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Black Like Me: The Definitive Griffin Estate Edition



Synopsis

This American classic has been corrected from the original manuscripts and indexed, featuring historic photographs and an extensive biographical afterword.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

As I write this review I have my old copy of *Black Like Me* in front of me. It's a Panther paperback, printed in 1964, bought by my parents, and found by my sister and myself on their shelves a few years later. I can still remember the shock when I read this, at the age of perhaps eleven, at realizing just how inhuman people could be because of something as seemingly trivial as skin colour. Griffin spent a little over a month--parts of November and December, 1959--with his skin artificially darkened by medication. In that time he traveled through Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia, finding out at first hand what it is like to be treated as a second-class citizen--or, as he says, as a tenth-class citizen. Everyone now know the story of the big injustices, the lynchings, the civil rights cases, and for most people those are now just another page in the history text book. Griffin's experiences take the daily evils of racism and thrust them in your face, just as they were

thrust in his--the rudeness of the clerk when he tried to pay for a train ticket with a big bill; the difficulty he had in finding someone who would cash a traveler's check for a Negro; the bus-driver who wouldn't let any blacks off the bus to use the restrooms; the white man who followed him at night and threatened to mug him. I've heard people worry that this is the white experience of racism: that whites can read this book and feel good because a white person felt the pain too. I'm white, so I don't know that I can judge that argument completely impartially, but I can tell you that this book profoundly shaped my views on racism, and that any book that can do what this book did for me is a book that is good to have around. One more thing.

John Howard Griffin offered one of the most important contributions to the Civil Rights movement when his work *Black Like Me* was published in 1960. Griffin approached his study on race relations in the South by asking a very poignant question: "If a white man became a Negro in the Deep South, what adjustments would he have to make?" To answer this question, Griffin shaved his head and had his skin temporarily darkened by medical treatments and stain in order to travel through parts of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia as a black man. Griffin had a deep understanding of discrimination even before he began this ambitious project. As a medic in the French Resistance Army, Griffin helped evacuate Austrian Jews away from the advancing Nazis. During the Second World War, Griffin lost his sight and was forced to live with this disability for over ten years. By 1959, Griffin was a published author and a specialist on race relations. Despite such credentials Griffin "really knew nothing of the Negro's real problem." Only by becoming black did Griffin understand what it was like to live as a second class citizen in "the land of the free." As a black man, Griffin described the variations and similarities of race relations in different areas of the South. Although some states were more "enlightened" than others, blatant acts of racism were found almost everywhere Griffin went. In Alabama, where Martin Luther King first introduced passive resistance, Griffin endured the hate stares from whites and observed that even graduates from Tuskegee Institute would not be allowed to climb the social ladder in the South because, "whites cannot lose to a traditionally servant class."

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