



Dear Senator: A Memoir by the Daughter of Strom Thurmond

Essie Mae Washington-Williams , William Stadiem

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Breaking nearly eight decades of silence, Essie Mae Washington-Williams comes forward with a story of unique historical magnitude and incredible human drama. Her father, the late Strom Thurmond, was once the nation's leading voice for racial segregation (one of his signature political achievements was his 24-hour filibuster against the Civil Rights Act of 1957, done in the name of saving the South from "mongrelization"). Her mother, however, was a black teenager named Carrie Butler who worked as a maid on the Thurmond family's South Carolina plantation.

Set against the explosively changing times of the civil rights movement, this poignant memoir recalls how she struggled with the discrepancy between the father she knew—one who was financially generous, supportive of her education, even affectionate—and the Old Southern politician, railing against greater racial equality, who refused to acknowledge her publicly. From her richly told narrative, as well as the letters she and Thurmond wrote to each other over the years, emerges a nuanced, fascinating portrait of a father who counseled his daughter about her dreams and goals, and supported her in reaching them—but who was unwilling to break with the values of his Dixiecrat constituents.

With elegance, dignity, and candor, Washington-Williams gives us a chapter of American history as it has never been written before—told in a voice that will be heard and cherished by future generations.

Dear Senator: A Memoir by the Daughter of Strom Thurmond Details

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Charlice says

I wasn't sure I wanted to read this book. In general, I avoid the pain of reading about slavery and Jim Crow. And as a black woman raised in South Carolina, the revelation of Essie Mae's existence was not news to me. I grew up with the knowledge that Strom Thurmond had a daughter (actually, the rumor was that he had numerous children) by a black woman. As the first African American police officer in Columbia, my grandfather claimed to have directly witnessed Strom Thurmond's amorous forays into the black community. That said, I didn't expect to be surprised, and I was not.

Although I agree with other reviewers that the writing was a bit dull and that it was disappointing to see Essie Mae so readily accept the role into which her father thrust her, I strove throughout the book to be compassionate. I struggled mightily to appreciate her affection for Thurmond, her willingness to accept whatever shred of attention he was willing to pay her rather than not have him in her life at all, her need to read love into his gifts of money and jewelry, her readiness to forgive him for his rabidly segregationist stance during a period when people were dying for black people to simply have the right to sit at lunch counters, and her simmering resentment at being denied the privilege that would have been hers had her mother been white. Until the last two pages, I was prepared to give this book four stars. And then Washington revealed that, as a result of being able to prove her lineage through the Thurmond family, she had joined the Daughters of the American Revolution and the United Daughters of the Confederacy. And she branded as racist anyone who would question her doing so because, as she put it, "I am every bit as white as I am black." Well, no one could deny her that. But I do take strong umbrage at the notion that it is racist to question joining organizations that celebrate the Confederacy in an unqualified fashion. I am not disappointed that she joined because I adhere to any antiquated rules about one drop making you black. I'd rather do away with the entire notion of race. Rather, I am disappointed in any human being who chooses membership in these organizations. If she had justified her membership differently, perhaps on the basis that she was intent on claiming every bit of acknowledgment of her belonging to the Thurmond family that she wanted after spending her entire life in the shadows. Perhaps if she had just said, "I missed out on a lifetime on Southern white privilege, and I'm now going to redress that in any way possible," I'd have said, "Fine. Your choice." But seriously. There are many reasonable objections to the approach these groups take to the celebration of American history. That approach has historically excluded African Americans and has excluded recognition of what the Confederacy meant (and means) to most African Americans, the existence of black Confederate soldiers notwithstanding. That history includes Essie Mae's own mother who, as a few other reviewers have so aptly pointed out, was in a completely powerless position vis a vis Strom Thurmond. To insult her reader on the final page for having well-grounded reservations about the UDC seemed, well, insulting. I had the patience to read page after repetitive page of attempts to rehabilitate the legacy of Strom Thurmond. If you assumed I was open-minded enough to stick with you through that, then give me enough credit not to write me off as a racist because I am not fond of the UDC.

There was also a part of me that wanted to believe Essie Mae's depiction of Strom Thurmond and of his relationship with her mother. But I have a nagging suspicion that she romanticized both. Perhaps it is just too difficult for me to revise my long-held views of the man. Perhaps it is impossible for me to divorce my perspective on his relationship with Washington's mother from the oppressive context in which it occurred. Whatever the case, I just could not buy it. But I certainly get why Washington needed to make sense of it that way, accurate or not. And she did plant a seed of doubt in my mind. She did make me consider that Thurmond was more complex than I ever would have imagined and to consider that he was, in a sense,

bound and gagged by the same system that he so vociferously defended. Thanks to that food for thought, I suppose it was a worthwhile read.

Dan Quigley says

I found this memoir to be extremely interesting. No fiction writer could have dreamed of all the plot twists this story of complex characters living through difficult times portrays. I love the honest and straightforward way Essie Mae tells her story, then how she backs away from making the moral judgements so that the reader can decide alone who was in the right.

All of the main people portrayed in this book are done so as complex characters. I can see why some (many?) African-Americans would rate this book poorly. Many would want to see Strom Thurmond portrayed as a shallow, two-penny villain, and would demand Essie Mae angrily set him straight and tell him what for. They might want a melodrama so that they can feel angry. Instead, we are given a rich, deep portrayal of a complex relationship. Essie Mae does not provide shallow gratification for self-righteous, militantly angry readers.

These critics might also forget or ignore the fact that Essie Mae is half white. Despite identifying most of her life as black, by the end of her life when she is writing this account of her relationship with her father, she has learned to embrace her white half and no longer considers herself as simply African-American. She can not be classified as a sell-out to her race since African-American is only half her identity. I don't think anyone who writes as honestly as this sells out anything anyway.

The reality of life and relationships is that they are complex, especially those formed over a long period of time and under unique circumstances. The relationships between Strom and Essie Mae's mother as well as between Strom and Essie Mae herself are portrayed convincingly (for me) as ones of love based on two-way purely consensual relationships in both cases. Hard-hearted cynics with axes to grind are going to want to believe otherwise, but the text is explicit on this point, and I find Essie Mae's account convincing. To believe their relationships were based on money rather than love requires cynics to bring their own baggage into the story in order to read it the way they prefer.

One of the things I most appreciated about the book were the many powerful local history lessons, some of which, like the lynchings, have been long forgotten. I live in South Carolina, very close to many of the settings of the scenes Essie Mae describes. Aiken, Edgefield, Orangeburg, they are all less than an hour's drive. No South Carolina history book will picture the history of South Carolina the way Essie Mae has, certainly not the textbooks of the public school system. However, what emerges from her account seems a truer and more helpful account of what really happened in this part of the country, why it did, and how all people concerned felt about it. Pitchfork Ben Tillman, Calhoun, and all the other key figures of South Carolina history are portrayed from a unique and honest perspective in this book. There are too few histories like this one being written today, histories that talk about the people, how they lived, what they cared about, how they felt about events, what their hopes, dreams, and aspirations were. I wish there were more books like this one.

Alisa says

A memoir full of conflicting feelings and actions told with amazing personal grace. Strom Thurmond was the longest serving Senator when he retired at the age of 100, and easily one of the most controversial figures over the course of his career. Many remember him as a staunch segregationist. Which makes the circumstances of this book all the more confounding - the author is his daughter, who was the product of an affair he had as a very young man with his family's black maid. Essie Mae grew up in the early years of her life thinking that the two people who raised her were her parents. She was being raised by her mother's sister and her husband. Surprise! This discovery was dropped on her in the most unusual way, first by her mother, and eventually her mother introduced her to the man who was her biological father, the Senator. This book tells the story of Essie Mae's discovery of her unusual family lineage, her eventual relationship with her father, how she kept it a secret until after his passing, and her reconciling of her feelings throughout the course of her life. Strom Thurmond's politics always made my stomach turn and this book did not endear him to me at all, despite the generous forgiveness bestowed on him by Essie Mae. Even though I read the book, I am still trying to imagine how she came to terms with her feelings and her father. Remarkable.

Delmer says

This book was about Strom Thurmond, a strict segregationist who fathered a daughter with a black woman and never acknowledged her publicly, even though he met with her secretly and gave her money for herself and her family over the years. Even when he had his own family, he continued to see his daughter "on the side", lest his political career would have been ruined. What a hypocrite. Still, it was good to see how she dealt with it. I would have sung like a canary.

Nandi Crawford says

To say upon hearing that Strom Thurmond had an African American illegitimate daughter was simply mind boggling. How can you say you want rights for only one set of people yet in your private life do another? seem contradictory to me and I was glad that the author brought it up as well in her book. As far back as the late 1940s when the author was attending South Carolina State College, (paid of course by her father), Ebony has known about the story of this woman, but not until after Senator Thurmond's passing in 2003, did his daughter come forward and tell her story. Ebony did a featured story on her, as well as showed pictures of her, her kids and grandkids. Also, although I initially didn't read it there and someone else pointed it out to me, it seemed as though Essie Mae's mother and the Senator continued their relationship long after Essie Mae was born. And come to find out that his other children did claim and consider her family so I am glad for that. Very interesting story

Jessica says

2.5 stars I wanted to give this more stars, because I wanted to like it more. Maybe I was expecting too much, or maybe I was just put off by the writing, but it just didn't resonate with me the way I thought it would.

I think I was expecting more honesty, frustration, anger, disappointment - *emotion* - than what the reader gets. It couldn't have been easy for her, having her world turned upside-down one lazy afternoon, and then watching it get flipped inside out when she's told her father is white. But, the thing is - there's no *emotion* in

the telling.

Essie-Mae grew up in a turbulent environment. She talks about her first encounter with prejudice, her realization that her friendships with the white kids would forever be altered, and her seemingly unreachable dreams of becoming a career woman. But there was no fire in any of these stories.

She says she was "disgusted" after hearing about what happened to Zack Walker, and "curious" when she found out about Carrie Butler. The only reason I know that is because it's written, "I felt even more disgusted..." and "...curious beyond the bounds of discreet behavior."

I don't think I'm explaining my beef with this book very well. I think the best way I could describe it would be like this:

Essie-May spent so many pages of this book telling the reader how disappointed she was that Thurmond never took her out for dinner, never asked after her mother, never inquired about her husband and children - things you'd expect of a father. It's always written that way, something like, "I was disappointed that he called them 'your children', instead of 'my grandchildren'." Paragraphs and paragraphs were devoted to how Strom Thurmond never acted like the absent father he was.

Yet, when her husband, the great love of her life, passed away, the reader got one paragraph, and sentences like, "poor, poor Julius" and "What a tragedy." **That's** what I'm talking about. Her husband passes and she drops a "what a tragedy" on the reader. I didn't know whether to laugh or be offended for Julius.

I found I couldn't believe that she never got upset with Thurmond, and that she didn't see his continual monetary support as "hush money", even just a little. I can't believe that someone as idealistic as her, as impassioned about people and family would have sat on the sidelines, not judging Thurmond's political antics, especially when he opened fire on her people.

Anyway, the most enjoyable parts were her perspective into the changing world, how these events changed her life. Maybe she's just feeling super benevolent because Thurmond's no longer with us, and because she's finally being recognized as one of his children. At any rate, this wasn't nearly as good a read as I had hoped it'd be, but at least it wasn't flat-out terrible.

*** kyrat says**

Like most people, I was rather disgusted at the posthumous revelation of notorious racist Strom Thurmond's illegitimate daughter.

Like many I doubted that in Jim Crow South of the 20's & 30's that her mother an underage African American girl financially dependent on the family could actually have a relationship of equals with Strom. Like many I assumed there was probably some coercion (financial if not physical force). I also assumed that he paid the daughter to keep his hypocrisy quiet.

The book taught me not to make assumptions, that the truth is more complex. And the truth was almost

sadder and more amazing than my preconceptions. To read that her mother loved Strom hopelessly. To know that she herself felt obligated to keep quiet. I was blown away.

It's also just an interesting story of growing up black in the 30's, 40's and 50's in the North (Pennsylvania and NYC) where there was more 'freedom'. And her time (and reasons for returning) in South Carolina is also compelling reading.

The descriptions of meetings with her father are fascinating. Her descriptions of her father's views of himself are astounding (he honestly did not think he was racist, he claimed he was trying to "help" the blacks (so long as they kept secret). It's these brief glimpses we get into Strom Thurmond's personal life and views (mediated through his daughter who obviously wants to see her father in the best light) that kept me glued to the book in amazement.

Especially interesting was that I was expecting & almost wanting anger & confrontation on her behalf, so when her husband and children rail at Strom and she defends him or tries to mitigate their anger it is rather heart-wrenching to imagine her position.

I could really empathize with what this woman went through.

And I applaud her for finally coming forward and sharing her story with others.

I highly recommend this.

Aprylle says

Well this book was certainly an interesting story, and it did give some unique insight into a side of Strom Thurmond of which I was unaware. It seemed like the author struggled, admittedly so, with her opinions of her father. On one hand she deplored his politics, and hated how he never officially acknowledged her or that she was his daughter. On the other hand, she consistently looked for reasons to excuse his racist ideologies.

Other than that, the writing was not great, it was very colloquial. I imagine that makes it easy to read for certain types, but I expected more from someone who professed to be so well read and intellectual.

Overall, the story is compelling, but some tidbits of her life were just plain boring. There's no way she would have been able to write a book without this claim to fame. Reading about segregation and her relationship with Thurmond was what was most interesting. Others have had similar stories.

Anita says

I found the author's story fascinating and sad. She showed such character through her very complicated childhood and then adulthood. I have to admit that I was surprised by the support and tenderness that Senator Thurmond showed his "secret daughter", albeit behind closed doors. In some ways it makes his racist policy-making even more despicable. I couldn't help but wonder if Essie Mae had been born today, a more open relationship with her father might have been possible. I guess I always assumed he had sworn her to secrecy and it surprised me that this was not the case. If you have read this or if you decide to read it, please let me know - I'd love to discuss it.

Steve Piacente says

As the first reporter to see Strom Thurmond after the death of his 22-year-old daughter in 1993, I got a different look at the one-time presidential candidate who vowed there weren't enough "troops in the Army to force the Southern people to break down Segregation and admit the Negro race into our theaters, into our swimming pools, into our homes and into our churches."

We met that day in his Senate office. He was coming off cataract surgery and, combined with Nancy Moore Thurmond's death at the hands of a drunk driver, looked and sounded awful. His eyes were swollen; his voice was barely a whisper. I expected nothing more. The man was not only crushed; he was in his nineties.

I also thought the interview was about Thurmond's oldest daughter. Little did I know that there was actually an older daughter, one he'd fathered years earlier (at age 22) with a black woman who had been a maid in his family's home. There had been rumors, but nothing was ever proven.

No, Essie Mae Washington-Williams kept quiet until 2003 after Thurmond died that year with one of the most improbable secrets in modern politics still intact. Then she came forward at a press conference in Columbia. All of it was true. "At last I feel free," she said.

"Dear Senator: A Memoir by the Daughter of Strom Thurmond," written by William Stadiem, followed in 2005. This is the full story from the point of view of a daughter who could never be seen in public with her father, and who willingly stayed quiet about their relationship. They met occasionally. He was interested in her and her children – his biracial grandchildren – but never called her daughter, even in private. Hugs were rare as moon landings. Her mother was 16 when she became pregnant with Thurmond's daughter, and Essie Mae was 16 when she first learned about and met her real father.

The book is well written and painful to read. Thurmond provided for his daughter and her family, an act many have written off as hush money. Essie Mae rationalizes much of Thurmond's behavior in a way that her first husband, and children, who came along in a different era, could not.

The story is also frustrating, as readers want answers that are not forthcoming. Essie Mae, who died in 2013, never put the hardest questions directly to the senator, not that she would have gotten any satisfactory answers. Part of that was Thurmond's make-up, which did not include expansive discussion of his innermost feelings.

I asked many times over the 10 years I covered him as correspondent for the Charleston, S.C. paper about regrets he may have harbored. He was coming closer to the end, and I thought he might want to try to make amends. The closest I got was that he "may have said some things I don't agree with now."

"Dear Senator" is worth reading. Just don't expect much explanation beyond, that's the way things were at the time. Four stars.

Kara says

I liked the book. It provided a refresher on some important history. The memoir was a little repetitive and shallow. The extent of Essie Mae Washington's self reflection and analysis was repeating and accepting that she wanted to be included--publicly and otherwise--in Strom's life, but she understood why she couldn't. In the end, of course, her existence did become public. But I was looking for a little more introspection into what it meant for her to be bi-racial, bi-cultural. She talked about how she is both slave and slaver owner and how she joined the organization, Daughters of the Confederacy, but her analysis remained fairly superficial. I wanted her to be more political, more angry, more in-your-face-strom, but she wasn't. Then I realized that perhaps it wasn't fair to make those demands on her. But that led me to want her to talk more about how she reconciled her position as his daughter and precisely why she did not hold him accountable--more than just "that's the way it is in the south." And I don't think she was the best writer. Having this said, I did enjoy the book. It gave me some insight into Southern Politics and at the end when Strom dies I ALMOST cried. WTF? Maybe there's a little bit of Essie Mae acceptance in me after all.

Annelisa says

Hmmm. On the one hand, this book has some relevance as a memoir and an historical document. Incidents such as the one involving Strom Thurmond and Carrie Butler were not uncommon across the South, and there were/are many like the author who were/are either the results of such unions, or have heard stories about such. The fact that she is bringing the events of her life to prominence is notable in itself. However, her reaction to and attitude concerning these events are problematic, and this is where the book does not live up to its potential.

As noted in some earlier reviews, there seems to be a lack of emotion and honesty in the book, and I agree wholeheartedly. I understand that people are individuals, and that they interpret certain events differently. However, I felt that Washington-Williams didn't display half of the anger and frustration that one would expect from someone who grew up the way she did. For one thing, she talks about the relationship between her father and mother as if it were a consensual relationship, rather than a coerced one enforced by centuries of racism and the devaluation of Black women and girls' bodies. No, Strom Thurmond did not "love" her mother. The fact remains that this was a 15-year-old girl who had no choice in the matter. The author shows nearly no emotion for her mother at all, nor does she attempt to understand her position. There is no outrage at the fact that a 23-year-old man was preying on a minor, using his privilege to do so.

Another issue is the author's willingness to absorb all aspects of her Southern heritage. No one should be ashamed of who they are, and I believe that they should be made aware of and celebrate all aspects of their culture. No one is asking Ms. Washington-Williams to choose between the two aspects of her identity. But she seems to feel that way, and she keeps asserting that she is "not just" African-American or white, but both. She has also joined the Daughters of the American Revolution and the United Daughters of the Confederacy. My question is, why would she want to be affiliated with these two groups, long representative of overt racism and exclusion? There are other Southern organizations to join that would reflect her heritage but also not be offensive. Furthermore, she states that membership in such organizations via her father has allowed her to trace her family history all the way back, while trying to do the same for her mother presents a brick wall. She's so nonchalant about the latter, unaware (choosing to ignore?) that events orchestrated by her father's ancestors, as well as the larger power structure (which she has joined) have made that brick wall possible.

However, the most glaring and disturbing issue with the book is the way that the author is all too ready to

excuse her father for his shameful behavior. Forgiveness is one thing; I have no problem with that. I understand that she wanted her father's love, and all that entailed. I understand that this approach may be her coping device to sort out complex and confusing emotions. I understand that the author was raised in a different time, and carries with her many of the customs from that period. I also understand that the system which permitted her father to act the way he did may have a more profound effect on her psyche than she's willing to admit, and that she may have internalized negative attitudes. That being said, her father still isn't off the hook. Throughout the text, Ms. Washington-Williams constantly recasts her father's character, instead of seeing him for what he really was. A complex human being, to be sure, but also a virulent and unapologetic racist who, despite fathering her, felt that one half of her lineage, with whom he mixed his genetic material, was not worthy of basic human rights and respect, to put it lightly. She tries to rectify this fact by portraying him as a flawed, but generally decent man. Even though she didn't agree with his views on segregation, by supporting him in nearly everything else, she actually substantiates his viewpoint. Whereas she views him sending her mother money a sign of his interest and devotion, it seems obvious to everyone else that it was an attempt to keep his secret that wasn't a secret as covert as possible. She even defended Thurmond against her family members when they told her that they didn't like him, which is more than understandable.

What's even more pitiful is the fact that the author is giving her father the devotion, respect, and admiration that he doesn't really deserve, and which he probably wouldn't have wanted from her in the first place. Most times, the truth presents itself in shades of gray. But there are times when it really is as simple as black and white. The problem is that the author is not, or does not, want to view it this way. With all due respect, I believe that Ms. Washington-Williams has internalized a lot more negativity than she's willing to admit, and it comes off as apologist and self-hating. I feel that she needs to reexamine herself and think truly about what has happened. Is she really so eager to gain her father's acceptance and love, even after his death, that she is willing to whitewash his actions? In this aspect, I feel a little sorry for her, because although she claims that she is at peace, it is obvious that she is still struggling.

Donna Bennett says

This book is Essie Mae's story and a living historic chronicle of the life and times intertwined with her real life situation. Williams's story can be viewed as a tragedy of the American south with its unenlightened prejudices and hypocrisies; but it also can be viewed as a story of family ties, of love and honor. Her restraint and respect for her father in an ugly period of our history--one that included segregation, racism and Jim Crow is incredible, which help to mitigate the harsh realities of her circumstances.

An argument can be made that since her mother, Carrie was in the employ of the Thurmonds, their sex may not have been entirely consensual (much like Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings). Strom Thurmond didn't have to do any of the things he chose to do for his mulatto daughter and he risked a lot by making special trips to see Essie Mae and giving her cash. He also can't be blamed for his daughter's long silence. He never told her to not tell anyone. That was Essie Mae's choice alone.

Essie Mae shows herself to be far more forgiving than most other people would be. Accepting her father's shortcomings whilst never agreeing with his policies and ideals but most poignantly of all she proves herself to be a good and loyal daughter, something that Strom Thurmond did not deserve in my opinion.

There is one moment that I had to question in this book. When Essie Mae leaves her children in California to attend her husband, Julius' funeral. I understand the financial part (help from her father at this time would have been then) but the emotional deprivation of saying goodbye to their father seemed crucial. Still,

Washington's story is one of courage, perseverance and grace.

I would have liked to see pictures of her mother, aunt and uncle in "Dear Senator" and she never explains what happens to relatives including her brother Willie, Father/Uncle and Cousin Calvin.

This is an amazing story by Washington of learning to accept and love her father and the legacy of her birth. The story is well written, fascinating and bittersweet to read. This book is not only personal but very factual. This is an interesting historical document. "Dear Senator" is written with candor, honesty, sadness and spirit.

David Ward says

Dear Senator: A Memoir by the Daughter of Strom Thurmond by Essie Mae Washington-Williams (Regan Books 2005) (Biography). Strom Thurmond was a powerful U.S. Senator from South Carolina and a former governor of the state as well. He was a senior statesman in the battle against civil rights in the South. He died at the age of one hundred in 2003. He was married twice; he married at the age of forty-four and was widowed thirteen years later. He and his first wife had no children. Thurmond married for the second time at the age of sixty-six. His second wife was twenty-two at the time of their marriage. They had four children, the first of whom was born in 1971.

Six months after Strom Thurmond's death, Essie Mae Washington-Williams came forward to publicly announce that she was Thurmond's daughter. Ms. Washington-Williams' mother had been a housekeeper for Strom Thurmond's parents; she became pregnant with Thurmond's first child at the age of sixteen and gave birth to Essie Mae Washington on October 12, 1925.

Ms. Williams received some financial support from the Senator during his lifetime, and she generally saw him at least once per year. However, he never publicly acknowledged his daughter's existence during his lifetime. Less than a year after his death, Ms. Washington-Williams spoke out about her birthright.

One thing is for sure: Ms. Essie Mae Washington-Williams is an exceptionally tolerant and forgiving woman. If there was ever an author who deserved to draft a poison-pen tell-all, it is this author. However, she has foregone the opportunity to spill. May we all be so forgiving. My rating: 7/10, finished 3/28/16.

Morgan says

Paints a surprisingly complex portrait of a man I always assumed hated black people.
