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Silence Of Our Friends, The



Synopsis

A NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLERAs the civil rights struggle heats up in Texas, two families—one white, one black—find common ground. This semi-autobiographical tale is set in 1967 Texas, against the backdrop of the fight for civil rights. A white family from a notoriously racist neighborhood in the suburbs and a black family from its poorest ward cross Houston's color line, overcoming humiliation, degradation, and violence to win the freedom of five black college students unjustly charged with the murder of a policeman. *The Silence of Our Friends* follows events through the point of view of young Mark Long, whose father is a reporter covering the story. Semi-fictionalized, this story has its roots solidly in very real events. With art from the brilliant Nate Powell (*Swallow Me Whole*) bringing the tale to heart-wrenching life, *The Silence of Our Friends* is a new and important entry in the body of civil rights literature.

The Silence of Our Friends Author Q&AHow much of this book's story is based on real events? Mark Long: Creating a book like this one required us to find a balance between factual accuracy and emotional authenticity. Some details as well as names have been changed for storytelling purposes. But the facts are that in 1967 Texas Southern University students began a boycott of classes after the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was banned from campus, and on May 17th they staged a sit down protest on Wheeler Avenue over conditions at the nearby city garbage dump. The protest evolved into a police riot that night when an undercover officer was shot and over 200 officers responded by pouring rifle and machinegun fire into the men's dormitory. The police later stormed the dormitory and arrested 489 students after a policeman was shot and killed. All but 5 of the students were released the next day. They came to be called the "TSU Five" and were charged with the murder of the slain officer. Only one of the students stood trial in Victoria Texas due to publicity in Houston. His trial ended with the dismissal of all charges against the five when it was discovered that the officer was shot accidentally by another officer.

With the civil rights struggle as a backdrop to the story, how did you balance a contemporary perspective on race with the reality of race issues at the time? Nate Powell: While visualizing and adapting Mark's largely autobiographical work on the story, I found myself calling on my own experiences as a kid in Alabama, Mississippi, and Arkansas in the 1980's. Though the story takes place in a specific historical framework, many of the attitudes, details, atmospheric elements, and anecdotes were extremely familiar to me -- sometimes too familiar. As the pages progressed, the twenty years between our Southern childhood experiences didn't seem like much of a difference at all, which was certainly disturbing at times. There were frequent case-by-case conversations about accurate depictions of racism, the privilege of authorship, and inherent charge carried by racism's role in the book. Generally speaking, we determined that this was in many ways a brutal story but a very

accurate one, and respecting the very real violence carried by certain words and actions allowed us to give them their ugly space in the narrative, for better or for worse. Is much knowledge of the civil rights movement required? Mark Long: Everything that pushes the narrative forward is contained within the story's pages, and a lot of the civil rights and struggle-related content is specific to Houston in 1967-68. It definitely covers what readers might need to know without having expertise on the civil rights movement. Having said that, however, I think readers are rewarded throughout the book as characters are offered windows through which they witness a much more massive social upheaval, framed within the last few months of Dr. Martin Luther King's too-short life. There's no easy way to categorize this book, how would you describe it? Mark Long: I'd say it's a culture's own coming-of-age tale. By that, I mean it's first and foremost an exploration of shifting boundaries: towns and neighborhoods, friends and families, customs and attitudes all on the threshold of massive (and ongoing) change. The boundaries themselves take on lives of their own at times. In a more traditional sense, it's also equal parts a story centering on two families' internal relationships as they find themselves in each other's orbit, struggle narrative, friendship-betrayal tale, and courtroom drama. Why choose to tell this story in a graphic format? Nate Powell: As the story's climax is dependent on sorting through multiple points of view, it's appropriate that comics are ideal medium by which to tell a tale with so many lenses. The book offers a pretty intimate view of the world through main characters' points of view, but bringing the narrative even closer through Mark's eyes and balancing them all without judgment highlight the strengths of comics storytelling.

Book Information

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Age Range: 11 - 18 years

Grade Level: 6 - 12

Customer Reviews

Cross posted from my blog Every so often a book will come along that will challenge you, that will make you think, and that will hopefully leave you a bit better after you've read it. And this is just one such book. And yes some people are probably thinking that's high praise for a graphic novel, but the story will give you chills within the first three pages and suck you in and not let you go until the very end of the story. It's 1968 in Houston, Texas and the fight for civil rights is heating up. Young Mark Long's father, Jack Long, is the local TV station's race reporter and he's embedded into the third ward, one of the poorest parts of the town. Jack is attempting to cover the events occurring in town, such as the expulsion of the the SNCC (student nonviolent coordinating committee) from Texas State University, and do justice to the people that he's covering. He's saved at one event by Larry Thompson, a local black leader, and the two become friends and their lives intertwine. One white family from a notoriously racist neighborhood in the burbs and one black family from the poorest ward in Houston, come together and find common ground in a conflict that threatens to tear the city apart. But before the end it may all come crashing down with the arrest of the TSU five. Which will be the loudest before the end, the words of hate or the silence of friends? This semi-autobiographical tale is based upon true events of Mark Long's father. One of the problem that I normally see with autobiographical stories, like this one, is that they often try to give the reader too much information about the story and invariably the reader gets lost or there are moments that leave us wondering why we're supposed to care about the story. But this book...

This graphic novel should have more than the few reviews that it currently has. It is a very thoughtfully written story with nice artwork and especially creative in the way that it paints the local picture of Houston, Texas in the late 1960's. The book conveys tension and a bit of suspense, but it is not a plot-driven pot-boiler. A small number of previous reviewers appear to have been looking for a more sensational and possibly superficial story, and I think that some of these folks missed the wonderful attention paid to Texas-specific elements like the prison rodeo or humanly specific elements like the experience of the character who suffers from a disability. I became a resident of Texas some years ago after living much of my life in the Northeast part of the country. This graphic novel is educational and it's entertaining because of the serious and accurate portrayals of society, peer pressure, parental responsibility, and genuine efforts to bridge gaps between people of

different ethnicities. A few things to note about the book: 1 - The overall quality and ending is serious and solemn, but it offers real hope and a resolution that is very satisfying. 2 - The book contains the use of the n-word and some profanity. 3 - The storytelling techniques and the references to Vietnam and the civil rights movement actually make this a story with some layers. It sounds like some reviewers were a little thrown by the subtleties of the story and how it's conveyed in both the words and images. 4 - Also, the size of the paperback is not tiny, but it is of a size that results in a book of artwork that is somewhat compact in terms of individual panels and images. It requires you to occasionally slow down and look closely at the art to understand the details.

I attended high school from 1964 through 1968, in the midst of some of the most intense racial conflict that America faced. The one event that I remember which highlighted discrimination to me occurred in my senior Pre-Calculus course. The girl who sat in front of me had missed a number of classes and upon her return I asked if she was okay. It seems she was Jewish and had been gone during the midst of one of their holidays. After explaining, she said, "I hope you won't hate me." It would be years before I understood her fear; but when I did, I understood far more than just her story. The Silence of Our Friends is another story that took place in the late 60's - a story that takes place in Houston, TX. Based on actual events, the graphic novel has been slightly changed to maintain the flavor of the times. As the authors write in their postlude to the story: Some details from these events - as well as names and details about my family and Larry's - have been changed for storytelling purposes in The Silence of Our Friends. Creating a book like this one requires finding a balance between factual accuracy and emotional authenticity. What we have striven to create is a story that offers access to a particular moment in time, both for those who lived it and for those who are discovering it for the first time. The authors have accomplished this as they tell the story of two families that focus on events on or around the campus of Texas Southern University. As the two families develop friendships, events spiral out of control. The results might have been catastrophic - except for those who are courageous enough to present the truth to a hostile audience. The story held my interest, the art was well done.

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