

# Block Party

JEWELL PARKER RHODES

**W**e lived in the dark green hills of Pittsburgh where the smoke from J. L. Steel dusted our clothes gray and blanketed the sky, causing sunsets to streak bright pink and orange. Streetcar wires crisscrossed overhead, making perches for the hungry crows who flew high when the lumbering cars came, spewing electric sparks. Sometimes we'd put pennies in the metal tracks and wait for them to be squashed flat as the streetcars rumbled over them, carrying passengers down the hills into the heart of the city that rested by the three rivers: Ohio, Monongahela, and Allegheny.

But what I remember most about growing up in Pittsburgh was living in a neighborhood where everyone acted like a relative—an aunt, an uncle, a brother, or a sister. Lots of women acted like my mother, bossing me, feeding me. Many would hold me on their laps and tell me stories about High John the Conqueror or John Henry. Some felt no shame about whipping out a comb and fixing my hair when they thought I looked too raggedy. And days when I was lucky, one of my neighborhood mothers would jump in the circle and join me in a waist-twisting, hip-rolling hula-hoop.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes it drove me crazy to have so many mothers, but it also made me feel safe. My real mother was gone—divorced from us—living in another city. But I lived with my dad, my grandparents, an aunt, a sister, and a cousin whom I called sister.

1. hula-hoop [hū'lə hūp]: a brand name for a ring-shaped, plastic toy that is spun around the hips, introduced in the 1950s.

Dad, Aunt, and Grandpa went off to work while Grandma took care of us. On Tuesdays, she did laundry in the basement and she let us stir the Argo starch and turn the roller drums to wring out all the wet in the clothes. Then we'd help hang the clothes on the line and, when the sheets were dry, she turned a blind eye while we played hide and seek among them. In the house we'd hike to the third floor and slide down the two banisters, smooth and fast, convinced it was better than any roller coaster ride at Kennywood Park.

We had a red tricycle with a bell. My sister, Tonie, had outgrown it. I was just the right size, while cousin Aleta was too small. But when Grandma made chitlins,<sup>2</sup> we would share the bike and make a game of driving through the stinking kitchen while Grandma cleaned out the pig's guts (yuck!) and boiled them. We'd ride our bike through dangerous territory, ringing our bell once we hit the kitchen linoleum, hollering and hooting like "wild ones"—or, as Grandma would say, like "Silly children with no sense!" If you held your nose you couldn't ring the bell and steer at the same time. So we'd count how many bells to figure out who won, who braved the skunky odor and didn't hold their nose the most.

The best part of growing up was the world we saw from our front stoop. Widow Chalmers mothered all the children, watching over us from her porch, waving her fan from the Methodist Church to cool herself in the summer heat. Mr. Berry, who had a splotch of pink roses on his cheek, liked checkers and would roam the street looking for a partner, carrying his own lawn chair. He even played with Aleta, who was five and had to be told every move. There was Jim, who played ball, spinning, ducking and diving, and throwing hoops into a basketball net and would only stop if someone was in any trouble. "Jim, my car stalled." "Jim, can you drive me to the grocery?" "Jim, my sink is clogged." Jim later joined the Army and came home and dunked three baskets in his clod-hopper<sup>3</sup> black shoes and khaki uniform. My sister Tonie, at eleven, swore she'd marry him.

2. **chitlins** [chit' linz]: the intestines of pigs, cooked as food.

3. **clod-hopper** [klod' hop' əɹ]: strong, heavy shoe.

Stuck-up Rachel liked to cheat at Jacks and had to be blackmailed into playing Double Dutch.<sup>4</sup> “I’ll give you some of Grandma’s chicken from Sunday dinner,” I’d offer. I promised a drumstick for each twenty minutes she turned the rope while I sang and dreamed of winning Double Dutch Champion at the “Y.” Truth be told, Grandma would have given anyone who asked a piece of her chicken. Rachel knew it, I knew it. Everyone knew it. But Rachel was two years older than I and, like another big sister, she was nice enough to let me think I was putting one over on her.

Sitting on the steps, looking up and down the block, I saw and felt a world where I was safe, where I knew everybody and everybody knew me. Everybody was brown and black and when babies were born, we’d all wait for them to grow into their skin. Their shades would sometimes grow lighter, sometimes darker. Even the color of their eyes would change—blue became brown, hazel changed to deep green, and brown irises could mellow to a luminous black. Hair textures all varied: soft, bouncy, waves; strands curled in fuzzy, tight spirals; or even hair thick and straight because of a throwback to a Cherokee.<sup>5</sup> I knew we all were beautiful.

Summer block parties were the best. We’d close off traffic and sometimes the Fire Department would open the hydrants and we’d dance and sing while water gushed at us. A spray of wet beneath the moon and stars. Tonie, Aleta, and I pushed boxes together to make a stage and lipsynched to the record player, pretending we were The Supremes. “*Stop, in the name of love! Before you break my heart. Think it o-o-over! . . .*” and we’d giggle as the grown-ups clapped and the other children squealed, and everyone danced, even fat Charlie who could boogie so well you’d swear there was magic in his shoes.

The best block parties happened for no reason. Anyone—even a child—could wake up one day and call for “Block Party Day.” And we’d share ribs, corn, chicken, tater pie, and collard greens, and Miss

4. Double Dutch [dub’ əl duch]: a game of jump rope in which two people swing two ropes at the same time, usually in opposite directions.

5. Cherokee [cher’ ə kē’]: Native Americans of the southern Appalachians, now living mostly in Oklahoma.

Sarah who never married always made punch with vanilla ice cream and it would melt into a swishy mess. Finally, when legs wouldn't move another dance step, then the record player was taken away, the street was swept. There were cries and whispers of good night. My real family and I, we'd go into the house. Grandma, Grandpa, Aunt, and Daddy would tuck us in bed and kiss me, Tonie, and Aleta good night. And I would wait until Tonie and Aleta were asleep in the small twin beds (I didn't want them to think I was off my head) and I'd go to the window. Then, peeking over the ledge, I'd whisper my own private "G'night" to the rest of my family, tucked in their beds inside the tall houses all along my street, there in the city where the three rivers meet.



#### JEWELL PARKER RHODES

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Jewell Parker Rhodes teaches at Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona. Despite what she calls her "fondness for gloomy days," she lives with her family in the sunny Arizona desert.

As a child, some of Parker Rhodes's happiest times were block parties. "I loved lipsynching to records," she says, "and I often imagined I'd grow up to become a singer or an actress." Instead, in college she chose to earn degrees in drama criticism, English, and creative writing.

As a writer, Parker Rhodes says, "I can be anything and everything in my imagination." She has written scholarly nonfiction as well as magazine articles, stories, and a novel. She is a co-author of the school book series that includes this literature book.