As "Mislaid," Nell Zink's second novel, begins, Margaret Vaillaincourt, a first-year student at Stillwater College in rural Virginia, and a lesbian with lofty literary ambitions, marries Lee Fleming, a gay professor and poet, after an unplanned pregnancy.

They have two children, Rhys Byrd and Mireille. After 10 tense years, Peggy comes home from Safeway, her arms full of groceries, to find her husband in a net muscle T-shirt getting it on with a teenage boy. Overtaken by a mad impulse, she drives Lee's "irreplaceable VW thing" into the lake.

When he threatens to have her committed, Peggy takes flight with her 3-year-old daughter, reluctantly leaving Byrdie behind, to be raised by his dad. To escape detection, Peggy and Mireille live in an abandoned shack and adopt an African-American identity.

In the South, which was governed for centuries by the one-drop rule, Zink reminds us, it was not difficult "to get your head around" blond, blue-eyed Black people.

Imaginative and offbeat, "Mislaid" satirizes conventional assumptions about family values, social class, race, sexuality, and the drug culture in the "New South" of the 1970s and '80s. Zink is not afraid to push the envelope.

"Black and proud"

When "Meg Brown" registers her daughter "Karen" for the first grade, the clerk asks her to consider having her be White. "We're black and proud," says Meg. "I'm blond," Karen objects. "There's no blond race," the clerk replies. "But it don't matter. All God's children attend the very same school. We like to know who's Black so we can help them out with affirmative action and a free hot lunch."

And the principal of the school, who voted for George Wallace for president, can't help thinking that this "petite female with a white body and black soul" might someday "be a sort of dream come true, assuming she moved away to the city and pursued a career in show business, broadly defined."

To increase Black enrollment in the "academic" track to two and head off allegations of tokenism, the principal sees to it that Karen skips a grade.

"Tedious, sentimental"

Unfortunately, the novel does not always hit its target. Zink's narrative is, at times, tedious and overly sentimental. "I'm glad I grew up black," Mireille/Karen confesses, "because it's cooler, but it's white people who run the place, obviously."

Progress doesn't come when Blacks "come out of the closet," Zink reminds us, "black people have been out of the closet since time immemorial – but when they can make money selling vital necessities, not cream soda and carrot cake."

And, surprisingly, Zink opts for a happily-ever-after ending. To be sure, the villainous Vaillaincourts want nothing to do with Peg. And, with her minority scholarship at the University of Virginia in jeopardy, Mireille must transfer to NYU.
Happy ending?

Far more important, however, Mireille and Byrdie find each other – and almost instantaneously embrace their parents. Mireille no longer thinks anyone in her family is truly unhappy. Peggy finds a woman who is literally crazy about her and starts what may well be a successful career as a writer.

Lee has inherited First Family of Virginia money, learned to respect people's boundaries and "to speak and listen and care about the world."

It's the first time in his life he has ever felt like a man.

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