

A Child Shall Lead Them: Martin Luther King Jr., Young People, and the Movement. By Rufus Burrow Jr. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014. Pp. ix + 331. \$19.

“God sees you.” These words were spoken by a black teenager to a racist white police officer during a long, forced run with other black youths arrested for a nonviolent protest in Selma, Alabama. The teen was hit in the mouth with a club and yet kept going. Although Burrow does not dwell on this incident, it encapsulates much of his book’s vision. B. narrates how black youth and some white youth were integral to the success of the Civil Rights Movement, and how Martin Luther King encouraged and was challenged by their courage, participation, and leadership.

B. focuses on five major events in which both King and young people played a role: the Montgomery bus boycotts, the student sit-in movement and Freedom Rides, the Birmingham campaign that included the “children’s crusade,” the work of voter registration in Mississippi, and the march from Selma to Montgomery. As the events unfold, B. traces youth participation as moving from mere cooperation with their elders to a self-determined role of leadership and groundbreaking direct action. It is for good reason, as B. shows, that King told Greensboro college students, “What is fresh, what is new in your fight is the fact that it was initiated, fed and sustained by students. . . . You now take your honored places in the world-wide struggle for freedom” (78).

One of B.’s most important contributions is showing that the broader work of the Movement would have been less effective, and perhaps impossible at times, had it not been for the courageous involvement of children, teenagers, and college students—and King knew this. To illustrate, B. provides an excellent chapter that narrates the situation of very real terrorism and brutality into which Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee activists entered in Mississippi. In addition to displaying how the entire government apparatus was interwoven into the terrorist activity of the Ku Klux Klan, including execution orders being carried out by local officials, B. picks up the stories of volunteers long after their time in Mississippi. He recounts an overabundance of posttraumatic stress disorder among the veterans of the Mississippi campaigns and how the effects of this campaign literally drove some young volunteers into madness, substance abuse, and violence in later years. B. unflinchingly recalls the sacrifices of the youth, some who were murdered, others “disappeared,” and still others who carry psychological, spiritual, and bodily scars. Had it not been for the courageous work of these students in many places, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference would not have had a leg to stand on in places such as the Mississippi Delta, Selma, Montgomery, and beyond. The youth, B. writes, “literally sought out opportunities to provide leadership in the struggle, and to contribute in whatever way they could, even in the most dangerous areas of the country. They were not incapacitated by fear; were not passive onlookers” (221).

What distinguishes this work from others within the voluminous writings of King scholars (including B.’s own oeuvre) is B.’s persistent focus on the essential role of youth in fighting systemic racism and white supremacy. B. makes it clear that King and the youth formed a symbiotic relationship in which “King came to see that violence was being done to black children and youths whether they were directly involved

in the nonviolent demonstrations or not, and consequently, it made sense to allow them to march for their freedom and dignity” (33).

After narrating the integral role played by children and youth in the Movement, it would have been easy for B. to conclude with an indictment against today’s youth who are in a far different situation. To B.’s credit, he takes a different route and offers instead a critically optimistic account of the possibility of black youth to continue the battles against white supremacy. To that end, he includes seven principles from King and the black youth of the Movement. He shows that the stakes remain high for black youth and, similar to the Movement days, radical action will not come from the black establishment elders; it can come only from the youth. B. makes it clear that it is long past time that black youth of today are taught that it was none other than black youth who played decisive roles in the victories of the Civil Rights Movement.

Although B.’s book is a success, he too often errs on the side of overrepetition of a few important insights about the youth movements and about King. This is a small criticism. In sum the book deserves a wide audience. It is informative, timely, accessible to a wide audience, and reasonably priced. It can be an important resource for students, activists, scholars, and others interested in this understudied aspect of the Civil Rights Movement.

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