

Book Review: Mockingbird Summer
By Lynda Rutledge

Over the years I've frequently heard folks who were born in the 1980s or later say how lucky I was to have experienced the 1960s. Often they rave about the great music produced during that decade.

There's no question (in my opinion) that the music of the '60s was pretty incredible. But there was more to that era than good music. Much more.

The '60s were tumultuous years, marred by segregation, assassinations, war and racial protests – a wake-up call to the changes happening around us.

That's the setting for Lynda Rutledge's novel "Mockingbird Summer," a coming-of-age story that balances the peace and love decade with some of the explosive realities of the time. And it does so at a high level.

It's the summer of 1964, and the setting is High Cotton, Texas, a small town where the railroad tracks literally divide the population into the white, more affluent families on the north side of the tracks, and the black and less affluent on the south side.

Kate "Corky" Corcoran is a 13-year-old tomboy who exemplifies the innocence of youth. She doesn't know what she doesn't know. But her view of the world, and herself, begin to change dramatically when the local librarian suggests she read "To Kill a Mockingbird." Immediately thereafter, her family hires a Haitian housekeeper whose 16-year-old daughter, America, runs as fast as the wind.

Corky, together with a local pastor, enthusiastically recruit America to play with her girls' softball team in the annual church rivalry game. Corky's team has never won the summer classic, though with America she feels this year's result will be different.

The racial tensions surface immediately. A south side girl is going to literally cross the tracks to play with the north side girls? Members of the small town, both adults and teenagers, are determined to make sure that doesn't happen.

Corky doesn't understand why America's participation is a problem. It's just a softball game, after all. But the softball game is a microcosm of the country's larger racial divide that is boiling over. As tensions escalate beyond verbal taunts and abuse, Corky experiences painful lessons that will impact her for years to come.

I grew up in the '60s, albeit in a much larger urban community, but I can relate to this very accurate and well-written depiction of life during this decade of change. When Corky's mother wants to get a job, her husband reminds her, "I'm the man of the house," and forbids her from working. Sounds archaic today, but it was a very real part of women's struggles to find their voice.

Similarly, when we chose up sides for softball or basketball games, it didn't matter what color your skin was. If you wanted to play, you played. Sports, and perhaps our own innocence of youth, made it seem very simple.

Perhaps that's one of the key messages in this story. Whether it's on the softball field or elsewhere, we can only make inroads as a society when we refuse to accept things as they are simply because that's how they have always been. We cross the line, whether on the softball field or other aspects of our lives, to bring about positive change.

I thoroughly enjoyed "Mockingbird Summer" and give it 4 out of 5 stars. I welcome your feedback and sharing your thoughts (through the Contact tab) if you engage this excellent novel.