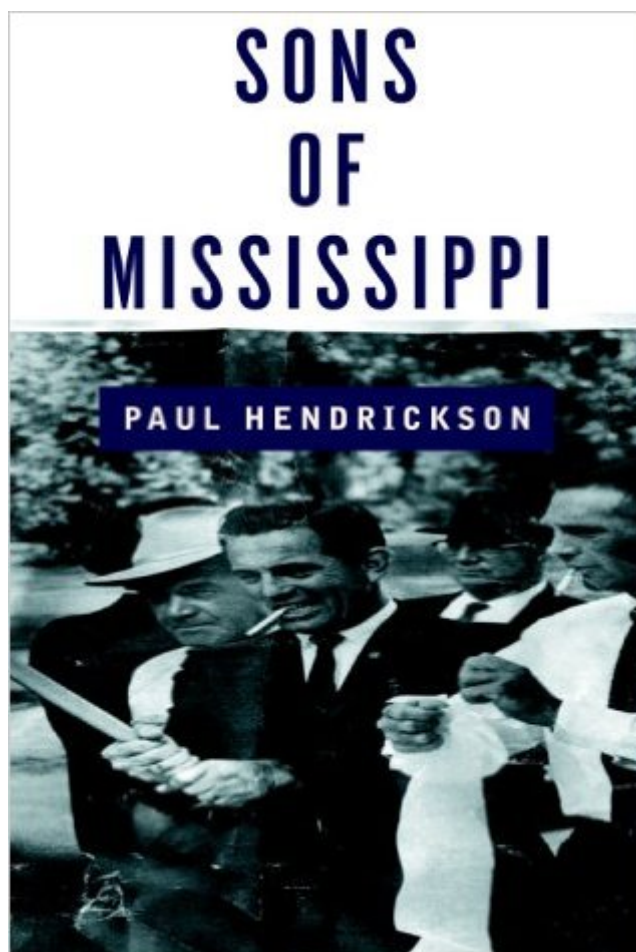


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Sons Of Mississippi: A Story Of Race And Its Legacy



Synopsis

Sons of Mississippi recounts the story of seven white Mississippi lawmen depicted in a horrifically telling 1962 Life magazine photograph and of the racial intolerance that is their legacy. In that photograph, which appears on the front of this jacket, the lawmen (six sheriffs and a deputy sheriff) admire a billy club with obvious pleasure, preparing for the unrest they anticipate and to which they clearly intend to contribute in the wake of James Meredith's planned attempt to integrate the University of Mississippi. In finding the stories of these men, Paul Hendrickson gives us an extraordinarily revealing picture of racism in America at that moment. But his ultimate focus is on the part this legacy has played in the lives of their children and grandchildren. One of them is a grandson—a high school dropout and many times married—who achieves an elegant poignancy in his struggle against the racism to which he sometimes succumbs. One son is a sheriff, as his father was—and in the same town. Another grandson patrols the U.S. border with Mexico—a law enforcement officer like the two generations before him—driven by the beliefs and deeds of his forebears. In all the portraits, we see how the prejudice bequeathed by the fathers has been transformed, or remained untouched, in the sons. For its sense of fragile hope, Sons of Mississippi is a profoundly important, revelatory work of still-evolving history. A stunning book by a masterful writer.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The genesis of Sons of Mississippi is a photograph taken in 1962 on the campus of Ole Miss. A

group of sheriffs gathered below a tree. They came to stop the registration of James Meredith, the first black student at the university. The sheriff in the middle of the photograph is swinging a bat. The others are standing in support. One sheriff on the left side of the photo is smiling in glee. He looks like the archetype redneck. Hendricks seeks out the men in the photos and their descendants in order to find out "what has come down" from what that photograph represents. What is the legacy of race in Mississippi and for these men and their families? Is there any redemption, any guilt, or are there things that have not changed? Only two men in the photograph were still alive for Hendrickson to talk with, and despite hours of interviews they didn't say much about the big questions. No sign of regret. Too polite he doesn't ask these men if they are still the people in the photograph - or their children for that matter. We are told that they weren't in the Klan. But then maybe they were. The truth is that the men in the photograph probably never wrestled with these questions - or the past - like Hendrickson does - and takes his readers on the trip that he takes them. Most people are content to live the lives that they want to lead and if that means seeing other people suffer they learn to accept and live with that. That's just the way it is. When Hendrickson goes to the store that Emmitt Till was murdered at he bumps into a man who says "the past is the past and why stir it up and get folks thinking about things that can't be undone?" That is the attitude that most white southerners have about the history of race relations.

Author Paul Hendrickson has written a very well researched book on racism in Mississippi while concentrating on seven Mississippi sheriffs photographed on the campus of the University of Mississippi during the fall of 1962 when James Meredith was to be enrolled at the University. The author spends Part One of the book painting very unflattering portraits of the bigoted men in the picture. Part Two emphasizes the past and present life of James Meredith who appears to be somewhat difficult to understand. As one of Meredith's sons says in Part Three, "My father has an overwhelming need to be famous and so will do whatever he thinks will provide that and get him attention--Jesse Helms, David Duke, you name it, even if it's only for a day...I'll call it his eccentric philosophy. This is my theory. He does these things--almost as a kind of offensive strike to throw you off...For instance, supporting David Duke. Why in hell would you even support a racist like David Duke if you're James Meredith? Well, maybe he knows he's going to get all these articles and letters about that, condemning him. And that somehow gives him the energy to do what he wants to do next." In addition to speaking to Meredith's children in Part Three, the author also visits two of the sheriffs in the picture that were alive at the time (one died shortly after) in addition to some of their children and grandchildren. A number of these offspring are working in law enforcement or in other

jobs in which they must relate with fellow workers who are African Americans. The book is slightly more than 300 pages long. Part Three may have told me a little more than I cared to know about the lives of the descendants of the bigoted sheriffs pictured on the cover of the book.

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