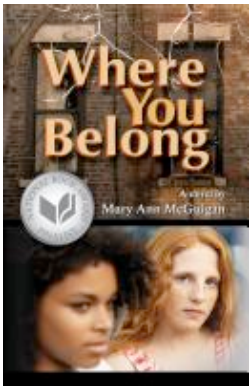
Where You Belong

NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST

A novel by

Mary Ann McGuigan



NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST. Where You Belong is the story of thirteen-year-old Fiona, in the Bronx in 1963, who runs away from her alcoholic father and a family that's been evicted. Alone, hungry, with no choices left, she wanders into the black neighborhood and finds her classmate Yolanda-and a journey of self-discovery begins. Together they learn that beyond the bigotry and chaos that adults leave behind lie reasons for hope, a place they can belong-to each other. Originally published in 1997 by Atheneum Books for Young Readers, Where You Belong was chosen by the National Book Foundation as finalist for the 1997 National Book Award for Young People's Literature. The New York Public Library also named the book to its list of Best Books for the Teen Age. In citing her work, the National Book Foundation wrote: "McGuigan limns the territory between divergent inner and outer landscapes and how individuals learn a tremulous courage to trust themselves and their experiences, despite the physical and psychological violence of the adult world. With sensitivity, empathy, and insight, McGuigan shows us that the young have the character and emotional acumen to recreate themselves and, in doing so, recreate history."

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PRAISE FOR
Where You Belong
and *Morning in a Different Place,* a sequel

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"In this deeply moving novel, McGuigan demonstrates a wonderful talent for creating emotionally complex characters, believable situations, and closely observed, realistic settings. That some of the plot situations remain unresolved reinforces the feeling of real life, which is one of the book's singular strengths, As for Fiona, she is an unforgettable character with a first-person voice that is marvelous in its understated artfulness and compelling in its emotional authenticity."

—Michael Cart, *Booklist* starred review of *Where You Belong*

"The urban setting [of *Where You Belong*] is nearly a character in itself.... McGuigan's characters are fully realized and emotionally complex, and they do not lend themselves easily to stereotyping or standard bearing. Any social

commentary is given from the perspective of a young adolescent who has already received too many hard knocks from an unkind world, and who is seriously questioning where her loyalties lie."

—The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books

"An insightful glimpse into the ravages wrought in an alcoholic family and the social pressures of the time. The characters are so well drawn and the story so engaging, it's obvious why this was a National Book Award finalist. *Where You Belong* will stay with you long after you close the cover."

—Telegraph Herald

"In *Morning in a Different Place*, the stage is set for a classic moral battle, but the results are never didactic. McGuigan's writing is spare and low-key, and her metaphors are acute: "When you're not wanted somewhere," she writes, "the feeling fills the place like a smell." History buffs will appreciate the visceral reminder of how much Kennedy's beliefs meant to the black community, and how devastating was his death.

—Daniel Kraus, *Booklist,* starred review

"McGuigan is as adept at evoking the class consciousness and racial politics of '60s New York as she is the horrors of adolescence, including insecurity and helplessness. With the twin evils of domestic violence and President Kennedy's assassination looming in the background, the author's portrait of the chameleonic nature of teenage girls builds aggressively to a powerful finale."

—Kirkus review of *Morning in a Different Place*

"McGuigan has created rich characters and tackles several uncomfortable social issues. Fiona's voice reverberates through a range of emotional highs and lows in this story of friendship, loyalty, trust, racism, and coping that culminates with the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Like Shana Burg's *A Thousand Never Evers*, the novel offers insight into a turbulent era."

—*School Library Journal* review of
Morning in a Different Place

Also by Mary Ann McGuigan

Cloud Dancer
Morning in a Different Place
Crossing Into Brooklyn

Where You Belong

Mary Ann McGuigan

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The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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First Edition

Jacket design by JoAnne Kanaval

For Maryann and Steff, friends always,
and for brother Bill, a dreamer sometimes

Acknowledgments

Thanks so much to JoAnne Kanaval for creating such a beautiful jacket design.

And many thanks to my son Douglas Pritchard for hours spent retyping the manuscript.

Many thanks to Rocco Mastronardo
for helping me remember the Bronx.

ONE

Mama had convinced herself—and us—that they would never go through with it. But the eviction notice said the marshal would arrive at 8:00, and he did. At first Mama tried stopping him with lies. "Mr. Levine said he'll wait for the rent. He told me himself. I spoke to him yesterday."

"I'm sorry, ma'am," the marshal told her, but he wasn't. He put his badge back into the vest of his dark suit and started his work for the day—October 11, 1963.

Mama's still at him, but Cait knows better. She's busy packing boxes, stuffing everything she can into the cartons Owen got from the grocery store.

This was our first apartment on our own, 1974 Mapes Avenue, just a little ways from Tremont Avenue, three rooms for the five of us. You can walk to the Bronx Zoo from here. It's the only place my mother could afford on her own. This neighborhood used to be all Irish and Jewish. Now there are a lot of Puerto Ricans, even some colored. Mama says they're ruining the neighborhoods, and the Jews are moving to Long Island. On Bryant Avenue, south of here, where my father lives, there are even more colored and Puerto Ricans. My parents get really upset about spics and niggers. That's what they call them. They act as if these people are taking something away from us. But really there's nothing much to take. Whatever it is my parents think we had, it's gone now. We hardly even look at each other anymore.

Cait's fifteen; Owen, nine. I'm thirteen, as tall as Cait and built like a pole. She calls me Carrothead because of my hair. Liam's seventeen, broad-shouldered, as tall as Daddy, sullen. He misses the old neighborhood—Bathgate Avenue, up near 187th Street—where he could sing a cappella in the hall with Big Al and Guido. It was safe there, almost all Italian. Now he leaves his dirty clothes for Cait to pick up and sings Clovers songs in a falsetto voice as he struts through the apartment, getting ready to go out. By the time he leaves, he's his make-believe self. Tough.

But I know what's underneath. I've watched him lean over the turntable and place the needle on the song he wants to hear, slip his hands palms down beneath his thighs, and rock against the armchair's deadened springs, back and forth and back and forth to the rhythm he needs so badly. When he closes his eyes, all the feelings he's hidden come out in the way he sings.

Before we left Daddy, Mama sometimes had us sing while we waited for him to come home. We never knew how drunk he'd be when he got in or what he'd do. Maybe he'd be sleepy; that's what everybody hoped. But mostly he'd have things to say, angry things that he'd saved up from days and days of not speaking at all or even looking at anyone. Then the slightest thing could trigger it—Liam answering back or Mama nagging, even a lightbulb deciding to blow. It didn't take much and then he'd go into a rage: lamps flying tables crashing, and always, always Mama getting a beating. It was like a kind of roulette, except you couldn't decide not to play. You were stuck in the game whether you liked it or not.

To keep our minds off the fear, Mama would get us to sing together. There were nights when the songs worked even for Daddy, times when he would keep the door from

slamming and stagger over to our circle. No interruptions. No hello. Only the voice we'd forgotten was missing.

But now Cait is packing our stuff and Liam's cramming his 45s back into their dust jackets. He's already dressed, and has filled a gym bag with clothes. He picks up his skinny comb and slides it into this back pocket, tucks a can of Barbasol into the corner of the bag. He's got the last of our toothpaste, too. He stuffs his record case with a many 45s as it can hold and tucks it between the handles of the gym bag. Then he slips another batch of records under his arm, picks up the gym bag with his other hand, and moves toward the apartment door. I figure he's leaving, but he stops at the closet first, the narrow one by the door, and reaches inside on the highest shelf for something else he wants. I can't tell what it is because it's in a plain brown bag, except I can see that it's small, no bigger than his fist really. He sees me watching him and gives me his toughest look. "Don't you say nothin'," he says, then leaves.

I go into the bedroom and find the uniformed moving man standing before the dresser I share with Cait, gathering in his broad black hands all the little perfume bottles and jewelry cases we've collected. The clothes I forgot to put away last night are still in the corner of the room, so I pick them up. I don't want those hands on my petticoat, don't want him to see how frayed my panties are.

After he leaves, I go to the spot where the dresser was, my clothes rolled into a ball against my chest. The man has placed the things from our dresser into a shopping bag, and the jewelry cases have come open; our chains and beads lie tangled among the bottles of perfume. One of the bottles has broken and the smell of Midnight Passion in the room makes what's happening all at once even more ridiculous.

The flowers in the linoleum haven't grayed here. Balls of dust are woven around things we've lost, forgotten: an earring, a pen, a spool of thread. A fifty-cent piece is indented into the floor. I get it out and take it to Mama. She's in the kitchen, searching the bottom of her pocketbook for loose change. Four dollars, two quarters, some nickels and a dime lie here and there on the table before Cait. "Mama," I say.

"Not now, Fiona. For Christ's sake, not now."

The marshal's heavy steps pound through the apartment, echoing through the empty rooms. He hesitates in the kitchen doorway, uncertain whether to come in. Maybe he thinks there's something private about this family circle, some line he hasn't already crossed. "Is someone coming to pick up your things?"

"I'm calling a storage company," Mama answers.

"Better have someone stay downstairs until they get here," he says, and walks away.

"Fiona, you better go down," Mama says wearily.

•

The morning light is thin, hardly warm at all. The men have placed the boxes and the furniture on the sidewalk, and the two Puerto Rican kids from across the street are playing on the couch.

"Get off there, Carlos," I yell and they dive off the back of the chair and scramble away. The furniture on the sidewalk makes me feel like a stranger. The mattresses and the cushions and the skinny-legged tables look alien. I don't want to belong to these things anymore. I can't wait for someone to take them away.

I sit at the top of the stoop, as far away from the stuff as I can get. Now and then someone passes by—someone about to have a day like any other—looks from the furniture to me, my

legs held tightly together, my arms folded across my chest. I try not to see beyond my knees. I take the coin from the little purse I keep in my shoulder bag. The bag used to be Cait's, but now it's mine; sometimes I get lucky and find loose change at the bottom. But there's nothing today, only the coin from under the dresser. I move it between my fingers, glad I haven't given it to Mama. I like the feel of it, the hardness, the idea that no one can take it away.

Liam comes over from across the street, rests his bag on the arm of a chair. I drop my coin into my bag. "Come on. We'll go home," he says.

"You mean to Daddy?"

"Yeah."

"I can't. Mama ... what will Mama say?"

"I'm going back," he says, shaking the last cigarette out of a pack. "If you wanna come, I'll take you." He lights up, cupping the tip of the cigarette from the wind. He doesn't seem the least bit concerned that Mama might come out at any moment and find him smoking.

I'm afraid to go with him, yet the idea of getting out of here feels so good. "Will Daddy be home?" I ask.

"He's probably at the gas station. We won't see him till he gets in. Who knows when that will be."

"What if he's drunk?"

"He won't go for you." He takes a hard drag on the cigarette and waves the idea away as if it's no big deal. "I'm the one who'll get it."

It hurts when he says this, because we all know it, that Liam gets most of the beatings. He gets it almost as much as Mama used to, but that's because he steps in between them all the time, to stop him. Daddy never hits me, only Mama, Liam, and Owen, even Cait sometimes. I don't know why. Maybe he likes to have someone watching. When it's

happening, I feel like I'm not really there, not even really in my own skin. I'm just a pair of eyes, watching.

"I can't leave," I tell him, and concentrate on my socks. They're Liam's, too big for me.

"Then don't." Liam gathers his stuff and leaves me there. He gets halfway down the block before I make up my mind to go with him.

We walk, saying nothing. I could be any kid walking with her big brother—a kid with a room, a dog, a phone number, things to do that day. But I know I'll never be a kid like that. No matter how many times we start over, the ache in our faces gives us away. I'm no one. There's no more to it than that. All I know is that it feels better with Liam, better than the smell of Midnight Passion. Better than Mama scrounging for dimes. Better than the sofa in the street.

TWO

Daddy still lives in our old apartment, the top floor of a two-family house on Bryant Avenue, a long way from here on the other side of Boston Road near 174th Street. We get to Southern Boulevard; the wind is strong here. I offer to carry Liam's record case, but he lets no one touch his records. He gives me his gym bag instead.

"And here," he says. "Have you got room for this in your pocketbook?" It's the little brown package.

"What is it?" I say, taking it from him. It's heavier than it looks.

"Belongs to a friend of mine. I have to return it." I tuck it inside my bag and pull the strap higher up my shoulder.

We pass Katz's deli. Even at this early hour of the morning, I can smell the knishes, or imagine I do. My fifty cents would buy us some Yankee Doodles, but I don't want to tell Liam I have it. I'm afraid he'll spend it on cigarettes. The wind is steady, cold, but he refuses to close his coat. I'm desperate for my hat, wonder if Cait has packed it away for storage by mistake.

We pass my school. It's too early for the kids to be there, but lights are on in some of the classrooms and I think I see someone in mine. I remember my homework is still in my book bag. No hat. No homework. I stop walking. "I have a math test tomorrow, Liam. Tomorrow's Friday."

"Not for us, it isn't." He pulls me along and I come more willingly this time, seeing that whether we go back or keep going is all the same.

The front door of our old house is locked and the bell is still broken so we walk down the narrow alley alongside. A porch off the living room of the apartment looks out over the yard, and wooden stairs lead to a door in the floorboards. Liam can climb up and get us in because the latch was broken long ago, but when we get to the back we see Daddy sitting on the porch. The sight of him scares me.

We watch, studying his movements. I haven't looked at his face in such a very long time, since long before we left him, and I'm hungry for it. Maybe Liam is too because he doesn't call his name. Daddy looks old sitting there, afraid, the way I've seen him look around people he doesn't know, as if he thinks they'll see the kind of man he is.

He's wearing his gray work uniform, one leg crossed over the other, staring past the antennae on the rooftops across the way. He can't be up very long; his cigarette trembles between his fingers. I want to run then, before he spots us, go back to the stoop and the furniture, wait for Mama. Liam grabs hold of my arm and calls to him. Daddy shoots up when he hears Liam's voice and leans over the railing.

"Get up here, you two. Your mother's been calling Mrs. Olsen." He goes back inside to let us through the front door.

"I don't want to stay. I want to go back," I tell Liam. My heart is pounding and I can hardly catch my breath.

Liam drags me back up the alley. "Back where? To what?" He sounds angry.

"Mama's worried about me."

He looks at me like I'm a fool. "Then go ahead back. You can hide in a dresser drawer and let them put you in storage."

We reach the top of the alley and Liam heads for the front door. I don't know where to go, what to do.

By then Daddy is at the door. "What do you two think you're doing?" he says, and I follow Liam into the house.

Mrs. Olsen opens her door at the end of the dark hallway, next to the staircase that leads up to our apartment. The morning light is unkind to her. Her face sags and her hair is brittle with the remnants of a perm. She wears one of those sweater clips to keep a dull green cardigan on her shoulders, and the sleeves hang loose. She looks at us for a second before she speaks, enough time for us to see what every outsider thinks of us. They're afraid of us, but they like it that way; we make them feel they're better than they are.

"Your mother called here twice. She's worried," Mrs. Olsen says, looking at me. She crisscrosses the loose sleeves over her chest to ward off our powers. "She said if you showed up here to tell you to call your aunt Maggie's house. That's where she'll be." She closes her door before I can answer. Aunt Maggie's house is up on Bathgate Avenue, near where we used to live, the place where I was born.

We follow Daddy upstairs. Liam takes the stairs two steps at a time, the way he always did. The banister feels good in my hand, familiar. This is the place we found to make one last go of it as a family, to give ourselves one more chance. The hope we had then seems so ridiculous to me now. I don't know what made us think anything could change.

The living room is nearly bare now. There's only one armchair; matching clown-face plaques still hang from the wall near the corner, the table below them gone. The lamp has tipped over on the floor, and the lampshade is dented. I remember the starched lace doily Mama kept underneath the lamp. I hang my pocketbook from the knob of the door that leads out to the porch, the place I always used to hang it.

We walk through the living room and into the kitchen "Take off your shoes," Daddy says, "before that witch starts banging her broom up at us." We already have them off.

The kitchen smells like an ashtray. The table is a collection of playing cards, sports pages, crushed Camel packs, and dirty deep black ashtrays taken from the bar and grill. A pillowcase full of laundry is on a kitchen chair; an instant coffee jar is open on the counter, packets of sugar from the diner all around it, some whole, some torn. The floor is sticky with beer.

"What's gotten into you, running away from your mother like this?" Daddy is standing in the middle of the room, hands on his hips. The question is for me, not for Liam. This isn't the first time Liam's appeared on Daddy's doorstep.

"We got put out." Liam says, sharing the chair with the bag of laundry. I lean against the counter, hoping I can't really be seen.

"Your mother never put you out," Daddy says. He's at the table now, reaching for his Camels.

"The marshal. I'm talking about the marshal. Put us out of the apartment. The stuff's in the street." Liam says this as if it's not big news and studies the unfinished game of solitaire in front of him on the table.

"You mean evicted?"

"Yeah," Liam says, and moves a red seven onto a black eight.

"Jesus." Daddy sighs and sits down across from Liam, then gets up again, knowing there's something he should do. He shuffles over to me, touches the top of my head. I think he's about to comfort me, hold me even, but he doesn't. That would be ridiculous and we both seem to know it. He never does that kind of thing.

"Did you eat?" he says.

"We're all right," Liam says.

"You hungry, Fiona?" he asks me, ignoring Liam's answer.

"I think so. I mean yes," I say.

"Go sit yourself down, and let me see what I've got." He reaches into the cabinets above me. His sleeve is torn a little underneath at the armhole where he can't see. "There must be something here."

I go over and lean against the table. Daddy pushed his way through the cabinets, as if he's never tried them before. He wants so badly to find something for us, as if we're finicky guests who'll turn up their noses if the food isn't just right. He pushes aside a bag of flour, a can of lima beans, cursing them. He finds Rice Krispies and comes back to the table pleased with himself.

"Get us some bowls, Liam," he says.

"I don't want any," Liam tells him. He's searching the ashtrays for butts worth saving.

"Bowls," Daddy tells him. The tone warns Liam not to disobey.

Liam goes to get them, and Daddy clears a place with a sweep of his forearm. I'm altogether taken by his doing this for me. He has me sit, moves a bowl in front of me, then takes the cereal box and tilts it to pour. But he can't hold still, and the Rice Krispies spray about the bowl, the table. "Ahh, bejesus," he says, wounded. "I don't need to be doing this for a big girl like you."

He goes to the refrigerator for milk, puts the pint down on the table near me, then sits across from me and goes back to his cigarette. I pour the milk and watch tiny curdles nest among the rice. I look at him, and before he can disguise it I see in Daddy's face what it must feel like to fail, to know that you can't change anything.

I want to tell him it's all right, it's not his fault, that I like my cereal dry, but I can't do it. I don't know how to make words come out that way for my father. We never talk about how we feel; we only answer each other's questions, the kind about finding sneakers or getting permission to go somewhere.

Daddy gets up from the table, takes his jacket from the back of a chair. "I'll go out and get you something," he says. "And I'll call Aunt Maggie, tell your mother you're all right. I'll take you over there after you have something to eat."

"We wanna stay here," Liam says.

"Here? Ya can't stay here."

"I ain't going back," Liam tells him.

"I'll tell you what," Daddy says. "We'll eat and go over to the arcade at Coney Island. It's open all year. We'll make a day of it."

Daddy is good at this, making promises that take your mind off all the bad stuff, the way you shake a rattle at a baby to get him to stop crying. He's done this over and over and still I'm always fooled at first. I think it's because it doesn't feel like a rattle; it feels as if he really means it. And I think he does. Maybe he believes he can actually find a way to keep his promises. When Mama finally left him, I knew it wasn't only because of the way he hit her; it was because she didn't believe him anymore.

"I won't be long," he says. He gets his wallet and goes out. I go into the front room, squat down by the window, rest my head on my hands on the sill. He comes out the front door below me, takes a few steps to the curb and stops, reaches inside his coat for his cigarettes. He lights the match and cups his hands over the cigarette to shield it from the wind. He tosses the match, and Mrs. Riley's dog comes up to him, his tail wagging wildly. Daddy bends and scruffs the dog behind

his ear, says something. I hear Mrs. Riley call the dog away, and Daddy steps off the curb. I watch him cross the street, and I know the direction he's headed. It leads to Gerrity's Tavern, not to the grocery store.

"Do you think he'll be back?" I say to Liam. He's brought the box of Rice Krispies in, puts them near me on the sill.

"Not with anything we can eat," Liam says, and begins to search through the 45s.

I know he's probably right. "What are we going to do?"

"Don't worry about it. Once I see my friend tonight, we can get all the food we want."

THREE

It's hours since we tried the refrigerator. We've already eaten all the dill pickles, and there are no more crackers or peanuts. Cans of beer are all that's left, and the sight of bare shelves makes us even hungrier. Liam takes a can out, starts looking for the opener. I find it for him in the sink with the dishes, a foot of slimy, wet string tied to one end of it. The doily is in the sink, too, a dishrag now. Liam opens the can and takes it back to the living room.

I take one too and follow him out. He's picking out some 45s from his box, moving into his ritual. He's gotten the spindle onto the turntable, has the turntable spinning. He holds four records in his left hand, evenly spaced along his fingers. He looks for one more. It will have to be just the right one, and then he'll play them in order. The order has meaning to him; it's like the rituals old Sister Mary Claire talks about when we go to St. Thomas Aquinas Church for catechism class after school, the ones that drive the demons out of a person possessed by an evil spirit. Once I hear the first song, I'll know what comes next. The record drops; the arm moves. There's the expectant swish of the needle on the silent band ... the Everly Brothers.

I sing with him. Liam likes it, I can tell, though there's no expression on his face. He just sings the song and drinks his beer, not looking at me. He turns the music up louder, sways with it, drinks as the second record drops into place. The Belmonts. He makes his voice go high like a girl's, the way

Deon does. Then come the Five Satins. The Flamingos. Liam looks at the armchair, and I leave him alone, go to my old room, letting him pretend I don't know what he needs to do.

My room is only wide enough to fit a bed head to foot from wall to wall. The full-sized bed is pushed flush against the room's only window, and I climb across to look out. We left Daddy in the night after one more of so many rages, about six months ago. We took only enough for a day. I've come back since then to get my clothes, and some of my dolls. I was ashamed to want them so badly, especially my favorite, Catharine. So I forced myself not to take them all. I pick up Betty from the bed, the tall, blond bridal doll with the too-perfect face. Cait and I always made her the mean one. She's catty, hurtful. I can see she hasn't changed.

I reach deep between the mattress and the box spring to see if my old issue of *Screen Gems* is still there, the one with Elizabeth Taylor on the cover. It is, still folded back to the story about her and the singer Eddie Fisher and his wife, Debbie Reynolds. A few years ago, it was all the Hollywood gossip that they were splitting up over Elizabeth Taylor. There's a picture of Elizabeth in a bathing suit. I get depressed every time I look at this picture. There's nobody in my family built like her, and the chances of me ever looking anything like that are not good. I study the picture of Eddie Fisher, look at his ordinary face, try to figure out why she would want to bother with him.

I read some more, then look out the window. I see Mrs. Kushman come out into her yard to put milk out for the cats that visit her. She looks in every direction before she slips back inside, just like she always does, as if she's afraid she's being followed. I turn back to the magazine and read all the stories, even the ads in the back for increasing your bust size and losing weight.

I hold Catharine close to me and fall asleep to the rhythm of the armchair pounding against the wall and wake to the sound of Daddy slamming the apartment door. At first I think that sleeping in this place has made me dream of him, but the phonograph needle screeches across the music and Daddy's curses fill the place, fill the whole night—vile, mad curses from an anger bigger and deeper and more terrifying than any monster I've ever dreamed. I jump out of bed, weak with fear, desperate to figure out what I've done wrong.

I've known for a long time that it makes no sense to do this. Daddy being mad has nothing to do with me or with Liam or with anything we've done. But I can't stop myself from hoping that if I can figure out what makes him so angry, maybe I can keep it from happening again. I tell my mother, I tell Liam and Cait, I tell them all the time just to do what he says. Don't argue with him. Don't make him angry. I never make Daddy angry. I stay on his good side. I just do what he says. Liam and I should have gone back to Mama. We shouldn't have stayed. That's what made him mad. Oh, God. We shouldn't have stayed here.

I go to the living room doorway to see what's happening, but I already know what I will find. I've seen him like this before, over and over, louder and louder for as far back as I can remember. Daddy is cracking Liam's 45s, folding them in his huge hand. Some bend and pop into his face. Liam grabs for the ones that remain and Daddy takes him by the back of his shirt, slaps him, throws him down. I watch. I want to scream, but I can't. When my father gets like this, the fear is like ice, freezing me inside. It takes over everything.

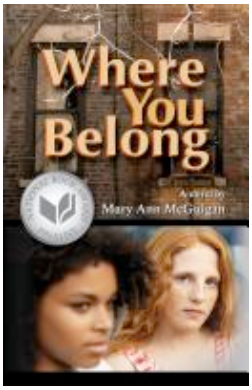
Daddy sees me in the doorway and stops. He looks confused, as if he's trying to place who I am, why I'm here. He doesn't seem to know me. His face is a stranger's face, the mouth all twisted, the eyes darting here and there, sweeping

the room, searching out who will be next. It feels like a very long time before he begins to move toward me, a very long time that I stand there looking at him, searching for some sign that he knows it's me, Fiona, the one he never hits. He takes little steps, shuffling steps. Don't hurt me, I want to say. Don't hurt me. But I can't get anything out. I can't make him understand who I am.

Liam gets up, to keep him from me, I think, but Daddy pushes him down again. Liam must be thinking Daddy's going to hurt me this time. He must be thinking that. His mouth has blood on it, and he's crying, though there are no sounds of crying, only tears on his face. Liam calls my name, but I run, leave him there. I run to the porch door and grab my bag. Out on the porch, I lift the door in the floorboards, climb down the narrow wooden stairs into the yard, then slip into the narrow alley. Leave him there.

A street lamp lights the opening where the alley meets the sidewalk, a weak light that does little for the rest of the alley. But at the top of the passage something catches in it, something leaning upright against stubborn weeds that grow from brick, a circle of black circles. I pick it up. The Clovers. I hold it with two fingers in that caring way Liam has, like a lover almost, and slip it between my sweater and my skin. I run from the house and let the coldness of the record center me, keep away the feelings that I'll break all apart. *There ain't nothing in this world for a boy and a girl but love, love, love.*

At the top of the street, an old lady with a shopping cart is waiting to cross 174th Street. She's woven twine into the places in the cart where the metal netting is gone; some tape makes the handle. She rests against it, weary, and smiles, at me, but it's too much of a smile, and I wonder if I've been singing.



NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST. Where You Belong is the story of thirteen-year-old Fiona, in the Bronx in 1963, who runs away from her alcoholic father and a family that's been evicted. Alone, hungry, with no choices left, she wanders into the black neighborhood and finds her classmate Yolanda-and a journey of self-discovery begins. Together they learn that beyond the bigotry and chaos that adults leave behind lie reasons for hope, a place they can belong-to each other. Originally published in 1997 by Atheneum Books for Young Readers, Where You Belong was chosen by the National Book Foundation as finalist for the 1997 National Book Award for Young People's Literature. The New York Public Library also named the book to its list of Best Books for the Teen Age. In citing her work, the National Book Foundation wrote: "McGuigan limns the territory between divergent inner and outer landscapes and how individuals learn a tremulous courage to trust themselves and their experiences, despite the physical and psychological violence of the adult world. With sensitivity, empathy, and insight, McGuigan shows us that the young have the character and emotional acumen to recreate themselves and, in doing so, recreate history."

Where You Belong