and Biography)

Norma Watkins

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Raised under the racial segregation that kept her family's southern country hotel afloat, Norma Watkins grows up listening at doors, trying to penetrate the secrets and silences of the black help and of her parents' marriage. Groomed to be an ornament to white patriarchy, she sees herself failing at the ideal of becoming a southern lady.

The Last Resort, her compelling memoir, begins in childhood at Allison's Wells, a popular Mississippi spa for proper white people, run by her aunt. Life at the rambling hotel seems like paradise. Yet young Norma wonders at a caste system that has colored people cooking every meal while forbidding their sitting with whites to eat.

Once integration is court-mandated, her beloved father becomes a stalwart captain in defense of Jim Crow as a counselor to fiery, segregationist Governor Ross Barnett. His daughter flounders, looking for escape. A fine house, wonderful children, and a successful husband do not compensate for the shock of Mississippi's brutal response to change, daily made manifest by the men in her home. A sexually bleak marriage only emphasizes a growing emotional emptiness. When a civil rights lawyer offers love and escape, does a good southern lady dare leave her home state and closed society behind? With humor and heartbreak, *The Last Resort* conveys at once the idyllic charm and the impossible compromises of a lost way of life.

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