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In the Deep South of the 1950s, journalist John Howard Griffin decided to cross the color line. Using medication that darkened his skin to deep brown, he exchanged his privileged life as a Southern white man for the disenfranchised world of an unemployed black man. His audacious, still chillingly relevant eyewitness history is a work about race and humanity-that in this new millennium still has something important to say to every American.

Black Like Me Details

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booklady says

Although John Howard Griffin was known primarily for *Black Like Me* and it fully deserves all five stars I've awarded it, I'm hard pressed to say which impressed me more—the book itself or the brief biography of the author at the end. In only sixty years (1920-1980) Griffin managed to fight in the French Resistance, lose his eyesight as a result of a nearby explosion during a Japanese air raid, become Catholic, marry and have four children and ultimately go on to become a spokesman for the Civil Rights Movement.

When his eyesight unexpectedly returned in the late 1950s, he was an established author with a strong sense of “otherness”, something he never lost even though now he could see again physically. More importantly to the man, John Griffin, he could see human beings and human life at a deeper level than many others around him could due to those years of not being able to ‘see’.

What I liked best about *Black Like Me* was Griffin's plain style of writing. He didn't embellish. And yet he describes the Negro (to use the book's own terminology) men, women and children he met and befriended with befitting gentleness and grace. Although they lived in poverty and endured much, they were without exception unfailingly kind, generous and helpful to Griffin, a total stranger.

The hardest part of the book to endure was the blindness and cruelty of the whites he described. I cringed. I was ashamed. I was deeply saddened. But I also (re)learned some valuable lessons about “otherness” from Griffin's journey into obscurity.

First of all, I learned to look at people, really look at them. Look them in the face. Don't avoid looking at anyone, no matter who they are. Often I have looked away out of something in me, shyness or fear—but the other person doesn't know that and they may see it as something in them. So have the courage to look at others in and with love.

Second, a smile is the best gift you can give almost everyone. So don't be stingy. Smiles are free and they can mean the world to someone who is hurting; give away as many as you can. There are so many hurting people in need of kindness and love.

And finally, black and white are only coverings on the outside and we have no control over them—well most of us don't. On the inside, that's another matter. There we can be whatever color we make of the character God has given us.

These aren't stunning revelations, I know. They're just simple reminders of truths I'm sure I heard a long time ago. But reading *Black Like Me* revealed that it's the simple things like this that really do make all the difference.

Fifty years young and as relevant as ever! EXCELLENT!

Chris Freeman says

This book must have been unbelievably revolutionary in its day. I must admit that its original impact was lost on me at times because I expected many of Griffin's experiences as a white man disguised as a black man in 1959. He's treated poorly by white bus drivers, the hotels he stays in are substandard, he has to use separate facilities. There aren't many surprises as far as how he is treated (although there are a few).

What is surprising is how emotionally involved he gets. Within just a few days, he feels as though he is fully a part of the African-American world. He takes in the constant frustration and humiliation in a very short time. He even feels uncomfortable calling home to speak with his family because he feels like a different person in the make-up.

The Epilogue, which was written sometime after the book the book was initially published, makes it clear just how impossible the issue of race relations is to solve. In it he says that whites trying to help black people in the '60s inevitably tried to help by making the blacks act more white. This only ended up being racist and disrespectful to black culture. So even those trying to help usually made it worse. I'm sure we still do this today.

Laura says

Essential reading - I don't know how I didn't come across this sooner in my education.

In 1959, John Howard Griffin decided to try to pass as a black man, to experience that life in America. He spent time in New Orleans under the supervision of a dermatologist, taking pills to change his melanin & laying under heat lamps. He got darker & darker, until one night he left his friend's house, & passed into the city as a black man. He expected to experience racism & the challenges of segregation. But he was demolished by how much hate was shown to him in the White South. He couldn't have understood how difficult it was even to get to a bathroom as a black man unless he had lived it; wouldn't have known how white men would talk to black men about sex unless he had hitched rides through Alabama; would never have felt the fear of walking down the street in a place where people hate you just for the color of your skin.

Sadly, this book is still relevant today. The details have changed, but not the substance. And when you read his indictments of Christians & patriots almost 60 years ago, it will sting to realize he could walk through America as a black man today & come to the same conclusions. But that's why it's essential reading, especially for white people.

Griffin is a role model for people wanting to make a difference. Wherever he found himself, he worked to break down the notion of The Other. As a teenager, he was in France during WWII. He smuggled Jewish children to safety, until he himself was put on a death list & had to escape. He was later in the South Pacific, & he served as an anthropologist as much as a soldier, making connections with the locals that led to victories over Japan. He was struck blind in that period, & had to go home & re-make his life as The Other, working to show his intrinsic humanity as a person with a disability. Upon spontaneous recovery of his sight a decade later, he dedicated his life to removing the stigma of Other-ness, working to show people how alike we all are. Quite frankly, he's an American saint & should be honored as such.

It's short. You have no reason not to read this. Go get your hands on it. Now.

Julie Christine says

Let's just put this right up front: the idea that it takes a white man posing as a black man to convince white America of the realities of racism smacks of patronizing racial tourism; something only tone-deaf Hollywood could conjure up (except that not even Hollywood dreamed up Rachel Dolezal, who egregiously co-opted a black identity to further her professional agenda and to block up holes in her own emotional dam).

But that is looking at John Griffin's extraordinary experiment through a 21st century lens, with all the cultural and political knowledge that hindsight affords. In 1959, Griffin darkened his skin by taking pills and sitting under a sun lamp and rubbing "stain" into his skin, and then spent six weeks traveling through the American South. That he was a black man was never questioned. He lived in black neighborhoods in New Orleans and travelled in fear into Mississippi, where the recent trial of white men accused of lynching and murdering a black man was an epic travesty of justice, like so many trials before it (of those crimes actually brought to trial). Griffin's actions became a catalyst in the Civil Rights era of the early 60s. After the publication of his experiences, first in the magazine *Sepia*, then in this book, *Black Like Me* in 1961, Griffin and his family became targets of retribution for his betrayal and his insistence on racial justice. In 1964, he was beaten with chains by a gang of white men in Mississippi and left for dead. Eventually his family moved to Mexico to live in the safety of anonymity.

The irony of course is that the very segment of the American population Griffin tried to speak for, black America, could never pick up and move to a safer, more just life in another place. Black America could not wash its face, wait for its skin to lighten, and then capture the spotlight as a curiosity or social experiment and earn speaking fees or royalties; no, black America is still waiting for so much of white America—fifty-five years after Griffin said to himself, "The only way I could see to bridge the gap between us was to become a Negro"—to acknowledge that systemic racism is ground into our political and cultural institutions, that it can't be washed off like Griffin washed off the stain from his skin.

Black Like Me is a painful read. I had a very hard time suspending disbelief that Griffin could so easily pass for black. I struggled with extreme discomfort at Griffin speaking for people of color in the narrative. This discomfort played out in Griffin's own life, when he admitted a few years after the publication of *Black Like Me* the terrible irony that people came to hear him speak, as if he were a circus side-show, yet would not give the same attention to civil rights and social justice advocates of color who lived their lives in the world where he had only sojourned for six weeks.

But again, I must put my reactions and feelings in context. What Griffin accomplished was revolutionary—he provoked white America into a radical empathy and exposed the fallacy of colorblindness. In his 1977 memoir, *A Time To Be Human*, he states, "Surely one of the strangest experiences a person can have is suddenly to step out into the streets and find that the entire white society is convinced that individual possesses qualities and characteristics which that person knows he does not possess. I am not speaking here only of myself. This is the mind-twisting experience of every black person I know." That statement is at the heart of the why and the what of his actions in 1959. *Black Like Me* is a mind- and heart-twisting book. It cannot be judged out of the cultural context in which it was written, but it can continue to be read for the profound relevance it still holds today, when we still have to explain why Black Lives Matter.

Allison says

I was ready to give this book a somewhat generous review for what may be obvious reasons, but then I read some other reviews and now I'm annoyed. It's ridiculous to cast John Howard Griffin as some kind of hero because he was "brave enough" to "endure" the "black experience" for less than 8 weeks. Sorry, but read a book by a black American about the black American experience if that's what you want to learn about; I suspect any would be more holistic than to cast black men and women as purely agents of suffering with such despairing lives that poor Griffin should be exalted to sainthood for attempting to "live as a Negro" for 6 weeks. And I should point out that with this reasoning, it would follow that every black man and woman born in the United States during our hundreds of years of terror against black people ought to be considered heroes—yet Griffin is the one being celebrated. Griffin is a white man his whole life, and readers think his slapping on some make-up for six weeks would allow him to understand the black experience. Bullshit! It's such a ridiculous suggestion; I am astonished this book is being described as a great piece of anthropology. I'm not criticizing the instances that his own racism shows through in his narrative, although those would be valid and useful critiques, but I'm disturbed by some of the reactions to this book.

Though it's also clear that the book is meaningful to whites. Some of the reviews white people give say that it changed their world-view and helped them think about racism more personally, so it seems that the book is still useful for the purpose of teaching empathy to white people, and in a sort of round-about way, one might even learn something about privilege. I can see how it makes the issue of racism very personal for white people, forcing them/us to imagine what it might be like to occupy a different place in the matrix of domination.

The book is also useful for analyzing the mentality of upper-middle class whites who worked for racial justice in the South during the sixties. Griffin was brave, yes, and at a time when nearly all white people were major assholes (understatement) he was at least one of the few trying to work for justice, which is interesting and causes one to wonder what stoked that desire in him. Especially, his resilience in the face of lynch-threats on his life is to be admired. But let's not forget that his "anthropological" experiment also advanced his career and he was paid by magazines to print his journals. What accolades did black men and women earn for enduring the terror of the Jim Crow south? I would have liked to see more self-criticism in Griffin's account. He evades what could have been the most powerful function of his text: an analysis of the racism rooted in the very conception of the project.

Bloodorange says

A note on rating: I would probably have given it five stars if I hadn't read *Invisible Man* and *Between the World and Me* - both tremendous eye openers, like this one - earlier this year. I may yet revisit the rating if I continue to think of this book.

My first reaction was: where *Between the World and Me* focused on mental strain produced by being black, this book focused on everyday physical humiliations - having to plan your day around the very limited map of places when a black person could have a drink of water, use the restroom, buy something to eat.

Shocking afterword on civil rights activists' lives in the sixties.

Greg says

What a brilliant anthropological/sociological study of the Black experience! Using medication and dye, John Howard Griffin, darkened his skin, and took on the role of a black man while traveling through the deep South for a month. His goal -- to learn for himself what it is like. With tremendous eloquence, Griffin conveys the despair and fear that he felt as he experienced humiliating segregation, discrimination, racism, and demeaning living conditions. He lasted little more than a month, during November and December of 1959, until he could stand the hopelessness no longer.

His experience, and the subsequent book, brought about a firestorm of criticism, argument, and discussion around the nation, and undoubtedly played no small part in our civil rights movement. While I don't believe it is possible for anyone from one culture to fully understand the experience of people in another culture, Griffin's remarkable journey (physical, emotional, and intellectual) shed light of a sort that simply is not possible in any other way.

Rowena says

I can't say enough good things about this book. I thank men like John Howard Griffin who took a stand against racism despite the fact that their own people were vehemently against it. This entire book was a fantastic sociological and journalistic investigation of colour relations in the South in the 50s and 60s. It answered some questions I've always wanted to know, for example how did racist Christians justify their racism? Doesn't God teach us that we are all equal? The answer the author came up with was often racism hides under the guise of patriotism.

The book also educates the reader on many key members of the civil rights movement (including Martin Luther King, jr) which I found to be very helpful.

Another central point the author makes is that race has no scientifically-proven bearing on intelligence or morality; it's the societal structure we are forced to live in, what we are given, what we are deprived of and how we are treated by others that makes us the person we are.

I know that racism was a big problem in the South but I was still shocked to read how pervasive it was and what extreme forms it took. The fact that the White author could barely survive 6 weeks as a Black man shows how demoralizing it must have been to live as a Black person back then.

This book is definitely something everybody should read. Racism isn't as prevalent as it was in the 1960s but it's still here. Our attitudes about people of different races need to change, people need to be given equal opportunities despite the colour of their skin.

David Turner says

My father took Griffin to the bus station in Dallas when he started his journey. when the book came out, the Griffin family

lived with us for many weeks until the threats died down. (castration,tarring and feathering, outright murder to name a few)

since my family was mentioned inthe book, we were threatened as well. since i was a very small boy, my safety became a concern

for my parents from time to time.

when i became a mouthy teen ager i would try to take this on myself.

i got into more than a few fights. and more than once was beaten by groups of my "peers".

Racism is amazingly strong, persistent, insidious, and all too easily accepted.

and if you think it magically died in the 60's you're not paying attention.

We have a ridiculous excuse for public and political discussion today. Racism is part of the reason our public discussion is such a miserable intellectual failure.

ONe of the most insidious claims is that racism is not part of our world or that those who challenge racism are somehow doing it for cynical political gain.

yet we have a nationally popular pundit who uses the word "uppity"

others use the code word "arrogant" and more than once, "socialist" has been the code.

As long as we tolerate this quality of public discourse, we will give this disease fertile ground in which to grow.

Didi says

The old saying is that you never know what someone else is going through or living until you've walked a mile in his shoes and frankly it's impossible. However, John Howard Griffin turned his skin black and tried to live as a black man for six weeks while travelling through the Deep South in 1959. He persisted to take a medication which is normally prescribed to patients suffering from vitiligo, a disease where white spots appear on the body and the face, in conjunction with exposure to ultra-violet rays to darken his skin. For the rest of the review go to <http://didibooksenglish.wordpress.com...>

Lindsey Rey says

This was so incredibly painful and terrifying.

Ella says

My main qualm with this book is that for some reason it's on teacher's lists and reading lists etc, but why are we listening and pushing a book written by a white man who "passed" as black for a while rather than actual black people who can and do study, write and explain their experience constantly. I get that perhaps some people won't be able to give credence to anyone but a white person, but isn't that a flaw of our culture? Why are the books written by and about black scholars/people not being disseminated so widely, taught and shared? The whole premise of this book -- written and taught, I am sure, with good intentions -- is exactly that: the road paved with good intentions. Let's start listening and giving credence to real live black people who have lived their entire lives in black skin and then I won't have so much difficulty with the prominence of this one book. (Along the same lines, I think, as the "food stamp challenge" where people of means

pretend they are living the lives of people on food stamps without giving up their cars and fancy cookware, warm beds/homes, etc for the duration. It's impossible to replicate the experience of life on assistance or in another person's skin without actually living it.) Just my opinion. I'm just another white person without any real experience.

Fawaz Ali says

We all claim that we know the feelings of one another. Just ask a group of healthy individuals and they will likely tell you that they know the feelings of the sick! Ask rich people and they will tell you that they know the feelings of the poor. The question is: do they really know or do they only think that they know?

In *Black Like Me*, John Griffin, a white journalist, sought to answer a complex question: How does it feel like to be black in America? By dyeing his skin black and travelling in disguise in the Southern part of America in the late fifties, Griffin was able to get a glimpse of the black experience. Throughout his journey, Griffin discovered that he himself had a residue of racism which he denied prior to the experience but was later forced to confront. Even the simple act of looking in a mirror proved to be tormenting because Griffin was looking at a black man with a white conscience.

This is a beautiful and brilliant book, with plenty of philosophical ideas. I highly recommend reading Griffin's book because throughout the pages, one will be challenged intellectually. Being one and acting to be one are two different things but nonetheless, Griffin succeeded in examining the darker areas of the human soul.

K.D. Absolutely says

John Howard Griffin, a 39-year old white journalist of *Sepia Magazine*, changed his skin color and stayed for seven weeks in Deep South, USA among the black population. The year was 1959 prior to the Washington March and passing of the major civil rights bill in 1964.

When published in 1961, this book caused a major controversy: Mr. Griffin was persecuted by his whites by betraying their own race. Remember that at that time, Deep South states, e.g., Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia were still in racial segregation. The discrimination worked both ways, blacks stay away from whites and vice versa. I have read a number of books on this and still remember two: *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou but this one, being a non-fiction, brought a totally different impact. That scene when Mr. Griffin first looked at his face on the mirror as a black man brought a deep insight on the discrimination he did not know existed even inside himself. He did not like the person staring back at him: black and bald.

This book sold a million copies in the 60's and so far has been translated into 14 languages. President Obama now lords in the White House but the call for social justice that this book purports still resounds up to the present time. Racial discrimination still happens in all parts of the globe. I travel every now and then and I had my share: condescending side remarks of a Chinese waiter in a restaurant in Hong Kong, very late arrival of already cold food in Melbourne, petty crime done to my American officemates in Kuala Lumpur being blamed to illegal Filipino workers by Malaysia police, always being asked for a secondary inspection

in LA airport, receiving a rain of F-word from a Mexican lady in Walmart, San Diego, etc. In all those cases, I just keep my cool. Despite giving my apologies twice to the Mexican lady in San Diego a Filipino-American guard told me in my way out: *"Mabuti sir 'di na lang kayo sumagot, nasa America ho tayo."*

We need not go overseas. In Metro Manila, we also have marginalized parts of population. It may not be about skin color. It can be about age, religion, social status, sexual orientation, etc. Sometimes we are not aware of it just like the white Mr. Griffin the first time he looked at himself on the mirror as a black man. We may not be fully aware of the deep seated bias and prejudices that are lurking inside our minds until we are in a situation that brings those to the open.

Mr. Griffin died in 1980 at the age of 60. He left a legacy that generations will be benefiting from: the lessons from the astounding experiment culled in this truly beautiful classic book - **Black Like Me**.

Kalem Wright says

"Black Like Me" follows author John Howard Griffin, a Texas-born journalist, as he explores the very face of racism and prejudice in the Deep South in 1960s...in blackface. Far from a punchline, it's the ethnographic method Griffin uses to infiltrate black neighborhoods that would be otherwise socially locked to him and elicit bigotry without guardedness and gentility from whites.

At its best, Griffin's journey serves as an example of the courage and effort it requires to put aside privilege and face with empathy and an open heart the experiences of others who are oppressed. Griffin ably renders the microsggressions that many blacks face(d) in the forms of assumptions, language, silence, etc. Most striking for me was an older white woman who assumed Griffin to be a porter and tipped him after his menial task was done.

However, it's incredibly complicated to read a work like this in 2015. At it's worst, Griffin can engage in racial tourism and oppression pornography. He freely uses certain epithets and assumes an air of ownership of his newly-pigmented skin, and elides looking like, thinking like, acting like, and being black. His conclusions are underwhelming (indeed, the author's prescriptions for racial harmony seem to be borrowed from DuBois's concepts that precede him by generations).

I'm positive this book was nothing short of momentous when it was published. It is a grand experiment in consciousness raising that is flawed and worse, bound to it's time.
