

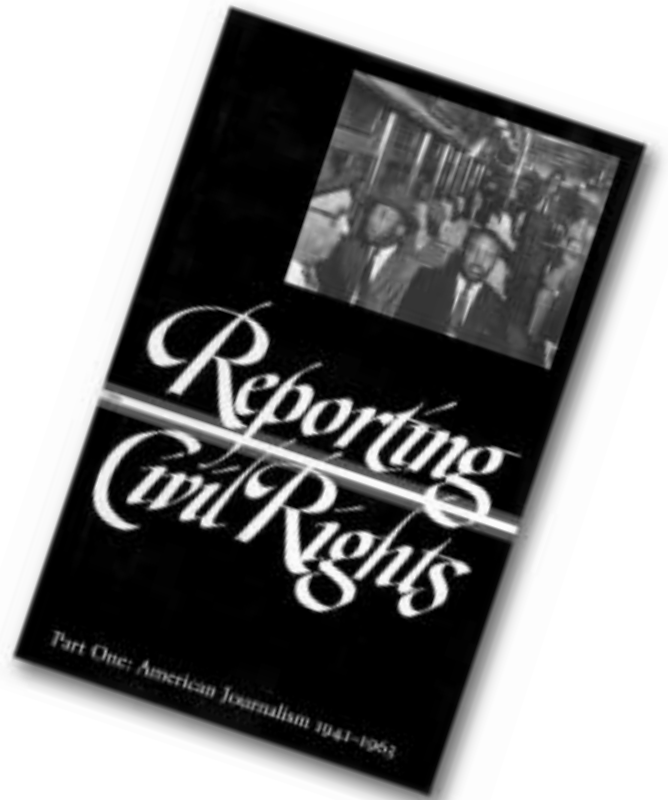


# BOOK REVIEW

Reviewed by Peter McCormick

## *Reporting Civil Rights: Part One: American Journalism 1941–1963*

The Library of America  
New York: *Literary Classics of the United States*, 2003.  
996 pages. \$40.00 ISBN 1931082-28-6



Most middle-aged white Americans today probably view civil rights from the prism of documentaries, news clips of Dr. King declaiming “I have a dream,” books, and mostly not-very-good Hollywood movies. The murkiness of this prism is understandable because *Brown v. Board of Education* occurred about the time we were born, and the drawn-out effort to desegregate the Deep South—the stuff of dramatic news footage and print reportage—occurred before we were adolescents. For this chronological fact alone, *Reporting Civil Rights* is instructional, vital, and often mesmerizing.

But this collection of news articles and essays does more than instruct readers, whatever their ages, on a crucial period in American history.

For some, like me, it will remind them of the complicated yet stark importance of race in America. In the mid-1970s, I left college to live and work for a year as a roughneck in Louisiana. Although I had never lived in the South, I at first found race relations superficially similar to those in my customary northeastern surrounding: blacks and whites did not mingle. But I woke up to the attitudes that many working-class white southerners held at the time when one of the young men I worked with told me that he, like most southerners, hated and feared “the niggers.” I had never heard such strong words about a group of people, and I learned he and most of his friends were not exaggerating. Although they liked and respected

some black workers, whom they denoted “black,” almost all African Americans in their eyes were lazy, devious, and dangerous. The only other twist to this Manichean view came from another worker, half-Native American but white in the eyes of his colleagues, who lived near Philadelphia, Mississippi, where local whites murdered three civil rights workers in 1964. “Everyone’s scared of that place,” he said.

I mention this personal detail because the Library of America’s superb anthology revived my bewilderment and sadness about race in the South and the rest of America. The wickedness of segregation and racism appears everywhere, and the accounts are

not easy to read. The reader can pick and choose what to peruse among the 102 essays, from Langston Hughes's caustic description of attempting to eat in segregated dining cars south of the Mason-Dixon Line in the 1940s, to Ralph Ellison's dispassionate eyewitness account of a riot in Harlem in 1943, to Robert Penn Warren's long, ruminative essay on segregation, written in 1956, or to Murray Kempton's examination of Autherine Juanita Lucy, the African American student whose presence at the University of Alabama caused a riot by whites who demanded her departure.

That year, *Life* ran a series of articles on segregation, including one about life in the hamlet of Shady Grove, 95 percent African American, in Choctaw County, Alabama. The piece discussed Willie and Allie Lee Causey, a relatively prosperous black couple. Willie was a woodcutter and farmer and his wife taught at the local school. Allie Lee Causey was quoted saying: "Integration is the only way through which Negroes

will receive justice." Four days after the story appeared in September, local whites began threatening the Causeys to leave the county. Willie Causey's truck was seized and the local board of education fired Allie Lee Causey. Richard Stolley, a *Life* reporter (later founder of *People* magazine), reported the Causeys' downfall the next month. His last paragraph begins: "Today all that remains of Willie and Allie Lee Causey in Choctaw County is their empty house on the hill."

Fascinating details pop out wherever you cast your eyes: the reporter George McMillan, in "The Ordeal of Bobby Cain" in *Collier's*, writes about a young black's inability to quote white teenagers' racial invective. McMillan likens it to the inability of World War II-era Marines to describe combat experiences; all Bobby Cain, the boy, can do is mumble "coon." Other accounts are stark and terrifying, like the series of pieces about the prolonged violence between a white mob and federal marshals, backed by National Guardsmen, and then regular Army

troops, at Ole Miss in 1962. Again, the matter of what we are taught and what we remember and do not remember offers a cautionary lesson. In 1962, John Kennedy was sending thousands of advisers to South Vietnam. Martin Luther King was famous for his doctrine of nonviolence. Old hat. But the shrill, profound violence of white extremists remains astonishing.

A tidy summary of the articles is impossible, given the territory, time, and subject matter that the anthology covers. But just as the fiftieth anniversary of *Brown v. Board* leaves us realizing the extent of Thurgood Marshall's accomplishment in helping to overthrow *Plessy v. Ferguson* and how severe segregation remains in education, so does *Reporting Civil Rights*. The stories remind readers of how cruel this country can be, yet we can take heart in the heroism of the people who fought against terrible odds to make America a more decent place to live in. Through these stories, we also realize that civil rights are about human nature, with its Sisyphean implications. ■



## Committed to Diversity in Education

The June Supreme Court rulings on University of Michigan admissions policies highlight the national debate on affirmative action in education.

The College Board closely follows this vital issue. At our Forum 2003 in New York this November, we will hold workshops and talks on diversity in education. We also maintain a Web site devoted to the subject.

During the summer, the College Board sponsored seminars to help colleges and universities understand the implications of the decisions for their institutions. A report on these meetings will be published later in the year.

#### Contents include:

- Background and Legal Context
- Different Approaches to Achieving Diversity
- Admissions Decision-Making Models

In coming months, the College Board will release additional information. Stay abreast of developments by checking the Web site.

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