



All God's Children

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From the National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *China: Alive in the Bitter Sea* comes the poignant story of how the tradition of white Southern violence and racism has long affected and still haunts one black family. Butterfield follows the Bosket family of Edgefield County, South Carolina, from the days of slavery to the present. Photos.

All God's Children Details

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From Reader Review All God's Children for online ebook

Laurie Tomchak says

It only took me two days to read this harrowing account of life in and out of prison. As with many prison accounts, the fortunes of the violent members of the family that Butterfield examines are heartbreakingly variable. Butterfield's originality is to relate the fortunes of poor black prisoners to their background in slavery and the fortunes of slave owners and their descendents (like Strom Thurmond). Even earning a B.A. and a Phi Beta Kappa Key in prison does not save Butch, Willie's father, from dying under gunfire. Things haven't changed that much since the book was written in 1995.

Lanier says

Not any surprise that violence in America is something whites built the country on, but also perfected to heights archaic and beyond cruel and unusual. I found this book when looking for that Street Kids' novel of the same name by Rene Denfield. This one by Butterfield is a great history lesson of Edgefield County, South Carolina where he follows the roots of another black family growing up through the institutions of violence stemming from pre-Civil War era to Willie Bosket's present multiple life stints in jail. This name may sound familiar, as he was the teen that influenced the changing of laws allowing teens to be tried as adults, aka "The Willie Bosket Law".

Bosket, an intelligent and artistic young man, will never see the light of an un-barred day as he never really had a chance. His father, Butch, probably even more intelligent earned a Masters in jail and was on the cutting edge of the computer technological curve before the law caught up with him again.

This book is equally an indictment of the child care systems, rehab centers and the dismemberment of the family as well as a slight insight to mental illnesses and the misdiagnosis of the same.

Fishface says

This is one fantastic piece of journalism. The author traces an American family back to before the Civil War, when they were still slaves in Edgefield County, NC and soaking like teabags in the brutal "culture of honor" passed down from their owners' Scotch-Irish forebears. He traces the way successive generations identified more and more with that brutality until it seemed like the only way to get ahead in life, with disastrous results for everyone involved. The author tries to give us hope, showing how some manage to walk away from the whole mess and create positive lives for themselves, but it's hard to get away from the fact that people often choose wrong in deciding on their next move.

Lloyd Kerns says

Read this forever ago and will never forget it. It sparked my interest in criminology.

StephTKO says

All God's Children was a text assigned to me in a university course called "The History of Violence in the United States." While I was completely enthralled by the lectures, at the time I only skimmed sections of the book. Now, nearly 10 years later, I finally read the book in its entirety. It's an excellent read. The book details the history of America's sub-culture of violence by tracing the lineage of a particularly violent young man named Willie Bosket, who, as a juvenile, murdered two people in cold blood on a New York City subway. His youthful crime spree was the impetus for the first law that allowed a juvenile to be tried as an adult in the United States. As it turns out, Willie was only the latest highly intelligent male member of his family to become a brutally violent career criminal. His father, grandfather, and great-grand father before him were all violent criminals and murderers. The story was very compelling, yet frustrating and left me feeling hopeless. As the chapters unfold the lives of each male Bosket, the reader is left to ride an emotional rollercoaster. I found myself getting angry because every time a Bosket seemed to be on the precipice of breaking the cycle, they would commit another brutal, senseless act of violence. The author did more than just tell the story - he identified the societal and systemic institutional shortcomings that he believed contributed to Willie's virtually predestined, self-fulfilling prophecy of criminality. He even provided an epilogue discussing possible solutions. Still though, when I put the book down, I felt like the events in the book were entirely inevitable. If you like books that challenge your world view - this one is a must read.

Susan says

Tremendous profile of our legal system, social confines, and failing support systems through the life and destruction of one man. Powerful,dramatic, infuriating, heartfelt, and sadly, true.

Keith says

I have been going through the papers pertaining to my career, and I ran across pieces of the story of Willie Bosket, told in All God's Children by Fox Butterfield. I googled it, and found that it is still in print. It is probably also available at most public libraries. It is a stunning story. It is about a teenage murderer. Fox Butterfield, then with the New York Times, was given access to him in solitary confinement, and through encounters with Willie, he set out to find out who Willie was and where he had come from, for Willie himself did not know. He uncovers one of the most powerful strains of violence in American, originating in the southern part of South Carolina that gave rise to Strom Thurmond. It is one of the saddest, most haunting, most riveting stories I have ever read. I would recommend it with qualification.

Amanda says

This is a fascinating examination of the way that American culture and our social policies create a hideous underclass where children are lost at a very young age without much hope for redemption. It focuses on Willie Bosket, NY state's "most violent inmate" who received a sentence of life in prison following a string

of juvenile crimes and then the violent murders of two people on the NYC subway. It was his misdeeds and unsuccessful attempts of the system to reform him (he had been in and out of institutions from the age of 9) that inspired NYS laws allowing children to be treated legally as adults in criminal court. Through some incredibly creative and thrillingly thorough research, Fox Butterfield traces Willie's family back to the deep south where they had been slaves. The pattern of violence and its connection to the culture of the South that he uncovers is intensely fascinating. He makes a very compelling case for the values of the antebellum South, as they translate to a modern urban environment, where drugs and guns are readily available, and hope is fleeting, as a root cause in our culture's creation of violent sociopathic children like Willie. It was truly chilling and fascinating reading.

On a personal note, as I was reading I learned that Willie's trial was taking place in my hometown while I was in elementary school and that two of my neighbors played important roles in the trial that condemned him to prison for life. I have no memories of this trial but it was interesting to contrast my own experiences with the ones that doomed a very young, and by all accounts incredibly gifted boy, who is not that much older than myself, to a life of crime and incarceration.

Brook says

This book did a good job of tracing the lineage of one of New York's "worst inmates in state history" back to the antebellum South, and back forwards to the modern day (the subject of the story is still alive and incarcerated). This ain't "The Hurricane."

Without giving too much away about the story, we follow one family's lineage (really the male side) from an early conflict with the law and an attempted lynching through to NY State's current penal system. Some topics that I knew little about and learned much about were the history of South Carolina and feuds, and the ultraviolent culture down there, both white and black, that evolved out of the European ideals of "honor" and respect, and eventually just morphed into hypersensitivity and a penchant for violence that rivaled the West. Indeed, the book quotes another historian who notes that much of the violent element in the "Wild West" was actually these post-Civil War southerners moving west with their dueling pistols and thirst for "retribution of wrongs." From this culture, the author hypothesizes that southern black culture, at once a part of southern culture but separate from white culture, adopted these norms. And, indeed, the gatherings of the now "free" sharecroppers were often marred with violence in this area, as were white gatherings.

We follow the path of generations of men from this family through the familiar route of rural south - new urban south - new north - new york. Along the way, we see men who father children that they do not care for (until it is too late), and the both biological and environmental nature of sociopathy.

I recommend this book to readers of nonfiction, true crime, social studies, and prison-culture texts.

Mary Slosson says

Deeply reported, phenomenally told, this is a monumental work that examines the root causes of intergenerational violence. Published in the mid-1990s, as a wave of three strikes laws were enacted across the country and prison populations began to skyrocket, Butterfield systematically breaks down what actually causes crime, and uses the Bosket family to illustrate his point. The result is a heartbreaking work that lays

bare what really causes crime: poverty, a lack of social services, and the mass incarceration of people of color in America. Our reactionary and punitive criminal justice system doesn't deter crime, Butterfield shows. It creates a pressure cooker system that exacerbates it.

Nicole says

The book traces five generations of the Bosket family, from slavery in South Carolina through Willie Bosket's incarceration in New York in the 1980s, where he was hailed (?) as the most dangerous criminal ever housed in the NYS penal system. The book demonstrates the legacies of a violence-based culture of honor in South Carolina and of the series of institutions Americans have designed to house and/or reform individuals who are somehow problematic. Willie Bosket has often argued that he is a product of those institutions and that his case demonstrates how badly flawed that institutional system is. After reading the book, it's very hard to disagree with that assessment.

The author, Fox Butterfield, is a professional journalist, but as I read this book, I didn't feel the need to hold that against him. He did a significant amount of historical research in both primary and secondary sources, and he uses excellent secondary sources in a responsible manner. His writing style is engaging, and I had a hard time putting the book down.

There are myriad things I could say about my reactions to the book's content. (It would be an excellent book to discuss in a group, whether that was a book club or a class.) Here, I think I'll limit myself to saying that I wish there was a companion book that more fully explored the lives and choices of the women in the Bosket men's lives. I could not quite wrap my head around why many of the women in the book made the choices they did (including why they got involved with Bosket men in the first place), and I'd like to know more. The book did succeed in providing explanations for male actions, and so I'd like to see a parallel study.

In the future, I'm teaching an introductory level course on race and racism in US history (the whole 200+ years), and I think it's likely this book will be on the reading list.

Jo says

Willie Bosket was one of the most violent offenders in NYC, starting at a very young age. The author, Fox Butterfield, researched the Bosket family back to when they were slaves in South Carolina and describes the progression of violence within this family. He raises the question whether or not chronic criminal activity is hereditary or socially learned, presenting arguments portraying in Bosket's life support for both theories. It is also an indictment of our country's child care systems, rehab centers, and prisons.

It's a very interesting book, to me, as I knew Willie Bosket (I'm not in the book). Mr. Butterfield portrayed him accurately. I came to know him for a time which began after the timeline of the book ended. I worked for a time for an entity which ultimately probably was as little true help to him as any of the others Mr. Butterfield rightly called to question in his book.

Gaylesaks says

I think I'm too stunned into sadness to articulate how devastating this book is.

Who is to blame for turning a 9-yr old into the most violent criminal in New York State history? His parents, his lineage, the endless number of institutions who couldn't contain him? The reader knows from the beginning for that Willie Bosket there will never be hope.

The story of his father, Butch, is equally as tragic. I work with both juvenile offenders and adult offenders and I have observed the endless cycle of hopelessness and of multiple family members incarcerated at the same time. Learned behaviors? Idolizing the badass men and uncles who came before them? HIDEOUS parents who laugh off the violence in front of them and wash their hands clean of them--making them disposable.

This book is a must for anyone interested or anyone who doesn't even know they are interested, in an incredibly flawed multi-service system. I will never forget this book.

Klevine says

The tragic story of a father and son, both who became murderers, one who found prison a place to learn, but who could not live what he learned from books in the real world. His son found prison a place to rebel and is known as New York State's worse prisoner. What is interesting to contemplate is why each man's experience lead them to take different paths in prison.

A must read for anyone interested in better understanding the impact of history, prejudice, oppression, community, and trauma. The Bosket family men were shaped by all these forces. The book also details the failures of the child welfare, juvenile justice, and mental health systems.

Elyssa says

This book was INCREDIBLE! Willie Bosket was one of the most violent offenders in NYC, starting at a very young age. The author, Fox Butterfield, researched the Bosket family back to when they were slaves in South Carolina and masterfully illustrates the progression of violence within this family. Butterfield provide in-depth portrayals of each family member as well as a comprehensive historical overview through each generation. This book reminded me of two other favorites: Random Family and American Dream, mostly due to the detailed research and engaging prose.
