

A Conversation with Jim Grimsley and Anne Rasmussen

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1. Almost fifty years have passed since that first school year, in 1966, when your sixth-grade classroom in rural Jones County, North Carolina admitted its first black pupils in response to the Freedom of Choice Act. And yet cultural tensions related to race are still very much a part of our current national conversation. You’ve obviously thought deeply and reflectively about these issues since the moment your own small-town, Southern, white world expanded to include those three black girls, and with them a discovery: that a world existed beyond what you had been taught to expect. What made you decide to write about this particular experience now, and why as a memoir rather than a novel (or play)?

The idea of the book came to me at least a couple of decades ago, and perhaps a bit more; I realized at some point that there had been rather little written about this event by white Southern writers. The idea for the book underwent a good deal of transformation as I considered it. My original idea was to write a memoir, but to mix fiction into it in order to make it both dramatic and true. I knew that a memoir would have a greater feeling of authority than a piece of fiction about this era, but I was constrained in making the attempt by the fact that I had already written a good deal of autobiographical fiction about this era of my life, and I did not want to write a repeat of that. My childhood story involved a number of powerful elements; I grew up in a family that was plagued by the violence of my father, his alcoholism, and the chronic illness, hemophilia, that my brother and I lived with. I told the story of this family in my first novel, *Winter Birds*, so I was aware of the power of the material. My fear was that these aspects of the story would cloud the focus of any memoir I might write about my early years.

I did a lot of reading over the last two decades to prepare me for this writing, and meanwhile pondered how best to shape the story. I read books about eastern North Carolina history, about the type of slavery that was practiced there, about the Civil War and reconstruction. I read slave narratives recorded during the Works Progress Administration (WPA) era, which were oral histories taken from slaves who had survived in Piedmont and eastern North Carolina. This reading taught me that I actually

knew very little of my own history; the process showed me that while Southerners might be reputed to be great storytellers and sharers of their own history, the history that we had handed down to ourselves in Jones County was incomplete.

About six years ago I felt that it was time to take on this book and set out to write it. I chose to shape it as a novel, hoping that later I would be able to weave some chapters of memoir into the fictional narrative. In framing the novel I chose a child of a family different from my own, but I told his story using largely the facts of my sixth-grade class as I remembered them. That story encompassed only the sixth-grade year when Freedom of Choice was in play in North Carolina, the year that the three black girls came to our class. I finished a manuscript of the book that was some four hundred pages in length, showed it to my publisher and to some other people, and got lukewarm reactions to the story all around. Rejection was painful, as it always is, and it took me a few months to work through their responses and to understand that the failure was mine. My editor at Algonquin saw the book as promising and offered some very specific suggestions to make it better, but while I knew these were good ideas, I also knew they were not what I wanted to do.

I decided to write a manuscript in which I simply wrote down everything I could remember about my encounters with black people and with the idea of blackness, reaching back as far as I could go. When I started this work, I very quickly realized that I was writing material that was vastly stronger than the

novel. My fears about the memoir proved unfounded, as I was able very easily to limit the writing to the subject of integration and to limit the material about my family. My story was largely that of my own transformation from a young bigot to something that I now term a recovering bigot, someone who still has racist programming but who refuses to act on it, much the way that an alcoholic recovers by refusing to drink one day at a time.

When I showed this manuscript to my editor, he became excited about the book, and he saw what I was trying to do with this story very clearly; he helped me to reshape that manuscript into the present book.

2. I'm interested in the point you make about growing up without knowing the true history of your own region in regards to race. (I think this could be said of white folks in other regions as well—the ability to remain ignorant of this history is a pretty major indicator of white privilege.) Can you give an example of a detail that you encountered in your research that particularly surprised you, either because it deviated sharply from your personal recollections or changed your own understanding of a memory from this time?

When I read the history of lynchings in eastern North Carolina, I was struck by the fact that the people who were involved in these events might have been friends and family. There's a

whole brutal history to the way our country was settled, and I knew it in outline, but the impact of it did not come home to me until I read about the lynching of men in Wayne County, in Lenoir County, and in Jones County, where at least three men were killed by mob violence. I pictured my relatives, my acquaintances, my friends, even myself in these crowds, and the feeling was startling and unpleasant. The last man was hung in Jones County sometime in the 1930s, about the time my parents were born. Understanding that such acts had taken place in my home, where I thought of people as gentle and kindly, made me understand how much bigger the history was than I had realized.

3. One thing that really struck me about the first section of the book, which follows the first year that Violet, Ursula, and Rhonda join your class, is how overwhelmingly silent the adults in your world (parents, teachers, and other whites in your community) are on the subject of race relations or desegregation. The teacher introduces the new girls as though they'd simply moved there from another town. And you and your white classmates receive no real cues from adults about how you are expected to respond or behave in this unprecedented situation: you and your peers are left to decipher the silence. Whereas the three newcomers (not having the luxury to ignore—or pretend to ignore—their racial difference) seem quite a bit more prepared for the possibility of

confrontation. You and your sixth-grade classmates learn by trial and error what you can and can't say or do; you form friendships and alliances in spite of (or perhaps because of) this. What do you imagine caused such a total silence on the part of the adults in your world, particularly your teachers, in the face of this tremendous cultural shift?

I think the people in my little town felt a deep discomfort with the whole idea of race and that they kept silent about the process of integration for a whole spectrum of reasons. So when I say that the community was silent on the subject, what I mean is that there was no consensus, no open discussion, no preparation for integration. White Southerners were deeply conflicted about civil right legislation and about the end of the two separate school systems. Some whites openly opposed integration; some saw it as inevitable; some even approved of it but looked on its coming with trepidation, not certain what this enormous change would do to what we called our "way of life."

People kept silent about this issue because to pursue it too directly would bring about conflict, and the adults I knew did not like open discussions of anything controversial. It's not the way of small-town people to discuss their feelings, their problems, their fears. The idea of integration was very frightening to people and so they ignored it as much as they could. When somebody mentioned integration at our church, usually in a negative way, the subject hung in the air uncomfortably for

a moment or two and then disappeared again. This is what I remember from the people I knew.

There were exceptions, I'm sure. There were parents who told their children to respect the black students in our classrooms, though I can remember only one or two families in which this kind of conversation took place, and I only learned about those families much later. In my own family, issues of survival overpowered even the idea of integration.

There had to have been some discussions about integration among the adults that went further than those to which I was exposed, because many white people took action to oppose the consolidation of schools. Private schools were formed in our county and the neighboring county, starting around 1968. I have no idea what this process was like, but it had to involve a good deal of discussion.

The silence of our schoolteachers on this subject was the most surprising to me. My elementary schoolteachers were nearly all women, very strong-minded people, and I doubt they would have been afraid of this kind of conversation without good reason. It's possible they felt they could not control such a discussion in their classroom; it's possible that some of them did not approve of integration or that they did not want to teach black students; it's possible that they did not want to come into conflict with our parents by having such discussions. I simply don't know why there was so little preparation for this process on the part of the schools.

4. In 1968 the Supreme Court rules Freedom of Choice insufficient to integrate the public schools, and a more enforced plan of busing and integration follows. Many of your white peers abandon the public system in favor of hastily created private schools, and you find yourself in the minority in high school, hoping to fit in with an entirely new set of peers. And there are institutional challenges as well: the teaching staff is mostly white and many are inexperienced new teachers working off their educational debt. Some resent having to teach black students and make racist remarks. When your black peers attempt to address these issues by staging a walk-out, it's reframed as a "riot" in subsequent reports. You and your classmates forged alliances, friendships, and romances across racial boundaries within the self-contained world of the school. And yet outside of school, most folks reverted to their (separate) communities. You were the only white person to attend your fortieth high school reunion—one classmate even asked you if the whites were holding a separate reunion elsewhere. What do you think could have been done to make these connections more lasting and meaningful over time?

The personal connections that we made were in fact lasting and meaningful over time, at least to some of us. Facebook brought me back in touch with a lot of my high school friends, and the sense of connection we feel to one another is palpable. Living

through those years was intense for all of us, and it forged bonds that are strong. The people I knew in high school can cut through to my core very easily and quickly, and some of them still do so, even in the shortest message on my Facebook page. I have a reverence for those folks that is not like any of my other friendships. They remind me of my childhood; they call me by my childhood name, Jimmy. They saw me at my worst and weakest, before I had developed my adult ability to disguise myself.

It's hard for me to speculate about why the white students did not come to the reunion because I don't live there any more. There are a lot of reasons that make it hard to face people you knew in high school; there is likely still to be a reluctance on the part of blacks and whites to socialize with one another, especially in groups. Since writing the book I have heard that the practice of holding racially segregated reunions is not all that uncommon in the South even today, and I expect this reflects a continued reluctance on the part of white people to accept integration at the social level. White people by and large do not see black people as their social equals, and this is particularly true in rural areas.

However, I know from talking to some of my friends in Jones County that the line of separation between the races is far easier to cross than it was fifty years ago. There has been a lot of intermarriage in the intervening decades, and most families are now integrated to some degree. It is easier now for white

people and black people to maintain friendships and to visit one another in their homes. The world changes in part and stays the same in part.

I think our biggest failure during those early years of integration was to fail at organized dialog with one another, and I fault the adults in Jones County for this. There were no active parent groups who stepped forward to encourage black and white students to talk to one another about the process of integration. It would have made a big difference if we had learned to discuss how it felt to be part of this enormous change. But those kinds of guided conversations were not all that common in any arena in the 1960s and 70s. Counseling was much less visible and active in that time.

5. In the middle section of the book, “ORIGINS,” you explore the ways in which bigoted ideas of race first entered your consciousness, possibly as early as you learned to speak. The word “nigger” enters your lexicon through nursery rhymes and children’s songs, in overheard jokes and stories, and in its casual, widespread usage as an adjective for “substandard.” Though you are taught not to use the word in conversation (it was “coarse”), its negative meaning and association with black people was clear. And in church, (your mother’s claim to cultural respectability) the symbolism is underscored: white is equated to goodness and black to evil and sin. You have this rooted notion of social order related

to skin color long before you enter school, much less encounter any black people. I loved the detail and sensitivity with which you unpack these early childhood experiences. (I was reminded of the playwright Adrienne Kennedy's examination of her own earliest impressions of race—like her fascination with Snow White—in her memoir, *People Who Led to My Plays*.) Since many of these early impressions were subconsciously formed, at what point did you become explicitly aware of them as bigoted?

I only examined the process that taught me racist ideas about blackness and black people when I was writing these chapters. I remember approaching the writing of these chapters with a good deal of anxiety, since I was not sure I would be able to find the earliest bits of this programming in myself. But once I started to write, I saw more and more deeply into what I had learned as a very young child. The chapter about the nursery rhymes was one of the first pieces of the book that I wrote, and I remember being horrified as I was writing those rhymes in which the word “nigger” appeared as a kind of chant. We spoke these lines of doggerel in play, but play is a very important part of shaping a child's world.

I only became aware of myself as a racist when I encountered the girls in my sixth-grade class, and even then my awareness was not very deep. By the time I was in high school I was able to discuss bias-issues with what passes for clarity among

teenagers, but I had no real understanding of how pervasive an issue it was in our county. In college I became aware of black political movements, and my own coming out as a gay person began to educate me in the mechanics of oppression. After college I moved to New Orleans, where the problems between whites and blacks were visible everywhere; and after I moved to Atlanta I worked for twenty years in the public hospital here, Grady Memorial, where the patient population is largely black and where the staff is largely black. So throughout my life I have worked and lived in settings that were far from homogenous or white. This taught me a great deal about the way white people maintain power even in settings where black people predominate, but once again these were lessons that only became explicit to me when I started to write about them.

6. How did those early lessons in language, storytelling, and symbolism shape your sensibilities as a writer?

These ideas are still shaping me as a writer. In my early years I was reluctant to write black characters into my work because I did not want to be seen as attempting to speak on behalf of black people. Those first books were mostly about the lives of poor white people, the class from which I emerged, and my focus there was on working through material related to my family. The first story I wrote in which I dealt with race overtly was a story called, "Jesus is Sending You This Message," the tale of a

fussy, uncomfortable white bachelor who tells a black preacher woman to shut up on a commuter train in Atlanta. Her bold willingness to preach in public frightens him and makes him afraid that his own Christianity is tepid. After writing that story I began to be more bold about writing overtly on subjects of race. The novel I am currently working on tells the story of the transfer of administrative power from white people to black people at Grady Memorial Hospital, a process that I witnessed while I was there.

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