

Human Rights & Human Welfare

Volume 4 | Issue 1

Article 3

7-2004

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Recommended Citation

Johnson, Tyler (2004) "Tyler Johnson on Sons of Mississippi: A Story of Race and its Legacy by Paul Hendrickson. New York: Knopf, 2003. 368pp.," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 3. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol4/iss1/3>

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In the early afternoon of September 27, 1962, *Life* magazine photographer Charles Moore took a photograph—one not as well known as his iconic images from Alabama of policeman, dogs, and fire hoses attacking black protestors—of seven Mississippi sheriffs on the campus of the University of Mississippi the day before riots broke out because a black man, James Meredith, insisted on his right to enroll. Two decades later, journalist Paul Hendrickson, who won the 2003 National Book Critics Circle Award for this book, came across the photo in a California bookstore and essentially became obsessed with it. *Sons of Mississippi* is the stunning product of that obsession—a book that traces the germinal history of that moment and the legacies descended from it. “The goal is to put a slice of emulsion—one of billions of photographs in the universe—in its historical perspective.... It’s about what we’re inflicted with, about what others do to us, about what we cannot escape—and about what we send down to others, our loved ones, in direct and oblique ways, wittingly and unwittingly.”

Hendrickson tracks down the men who are still alive from the photo and then locates their children, particularly their sons. The sons as the next generation is what Hendrickson is really after and he attempts to locate them in many ways: by where they land on the racial scale, by class and job, by their relationship with black people and with their own family. Hendrickson also interviews the photographer Moore, James Meredith and Meredith's son who quietly graduates from the University of Mississippi with his doctorate during the course of the book. James Meredith has not gone gently into civil rights history as some benign patriarch of the movement. Meredith is a conflicted and troubled man; he later worked for Jesse Helms; he publicly supported former Klansman David Duke's run for office; and his interviews are often bizarre, angry and contradictory. Hendrickson ponders the mental toll of having an entire community, state and nation focused on one man. He explores Meredith's intertwining anger, confusion and nobility but the man remains an enigma.

Sons of Mississippi is a wide-ranging book but Hendrickson's primary narrative is to trace the fate of each man in the photograph and their offspring. The most far-reaching story is that of the Ferrell family. It would be difficult to underestimate the malice at the center of the photograph where Sheriff William T. Ferrell of Natchez bares a grimacing smile while clenching a cigarette between his front teeth and swinging a club—his knuckles are whitened—in anticipation of Bobby Kennedy, the federal marshals and James Meredith. In interviews with Hendrickson, Ferrell is a cagey, retired man who would rather fish from his dock than confront that image of himself and that “civil rights crap.” His son, Tommy, eventually moved into the sheriff's office like it was his birthright and later ascended to the presidency of the National Sheriff's Association. By all accounts, he appears to be an honest and confident man whose main drive is law enforcement; he takes the fair application of law seriously and understands his father's name brings an additional burden of proof. Tommy's son is William T. Ferrell III (“Ty”) and any generational guilt or qualms may have skipped Tommy to land squarely on Ty, who left Mississippi but not the family tradition of law enforcement (Ty is a border patrol agent in New Mexico). He is more tormented than his father, not just because of Mississippi's racial legacy but also because he knows that one-mile over the border he patrols, people in the shantytowns don't have toothbrushes or medicine or potable water. Comprising three generations of Mississippi lawmen (Ty eventually returns), the Ferrells illustrate the change slowly seeping through the South. Other descendants of the photograph willingly engage in a daily struggle with their racial legacy while some seemed destined to struggle with race for life.

Hanging over all of this is the ghost of Emmett Till, the 14-year-old city kid from Chicago who went South to visit family and then whistled at or propositioned a white woman—something not deferential enough—and was found later beaten and shot at the bottom of the Tallahatchie River with a cotton gin fan tied around his neck. That was 1955 and the incident forced Americans to confront the reality and ferocity of the country's racism. No one was ever convicted in the case, yet the Department of Justice announced this year that the case was reopened. Hendrickson writes: "In Mississippi, nothing ever changes, and everything always changes, and sometimes it seems as if God put Mississippi on earth purely for our moral and confounding contemplation."

This book is ideal for the classroom since it is both heavily researched and beautifully written and is unquestionably an important and powerful look at recent American history. Civil rights scholars will find a wealth of material here about James Meredith and the University of Mississippi as well as the various powers and roles held by sheriffs in the state during that era.

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July 2004