

WE HAD A DREAM

by

Bernard Marin

This is a fascinating and informative collection of 13 fictional accounts of significant moments in the civil rights campaigns across the USA, mainly during the 1960s.

The author's detailed research reveals inspirational leaders, dedicated freedom fighters, violent confrontations, government duplicity and police brutality, all through the eyes of participants. The Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955); the assassinations of Martin X (1965) and Martin Luther King Jr (1968); the Chicago Eight Conspiracy Trial (1969–70); the failure of the Equal Rights Amendment seeking equality for women; and the Women's Strike for Equality (August 1970) when 50,000 women blocked New York's 5th Avenue during rush hour demanding equal rights, abortion on demand, equal opportunity, and more accessible child care, are all discussed. Many of these aims remain unfulfilled today, fifty years later. All this, and much more, is examined by way of 'biographical fiction'.

Throughout, the author utilises a personal approach, providing an enthralling window into how people from all walks of life, races, genders, ages and religions, from different circumstances and at different times and places, united to confront ongoing racism and injustice, particularly in the southern states. Thus we experience, for example, the Greensboro sit-in (1960) – where black activists in North Carolina, defying segregation, dared to sit at a 'Whites Only' counter – through the eyes of a young woman, a 'senior at the Women's College of the University of North Carolina'. Our narrator states:

The cop's face creased in a grimace of perplexed annoyance. I decided to retain the initiative. 'Racial discrimination in schools was abolished by the Supreme Court in its Brown decision six years ago [ie, 1954]. These people are simply demanding equal treatment under the law.' [p. 52]

The stories – succinct and tightly written, each of about 15 pages – are both personally involving and historically instructive, with many intimate insights. The book is a successful combination of significant research producing fascinating factual details, plus personal descriptions bringing to life the characters involved. For example, we learn precisely how Dr Martin Luther King Jr was assassinated, including how:

A single .30-06 calibre bullet struck the right side of Dr King's face, cracking his jawbone. It ... re-entered his body through the neck area, severing several arteries and shattering his spine. ... He was taken to St Joseph's Hospital ... [and] ... pronounced dead at 7.05 pm. [p 127]

Such insights continue in a highly-skilled blending of factual research and creative writing. Thus, we are informed how King's assassin, 'a forty-year-old prison escapee named James Earl Ray' [p. 131], was eventually arrested in England. Following a plea deal in March 1969, 'Ray avoided the death penalty for a 99-year term of imprisonment at the Busy Mountain State Penitentiary.' [p. 135] The American legal system is again scrutinised as we join a young journalist who witnesses the Chicago riot of 1968, and the chaotic trial of the ringleaders – known as the Chicago Eight.

These colourful vignettes provide a fascinating and engrossing insight into the most significant events during the tumultuous 1960s in the USA – much of which, unhappily, should resonate with readers in many fractious communities around the world today – including in Australia.

Of particular impact for this reviewer is the author's chapter on one of many anti-Vietnam War protests of the 1960s, including one held in Washington DC in November 1969. The narrator, a university student bussed in for the event with others, recalls:

... we made our way as a group to Arlington National Cemetery. There, we were each issued with a candle and a small sign featuring the name and date of death of an American Vietnam War casualty. Mine read: 'Rudolph Aguilar, 11 August, 1965'.

With our candles lit, we joined a procession of thousands who marched silently across the Theodore Roosevelt Bridge over the Potomac. There was something spectral about the sight of flickering candles held by myriad hands moving in soundless accord past the Lincoln Memorial to the White House. From there we strode down Pennsylvania Avenue to the foot of Capitol Hill. The 'March Against Death' – as this event has been titled – broadcast a powerful message of popular discontent with the war in Vietnam – all without a single word being uttered. [p. 200]

I'm sure such descriptions will resonate particularly with Australian anti-Vietnam War protesters (including the author, a self-proclaimed conscientious objector, and this reviewer, who supported such objectors); they might also cause American readers to reflect on changing times and circumstances, following that very different, and very violent, march upon Capitol Hill of 6 January 2021; and remain tragically very pertinent today, given the appalling carnage and cruelty of Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine.

This work of historical fiction should enthral and inspire all those concerned with the protection and advancement of human rights in our troubled world of today.

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