



## October Suite

*Maxine Clair*

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"The air cools to crisp, carries sound farther. Last pears ripen and fall, ferment on the ground; the aroma of their wine mixes with the pungency of leaf smoke from nowhere and everywhere. At nightfall, the wing-song shrill of crickets announces that this season has a natural pathos to it, the brief and flaming brilliance of everything at the climax of life moving toward death.

"October Brown had named herself for all of that."

So begins this beautifully written coming-of-age story about a young woman who struggles to overcome her family's frightening legacy and keep her own child from similar emotional harm.

It is 1950 and October Brown is a twenty-three-year-old first-year teacher thanking her lucky stars that she found a room in the best boardinghouse for Negro women teachers in Wyandotte County, Kansas. October falls in love with an unhappily married handyman, James Wilson, but when she becomes pregnant, James deserts her. Stunned, and believing that James will eventually come back to her, October decides to have the baby. But he doesn't come back. As her reputation suffers, and with her job in jeopardy, she spends her days in self-deception and denial. Her best friend, Cora, contacts October's family: her older sister, Vergie, and her aunts Frances and Maude, who raised the sisters after their mother was killed by their father.

October goes back to her family in Ohio and gives birth to her son. Numb, she gives the child—David—to Vergie and her husband to raise as their own, then returns to Kansas City to rebuild her life. But something is missing—and, apparently too late, October realizes what she has done.

What follows is the heartrending account of October's efforts to reclaim her dignity, her profession, and her son, efforts that lead her into a bitter struggle with her sister and a confrontation with her parents' violent past. The Midwest, the flourishing of modern jazz, and the culture of segregation form a compelling historical backdrop for this timeless and universal tale of one person's battle to understand and master her own desires, and to embrace the responsibilities and promise of mature adulthood. *October Suite* plays a beautiful, haunting melody, turning everyday life into exceptional art.

## October Suite Details

Date : Published September 25th 2001 by Random House (first published 2001)

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Author : Maxine Clair

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## From Reader Review October Suite for online ebook

### A B says

I enjoyed this book for the most part, but didn't find it to be particularly noteworthy or a must-read of any sort. It took a few chapters for me to become interested and I nearly put it down. The central character is October Brown, a schoolteacher fresh out of college who has a sad and complicated past. She makes the mistake of thinking that an unplanned pregnancy will make the man she loves stay, and instead winds up with a child she feels nothing for. Her choice affects her career, friendships, and most of all, her relationship with her sister.

October's an interesting heroine. I liked that she struggled with her choices and accepted responsibility for them, unlike the archetype "strong" woman so overdone in literature who would have simply stormed in and done as she pleased, regardless of who she hurt. October's strength is showcased in the passive submission she makes. There's too much *deus ex machina* towards the end and I lost interest in the last 1/4 of the book, and felt the ending was too abrupt.

What I did find very interesting was the ridiculous work regulations for black and African-American female schoolteachers. I remember my grandmother telling me that women were usually required to quit teaching when they became pregnant, but black women were forced to quit from the moment they got married. The creative lengths these women went to to hide their marriages was heartbreaking.

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### Tina Landow says

I really enjoyed reading this book. Maxine Clair is a really good writer. The book describes black people's hurdles of the sixties and the main characters complicated life.

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### Jedah Mayberry says

I admire any writer's ability to conjure lifelike beings in their fiction. I read *Rattlebone* some years back. I came away with a lifelike impression of October Brown—proud, a bit self-absorbed in her view of the world. Cognizant that some of the choices she had made would ultimately be deemed callous, hard-hearted whether or not that had been her intention. *October Suite* steps in and tells the rest of the tale, explains what happened to October's heart, the ways she had adopted as a means to protect herself, to wall herself away from the disappointments that plagued her.

Maxine Clair possesses keenly honed insights into the human condition, explores the heights of ambition through to the depths of the lowest despair to reveal how a person got here, how she came to be the person she is today. Clair gives the same attention to detail when describing a shoe shine, the improvised runs in a jazz riff, how to sew a hem as she does to the care needed to mend a broken relationship between sisters, how at last to face the many buried truths keeping the two of them apart, how to move forward living in full light of the truth. You come away wanting for her characters the same way you imagine they might want for themselves.

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### **Katie says**

Great story about the hardships of an African-American teacher in the '50s. The main character has several ups and downs that take her through a life journey and lead her to a happy place. Great read.

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### **Beth says**

I loved this book! it is all about family relationships told through the experiences of two black sisters who are orphaned when their father murders their mother and is sent to prison. There is a lot of flashbacks, but it is well done and easy to follow--at least after I realized that sometimes you are listening to Carrie, their mother and sometime to the Aunts who raised them. I listened , which I felt added a lot because of the dialects being so well performed. Perhaps in print, there are indication when other voices are heard. The story is told mostly about October, the younger sister. It is beautifully written, I fell that i would recognize October if I met her on the street ( and she would be wearing something red, that she designed and sewed herself!

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### **Titilayo says**

great book. weak beginning that leads you down a well crafted path that brings these characters and their choices into the 4th dimension! the last paragraph sums it all up.

"the wept for the wonder of endings. though they could never shape happy endings, they could go toward them, and marvel at how the pieces come together and fall apart to make new beginnings."

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### **Courtney says**

October Suite is a beautifully written novel about a young woman who finds love, loses it, gives a part of that love away and struggles to get it back. Maxine Clair tells a story that will inspire readers to appreciate all the challenges life throws at you and learn to live with what you've got while fighting for what you believe is right. October Suite made me laugh, cry, and angry at the ways people of color were treated in the 1950s and the fight against discrimination that still remains today. I would recommend this book to all mothers and mothers-to-be or anyone looking for a non-traditional love story.

**Favorite Quote:** "...grace just is. Nobody can explain it, and it's not something you can deserve. Whether you recognize it or not, whether you feel grateful for it or not, it just is. Guilty or innocent, condemned or redeemed, when you think that you can't go on, and when you think that you've already gone on, grace is wider and deeper than you think, and it can change far more than you ever imagined.

There is no place where anything begins or ends, but by grace, everything comes in its time." (Chapter 27)

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### **Diane says**

1940's Ohio, a black woman named October gives birth to a son. Because the father is married to another woman, October gives the baby to her sister... and then regrets it. This is a story of family, love, regrets, and learning to live the choices you make. Set in the time of jazz and segregation.

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### **Mocha Girl says**

October Suite is a coming-of-age story about a young woman who struggles to deal with her family and relationship issues. Lillian "October" Brown and her sister, Vergie, are sheltered orphans raised by their two aunts because their father murdered their mother in their presence. The novel begins when October leaves home in 1950 for the first time to begin her life as an educator. Her naivety gets her into "trouble" and she returns home to give birth to her son by a married man. She allows her married, childless sister, Vergie, and her husband to adopt the child and tries to resume her life. Along the way, she deals with her curiosity and details surrounding her mother's death, the loss of her Aunts, the upbringing of her son, her career, her relationship with men and her sister.

The novel starts slowly but we see October as she matures, grows, and develops into a caring and smarter woman. The novel wraps up a little too quickly in my opinion with the door open for a sequel.

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### **Cinda Brea says**

Just completed Maxine Clair's novel October Suite and actually feel as if I have left someone near and dear to me behind. I listened to the novel through my local library and then purchased the hardback copy to read. I found October Brown and her family and friends completely captivating. I knew these people deep down in my core. Ms. Clair's descriptions of her characters were not laid out in long paragraphs with great detail but rather sprinkled throughout the novel. Each character changed and grew. I am a professed escapist reader. I forever tell myself that I prefer light reading: romance and mystery thrillers so I thought this book might be a bit heavy for me. It was heavy, deliciously heavy and deep, and so very realistic. October Suite is a story about the tragedy and love of family by both bloodline and choice. It's a story of grace and fate. It's a story about no one being right or wrong but people living the best way they know. Rich in descriptions of mid 20th century American culture, the novel transported me to a time I know so well although I am not familiar with the physical locations in which the story was set. I am so happy that I moved this novel up on my reading list.

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### **Shirley nature says**

Lyrical written and visually descriptive, I feel connected with the characters.

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### **Margarita says**

This was a wonderful and heartbreakng story of family loyalty and hardship. It was emotional without being sappy. It was one of those "quiet" books that will stay with you for a long time. I highly recommend, and since I agree with the reviewers who said it started out slowly - stick with it... it's well worth it.

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### **Martha Johnson says**

We read this for our book club. I enjoyed the setting, the terms for African American teachers in those days, some of the jazz context (although it is hard to get excited about reading about music instead of listening to it.) The story was a little to neat the way it circled around. It was also a little hard to understand her love affair. However, there is no question that there is pain in the plot line about whether to raise or give up a child. I think the character development was tricky because there is so much pathos in giving up a child that we are wrung out by that but the real story line is about sisters and their relationship. The love affair got diluted as a result and the competing emotions were not well explicated. I found everything went bland, instead, because the intensity couldn't be sustained. An admirable work and Clair picked quite a challenge.

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### **Rita says**

This mid-century, mid-western saga was quite a good read. October Brown was a young woman faced with a life altering decision. It was clear that she was not yet ready to take on the responsibility of a child. Giving up that child was the best decision for the time period. The story kept me interested til the very end.

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### **Diane Sugars says**

October Suite is a deep story with complex characters and intertwined storylines. The author breathes life into the characters and they seem to lift up off the page. October is a strong character and the story of her life is remarkable.

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