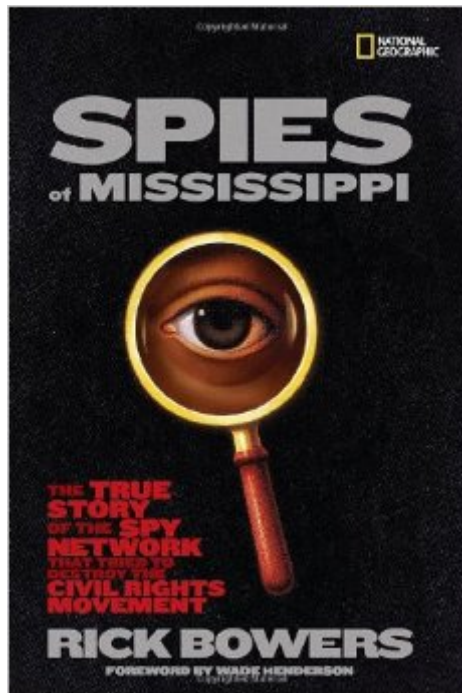


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Spies Of Mississippi: The True Story Of The Spy Network That Tried To Destroy The Civil Rights Movement



Synopsis

The Spies of Mississippi is a compelling story of how state spies tried to block voting rights for African Americans during the Civil Rights era. This book sheds new light on one of the most momentous periods in American history. Author Rick Bowers has combed through primary-source materials and interviewed surviving activists named in once-secret files, as well as the writings and oral histories of Mississippi civil rights leaders. Readers get first-hand accounts of how neighbors spied on neighbors, teachers spied on students, ministers spied on church-goers, and spies even spied on spies. The Spies of Mississippi will inspire readers with the stories of the brave citizens who overcame the forces of white supremacy to usher in a new era of hope and freedom "an age that has recently culminated in the election of Barack Obama. National Geographic supports K-12 educators with ELA Common Core Resources. Visit www.natgeoed.org/commoncore for more information.

Book Information

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Age Range: 12 and up

Grade Level: 7 and up

Customer Reviews

When kids think of spies the general impression is almost always positive. There's that vague sense that Benedict Arnold was one and that was a bad thing, but generally their spy-knowledge is informed by folks like James Bond, Alex Rider, and other intrepid adventurers. The notion that

spying could be used for evil instead of good doesn't get a lot of play in their literature. So when I read the subtitle of this book and saw that it read "The True Story of the Spy Network That Tried to Destroy the Civil Rights Movement" I was (A) surprised I hadn't run across this story before and (B) I was amazed that we now had a book for kids where we see spies used for the ultimate nefarious purpose. Rick Bowers brings to light a story never before seen in a children's non-fiction publication. It's what went on behind the scenes in Mississippi when racism decided to get organized. In it you'll find both stories of unsung heroes and tales of horrendous crimes. This book is many things. Dull, it is not. Sometimes you hear talk about the mundane nature of evil and nothing is more mundane than the name "Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission". Its activities, however, were anything but humdrum. In 1956, Mississippi state governor J.P. Coleman signed into law a bill calling for the creation of an agency whose sole purpose would be to protect the state of segregation, as it currently existed at that time. Essentially, this Southern state now had its own publicly funded spy program. Over the course of two decades they would infiltrate civil rights organizations, hire spies, gather information, and do everything in their power to fight the change that was coming. By turns chilling and compelling, Rick Bowers dives into the recently released 134,000 pages of the commission's secret investigative files and supplements them with interviews and additional research to bring to light a dark time in our nation's history. Endmatter includes information on what happened to the key players, selected documents, an extensive Bibliography, Quote Sources, and an Index. Bowers does a good job of conveying the horror of what a lot of these Civil Rights activists went through. But the book weighs in at a slim 120 pages, which doesn't allow the author much time to go into people's lives. With that in mind, the author does a deft job of allowing you to get a sense of the book's participants. Enough so that when you read about a man "tied to the back of a garbage truck and forced to load trash in full view of his neighbors" or the student who was placed on a table and beaten with a belt when she was arrested, the demeaning nature of these incidents is not lost on a young reader. And Bowers is adept at plucking out essential details that give you a sense of the whole. When you learn about Governor Ross Barnett, Bowers shows you what a buffoon the fellow is by mentioning, amongst other details, that, "He would become the only governor to name two Miss Americas honorary colonels in the Mississippi National Guard." Mind you, that's a detail that more adults than kids are going to find funny, but I like that it's in there. I found the way in which some of the information was laid out to be surprising. To my mind, the most interesting passage in the book is a section in Chapter Eight (The Clandestine War) that lists the five steps Ross Barnett took to fight the Civil Rights Movement. Since Bowers has written the book chronologically, this section comes later in the text, but I would have loved to have run into it earlier

on. As far as I can tell, it's a fascinating portion that really drills home how to destroy a movement (though we are fortunate that it ran into enough problems to prevent it from ever meeting its goal). I can see why that section comes as late in the book as it does. Less understandable is Chapter 9 (Never, Never Land). This chapter explains why Mississippi was the way it was. One explanation says, "Mississippi had no major cosmopolitan center like Atlanta, New Orleans, or Memphis, where large newspapers carried competing points of view and major universities debated new ideas." Which is great and all, but why introduce it so late in the game? Seems to me that if you're going to understand why things happened, it would be useful to put things into context earlier rather than later. Perhaps this was a concession made to the child readers. Was there a fear that if you put in statistics like the fact that Mississippians were 55 percent white and 45 percent black at the beginning, kids would get bored early on and put down the book? I dunno but it certainly would have benefited the book if it had been introduced at the start of the story. Though I initially read a galley copy of this book, I was glad that I waited for the final product before reviewing it. The additional backmatter and photographs in this tome make all the difference. The Epilogue, for example, shows that through meticulous interviews, Bowers discovered that the infamous Agent X who infiltrated Civil Rights meetings could have been one R.L. Bolden, a man who conceded to Bowers that he did send his bosses at the Day Agency information on Freedom Summer training seminars in Ohio. The photographs in the center of the book are also interesting, displaying billboard smear campaigns painting Martin Luther King as attending Communist training camps, and photographs marked up by The Commission identifying protesters to harass. And the selected documents from the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission included at the end are truly fascinating and, in the case of the map of the gravesite of Civil Rights workers, chilling. Bowers does get a touch overly dramatic in his writing, which may or may not work for his young readers. At one point in the Prologue he says of this story that it is, "usually relegated to a footnote in the history of the civil rights movement. No longer. This is how it happened." Or later, when describing some mug shots (provided quite nicely in the center of the book) he says that they show, "innocence mixed with fear mixed with defiance." He has a taste for the dramatic, this one. Then again, these were dramatic times. And at no point is Bowers more descriptive than the folks he is describing. What author could compete with a group who describes activists as "communists, sex perverts, odd balls, and do-gooders"? The material speaks for itself. To what extent does Bowers cater to a child audience? As I've mentioned, the book is short and the character studies to the point. The dramatic language that sometimes comes up could be a sign of concessions made to younger folks. As it stands, though, this is just a great book for older kids, teens, and adults. Synthesized down to its most essential parts, Bowers has found a

new way to highlight the heroism and the horror of this amazing moment in American history. After reading this, kids may find themselves reassessing their thoughts about spying and what it can be used for. It's hard not to love your civil liberties when you see them so expertly trampled. A good read. Ages 10 and up.

The expose' by Rick Bowers provides the frightening details of how these state government funded and sanctioned organizations controlled the state of Mississippi in the 1960's. They were authorized by the state legislature and given broad powers by the segregationist Governor Ross Barnett. They were provided with unlimited resources to spy on the black citizens and any white sympathizers in their own state. The Sovereignty Commission was the authorizing body at the state level and the White Citizen's Councils, usually partially made up of local Ku Klux Klan members, controlled the local communities. State's rights was the law and no federal government was going to tell the people of Mississippi what to do. The first time that I ever heard of the Sovereignty Commission was in the John Grisham novel, *The Chamber*, this book fills in the details behind one of the more insidious organizations in Mississippi in the 1960's.

Fear and hate, two of the most dangerous weapons on the planet. And boy did the segregationists use them to manipulate the public. Segregationists in Mississippi were so determined to undermine the civil rights movement and the legal decisions that were increasingly turning against them that they set up the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission to combat it. They recruited spies to check on civil rights workers and anyone they considered a threat. Generally they tried to use more subtle methods to stop the movement, things such as manipulating jobs, white supremacist organizations, etc. All to undermine and stop integration. Bowers shares the stories of men who worked for both sides, those who worked against integration and those who worked for it. Some of these stories were encouraging and some of them were sad. It just bothered me what these men were willing to do to preserve their way of life, no matter how distorted. A powerful example of how much some people hate change and yet how impossible to avoid. This is an important book about the dangers of too much power in the hands of a few and how easily it can be misused. It's also an important book about the courage of individuals in making a difference despite the sacrifices that are sometimes required.

First, I couldn't put the book down. Then I couldn't believe that this occurred in America. And lastly, I couldn't believe I had never heard of this "Commission" before. This book delivers a crisp, clear

story of another side of the Civil Rights movement, a story that typically never goes further than marches, cross burning and KKK uniforms. These are stories of average citizens who were ultimately jailed for applying to college or whose businesses were burned, or who were shot in cold blood, all for trying gain equality. My teenagers loved this book too - it ties into their growing awareness of social justice and why you have to push back when things are unfair. I looked up the MDAH web site and read the original spy reports, now digitized. Chilling. A must read for inquiring minds who know there is always another side to history. The photos were compelling too. Give it to your child's history teacher, today.

~A short, readable history, from National Geographic publishing, about the State of Mississippi's finely-tuned clandestine efforts of the 50s and 60s to stop the civil rights movement cold. It's understandable and interesting enough for school-agers studying the rights cause...and meaningful enough for adults who can remember the violent period, still with dismay and disbelief. This book fills in the blanks, connects the dots, and provides answers to questions some of us never thought to ask. ~Informative reading. ~Outstanding effort by the author. ~Fast and fulfilling.

I found this book fascinating to read. Some of the issued raised I had trouble believing to treachery people will do for money. Then again, I should have not been so surprised as money talks and the rest walks.

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