



Brother to a Dragonfly

Will D. Campbell

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Will Campbells award-winning book shares two interrelated stories. One is of his youth in rural Mississippi and his devotion to his brother whose life ended in seeming tragedy. The other tells of his ordination at age 17 and gradual realization that civil rightsfor blacks, for women, for gays was an essential part of a ministry that has not yet ended.

Brother to a Dragonfly Details

Date : Published April 1st 1980 by Continuum (first published 1977)

ISBN : 9780826400321

Author : Will D. Campbell

Format : Paperback 268 pages

Genre : Autobiography, Memoir, Biography, Nonfiction, History, American, Southern

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From Reader Review Brother to a Dragonfly for online ebook

Camie says

This memoir narrated by Will, tells the story of he and his older brother Joe Campbell, who grew up similarly in a very close knit but impoverished family in Mississippi, who grew up to become very different men. As young men, Will becomes a leader as a Baptist Minister, while Joe struggles as a pharmacy worker who loses his way, in an America which is deeply embroiled in the civil rights movement. A story for those who love Southern Lit (me) and are interested in the underpinnings of the early civil rights movement (where I felt the book got a touch bogged down). It is still an interesting and endearing tale of the almost mythical power of brotherly love. 3.5 stars

Kirk Smith says

This gave me the best insider's view of activities of the civil rights movement that I have ever had. A pleasant mixture of Mississippi grit and ethical development for an admirable and humble man that was right in the middle of it. Will Campbell, as a minister and leader, is on moral and ethical high ground consistently. His confidence is strong and assuring, he has an absolute lack of vanity, and his humble nature is a pleasure. A great man all around, he doesn't suffer the all too common "feet of clay" plaguing too many stories of spiritual leaders.*** The structure is such that there are two stories going on throughout. I believe Will's love and dedication for his brother to be the primary story, with his own history and accomplishments taking back seat throughout. Will's brother Joseph is of course "troubled". Profane and profound, this teaches that rewards of lasting value require patient and persistent toil.

Tim Williams says

I have waited months to review this book, mostly because I wanted to write with the experience of having taught Campbell's memoir two semesters in a row. As the academic year comes to a close, I feel ready to review. I assigned the book for a first year seminar entitled "memoir, history, and culture." Some students struggled with the writing, but beyond that it was popular among most of them. I absolutely loved this book from the first page and the thoughtful genesis poem of Campbell's family. The book is important to study as a memoir, a window into the twentieth-century South, and as a treatise on civil rights.

As a memoir, *Brother to a Dragonfly* is full of beautiful southern storytelling language that's at once polite and blunt. Few memoirs today (if you can even call the recent spate of autobiographical prose memoir), contain such literary beauty as this book. The story of Will and Joe's relationship is real--easy to feel and imagine--because of the prose.

As a window into the twentieth-century South, the book is invaluable and easily could be paired with other coming-of-age memoirs of the period, including Lillian Smith's *Killers of the Dream*. In fact, I assigned the first chapter of Smith's book to get students to think about how we learn about race and come to identify injustice. The closest book published recently is Tim Tyson's *Blood Done Sign My Name*. I therefore highly recommend this book for any student of southern history.

Finally, as a treatise on civil rights, this book is timeless. Campbell challenges us to love as Christ loves--universally and without condition--and does so in our uniquely American context of racial injustice. In the end, the book leaves me wondering: where are the New "New South's" prophetic voices? From which pulpits do they resonate? When will the religious left embrace with gusto the activism it once had? I see this happening in my own church and throughout North Carolina with moral Mondays, and public protest. Opportunities to live and lead as Campbell did are all around.

Silvana says

I gave this book five stars not only because it gives an engaging insight into the tumultuous civil rights era of America's history, but primarily for the deeper insights that came to Will Campbell as he lived amidst the reality of the darker side of humanity. He does not mince words or gloss over the raw and painful realities of life. From his realization of his own self righteousness and mistaken dependence on human systems to the ever present reality of his beloved brother's drug dependence, to the ongoing deep divide that segregation and discrimination brought to real people, Campbell learns the deeper meaning of grace that extended beyond traditional boundaries. I have great respect for this man who was able to see below the surface to the real heart of the matter. Highly recommended for those willing to see things a little differently!

Fredr says

"We are all bastards, but God loves us anyway". Wonderful story of struggles during the Civil Rights period and who and when you learn of God's teachings is not always clear cut. The love of family throughout.

Shane says

I wonder what Baptist would take seriously Campbell's stance re: separation of church and state as it relates to marriage? Further, what if that same argument was applied to the current hot topic of civil unions? Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's . . . hmmm.

Josh says

Raw, revealing, and steeped in love of all kinds. This memoir approaches several topics about as head on as possible. Careful not to dull any sharp points which might soften the ugliness of several personal struggles, Campbell did a masterful job in both honoring and examining the lovely, tragic, and inspiring tale of his brother's life. Ultimately, the demons were too strong, but along the way we gain perspectives on so many more topics than simply a brotherly bond.

Campbell also exposes his own perspectives, failures, and rooted beliefs. Some of which he later explained as ill fated; you get to watch the beliefs grow through a lifetime of experiences.

When's the last time you read a book written by a whisky drinking Baptist preacher who was a key leader in

the civil rights movement? Not only that, he was protested by those you might expect from his bold leadership in desegregation (some actions of which he brings up as "should I have done this differently" in the book), but also controversially developed a relationship with some of the key leaders in the Klu Klux Klan- angering his friends in the civil rights movement. His belief being that Christ's love was available for all- and his mission being to help others find it (but not in the contemporary evangelical method). His thought was that "we are all Bastards, but God loves us anyway".

Just as his actions at that time didn't find fertile soil with everyone- I can almost guarantee you (regardless of your beliefs or opinions) will not be aligned to his exact way of thinking on a host of issues. That's what makes it so great to me. In his differences, his positions are laid out so beautifully, and in such raw strokes that you can't hardly do anything but be drawn to his way of thinking. Really though, in the end, this is a story about love- not romance- love. It left me rethinking a few things, and made me wish that our world today had a few things more similar to the past. Certainly some of the issues for which Campbell fought for have progressed greatly, but other parts of modern life leave me wishing for the nostalgic parts of the story Campbell describes so beautifully- mainly an ability for people of all backgrounds to get along despite the differences.

Worth your time to read.

James Klagge says

I read this once before, many years ago. And I had the author sign my book about 10 years ago. He is a legend in southern civil rights work. It was time to read it again. And as with other books I've reread, I remembered hardly anything except a certain feeling. But this one I was glad I reread. The story of Will and his brother Joe (the dragonfly) holds the reader's attention, but the theological moral comes near the end. Campbell learns/decides that everyone is a bastard, and God loves everyone, even the KKK. This makes his civil rights work extend to white racists as well--understanding how they are children of God too. This is a significant challenge to each of us, regardless of where we are--to love our enemy, or to stop thinking of them as our enemy. For example, the fundamentalist minister, the narcissistic co-worker. It's easy enough to agree with in the abstract, but an actual and ongoing challenge in the flesh. Well...what are we waiting for?

Sharon Larocque says

A wonderful read, especially revealing the lives of a poor southern Mississippi family focusing on 2 brothers and their relationship with one another as they grew up and each traveled much different roads, one a preacher without a church and the other a pharmacist who became dependent on drugs. Captures a close-up view of what deep southern life is all about. Will D Campbell was a special man who defended the civil rights of blacks in the South while all the while trying to understand just why his fellow southerners believed what they did. I can't praise this book enough.

Be sure and look him up on Youtube, fascinating videos about just what and who Will was all about.

Diane Barnes says

"We're all bastards, but God loves us anyway." This was Will Campbell's response to an avowed atheist who asked him to define Christianity in 10 words.

This is a memoir of two brothers who grew up poor in rural Mississippi in the 30's. They idolized each other, but took different paths. Our author became a Baptist minister, highly educated, and very active in the early years of the Civil Rights Movement. His older brother Joe became a pharmacist who abused and became dependent on the pills he was handing out. The brothers helped and defended each other all their lives. It's an honest story of love and family devotion.

But what makes this book special is that it's also the story of the South that the author knows and loves, and the questioning of things he had always believed, including and especially his evolving views on what he believed and how best to minister to people while leaving the church behind. At one point, he became friends with a member of the Ku Klux Klan in an attempt to understand what they wanted to accomplish. In a particularly moving scene he comes to understand - "Suddenly I knew that we are a nation of Klansmen. I knew that as a nation we stood for peace, harmony and freedom, but that the means we employed to accomplish those ends were the complete opposite."

This book is guaranteed to make you think, about family and relationships, about religion, about race, about human nature itself.

And it is sure to offend almost everyone who reads it at one point or another because of its honesty. That's why I like it so much.

Todd says

A captivating, heartwarming (and heartbreaking) autobiographical reflection on the early life of the bootleg preacher Will Campbell, who grew up poor in Amite County, Mississippi, and became a notable, vocal supporter of civil rights when it was dangerous for him. A fine reflection on growing up in the rural south, this book was a finalist for the 1978 National Book Award.

Milton says

I accidentally picked this book up in 1981 on a sale table at a bookstore. I started reading it and could not put it down. Will Campbell visited me in my home several years ago. I live close to Amite County and he had read an article I had written on the Iraq War. He just wanted to come by and meet me. How honored I was. He was so down to earth.

C. Michael says

Brother to a Dragonfly

By Will D. Campbell

Continuum, 1977

This is not a new book. I read it while it was still young when it was suggested to me by a faculty member while I was attending Hendrix College. But, I was too young to be reading this book. First, it was written by a Southern Baptist minister and seeing that I was already pretty suspicious of the Roman Catholic priests of my youth and adolescence, a Baptist minister had little chance capturing my attention. At the time, I may have considered Campbell's memoir a non-fiction version of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a book I read while in high school and a movie which I had seen much earlier, soundly affected by both at the time. But my attention to *Brother to a Dragonfly* waned in my youthful belief that I knew all and everything in the world was okay..

That was almost 40 years ago. It is a funny thing what an intervening 40 years does to prepare one to understand those things lost on hubric youth. What is the old saw attributed to the Buddha..."when the student is ready, the teacher will appear?" Well, my recent return to Campbell's book was almost like that. I say almost, because my turnings, those changes in temporal and philosophical direction that life events catalyze, began well in advance of this re-reading. And, it was these turnings that properly prepared me for the deceptively light gravity of Campbell's memoir of growing up in pre-, para- and post Depression Mississippi with a brother larger than life and a most improbable destiny for a Baptist minister hailing from the bowels of the Mississippi delta.

Will Davis Campbell's biography (in the most universal sense) is, well, downright biblical. Born in pre-Depression, Jim Crow Amite County, Mississippi, Campbell was the son of dirt farmers who lived in a part of the country that failed to realize the Great Depression because everyone was already poor. Campbell served as a medic in World War II returning after the war to attend Wake Forest, Tulane, and finally the Yale Divinity School. Then, in turn, Campbell led a Louisiana congregation who did not take his integrationist tendencies seriously and was the director of religious life at the University of Mississippi, only be threatened run off in 1956 because of his racial views.

Campbell eventually help positions in the National Council of Churches, where he entered formally the Civil Rights Movement. In 1963, Campbell became director of the Committee of Southern Churchmen, which sponsored his activism, documented in the organization's journal, *Katallagete*, the title of which is derived from the New Testament Greek for the Pauline phrase "be reconciled," referenced from 2 Corinthians 5:20:

"Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God."

Campbell was present at the 1957 desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, walking with the Arkansas Nine as they approached the heavily guarded building, as well as the integration of lunch counters in Nashville and points south. Campbell was present in Selma and Montgomery and Birmingham with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as well as in Memphis on April 4, 1968 at the Lorraine Motel. In his obituary for Brother Campbell, *Atlantic* contributor Andrew Cohen proffered,

“It is impossible to know what the civil rights movement would have been like without his counsel. It is impossible to know if he saved lives with his advice. But it is also impossible to conceive of the success of the movement without his profound contributions to it.”

It is not this density of importance that one will derive from Campbell's memoir, rather it is the picture of a man humbled, following Micah's admonition,

“He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God?”

Campbell's account is of multiple parables united in a homespun allegory that weaves family, race, justice, faith and love into a grandmother's quilt as timeless and urgent now as it was then. Campbell uses his relationship with his older brother Joe coupled with the tender memory of his parents, grandparents and siblings as the backdrop for this personal *bildungsroman* that defined in the most simple terms the unconditional love, sense of justice and compassion that should be the foundation of Christian thought and action, but are so often absent in deference to moral bean-counting and dogmatic pronouncement.

Brother to a Dragonfly is as profound a written document as *To Kill a Mockingbird* existing infinitely closer to the marrow. One need not have any faith tradition whatsoever to understand and benefit Campbell's themes of universal fairness and the continued openness to learn, even in the face of unwarranted and unnecessary harsh judgement. Throughout his account, Campbell always, when verbally attacked, looks for the lesson for himself first, incorporating it into his expansive and relevant world view. The themes in *Brother to a Dragonfly* are as important and essential now as when they were penned.

Nan The Great says

I found this book in a "Friends of the East Atlanta Book Sale" cart for \$1. I grabbed it because the forward by Jimmy Carter promised a poignant look at the south from the depression through the Civil Rights era. Those of you who know me will note that this is one of my favorite topics.

I am working my way through and it has proven to be a raw and very sad look at life during a time of extreme turmoil and confusion for southern people. The authors stories even sound somewhat familiar to me having grown up in Georgia WELL after the 1960s. Coming to the realization one day that your grandma not only makes the best lemon cake in the land, but also tells nigger jokes. A sad day.

His writing style is rambling giving the book a nostalgic feel but is sometimes so rambling that it becomes hard to follow. He takes you inside his memories and when they jump subjects, be prepared to follow.

Overall I am enjoying the story. It is a fine example of the difference between history books and the memoirs

of people who were actually there.

Jessie says

Honest portraiture of close brothers evolving as human beings (and as poor white Southerners) during the early years of the Civil Rights Movement; as a poor white and a Baptist, Campbell occupies a different space than that of more prominent Southern writers "of faith" (Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy), or writers faithful in general -- but he's more a straight-up preacher, remarkable in his life and thought, and not as a literary light (I admit, some of the writing and use of metaphor here is belabored--but he's a golden storyteller, even when his stories are embedded in homilies).

Robert Coles says in his blurb on the back that the brothers become mythic, and that's true, and when reading I could graft my own grown-sibling story into Will & Joe's -- how we tend one another as we get older, losing each other in some ways and getting much closer in other ways, and how we negotiate our home ties - - all that's very moving in the narrative.

Like Stringfellow, Campbell balks at easy camps (liberal, conservative) and conventional definitions (Christian, decent, enemy, human); he's radically inclusive and relentlessly (unsophisticatedly) justice-minded -- eventually going so far as to pastor members of the KKK.

There's something here, I think, for those of us who inhabit an atmosphere of "liberal churchgoers" who say everything right and who maybe even carry a self-congratulatory air -- the Bush-bashers, the loathers of the Christian Right and its Fundies; this book at least bears witness to a more human way of gauging those we disagree with and of looking at what makes each of us the sort of person we are.
