

About the Book

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Remembrances by Rosanna Warren

On the occasion of the conference on WHO SPEAKS FOR THE NEGRO at the Warren Center at Vanderbilt, I am prompted to remember some of the circumstances surrounding the writing of that book, as perceived by a child. That year, our father was absent from home for weeks on end, and by listening to adult conversations, my brother and I began to piece together some sense of what he was doing. We knew that he was often traveling "in the South," interviewing people involved in the struggle for civil rights. Stories emerged: how he and his hosts often had to travel on back country roads long distances at night in cars without headlights for fear of being shot. At least once, we learned, he had to crouch down in the back of car so that he – a white man – wouldn't be seen riding in a car with black people. He attended meetings in remote farmhouses where all the blinds were down, and where at night almost no lights were lit. Our parents tried not to communicate too much of this fearsome material to us. But one day, it came home to me quite directly. I had walked out to the mailbox on our country road in Connecticut where we lived, and when I opened the mailbox, out fell a garish, large pamphlet from the KKK splattered in bright red paint. On the front was a crude cartoon drawing of a lynching. A scrawled message on the cover read, "Nigger Lover, Jew Lover, we know where you live and we will get you." I think, at that age (about ten) I didn't know what the KKK was. I stood stunned in the gentle autumn sunlight, trying to make sense of this thing I held in my hands. Inside were more drawings of lynching and more abuse and threats. I remember running into the house, to find my parents, and show them and ask them what was happening. There followed anxious, whispered conversations between the grownups, where there was question of contacting the FBI and eventually a sense that that would be useless.

I also remember, from this period, the more cheerful excitement of guests from the civil rights movement coming to the house. One who stands out most vividly for me is Stokely Carmichael, tall, handsome and intense, wearing (I think I remember this accurately) a dashiki and a spellbinding Afro. He came to lunch and stayed for some hours talking with our father. Later, Pa mentioned something about hoping to get Carmichael a scholarship to study at Yale, and his quiet disappointment, but his understanding, when the young man decided to pursue more immediate political activism. And I remember our father's thrill, the evening he returned from spending hours talking with Malcolm X in his office in New York. He described the difficulty in penetrating past the guards to Malcom's inner office, and how he had been warned he would only be granted a fifteen minute talk, and how the two ended talking for several passionate hours. The two had become so deeply engaged in their conversation that Malcolm invited Pa to return to the city and go on his "rounds" with him one afternoon, to see how his organization worked. Pa was all set to

do it. And then – only months later, before they made their appointment – Malcolm was shot.

These are a child's recollections. I hope they help to sketch in some context for the writing of a book which represented a deep inner exploration for a white Southerner, born into segregation, as well as an outer exploration of the country in which so many people struggled and still struggle to bring justice into reality.

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