

Summary and  
reactions to the book  
black like me, author  
- john howard griffin



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Response to Black Like Me Many people, no matter what their racial background, have a hard time understanding why the races just can't get along. Black people wonder why white people treat them so bad and white people wonder why blacks are always so suspicious and hateful. Hispanics generally know the rest of the world is against them and Asians desperately hope that they are naturally smarter than the average guy just to keep up with other races' expectations of them. The divide between blacks and whites, though, has been the most historically violent relationship in America and it is this relationship that is the subject of John Griffin's book Black Like Me.

In the book, Griffin explains how he came up with his idea to try living like a black man for a while as a means of trying to understand how their lives are affected by racism and prejudice in the 1959-1960 South. He does this by presenting the material as a journal entry, allowing his thought process to flow, finally leading to the conclusion that you can never know another man unless you've walked a mile in his shoes. The first 'chapter' is presented as an introduction to the idea, the mechanics involved in putting it into motion and his arrival in New Orleans where he plans to make his transformation, but it ends before the transformation starts as he is still enjoying the comforts and fine lifestyle of the white man in the city. The second chapter outlines his change and his first experiences as a black man before he's even become one. This is in the form of his doctor's comments about the 'nature' of the black man as inherently violent the darker they are. When he first sees himself as a black man, he panics and feels like he isn't himself anymore and this is somewhat verified as he is no longer able to do the kinds of things he was used to doing as a white man. The only positive difference

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he discovers is that the black people treat him better. Although he discovers an entirely different world in New Orleans, he learns about how much more difficult things are for blacks in Mississippi and decides that he needs to go there to understand the dynamics of what is going on.

There are so many experiences in the various chapters that it is impossible to list them all, but Griffin, in his journeys, discovers that the problem of racism isn't just with the ignorant white people of the countryside, but that it rests more squarely on the shoulders of the educated white men that continue to create laws that make it possible for racism to continue. In addition, it is this racism that makes it impossible for the black man to escape his situation as he is trapped in poverty and hopelessness from his childhood well into old age.

This book was shocking to me as I had never experienced anything like the South as it is described here. However, as Griffin took me through the various stages of his journey and showed me how even he, who had only been a black man for a short period of time, was already beginning to feel the hopelessness and desperation he had seen on the faces of the real black people he knew, things started to make sense. I think I see some of these things now as people feel trapped in poverty and unable to make any positive changes in their lives. It is not as severe and not as blatant, but when people can't get help when they're sick and can't get decent treatment at their job without risking losing it and aren't allowed to pay off their credit card debt no matter how hard they try, it seems like the same situations are trying to develop except for maybe not as strongly drawn along racial lines.

It seems to me what really needs to happen is that people need to start treating people like people - honor their rights and expect them to be able to

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fulfill their responsibilities.

#### Works Cited

Griffin, John Howard. *Black Like Me*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1961.