

# Fresh Face

## *Emerging author pens a winner*

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### *Suspended Sentences*

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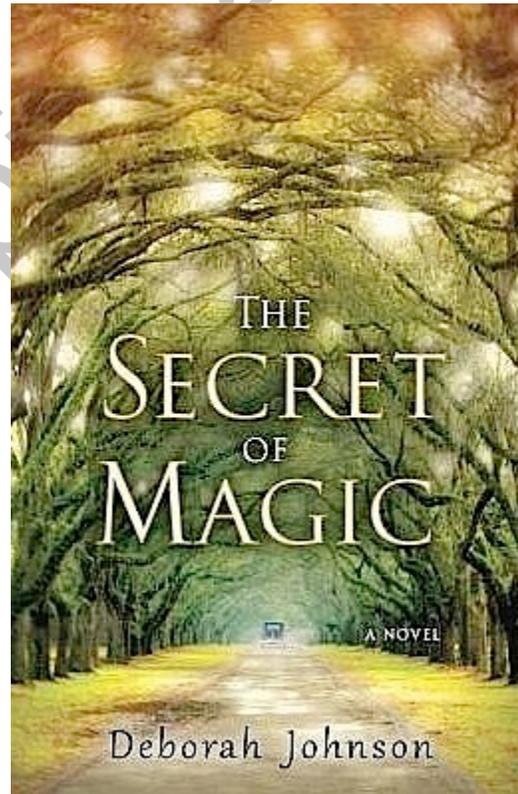
by Jim Napier

It is a happy day when a reader discovers that very rare thing, a piece of literary fiction that's also a cracking good crime novel. It is also only the author's second novel, holding out the elusive promise of even greater things to come, and these spur the reader on to revel in the carefully-chosen word, the subtle images, and even more subtle reflections found in enduring writing.

It is October of 1945. A black man, Lieutenant Joe Howard Wilson, is returning home on an interstate bus from the war in Europe, passing through Alabama on his way to his hometown of Revere, Mississippi. When he nods off he relives a moment of the war, the death of a friend, and awakens, startled, and the small boy next to him asks if he's all right.

In the manner of the day, the bus is segregated: whites in the front seats, coloured folks in the back. Joe Howard recalls the first time he'd gone to Alabama, when he was five years old. It is not a happy thought: for miles he and his

daddy had followed an aging Ford pickup decorated with no less than thirteen Confederate flags. Even at the age of five, Joe Howard knew what those flags stood for.



When the bus stops in the small town of Aliceville, Alabama, he knows he is less than thirty miles from home, and begins to breathe easier: soon he'll be reunited with his father, Willie Willie, who was

understandably proud of his son, one of a very few black men to achieve officer rank, and one of even fewer to be awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for heroism in the Italian Campaign.

But before they leave Aliceville, a group of German POWs board the crowded bus, and their white prison guard orders Joe Howard to give up his seat. It's asking a lot: the Germans are the comrades of the same men who killed his war buddies, the same men whose racist values, had they prevailed, would have condemned him to death. He confronts the prison guard, openly challenging the unwritten laws that still define the Deep South, the mores that still refuse to acknowledge the results of the War Between the States, the rules that say *when a white man orders you to do something, boy, do it*. It is a fatal mistake: Joe Howard will never see his home, or his father, again. Instead his bloodied body will soon wash up on the banks of a nearby river.

A few months later in New York City a young, newly-minted urban lawyer named Regina Mary Robichard is sorting the mail in her office at the Legal Defense Fund, an arm of the fledgling NAACP, when she comes across an envelope addressed to her boss, Thurgood Marshall. Opening it she discovers a small pile of newspaper clippings and a

photograph of an old man and his son, the younger man proudly decked out in an Army uniform. In an accompanying letter a lady, clearly white and entitled, asks Marshall to come to Revere, Mississippi to look into the "unfortunate incident" that led to the death of Joe Howard Wilson, and offering to pay his expenses. It is a request that will come back to haunt her.

At first Marshall is disinclined to invest the limited staff resources of his office in the case. There are many, thousands even, of more clear-cut cases of racial prejudice coming to light in the aftermath of the war. They deserve attention too, and the prospect of using them to advance the Negro cause is more compelling. But ultimately he relents, realizing that his young protégé will learn more by leaving her northern roots behind and travelling to the soul of the Old South, than from all her years of legal training. He knows, better than she, that it is a journey that is fraught not only with promise, but with peril.

With a strong yet poetic voice, grounded in the personalities and events that defined postwar America, and evoking echoes of such classics as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Mississippi Burning*, Deborah Johnson offers an atmospheric, nuanced, and layered tale that is also a penetrating account

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of life in the postwar South. She has a finely-honed narrative voice that captures perfectly the measured cadence of the Old South – where everyone knows their place and the unspoken rules that govern it. She is no less adept at portraying a rich range of characters, from M. P. Calhoun, the flinty white woman who, it turns out, has penned a classic portrait of the

South, to the arrogant and powerful white men who run the community with apparent impunity. It is a fine story, one that will enlighten as well as entertain; and if you don't come away profoundly moved, then shame on you.

*The Secret of Magic* is published by G. P. Putnam (Penguin Group).

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Since 2005 Jim Napier's reviews and interviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and on various crime fiction and literary websites, including his own award-winning site, *Deadly Diversions*. He can be reached at [jnapier@deadlydiversions.com](mailto:jnapier@deadlydiversions.com)



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