



The Best of Enemies: Race and Redemption in the New South

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C. P. Ellis grew up in the poor white section of Durham, North Carolina, and as a young man joined the Ku Klux Klan. Ann Atwater, a single mother from the poor black part of town, quit her job as a household domestic to join the civil rights fight. During the 1960s, as the country struggled with the explosive issue of race, Atwater and Ellis met on opposite sides of the public school integration issue. Their encounters were charged with hatred and suspicion. In an amazing set of transformations, however, each of them came to see how the other had been exploited by the South's rigid power structure, and they forged a friendship that flourished against a backdrop of unrelenting bigotry.

Rich with details about the rhythms of daily life in the mid-twentieth-century South, *The Best of Enemies* offers a vivid portrait of a relationship that defied all odds. By placing this very personal story into broader context, Osha Gray Davidson demonstrates that race is intimately tied to issues of class, and that cooperation is possible--even in the most divisive situations--when people begin to listen to one another.

The Best of Enemies: Race and Redemption in the New South Details

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From Reader Review The Best of Enemies: Race and Redemption in the New South for online ebook

Shannan Harper says

I read this book in anticipation of the movie, but it was a little hard to read. This is probably one of the few instances where I'll like the movie better than the book.

Jennifer says

I found the history of Durham, NC with a focus on racism and the Civil Rights Movement to be interesting. Although this book is older, it's still relevant, and Osha Gray Davidson's major contribution/impact to a discussion of this history is his intentional exploration of the intersections of race *and class*, as well as his willingness to censure the ambivalence of both "moderate" black and white members of Durham (usually more affluent people) about race relations. This book was refreshing insofar as it allows the "messiness" of life, activism, and humans to exist with its pages, as it was in real life, as opposed to homogenizing to create a convenient national myth.

This book was not what I expected. From the title and cover of the book, I was expecting more of an exploration of the relationship between C.P. Ellis and Ann Atwater, but this ended up being more a history of Durham's "race relations," punctuated by mentions of Ellis and Atwater. I would have liked to hear more about their transformations, both from poor workers into activists, and from enemies to friends.

Ebony says

3.5 stars

Janel says

As a Durham resident and NC native, this history is crucial for me, a white woman hoping to raise antiracist children here. I was a little frustrated that it took so long to get to CP and Ann's story, but after finishing it I understood why — it was a vignette in a longer epic, not enough for a standalone book.

It helped me also understand the importance of having respect for those who disagree with you / are hateful. I prefer to write them off and indulge my anger at them but the impact that a few individuals had by treating their enemies with respect is just astounding. Well done to them.

Thaddaeus says

Really excellent historical outlay of Durham's history as well as a profile of Ann Atwater and CP Ellis.

BLSSDQT says

What to say...this will be longer than any review I've done - sorry in advance.

I started this book as part of a book club where we had to choose a book that was/is being made into a movie.

I gave it 2 stars because it is a very hard read. It is not necessarily a story about two people and their efforts together to overcome racial inequality. That is what I thought the book was about.

The author really wanted you to understand the history of what was happening at this time, which is a good thing. However, it could have been done a lot better. It jumped all over the place from year to year where you're asking yourself 'wait, when was this again?'. So I found myself skipping big sections.

Now, the characters...while you are introduced to them a little in the book you don't get to the meat of the story with the two of them until 60 pages before the end of the book (if even that many).

In a nutshell, too many history lessons and not enough emphasis on what the two characters themselves were feeling about it and the internal struggles they had. This would have went a long way to helping the last 60 pages of the book where the real story was.

Dan says

A great, readable history of the civil rights movement in Durham, North Carolina, focused particularly on the human experiences of two prominent community organizers of the lower class: one, a particularly aggressive proponent for the rights of poor blacks named Ann Atwater; the other, C.P. Ellis, a poor white supremacist and leader of the local Ku Klux Klan. When these two are brought together to take on the challenge of school desegregation some incredible human change takes place. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in the micro-level change brought about by larger social movements. The story of Ellis' transformation is especially heart-wrenching. My one critique is that Osha Gray Davidson doesn't spend much time on the outcome of Ellis' and Atwater's work on school desegregation. I would have been very interested to see if there was any substantive social change based on their work.

Catherine says

Excellent social history telling the story of transformation of a poor white leader of the KKK into a man who realizes that black people are human beings with the same need for respect and economic opportunity. He was appointed to a public school integration project with Ann Atwater, a black community organizer. Both started out being suspicious and hateful but they became friends and allies as they realized that both groups of people--poor whites and blacks--had been exploited by the South's rigid power structure and that race was being used as a divide-and-conquer strategy. They forged a friendship as their eyes were opened to a new vision of a better world. C.P. Ellis quit the KKK after being part of the school integration project and was

ostracized by the white community as a traitor, but he decided that he had changed, he had been wrong and that poor whites were living on a false dream and bitterness that only benefited the white wealthy class. He crossed the color line and discovered that class was an important line, too, that was difficult to cross. Later, C.P. Ellis organized a union and became its leader. This book by Osha Gray Davidson was inspired by an interview with C.P. Ellis by Studs Terkel. [Warning: In describing actual historical events, Davidson records the use of the N-word as a racial epithet, but he never engages a discussion of the destructive negativity of this word.]

David Ward says

The Best of Enemies: Race and Redemption in the New South by Osha Gray Davidson (Scribner 1996) (305.800). This book has a distinctly National Public Radio flavoring to it. It's the story of how blacks overcame the status-quo Jim Crow South in the 1960's and 1970's in Durham, North Carolina. It follows two community organizers as they worked to improve the lot of their constituents: Ann Atwater was a poor uneducated black single parent who rose to a position of leadership among the poor blacks of Durham, and C.P. Ellis was "poor white trash" who was the head of the local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan. They became if not friends, then at least trusted enemies. Strangely (or inevitably), the book concludes before the two sides are able to achieve any real progress or before they actually demonstrate any ability to work together for the common good. What an odd (and oddly hopeful) book! My rating: 7/10, finished 2/27/15.

Jihemmin says

I think I grew up thinking that Brown vs. The Board of Education was a magic wand. All of a sudden, schools were desegregated. Obviously, that is not the case, and this book gives a powerful portrait of an important window of time when that threshold had to be crossed. Of course I'm partial to Durham, but this story is super compelling. Osha is a journalist who does an exquisite job of making history come alive through just enough fictional detail to give it immediacy and a sense of being there. He tells the story of class politics in the South through the life stories of Ann Atwater, a working class, black activist and A.P. Ellis, a working class white who led the local KKK movement. These two individuals became the co-chairs of the school desegregation committee in Durham in the early 70s.

This book has important things to teach about race and class in America--I would read it again and recommend it highly to anyone curious about this entrenched issue.

Jaime says

2019 Reading Challenge: Set in Your Home State

This book is an in depth history into racism in the South, specifically Durham, NC. The first half is context and setting the stage for what ultimately becomes a inspirational story of a former Klan member who helps integrate the schools. It shows that if you just put yourself (or are put into) a situation where you can learn about another person, even one who is hated, you may realize that there are always commonalities.

I learned a lot!

Terry Earley says

Mentioned in the book "Being Wrong" by Kathryn Schultz.

This book has been on my "want to read list" for years, but was unavailable at the local library. Finally, with the movie coming out, I got a copy via an interlibrary loan.

What a moving story. There is plenty of backstory, since the city of Durham plays a large role in this important time in the Civil Rights movement. Still, that was informative.

The important takeaway was the realization that the issues were not between races, but between the poor and the "leading citizens". Those Southern aristocrats, in their pride pitted poor whites against poor blacks. Once people came together to talk through issues of failing schools, they found that their issues were the same.

Osha Gray Davidson says

I sympathize with readers who said it was slow reading, and if it's any consolation, it was far slower to write.

Maya B says

This was an interesting read. This book was mostly about the history and race relations in Durham, N.C. I felt the author only touched a little on C.P. Ellis and Ann Atwater, who clearly did a lot to try to desegregate their communities. I was hoping the book would have been more about how these 2 individuals came together for a common cause and have the history of Durham as the backdrop.

Susan Chapek says

This is an amazing book, framed as a dual biography, about Durham NC during the Civil Rights era.

The two principal subjects are Ann Atwater (an African-American Civil Rights activist) and C.P. Ellis (a member of the KKK); during the course of their activism they begin as bitter opponents, and slowly come to realize that they're both actually fighting the same enemies--chiefly poverty and lack of opportunity. This discovery, their extraordinary collaboration in working out the required integration of the Durham school system, and their eventual close friendship, makes this well-researched book a page turner and a story of hope.

It also provides a brilliant "biography" of Durham. I always recommend this book to new Durhamites who want to get a feel for the town and its history.
